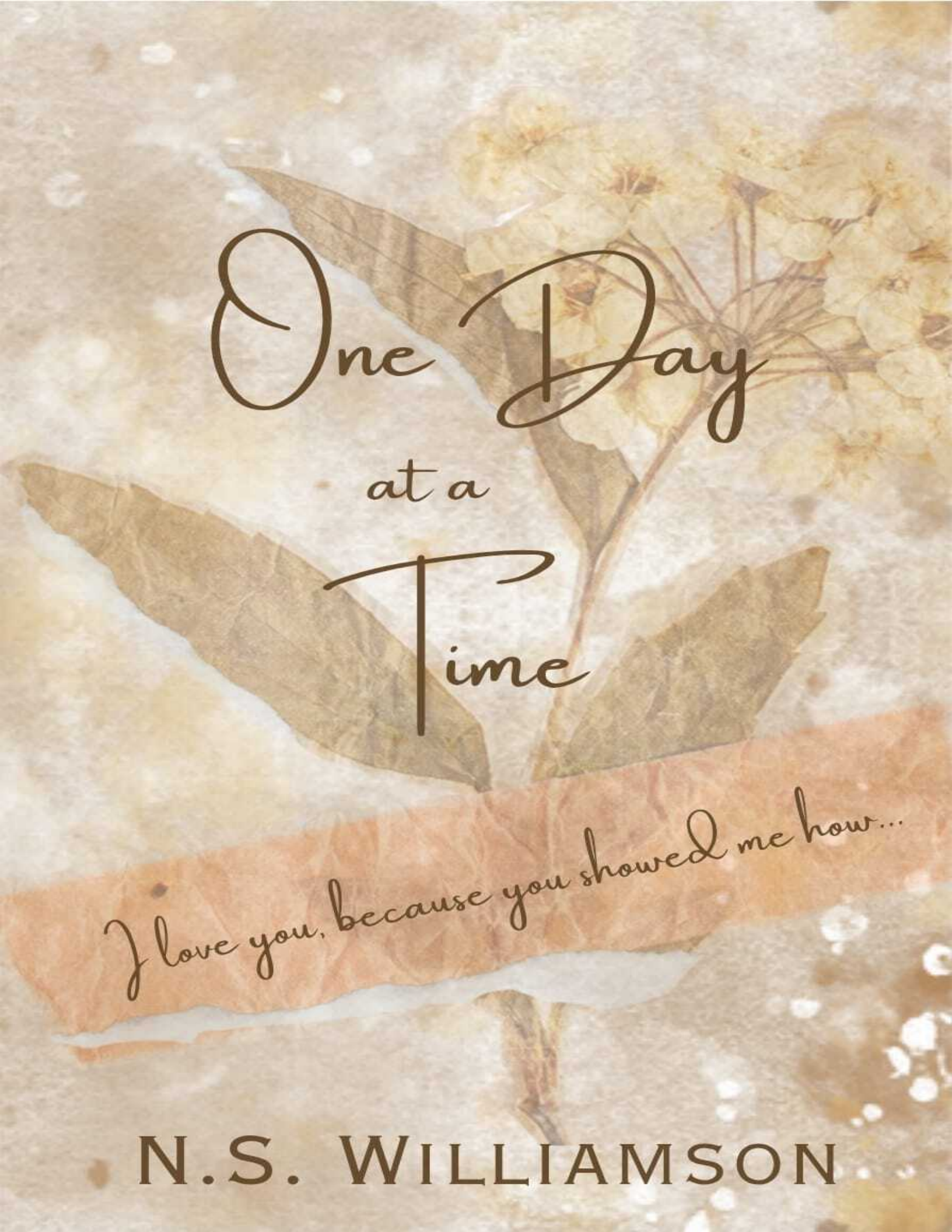

One Day
at a
Time
I love you, because you showed me how...
N.S. WILLIAMSON

One Day at a Time

N.S.Williamson

OceanofPDF.com

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Content Warnings

Alcohol use/Dependency
Drug use/Dependency
Parental Neglect
Child abuse (Off page brief description)
Death of a parent/parents (Brief descriptions-graphic)
Death off page
Serious accident-resulting in severe injuries
Open door sex scenes
Self harm

If any of these make you feel uncomfortable or trigger an emotional response, please take care when reading, or if you choose not to, I completely understand. Your mental health matters.

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Playlist

Need you tonight - INXS
Butterflies - Abe Parker
Bloodstream - Ed Sheeran
Birds of a feather - Billie Eilish
I guess I’m in love - Clinton Kane
Cleaning out my closet - Eminem
Lost cause - Billie Eilish
I love you - Billie Eilish
J’s lullaby (darlin’ i’d wait for you) - Delaney Bailey
Million Reasons - Lady Gaga
Who Knew - Pink
Lose you to love me - Selena Gomez
Conversations in the dark - John Legend
Die on this Hill - Sienna Spiro
Sad Eyes - James Arthur
Bed Chem - Sabrina Carpenter
Make me Feel - Pomplamoose
So Easy (To fall in love) - Olivia Dean
Baby Now That I Found You - Ella Bright
Faded - Alan Walker

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Foreword

This book is for anyone who knows how it feels to love someone struggling with demons, or those who know how it feels to be loved by someone who will never walk away.

This story is for all those that stayed, all those that endured, and all those that only saw the good parts of a broken soul.

I hope my story will help people to see that even a flawed diamond is still a precious stone.

Sometimes all they need is someone to love them...

One day at a time.

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Chapter One

Ella - Aged 15

My Brother's Best Friend - Hannah Trager

I have been in love with…*him* for as long as I can remember. *Him*...I can't say or even write his name, because if I do then the gilded cage I have constructed around my love for him will be torn open, and well...I'm just not ready for that.

From the first day my older brother Damon had him over at our house, I thought he was the coolest, funniest, and kindest boy I had ever met. I was only four years old, and he was six, the same age as my brother, and due to our Dad working full time and Mum running her ironing business from home, it was pretty much down to Damon and him to keep me out of trouble and entertained. They were already at school together and had become inseparable. At such a young age, I had no idea what love was, but what I did know was that that boy was someone I wanted in my life forever, because quite simply he was magic. He was my new favourite person, and deep down I'm sure he knew it because there seemed to be a part of him that fed off the attention I gave him.

We were like two magnets drawn together with late-night chats in my garden, lying on our backs looking at the stars. I would talk about anything and everything, from my dreams for the future to my biggest fears. He would lie in the grass, just listening to me, his face relaxed and content.

The first time I was allowed out of the house with them both I was seven and he was nine; he held my hand to help me cross the road. It seemed so instinctual for him, and I remember thinking that surely this is my prince charming and that the dreams I had for when I was older would of course include him.

He and Damon never minded that I used to tag along with them everywhere they went. I was one of them, after all. Joining in on any and all

adventures they got up to during the day. From helping them fix their bike chains to playing endless games of football in our back garden, *he* was always at our house more so than his own. I wasn't sure at the time, but I didn't think being at home made him feel as happy as being at ours did, and he never spoke about it.

As we have grown up, I've noticed that when Damon isn't looking, *his* eyes will sometimes linger in my direction, almost like I was a puzzle to solve. Being so young, I wondered what he was looking at, because surely he wasn't looking at me the way I looked at him.

Snapping me out of my thoughts, he plops himself down beside me, grabbing my hand. "What ya reading today, El's Bells?" he said on an overly hot August day. The heat from his palm caused a calmness to wash over me. After all these years, holding hands felt like the most natural thing in the world.

"Wuthering Heights," I replied with my usual tone of forced indifference. Talking to him and getting his undivided attention was something I craved, but I couldn't let him know that.

"AGAIN?! How many times have you read that book now, Ella? You know it doesn't matter how many times you read it, Heathcliff is not going to jump out of the book and whisk you off to the moors." He says, digging his elbow into my ribs playfully but not letting go of my hand.

He was so close I could smell him, a mixture of sweat and body spray and another scent that I didn't recognise, but was so uniquely him.

I huffed, "Cathy was an immature, narcissistic, spoiled brat. How can you love a person like that? Heathcliff loved her with everything he had. He took beatings for her; he could have left that house, but he stayed…for her. That's real love, someone who sticks around even when it's the hardest thing in the world to do."

The playful edge to him seems to disappear in the wind then, like smoke in the breeze. He looked at me again like he was desperately trying to form words, or say something he knew he probably shouldn't, and just when I thought he was going to say it, he rose to his feet, dropping my hand in the process and dusting off the back of his shorts.

"Erm," he paused, looking deep in thought. Deciding better than to voice his opinions, he simply shrugged. "Catch ya later, El's Bells," as he walked off towards home, leaving me with a head full of questions.

“Bye,” I whispered to myself as I watched him walk away, my brows furrowed with confusion at the strange interaction.

I’m fifteen now, and he’s nearly seventeen, and he is quite possibly the most beautiful boy I have ever seen. But there’s always a cloud behind his beautiful blue-green eyes, a sort of darkness that he constantly pushes aside.

But I see it. I can feel it like it’s a living, breathing entity.

Putting down my book and reaching into my bag, I retrieved the tattered diary hidden at the bottom. No one besides me knows about it, and that's exactly how it’s going to stay. This is the only place I will let my true feelings be heard. However, I’m no Brontë or Austen; I don’t have the first clue how I was even supposed to write a diary. Which meant that the first few pages looked something like this;

Dear Diary….This is rubbish, and so am I

Hey Diary…it’s me

Yo whattup!!

Eventually settling on…

For you, and only you.

What was it you wanted to say to me? I wish you could have told me, or more likely, I wish for once I had been brave enough to ask.

How can it be that after knowing each other for all these years, you don’t know my biggest secret? The one thing that makes me, me.

The real me. Not the girl I let you see, the girl who just for once wants to be vulnerable. The girl who wants to hear sweet words, not just those written by others. She wants to hear you *say them. Would you, though? I doubt it, because I’m me and you are you. The thought of you ever reading these words makes my chest tight. So you can’t and you won’t, because the one secret I will never tell you is that for the rest of my life, I truly believe there will never be anyone who makes me feel the way you do. There will never be a version of you that doesn’t feel like an extension of my own being. As Cathy says, “Whatever our two souls are made of, his and mine are the same.”*

Yours always, Ella

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Chapter Two

Ella - Aged 16

"Come on in, Damon's not home yet; pizzas will be ready in about five minutes. Have you guys chosen what we're gonna watch tonight?"

"So I managed to get a dodgy copy of the new 'Conjuring.' It's supposed to be even scarier than the last one. Did you see it?" he says to my back as I walk towards the kitchen.

I definitely hadn't seen it; my idea of a good movie was 'Pretty Woman' or 'Pride and Prejudice' with Matthew Macfadyen y*um*. I couldn't admit that to him, though, so instead I just nod my head enthusiastically and say, "Uh, yeah, of course I have! Who hasn't?"

He looks at me skeptically, not sure he really believes me. So I busy myself with checking on the food in the oven.

When I turn back around, he's looking at his phone, disappointment written all over his face.

"What's up?

"Just got a text from Damon saying he's going to be home really late and won't be able to make movie night."

"Oh, that sucks," I sulk and instantly turn off the oven, expecting him to get up and tell me he is going home.

This is so typical; the one night of the week I look forward to the most is movie night. We all huddle in Damon's room with snacks and drinks and watch whatever knock-off film we manage to get our hands on. It's the only time I can look at *him* for as long as I want under the cover of darkness.

"Well…I guess…Nah, never mind," he says, standing up and grabbing his jacket off the back of the chair.

"What? You…You guess what?"

"Well, I was just gonna say, I guess *we* could still watch the movie? I know Damon's gonna be pissed we're watching it without him, but tough shit. You snooze, ya lose, right?"

“Oh, uh...yeah, definitely. Ok, cool.”

Pulling the pizzas out of the oven, I start slicing them up and putting them on a big serving platter. Then, something dawns on me– we usually watch movies in Damon’s room because my parents are always in the lounge watching their old people soaps.

“The only problem is, I think Damon might get funny if we go into his room when he’s not there. He’s kinda weird with his stuff.”

“Oookkkay, I’m gonna go out on a limb here and assume you have a room too, right? Your parents are way too nice to have you sleeping in the garden shed. Can’t we just watch it there?”

My room?! As in… him and me? In my room. Together. Alone. Play it cool, Ella; remember, this isn't a big deal to him.

“Sure, yeah, of course, my room.” My voice sounds off even to me, but he doesn’t seem to pay it any attention.

“Lead the way, Macduff.” he dramatically swings his arm towards the stairs.

I make my way towards my room, praying to anyone who can hear me that there are no stray pairs of underwear lying around, or that Ralph–my childhood teddy–is not sitting proudly on my pillow.

Walking through my door, Ralph is sitting in his usual spot, just as I knew he would be. I make a dive for him and shove him under the bed.

“Hey! A little respect for Ralphy, please.” A voice comes from right behind me. He bends down and retrieves my bear, placing him back on my pillow.

How the hell did he even know about him? Oh God, I think I’m going to die with embarrassment.

Plopping himself down on my bed, he hands me the disc with the movie on. I switch to the right channel on the TV and load the disc into the player.

Sitting myself as far away as I can, I put the pizzas between us. He leans over and turns off my bedside lamp, plunging us into near darkness, except for the glow of the TV. The rich scent of his aftershave mixed with the smell of the pizzas is making my head feel dizzy. The sound coming from the TV is jarring, paired with the thump of my heartbeat in my ears. The lack of light in the room makes everything feel so much more intense.

The movie gets going, and we watch for a while. He happily munches his way through the pizzas; I watch how his throat bobs with every swallow and the flex of his jaw as he chews. For me, swallowing suddenly feels like

a mammoth task; my nerves make it feel more like cement than dough. When we've finished, he picks up the near-empty platter and puts it on the floor, and I catch a glimpse of tanned skin as his T-shirt rides up his back. Thoughts of running my hand over that stretch of skin have my heart racing. Getting himself more comfortable, he sits next to me with his back against the wall and legs dangling off the side. I, however, have never felt more *uncomfortable.* It's like my body is hyper-aware of his nearness all of a sudden.

This is stupid. We *hang out all the time*. So why does this feel so different? So awkward?

Uh, because he's sitting in your room, on your bed! The same bed that you have slept in night after night, dreaming of him!

"You ok?" he asks, snapping me out of my rampant thoughts.

"Yeah, I'm good. You? Do you need anything? Do you want more to eat? Another drink, maybe?" I sound erratic.

"No, I'm good, thanks. I'm stuffed." He places a hand on his flat stomach, and I can see the defined muscles of his abs.

Sitting back and tucking my feet underneath me, I try to relax and watch the film.

Well, I would relax if I wasn't watching a film about a young girl being possessed by a demon in a nun outfit.

About forty-five minutes into the film, I'm just starting to feel more comfortable and relaxed when said Demon-Nun springs to life from a painting and starts running straight for the girl.

I jump out of my seat, my heart racing. That's when I feel strong arms wrap around me, a warm chest at the side of my face. I jumped straight into him, and he wasn't pushing me away. If anything, the more the seconds tick by, it feels as though he holds me closer, his face nuzzling into my hair.

"Shhh," he says, his breath tickling the top of my head.

I freeze, unsure if I should get up or stay here. The sound of his heartbeat is all I can hear, and if I'm not imagining it, it's going just as fast as mine.

Was he scared by the film too?

Wait, did he just sniff my hair?

I was going into complete panic; my heart was racing, and I can't seem to calm myself down.

Leaning into him, I soak in the warmth of his skin and the soft, constant thump of his heartbeat—the soothing balm calming my fragile nerves.

He inhales deeply, my head rising on his chest, and as though realising at that moment exactly what I was doing, he gently places his free hand over my exposed ear. Cutting off all external noise except for the beat that is his life force.

After a few minutes, my own calms into a steady rhythm, matching his beat for beat.

I tilt my chin up, the tips of our noses almost brushing. His gaze drops to my mouth, and he leans forward, the warmth from his breath rushing across my lips. His beautiful blue-green orbs seem clearer and bluer than I've ever seen them.

I close my eyes in anticipation for the one thing I have been dreaming of since I could remember.

Loud footsteps thump up the stairs, and we pull away from each other just in time before Damon bursts into the room.

“Oh, good you’re still here. How’s the movie?” He flops down in between us, bending forward to grab a now-cold slice of pizza. “Oh man, seriously?! You watched this one without me? You guys suck.”

From each end of my bed, we look at each other over the top of my brother's bent back.

Did that really just happen?

Was he really about to kiss me?

If Damon hadn’t come home at that point, what would have happened?

Those are the thoughts I’m left reeling with for the rest of the night whilst staring blankly at the TV. The scary nun was no longer the scariest thing to happen tonight.

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Chapter Three

Ella - Aged 17

For you,

Today is your 19th birthday, and it has been exactly 8 months and 22 days since I last saw you at Christmas.

Well, when I say I saw you, I saw your fake smile (I know it was fake because your nose didn't wrinkle and your ears didn't pull up).

I saw you sitting at the table making loud, over-the-top jokes and talking with your hands. You never used to do that.

I saw you have tattoos, but I couldn't see exactly what they were, just shadows beneath your white shirt. When did you get those? Did it hurt?

I saw your cheeks turn pink when you accidentally knocked over your glass of wine during dessert.

Then I saw you go to the toilet and stumble back to your seat.

You didn't look at me once.

You looked at everyone else, but never at me.

I saw you leave in a taxi from my bedroom window. You stopped like you forgot something, but thought better of it. Then you left.

I wish your eyes could have met mine, even for just a moment. You would have seen how much I miss you.

How much I love–

Never mind.

Happy birthday.

Yours always,

Ella

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Chapter Four

Ella - Present day

That night we almost kissed would be the last time he and I spent alone. Movie nights only happened if Damon was definitely going to be there, and any other times he thought it would be just us two, he would make an excuse not to be there. *It hurt.*

I went over and over that night in my head, replaying it. *He held onto me!* Ok sure, I jumped on him, but he could have let me go. But he didn't; he was the one who kept his arms wrapped around me. He was the one who I'm pretty sure sniffed my hair, and most importantly, he was the one who pressed his hand against my ear to calm me. Picking up on the fact that the sound of his heartbeat was the thing that was calming me down the most.

After losing both his parents later that summer to drinking and drugs, he packed his bags and flew to Australia. He didn't even stick around long enough for their joint funeral.

Saying goodbye to him felt like a part of my soul was being cut out.

My brother also decided to go with him, because wherever he went, Damon was never far behind. And I think Damon knew he needed him right now.

So in the blink of an eye, my two favourite people were gone. Of course, being nearly two years younger than them, this meant that I had to stay here, having enrolled to go to the local college in just a few weeks. I had never felt more alone in my life. All my life up until this point, I was part of a three; now it was just me. And the days were long.

The first three months they were gone; I rarely heard anything from them. The time seemed to stretch on endlessly, a constant loop of monotony and predictability. I wondered if they would come home for Christmas, and they did, or at least a version of him did. I confessed to my diary that day that there would never be a version of him I didn't love, and that was still true. However, I wasn't prepared for the changes I saw in him after only a few

months. A metamorphosis I feared would change the trajectory of both of our lives.

The sound of the bell above the shop door jingles, and I lift my head from where I'm sitting behind the counter, reading a book.

“Good morning,” I say to the two girls who look to be in their late teens. I watch as they walk through the aisles arm in arm. They give me a shy smile and continue on to the stand with the newest releases of YA romance books.

Jones and Sons' independent book shop doesn't really hold anything spicier than a few steamy books. They’re kept tucked away in the restricted area right at the back, where not many people go.

Although I have been trying desperately to persuade Mr. and Mrs. Jones that there is definitely a demand for those types of books, they refuse to budge. Despite the growing enquiries over the last few weeks for dark romance or fantasy romance. Unfortunately, they’re older and far too stuck in their ways. So it's the classics with a few relatively modern ones sprinkled in for the teens.

Located on the outskirts of our sleepy little village in Bransgore, Dorset, Jones and Sons is a beautiful little shop that caters to the bookworms in town.

I’ve been working here for nearly three years now, after I finished my degree studying English Literature and modern writing, and for the most part, I love it. Mainly because, in between customers, I can spend my days reading, and if anyone questions me on it, I can just say it's ‘market research.’

I ring up the books the girls finally decide to purchase, and check my phone. There’s a missed call and a message from Holly, Damon's soon-to-be wife.

Holly:
Hey, babe, are you working? Fancy getting a coffee at the coffee bean?

Holly and I hit it off instantly when Damon finally brought her home. He had been talking about her for weeks, and finally, Mum convinced him to invite her for dinner one night.

When she came through the door with her gorgeous red hair cascading down her back, and a black leather jacket that read “slut for smut’ on the

back, I knew instantly we were going to be friends.

Me:
Yeah, I'm at work; I'll be on a break in 5. Can you order my usual?

Holly:
Sure thing, babe :)

Walking through the doors of the Coffee Bean, the smell of caffeine and pastries hits my nose immediately. It's pretty busy for a Thursday, so I quickly scan for Holly.

When I see her, she shoots her hand up in the air to get my attention, her silver bangles and rings glinting in the sunlight.

“Hey, beautiful,” she greets me with a kiss on the cheek. We take our seats, and I reach for the steaming cup of vanilla latte she's ordered for me. She proceeds to pick up her Americano, “black, like my soul,” she always says. But it's the furthest thing from the truth.

Holly is not only beautiful but also caring and chaotic all at the same time. She's the perfect yin to my brother's yang. Where she’s wild and a little hot-headed, Damon is soft and the most chilled-out guy you will ever meet. With his blonde hair and blue eyes, he's the epitome of the southern surfer boy. The exact opposite of me, my looks are a fluke, a throwback from a relative I've never met. My hair is the darkest shade of brown, with eyes to match. The only hint of colour is the shimmer of gold in the sunlight. To be honest, I don't even look like I belong in my family.

“So, where are we at with the planning?” I say to her whilst adding more sugar to my coffee.

She claps her hands together in excitement. “I'm so glad you asked,” she says, pulling out a very thick notebook that looks full of cutouts and fabric swatches.

“Wow! So have you gone full bridezilla on me now, Hols?”

“No, I am not,” she pouts dramatically. “I just like to be organised, that's all. Ok, so I’ve decided on my colour scheme for the bridesmaids,” she bites her bottom lip with anticipation, and I already know what she is going to say. “I want you girls in black silk. I mean, I mainly made that decision because it’ll look stunning on you, and next to me…fabulous. Not so sure how it's going to look on Cheryl, though.” She rolls her eyes at the mention of her ‘cousin’.

“Hol, why are you even having Cheryl as a bridesmaid if you hate her so much? She's not even your real cousin. She's your Mum's best friend's daughter.”

“I know, but she's really the only other sort of family I have.” My mind instantly wanders to *him*. Where is he right now? More importantly, who’s he with?

“So speaking of family,” I say, clearing my throat and trying to sound as natural as possible. “Has he said yes to being Damon's best man yet?” Shifting in my seat, I brace myself for Holly's response.

“Yeah, Damon asked him over the phone. Not exactly how he wanted it to go, but with him still in Australia, he can't exactly ask him to his face.”

It had been ten long years, yet I miss him the same way I did when he left. He was, and still is, the reason every date I’ve been on in the last ten years has failed. Every time a man has shown me attention or tried to get to know me, it has ended in me pushing them away. Don't get me wrong, I’ve been in relationships, and I’ve done the things that couples do, but I could just never give that piece of me to them. So I either ended it or became so distant they thought I was uninterested or cold.

I'm neither one of those things. I am profoundly interested and beyond hot…the problem is, I'm only that way for one man. One man with hair as dark as ink, eyes the colour of the deepest part of the ocean, and the only man who calls me El's Bells.

My eyes snap back to Holly when I realise she’s still talking. “So he said he will be coming here next weekend so that we can talk over plans and get dates in the diary for the Stag and Hen party and anything else we might need him for.” She wipes the corners of her mouth with a napkin, then screws it up and puts it in her empty coffee cup.

“So he's coming back here? To the UK? Just to put dates in the diary?”

“Yeah, I know, right! So sweet of him, well, I guess he can afford it now with his own tattoo studio and everything. Damon said his work is insane!”

I already knew this, though. I found his Instagram page while looking through Damon's following list. He's incredible. Unfortunately for me, there was never more than a side profile of him at work, so I never got to see him face-on. But from what I have seen, he's now such a…such a man! He's covered in tattoos from his neck down and now has this gorgeous dark scruff over his jaw. In most pictures, he’s wearing a T-shirt with the sleeves cut off and a backward hat. I should be arrested for stalking the amount of

times I’ve looked at his pictures, screenshot them, and zoomed in. Never his stories, though; I can't risk him knowing I have looked.

Holly brings me back to earth when I hear her say, “So you'll be there, right?”

“Be where?” I ask, confused because I was too busy daydreaming.

“At the dinner, next Saturday at our house! I need my Maid of Honour there, too, dumbass. Plus the fact, you guys are going to have to speak about syncing up our Hen and Stag parties, etc.”

I swallow thickly at the thought of sharing the same space as him for the first time in just over ten years. What will he think when he sees me? As much as I have noticed the changes in him from his photos, he will see the change in me, too.

∞∞∞

The next seven days flew by far quicker than I wanted them to, and before I knew it, it was Thursday. *Two days to go*.

Surrounded by every item of clothing I own, I slump down in the pile, defeated. I officially have nothing to wear. At this point, I’m not sure why I am even worrying about what I wear. After all, he’s never said or acted in a way that would make me believe that I am anything other than Damon’s little sister or a friend from years gone by.

What if he completely ignores me again like he did at Christmas? What if the version of him I have in my head from when we were teenagers is just that, a version? Someone he no longer is, someone who doesn’t have time for someone like me, who has never left this country, let alone flown across to the other side of the world and built a life for herself. I don’t even know what we would have in common anymore, let alone anything to talk about.

I’m driving myself crazy. I need to get out of this house. So with that, I jump up and leave my bedroom, grabbing my keys off the hook and my bag near the front door. My home is my pride and joy. Walking through the doors, there is a quiet hum of conversation between the locals who come here most evenings for a drink to wind down from their day. Walking to the bar, I order myself a large glass of rosé wine. Making my way through the pub, my eyes scan for the perfect seat. A large brick fireplace sits tucked in the back corner, offering the perfect cozy nook. Pulling out my current read,

I settle in and let the white noise of conversation relax me. Halfway through my wine, I look up just in time to see the front door open and... It can't be; there's no way. He isn't due to get here until tomorrow. But there he is, striding through like he was always supposed to be here. Wearing all black, he looks like every anti-hero I have ever read about. His hair is slightly longer than it used to be, curling on the collar of his leather jacket. He's a dream and a fantasy all rolled into one. From my vantage point, he can't see me, and I silently pray it stays that way. Hoping I can just sit here and enjoy the view of him for a little while. To soak in the view that I have been craving.

I see him effortlessly chatting to the pretty blonde girl serving behind the bar, her pale skin going pinker every time he says something. *Same girl, same!* As he leans forward to point to one of the bottles on the shelf, his jacket and shirt ride up, giving me a glimpse of skin between his jeans and shirt. Ink swirls over every inch of skin that I can see, and I strain my neck to get a better view. As I do so, the book on my lap falls to the floor with a soft thud. Bending down quickly to grab it, cringing as I do so. *God, please don't let him have heard that.* I peek over the table, and by the grace of God, he appears to still be flirting with the barmaid. I sink down low in my chair and gulp back the remains of my wine and take a few steadying breaths. He starts to walk towards me with his head down low. Just as I think he is going to walk right up to me, he turns left towards the restrooms. This is my chance to escape. Swiftly, I grab my things and rush towards the door, speed-walking until I am safely home.

Locking it behind me, my back falls against the door. I don't know if I can do this. Tonight, I was lucky, but in forty-eight hours, I'll have to face him whether I like it or not.

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Chapter Five

Jacob - Seven years previous

Jesus fucking Christ. I can't keep doing this. Living like I'm daring the Grim Reaper to collect me.

Laying in bed my heart races in my chest for no reason; my hands are trembling after hours of fitful sleep, and I can’t catch my breath. The phantom sensation of itchiness begins under my skin, and I know only one way to soothe it.

Fuck it. I swing my legs out of bed and just sit there for a while, holding my head in my hands that feel like they are vibrating against my skull.

I reach for the half-empty vodka bottle sitting on my bedside table, left there from when I passed out last night. I know there’s only one way to do this, to rid myself of this disgusting feeling inside me. So I bring the bottle to my lips and down five long gulps; the burn is a welcome relief, and I know that soon all will be well in the world. Just as I'm going for a sixth, my stomach decides that it’s time to reject all I just consumed. Gritting my teeth and holding on tightly to the edge of the bed, I force the bile back down, refusing to let a single drop go to waste.

To anyone who knows me, I’m just Jacob, the guy who owns a tattoo shop, the guy with a gorgeous home and fancy car on the drive. However, the reality is starkly different. For years now, I have not been able to function within my day without alcohol in my system. Drugs I can take or leave at the moment (but preferably take). The drink, however, has gotten so out of hand that if I try to go without–*and believe me, I have tried*–my body begins to shake and sweat so badly that I have no choice but to give it what it craves. Then, once the come-down hits, the feelings of regret and remorse for whatever occurred that day hit so hard that I numb it by drinking again–rinse and repeat.

When I was in Australia with Damon, I was the life and soul of the party. The guy who always brought the fun, and when that became what I was known for, I ran with it. Because being that version of myself gave me something I had never had growing up: *attention*. Whether it was for the right reasons or not, I revelled in it. Basked in it like a cat in the sunlight. Endless parties came with them, and alongside them came the girls. I slept with dozens of girls, all gorgeous strangers with no names. No names, no do-overs, and definitely *no* relationships.

Then the drinking came earlier and earlier in the day, to the point I would reason with myself that it was completely fine to be drinking goon at ten am, because I'm in Australia, for fuck sake!

The first time I was arrested for being drunk and disorderly out there, I was released without charge, and it was just another thing for our group of friends to laugh about. About ‘what a nightmare Jacob is’ and ‘oh God what's he done now’. I was becoming a caricature of my own self.

The second time I was arrested, I was two years into a sponsorship visa, working in a tattoo shop in Bondi. I had secured this incredible opportunity after striking up a friendship in a bar with a guy called Robbo. He owned the shop, and when I spoke to him about my dream of one day having my own, he asked me to come down and see him at work and bring some of my designs.

So that's what I did; he took me on as an apprentice and promised that if I built up my clientele, he would sponsor me to stay on. It was the happiest I had been in a long time; I was even easing up on the drink to begin with. Then, as I got more settled, more confident in my abilities at the shop, I became complacent.

Robbo stuck to his word, but I screwed it all up when one night I decided to go on an all-night bender, ending with me once again getting arrested for a fight outside a bar. The fight started because I had been doing my usual trick and getting ‘free drinks’ by sweeping past tables and taking what I deemed to be ‘dregs’. Unfortunately for me on this occasion, the man whose drink I swiped saw, and all hell broke loose. Thinking about it now, it frustrates the shit out of me because I could afford my own damn drinks; I just enjoyed the game–and the free drinks. Anyway, this time, I was charged, my visa was revoked, and I was sent packing back to the UK.

I didn't go straight back home, though; I couldn't. I didn't want to look like I had failed. Damon had only done a year in total. Six months partying with

me, and then the following six months on a pig farm out in the sticks. He came back after that and stayed home. He met someone and felt like it was time to start being a grown-up. *Me*? Well, I didn't want that one bit– I wanted to stay in Never Never Land and keep pretending that I was Peter fucking Pan and never grow up.

Of course, that all came to an abrupt end when I was shipped off back home. So I decided to build my tattoo portfolio by moving around the country using guest chairs at whatever tattoo shop would have me. But always keeping a safe distance from my hometown. By this point, my drinking was reaching its peak. I stopped going out socially, opting for staying in and drinking until I blacked out. My routine was the same every day, wake up and drink just to level myself out, then head to work. Lunchtime…drink so that I don't shake so much that I fuck up someone's tattoo and then attempt to finish my day undetected. Then, on my way back to wherever I was staying that night, I would buy at least two litre bottles of vodka so that I knew I had enough for the evening and the following morning. Rinse and repeat.

Damon was constantly on my case, asking how Aus was treating me, and 'have I met a nice Sheila yet?' *He's such a dork*. I desperately wanted to message back, "Wouldn't know how Aus is, mate; the bastards kicked me out. So your guess is as good as mine." But I didn't. I just kept my responses vague because my ego wouldn't allow me to tell my best friend the truth. Much easier to continue drinking on the lies and deceit that were piling up by the day.

We had never lied to each other, and now every single day was becoming just that: one big fat lie. And the longer time went on, the harder it was to break this cycle; it's not like it was something I could just drop into conversation one day. I had to wait for the right time, but unfortunately for me, that time never seemed to come.

I was lucky, really. Damon was the only one who reached out. Although, if I'm being honest–*and during the incredibly dark times when the drink was hitting differently*–I wished it was her, the girl with dark hair and golden eyes. The one with her nose constantly in a book. The girl I would sneak glances at when I knew no one was looking. She had a name; unlike those other girls, she had the most important name to ever exist. *Ella*.

My El's Bells.

I absolutely know I shouldn't have been looking at her in any other way than an older brother figure, because her actual brother was my best fucking friend.

But that's just me; I take and take and take, and when I want something *or someone*, I seem to hyperfixate on it.

So, along with the death of my deadbeat parents, she was one of the main reasons I ran to Australia in the first place. Because that last day the two of us sat under her tree, with that dreamy look on her face, reading Wuthering Heights for the millionth time, I wanted to tell her. I wanted to scream at her that I could be her Heathcliff. *Let me be the one who puts that look on your beautiful face*. But I knew I couldn't…*shouldn't*, have her. So I left before I fucked that up too, because I would… I always do.

When chat around the tattoo community started about a studio that was up for purchase with all equipment included, my ears perked up. The guy who previously owned it was retiring. Then, when I found out it was only an hour or so away from my old home, I quickly deflated. There was no way I could risk being that close, but when curiosity got the better of me and I looked up the space online, I fell in love. If I just stuck to my end of town and kept as low a profile as humanly possible, I could work out the rest as I go.

But deep down I knew I wouldn’t be able to keep this secret up forever; eventually I would have to come clean.

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Chapter Six

Jacob - Present day

Walking into the restroom, I place both hands on either side of the sink and take in a deep breath. She's even more beautiful than I remember. When I came into the pub tonight, I had a single goal: to get so drunk that, with any luck, I would black out and not wake up until Sunday, missing Saturday night's dinner entirely. That came to a screeching halt when the first face I saw through the window was hers. I think it almost comes naturally to me now to seek the chair in the most hidden part of any room, because that's the one she would always choose.

In the last few years I was away, it became second nature to pick that seat too. Obviously, in Australia, I knew she wouldn't be there, and as the years rolled on, I no longer looked for her, expecting to see her around each corner. Peering through the window, my eyes instantly sought out the most peaceful areas, the ones where I knew I could just sit back with my drink and watch the world go on around me. That was until a curtain of dark hair drew my attention; the colour was familiar–a rich chocolate brown draping over a book held by petite hands. When the girl finally tore her eyes away from the book and reached for her wine, her hair fell back behind her shoulder, and I got my first glimpse of her exquisite face. Older, more mature, like all her features had finally settled into the perfect piece of art they were always meant to be. *My El's Bells.*

I watched as she delicately took a sip from the glass, her eyes returning immediately to the book in her hands. My heart felt like it was going to beat straight out of my chest; there was a chance I was going to throw up, and I was *nowhere* near drunk enough to deal with that situation.

I turned to walk away, back to the B&B I was staying in for a few nights. But as I got to the end of the street, I felt a tug, like a magnetic pull had me between my shoulder blades, turning me around and back to the pub. I told myself, '*I can do this, it's just Ella*.' Taking a steadying breath, I pulled

open the door and strode in like the badass I had always portrayed myself to be. When I got to the bar, an average-looking blonde popped up from behind with bottles from the cellar.

"Hi," she says, blushing from her neck to the tips of her ears. *God, they make it so easy sometimes*.

"Hey, how's it going?" I replied, giving her the smile that makes all girls melt on the spot. At least this is a little confidence boost before I go and speak to Ella.

"Can I please gettttt…" I let the word drag, knowing it would bring her attention to my mouth. Biding my time, I leant my elbows on the bar to get a better look at what spirits they had to offer. "Can I just get a pint of lager, please?" Getting on the spirits would possibly be the worst idea in the world. After ten long years of not seeing the girl that makes my throat seize up and my pulse go rapid, I cannot be slurring all over the place. *Wow, J, that was probably one of the most rational, grown up thoughts you've had in a while.* That's when I felt a heat at the back of my neck and a sensation like someone just walked over my grave. It was the same feeling that made me want to turn around and see what it was. *Is she looking at me? Oh God, what do I do now? OK, J, stay cool; you're not ready yet. Get this pint down your neck. Go for a piss and then pretend like it's the biggest shock in the world when you bump into her.*

That's how I found myself here, staring at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. I wonder what she'll think of me now that we're all grown up. Will she still look at me with that shy expression she used to wear around me? Will that delicious blush appear on her cheeks and down her neck? *Ok, it's now or never, J…*

I quickly splash my face with cool water, put my baseball hat back on, and roll my shoulders. *Let's do this.*

Swinging the bathroom door open, I go over in my head what I will say.

"Hey, how's it going? How's life?"

"What you been up to?" *Since I ran away like a pussy...*

"You look different." *Of course she does; it's been ten fucking years.*

Reaching the place in which she should be sitting, all that greets me is an empty chair and an equally empty glass on the table. *Fuck! Where did she go?* I hang around at the bar hoping she's just gone to use the toilet, but when five minutes turn to ten, then twenty, I slump on the high-top bar stool in defeat.

“Did you see a pretty brunette walk out of here?” I ask the barmaid whilst staring into my pint.

“Nope, but I know a blonde who would be interested,” she responds with a suggestive smirk.

“Nah, I’m good. Blondes are a bit too desperate.” I catch a brief look of outrage from her before slamming my now-empty glass back onto the bar. I stride out into the cold night air.

Back in my room at the B&B, I throw my jacket onto the tattered armchair that sits in the corner, pacing up and down on the threadbare carpet. I chastise myself for being a complete chicken shit. I’ve been waiting ten fucking years for an opportunity like tonight, and I bottle it—*Ha! bottle it, the fucking irony.*

I go over and over the events of the night, thinking about all the ways I could have handled the situation differently. If only my mind didn’t always convince me that I wasn’t good enough–a good enough son, a good enough friend, or potentially even a good enough *partner*. All throughout my childhood, I was told I was ‘no good.’ After a while, you have no choice but to believe it as the truth. Slowing my steps, I pick up my case from the floor and set it on the bed. The sound of the Zipper echoes around the room as I retrieve one of the many miniatures I have stashed in rolled-up clothing. Unscrewing the cap, I put it to my lips with shaking hands.

If only I were strong enough to stop this, strong enough to just put the bottle down. The problem is I'm not. Not strong or brave. I’m just like them, those rotten people I called parents.

Parents are the ones you’re supposed to feel the safest with, your ‘go-to’ people that when shit hits the fan, they come swooping in to fix it. Not mine; my parents barely managed to be up and out of bed by the time I came home from school. I never had that Mum that I saw in movies, who would be in the kitchen making dinner as I walked through the door. One who would ask me how my day went, and if I wanted to have a friend over for dinner. No, I was making my own by the age of six. As many nights as I could, I would eat at Damon’s, but on the nights I knew I should go home and check on them, I would eat cold beans out of the can. Sometimes, if I was lucky, I could make myself a sandwich, providing the bread hadn’t turned moldy. Those nights were the worst, when I would go to bed in my cold room, my stomach aching with hunger and the sounds of my parents screaming at each other. I would hear people coming in and out of the house

at all hours, so I would wedge my desk chair against the door handle so no one could get in, and cover my ears so the only sound I could hear was my own racing heartbeat.

I'm not even sure if the strange people in my house knew that there was a child living there. It's not like my parents proudly hung my school photograph on the wall, or my latest artwork on the fridge.

So no, I wasn't brave enough to stop this bullshit. Tipping the bottle back, I let the burning liquid flow down my throat until it lies empty in my hand. Then, quickly grabbing two more, I do the same again until I feel my heart start to slow, my thoughts getting quieter as everything around me starts to blur.

I wake the next morning with my head pounding and my mouth as dry as the Sahara Desert, still in the clothes I was wearing last night. Rolling onto my back and slinging one arm over my face to protect my eyes from the morning light, I attempt to piece together what happened the night before.

Most mornings, I begin like this, attempting to arrange my life like a puzzle bought at a jumble sale, with bits missing. That's when my stomach decides to lurch involuntarily, and I make a run for the bathroom. Purging last night's intake into the toilet bowl,

Lying my face on the cool tile of the floor, it comes to me,

Ella, I saw Ella.

When I left for Australia, I had no plan to ever return here, but of course, my life, being the shit show that it is, had other ideas. Of all the people on the planet for Damon to meet and connect with, it had to be my cousin Holly. Neither of them knew the connection at first, but by the time they did, it was too late. Their connection was instant, and I got it. They really do make the perfect couple. Damon was obviously a little wary at first, thinking that I wouldn't be ok with them seeing one another. I never had an issue with it. Damon's happiness was always a priority to me, and if that meant him being with my cousin, then so be it.

I wonder if he would feel the same if it were his sister and me? Don't be fucking stupid, J. Of course, he wouldn't.

It's a completely different situation; it's his *sister, and* they grew up together. In the same home, a home that he welcomed me into at such a young age.

Damon knew a little of what was going on for me, and he did the one thing no one had ever done: love me. So when I realised as a teenager that I was no longer visiting his house for him, I knew I needed to pull away. For her sake as well as my own. I wasn't naive; I saw the way that Ella would look at me. The difference was that Ella wouldn't have thought in a million years that the feeling was reciprocated. That's just who she is; she doesn't see herself the way everyone around her does. That's one of the many reasons I fell for her.

Peeling myself off the floor, I look at myself in the bathroom mirror. I'm as much of a mess on the outside as I am on the inside. I can't let Damon, Holly, and most importantly, Ella see me like this. So I make a promise to myself that I will not drink again whilst I'm here. I can go 72 hours without alcohol, *right?*

Fucking wrong! After going to a barber a few towns over to get a fresh haircut and then running a few errands, I'm back in my room, and I can't stop the shaking in my hands or the constant rolling in my stomach. After making the promise to myself this morning, I poured the remaining vodka I had down the toilet. God, I just need something, *anything* to take the edge off this.

This is usually the point where the devil on my shoulder wins the argument, and I reach for another drink. But there's something about being back here, being close to where my parents chose this lifestyle over me and lost, that makes me want to stick two fingers up at them and say *"Fuck you! I'm better than that. I'm better than you."*

So, with just under twenty-four hours until I see my chosen family, I toss and turn on sweat-soaked sheets. I will do this, and I'll do it for her.

∞∞∞

When I wake on Saturday afternoon, the shakes still wrack my body, sweat drips down my back, and anxiety rolls through me like a low-level earthquake. At this point, I don't know if it's from the alcohol withdrawal or the sheer panic of what is to come in just a few short hours.

Taking the empty glass that sits on my bedside table into the bathroom, I fill it with cold water, repeating the process until my mouth is no longer

drier than Gandhi's flip-flop.

I seriously need to brush my teeth and have a shower. Turning the dial on the shower wall to scalding hot. I tentatively stand under the spray–the hot water feels like a thousand needles on my overly sensitive skin. I stand there for a long while, just willing the sensation to ease. Pouring a generous amount of shower gel into my hands, I lather it all over my body, brushing my cock in the process….nothing, I give it a tug... still nothing. *What the fuck! Well, that's just brilliant, isn't it? Even my cock feels half dead.*

After brushing my teeth–*gagging several times around the toothbrush*–and sorting my hair, I pull on my usual black jeans, black t-shirt, and leather jacket. Spraying myself with aftershave to attempt to mask the smell of alcohol seeping from my pores, I grab my keys and pull on my boots. *It's showtime.*

On my way to Damon's house, which he sent this morning, I realised that not only am I going to be coming face to face with Ella again, but I'm also seeing Damon for the first time in years. We've stayed connected by phone the whole time, with me even going to the lengths of making sure I only contact him when I would be awake in Aus. I know I need to come clean to him because I would hate for him to think that I've lied. *I mean, I know I have, but it was for a good reason.*

The whole time I'm driving, my mind turns over all the ways in which I can bring it up without sounding like a lying piece of shit. *Again, ok, I know I am.*

"So... Damon, buddy! Funny story, you know when you thought I flew here from Australia… well, actually, I drove about an hour and a half. Stayed in a B&B that was completely unnecessary, as I could have come from my own fucking house." I can safely say this is going down like a cold cup of sick.

Unfortunately for me, there's no more time to dwell on the issue as I pull up outside Damon's house, where all the lights are on, and three cars are parked on the drive. *Three cars, ok, so that means Ella is already here. Brilliant! Ok, let's do this.*

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Chapter Seven

Ella - Present day

Popping another crisp into my mouth nervously, I stare at the clock above the kitchen door; the hands seem to stick with every second that goes by. The sound of the doorbell sends everything into slow motion, and the air around me thickens, making the simple task of breathing exhausting. Dolly, Damon and Holly's chocolate dachshund, runs through the hall to greet the new guest, her excitement a complete contrast to what can only be described as my terror.

Damon casually gets up from his position on the sofa, and Holly is still nonchalantly seeing to the dinner she's cooking for the night. I, however, am desperately trying not to hyperventilate.

He's here, even though I saw him at the pub two nights ago; I feel like this is a pivotal moment. Knowing that I'm going to be face-to-face with him in a few mere moments has my fingers twisting anxiously in my lap.

"Mate! Long time no see. Come in, come in," Damon welcomes him in with the obligatory 'bro' back slap hug. Dolly's barking and heavy footsteps sound through the hall to the kitchen. Until he's there, in the doorway. All 6ft 5 of him, casually leaning against the doorframe, staring directly at me.

"Hey, Ella," he says with his trademark smirk and a mischievous twinkle in his eye. Like he's constantly in on a secret and he's just dying to tell you about it.

I swallow thickly, trying to remember how to form words.

'Hey, yourself, Jacob.' The pause I have to take before saying his name out loud feels so obvious to me. Like everyone in the room can hear my heart beating out of my chest. As if they can see the sweat that is currently trickling down my back from his close proximity. His nonchalant demeanour is screwing with my head– why does he get to be so cool, calm, and collected while I'm here, having a silent panic attack?

“Dinner will be ready in twenty minutes, so if you guys want to go chill in the lounge, I’ll be through in a minute,” Holly says after giving him a swift kiss on the cheek in greeting.

“Sounds good to me, J. Do you want a beer?” Damon asks as he goes towards the fridge to retrieve the drinks.

Jacob seems to falter at this, just a breath of a moment that, if anyone else were watching, they wouldn't think anything of it. But it’s not just anyone watching him; it’s me. Even though we have spent all these years apart, it seems I still know Jacob like I know myself. I mean, I should; I spent enough years watching him, learning all his little tells and expressions. He’s warring with himself over something, and whatever that something is, it’s taking all his strength to fight it.

“Nah, I’m good, mate, thanks. I’m driving.” He simply states with a shrug.

Damon begins to laugh at this. “Since when has that *ever* stopped you before?”

Pushing off the door frame, Jacob walks behind my position on the breakfast bar stool to playfully punch Damon on the arm.

“Since I grew up, dickhead, maybe you should try it.”

His scent overwhelms me, flooding my nose and making heat spread up my neck and down my chest. That unique smell I thought I remembered so clearly feels new yet familiar all at once. That’s when it dawns on me; it’s not the scent that has changed, it’s the person wearing it. It’s a rich, masculine smell with soft undertones of amber and vanilla, something sweet and intoxicating, making my mouth water and my legs clench together. A strong hand touches my shoulder, and a rumbling voice reaches my ear–

“Looking good, El’s.”

I’m dead. I must be; I have to be imagining that Jacob just whispered that to me. Shooting my head towards Holly and Damon, neither one of them appears to have noticed this moment. So I swing my head back round to look at Jacob, whose eyes are trained on me over the rim of his glass. I watch mesmerised as his Adams apple bobs, swallowing down the liquid. *Holy shit! What is happening right now? I’ve forgotten how to breathe. Say something for the love of FUCK, Ella.*

“Thanks, you too.” Jesus, with all the romance books I read, all the fantastic one-liners I have read over the years, and that is what I settle on!

Smooth, Ella, really smooth.

Needing some space from whatever the *fuck* this is, I get up as casually as I can manage and make my way to the bathroom. Closing and locking the door behind me, I stare at my reflection. My cheeks are flushed, and there are patches of red forming on my chest. Running the cold tap, I splash some on my face and down my neck; the cool water feels refreshing on my overheated skin.

I have to get a grip. I'm going to be spending a lot of time with him in the coming months, and it can't be like this every time.

So with that in mind, I take a deep breath and go to walk out of the bathroom. A wall of what can only be described as pure masculinity stops me; my hands instinctively fly out and connect with a hard, muscled chest.

"Just came to check you were ok; you looked a bit flustered," Jacob says, looking down at his shoes. A look of vulnerability on his handsome face. I take a step–*and my hands*–back.

"I'm fine, just lots going on at the moment, that's all. How long will you be in the UK?"

"I'll be going home the day after tomorrow." he replies with a genuinely uncomfortable look.

What is with him? He's giving me whiplash. One minute he's all cocky, telling me I look good–*which is definitely something I am going to have to unpack later at home*–then the next minute he's giving me this shy and defenseless look. Now that I'm so close to him, I can see the thin layer of sweat that covers his forehead and the dark shadows under his eyes. He will always be the most good-looking man in any room, but right now, I can see how the years have aged him. He almost looks unwell. My hand itches to touch him, to comfort him from a hurt I'm not even sure of. So I shove it into my jeans pocket to make sure I don't.

I really need to create some distance here. I go to move around him in the narrow hallway that leads to the bathroom. Though when I do, the hand that isn't stuffed in my pocket brushes his, and he grabs it. The contact sends electricity all the way up my arm, and I look up to see him. He's staring down at our joined hands like he's just as confused by the action as I am. As abruptly as he grabbed it, he dropped it, mumbling what I think is an apology.

Continuing down the hall, I still have the phantom feeling of his skin against mine, like those couple of seconds of contact have branded him onto

my body. I wipe my hand down my thigh to try and rid the feeling, but I'm under no illusion that he will be easy to shake off.

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Dinner passes by without any further awkward encounters as we discuss the plans for Damon and Holly's wedding. They have decided that they don't want a traditional separate stag and hen party. Instead opting for a joint long weekend somewhere sunny.

The realisation is not lost on me that this means not only will I have to organise this alongside Jacob, but I will be spending the weekend in the same hotel as him for *four* nights. *God give me strength.*

I start making my excuses to leave early once dinner is cleared away. The tension has been quite enough for one evening. Grabbing my coat and bag, I say a quick goodbye to Damon and Holly, and as I turn to say goodbye to Jacob, he is standing with his keys in his hand and his jacket on.

"I'll walk you out," he says to me, as he kisses Holly goodbye and gives Damon a quick hug.

"There's really no need; my car is on the drive," I reply, walking out the door.

He's right behind me as I use my key fob to unlock my car. In a split second, he's in front of me, his hand on the driver's side handle.

"So can I take you for lunch tomorrow, you know, to talk about the stag and hen party?" I slide into the car, making sure to keep as much distance as I can. Jacob leans in, bending at the waist so that he can still see me.

"Ummm…yeah, I guess that would be ok. We don't have a lot of time together to plan, so it would probably be a good idea to hash out the important stuff before you go home."

"Ok, great. I'll pick you up tomorrow at twelve. If you give me your number, you can send me a pin of where I need to go." Quickly unlocking his phone, he passes it over to me. I input my number and then hand it back to him.

"See ya tomorrow, El's Bells." Closing my door gently, I watch as he walks down the drive towards a slick black SUV.

I blow out the breath I feel I have been holding for the last ten minutes, put my keys in the ignition, and fasten the belt across my waist. The sound of my phone chiming pulls my attention from setting off–

Unknown:
It was so good to see you tonight, El's and I meant what I said; you really are looking good…

With shaking hands, I quickly respond:

Me:
Well, you have my number now, so we can discuss all things wedding. Also, here's the pin for my address. Ella.

Unknown:
See you tomorrow. Can't wait.

I read and re-read the text thread four times before inputting his number into my phone and starting the car. The entire journey home, my head is reeling at the events of the night, and now, I have to do it all again tomorrow.

Shit.

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Chapter Eight

Jacob - Present Day

Crashing down on the bed once I get to my B&B, I replay everything that happened tonight.

I honestly don't know what came over me the first time I told Ella how good she looked, but my god, she did. Ella has always marched to the beat of her own drum; she never tries to be someone she isn't, and because of that, she's even more attractive. When I first saw her sitting on that stool with her long legs crossed at the ankles, and her dark hair pulled up into a ponytail showcasing her slender neck, I wanted to pounce on her and kiss her until she forgot her own name.

She looked so nervous sitting there, wringing the life out of her delicate fingers; all I could hope was that I wasn't the cause of her discomfort, but then again, if it was someone else who made her feel that way, I would have to kill them.

I flop onto my back and stare at the ceiling, recalling how good she smelt when I whispered in her ear. I watched goosebumps appear on her forearms, and her chest rise and fall much faster than before. *God, I wonder if those perky little nipples got hard at the sound of my voice so close to her….FUCK.* I should not be thinking of my best friend's sister's nipples.

After brushing my teeth and stripping out of my clothes, I fall into bed. My body feels like I've gone ten rounds in a boxing ring and I lost every single one. But then my brain switches onto the fact that I have officially gone over forty-eight hours without a drink. Maybe I really can do this long-term… *no*–I can't think about the long-term. I need to sleep, and tomorrow is a new day. A new day where I get to spend it with her…*alone*.

I pick up my phone and read over our little message exchange from earlier. I lay there for longer than I should, contemplating if I should send her a goodnight message, but I think better of it. Coming out of the message

app, I set my alarm for 8a.m. I need to go for a run before I see her to try and burn off any built-up tension.

I close my eyes and *will* myself to relax and stop thinking about tomorrow. I cannot turn up there looking like an extra from the ‘Walking Dead’.

∞∞∞

It turns out that one of the many ‘fun’ little perks of going cold turkey from alcohol is insomnia, which means that I got a grand total of about four and a half hours of sleep before I finally gave up and put on my running gear.

Once my feet hit the concrete, I couldn’t seem to stop, and my legs took me of their own accord, right back to where it all started: my childhood house. It didn’t look like how I remembered. There were no overgrown weeds in the front garden; instead, there were beautiful potted plants lining the small path that leads to the front door. The new glossy red colour with shiny hardware is a world away from the bashed-up green door I used to walk through. For a while I just stand and look at it. I wonder what kind of person I would have been if I had grown up in a home like this, with parents who not only cared for me, but also for the environment that I lived in. I shake my head to rid myself of these thoughts, because I didn’t grow up in a house like this, and I certainly didn’t have parents who cared.

The run back to the B&B is much harder than the one coming out. My legs now feel like lead, and sweat is pouring from every inch of my body. *Well, I guess that’s one way towards getting all this shit out of my system.*

Going through the main entrance, the smell of bacon and eggs hits my nose, and my stomach growls its appreciation at the scent. I make my way into the small dining area where there is a long table against the back wall with a white tablecloth on it. A large urn sits at the end with a small tray next to it offering sachets of crappy instant coffee or individual tea bags. I make myself a black coffee and also pour a glass of fresh orange juice from a jug, gulping the refreshing drink down as I stand. *Why are the glasses always so damn small in these places?* Filling another glass, I go and take a seat at one of the tables near the window. Checking the time, noticing that it’s only six thirty in the morning, I wonder if they’ll even serve me this early.

Just as I’m considering leaving and coming back later, a woman in her late sixties with wild curly hair tied up and extremely rosy cheeks comes bustling through the door that leads to the kitchen.

“Christ!” she exclaims with a hand to her chest. “I didn’t know anyone was in here yet; you certainly are an early riser.”

“I can come back later if it’s too early,” I say as I stand to leave.

“Nonsense, darlin’, sit back down. Everything’s nearly ready anyway. What would you like this morning?” She hands me a small handwritten menu with different breakfast options.

“Can I please have a plain omelette with some bacon on the side?” I ask, handing the menu back. Usually I would order a full English, but my stomach still isn’t in the best shape, so I think it’s the safest option.

“Of course, sweetheart. I bet it’s hard keeping a figure like that,” she says, pointing in the general area of my chest and abs that can be seen through the T-shirt I’m wearing. “I wouldn’t know, of course.” Laughing as she pats her own round tummy.

She turns around and goes back through to the kitchen, and I mindlessly scroll through social media. After answering a few enquiries from potential clients, I put my phone down just as she returns with my food.

“Here you go, lovely, enjoy! If you need anything else, I’m just through those doors.” After putting down the plate of steaming food, she leaves.

The smell instantly starts to turn my stomach, but I know that I need to eat something or I’m going to feel ten times worse. I tentatively scoop a fork full of the fluffy eggs and put the bite into my mouth. It’s delicious, and the more I eat, the more I start to feel human again. Finishing the whole plate, I leave to go back up to my room. *Time to get ready to pick up Ella.*

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Chapter Nine

Ella - Present day

Adjusting my chair to get a better view of the ocean, I look out of the floor-to-ceiling windows and take in the scene before me. Endless blue sea that sparkles from the spring sunshine that reflects off it. Golden sand with families huddled together, the weather not quite warm enough to fully enjoy the beach. But after a traditional British winter, the public flocks to the nearest beaches as soon as the sun shines.

“What are you thinking about?” Jacob asks me from across the table in the seafront restaurant we drove thirty minutes to get to. When he picked me up earlier, he said that he wanted to take me somewhere away from our usual places. We drove in relatively comfortable silence, with just the sound of the car stereo on in the background.

“I was just thinking I bet this beach doesn’t have anything on the ones from Australia." I meet his eyes, and I see that look again, the one where it feels like he is holding something back. Is now the time to start pushing him for answers? Why did you leave me? Why didn’t you say goodbye? Why didn’t you call? All the questions that have been swimming in my head for the last ten years. But now that I have the opportunity to ask them, I can’t seem to find the words. Or the right way to ask them.

“Yeah, I mean Aus is amazing! The beaches are some of the best in the world. But nothing is quite like home, right?” he says as he takes a sip from his drink.

I nod, not really sure if that was an actual question. I have too many emotions in me to actually answer anyway. Looking over the menu the waitress handed us as we sat down, I go over all the options. Usually I would go for the double cheeseburger and fries, but considering who I am sitting opposite to, I think today will need to be a chicken salad day; I can’t have him seeing me gorging on burgers whilst he effortlessly looks that good.

I look up to see a broad man with a bald head covered in tattoos making his way over to us.

“Jacob, mate, I thought that was you!” he slaps his hand down on Jacob’s shoulder in greeting.

Jacob looks up at him, alarm written all over his face, hesitating for just a moment.

“I saw you from over at the bar and just wanted to come thank you again for the work you did last week on my back. It’s healing nicely. Can’t wait for next month to finish it off.”

Jacob still hasn’t said a word at this point, and he looks like a goldfish out of water.

Wait, what does he mean by last week?

Having found his voice, Jacob now stands and gives the man a one-armed hug.

“That’s great, Luke. I’m so glad you’re happy with the piece, and it’s going to look sick once it’s finished.” They continue this conversation for a few more minutes, but I can’t hear them over my thoughts.

Last week? He wasn’t here last week. He only came home three days ago. Didn’t he?

I realise that the man has left us alone now, and Jacob is looking at me with a pale face and an expression of trepidation.

“How do you know that man?” I ask, sitting on my hands to stop them shaking. Somehow, I just know that whatever is about to come out of his mouth is something that’s going to change everything and be the answer to the weird looks he’s had on his face.

Jacob looks down and starts playing with the napkin on his side of the table.

“He’s a client of mine.”

“Soooo, he just so happens to be in the UK at the same time as you and in the same town and the same restaurant? Sounds like a massive coincidence to me.” I shoot at him.

He pauses for what feels like forever, resignation settling across his features as he leans across the table–

“Can we not do this now?”

“When’s best for you? Another ten years?”

“C’mon Els, please?”

“Don’t ‘*Els’* me right now, tell me, how long have you actually been here?” He lets loose a long sigh, not out of irritation but more like he’s resigned himself to the fact that he’s been caught somehow.

“You’re right, it’s not a coincidence, and no, he’s not here from Australia. He lives here… just like I do.” Those last few words out of his mouth are mumbled like he didn’t want me to hear them. *But I did.*

“What do you mean, you live here?” Leaning forward in my chair, I attempt to make eye contact with him. I need his eyes; his mouth may lie to me, but his eyes never did.

“Exactly what I say,” he continues, finally looking up at me. That’s when it hits me, that look on his face. It’s one I’ve never seen him wear before...defeat.

“I’ve been back living in the UK for nearly seven years now, El’s.” The breath is completely stolen from me with his words.

Seven years? He’s been here all this time, and not once did he reach out. Not once did I see him.

“I’m sorry,” I say, shaking my head to try and clear it. “I don’t understand. What do you mean you’ve been back here for seven years? What about the amazing tattoo shop? The beautiful house near the beach? I don’t get it, Jacob. Was all of that a lie?”

“No!” he implores, reaching his hands over the table to hold mine, but I snatch mine away, not wanting him to touch me right now. “No, none of that was a lie. I *do* own a tattoo studio, and I *do* have a house near the beach.” he pauses, seemingly thinking about his next words. “I have all of that, El’s. It’s just that both those things are here, not Australia.”

I look out at the sea again, a frown pulling my eyebrows together. The landscape before me seems mocking in its beauty now, as if it were in on the secret the whole time.

“Say something, please.” His tone makes me pull my gaze from the window.

“Why?” I ask. Tears sting my eyelids, but I refuse to let them fall. “Why didn’t you tell me? Tell *us* that you were here this whole time?” My reaction to this news must be confusing to him. Why would I care, really? To him, we are nothing more than childhood friends; he never owed me anything.

He drops his hands in his lap, which had been lying unwanted on the table. Nervously playing with the hem of his T-shirt.

“Because I hated that I did what I seem to always do: fail. At first, when I came back, I was just going to get myself set up, and then I was going to tell you I was back.” He takes another sip of his drink, needing to regain his composure.

“Then the more time went on, the more difficult it became to tell you and Damon. You both thought I was out there living the dream, and to be honest, I just wanted to live in that lie for a while. A lie where the version of me isn’t a complete fuck up.”

I take in his words, chewing them over in my mind. I do get it to an extent, but I always felt like our bond was stronger than that. I never felt like Jacob was trying to be anything but himself in front of us. Now it just feels like the man I am looking at in this restaurant on a Sunday afternoon is nothing more than a made-up person.

“Do you want to leave?” he asks, flicking his eyes between me and the window.

“I think that might be a good idea. I need some time to digest all of this.”

“I get it, let's go.” Standing up, he comes around to me to pull out my chair. Our bodies brush together as I stand.

“I’m so sorry, El,” he says in a voice that I hardly recognise as his.

“I know, Jacob, I know.”

∞∞∞

As we drive home, Jacob starts heading in the opposite direction from where I know we should be.

“Where are we going?” I ask, twisting my body to face him.

“You’ll see really soon, I promise. I just want to take you to one place, and then I promise I’ll drive you home.” He continues to concentrate on the road ahead of him. Giving me the opportunity to sneak glances at him. The way his jaw flexes as he chews a piece of gum. The way the corded muscle of his forearm, covered in ink, flexes as he changes gear.

God, he really is a thing of beauty, but he’s restless; I can tell by the way his fingers drum on the steering wheel and how his leg bounces when his foot isn’t on the clutch. He’s nervous. Of what, though I’m not sure.

After a short drive, we pull up to a tall wrought-iron gate with high stone walls on either side. Jacob rolls his window down and leans out, entering a

code into the PIN pad.

The gates swing open, and behind is the most breathtaking house I have ever seen. It's almost completely made of glass with just the odd black accent of structure. Jacob swings the car around so we are parked directly in front of two massive black front doors. He hops out of the car and comes around to my side to open my door. Taking my hand, he leads me up the steps. With the set of keys he has, he opens it, and I suck in an audible breath.

"Holy shit!" I say as I slap my hand across my mouth. White marble and soft lighting greet me, and on every wall, there are big canvas paintings of black-and-white art.

"Is this… is this your house?" I ask in complete shock. I knew Jacob had been doing well for himself, but seriously, how the hell has he afforded a place like this?

"Yep," he says, shrugging with a humble smile on his face.

He leads me through the entranceway into the biggest kitchen I have seen in my life. A far cry from my cosy little cottage in the sticks.

"It's fucking huge, Jacob." I innocently say as I'm walking around the kitchen island.

He lets out the biggest laugh, and I turn round to look at him questioningly.

One eyebrow raised, he says in a tone I have missed so much, "That's what she said." Then winks.

Composing myself, I say, "I meant the house smartass!"

Continuing to laugh, he walks up next to me and softly says, "For now."

WTF!

Putting distance between us, I continue to stroll through the different rooms, each one more beautiful than the last.

"You wanna come sit outside with me?" Jacob asks, pulling two bottles of water from one of those massive American-style fridges.

"Sure."

Following him out of the large glass sliding door, I am greeted with the prettiest garden and a view of the sea out in the distance.

"Jacob, this place is incredible."

"Thanks. I bought it about two years ago, once my shop was doing well. Before then, I just lived in the room above it so that I could afford the house of my dreams. Once the money from the sale of my parents' house came

through, I was set. Thank god they decided to buy in an area where house prices are high, before they got…*high.*"

I don't know how to react to that, so I just take a seat in one of the comfy-looking patio chairs and look out at the view.

"Come on, then hit me with them."

I look over at Jacob, not really understanding what he means.

"Questions! I know you must have them," he says with a confidence I'm certain he doesn't feel right now. I sure as shit don't.

I sit back in my chair and try to get comfortable for a conversation that I know is going to be anything but; I don't even know where to begin. Everything feels so heavy, and even though I've been pining for ten years for a moment like this, now I just wish I were back at home, where I can think over today's revelations in peace.

I decide that the only way to do this is to jump in at the deep end.

"Why did you leave without saying goodbye?" I watch him out of the corner of my eye, mulling over my question.

"I know it was selfish, El's, but after my parents died. I finally felt like I could be free. Free to go and see and do whatever I wanted without them tying me down." He unscrews the cap on his water bottle and takes a long drink, continuing, "I should have come and said goodbye to you, though. I just thought it would be easier for both of us if we didn't have to do the whole goodbye thing."

"Easier for you, you mean. In the space of a week, both you and Damon were gone, and even though I got to say bye to him, it was still shit to watch my two favourite people leave." I realise I said that last part out loud, and I look at him to see if he heard me properly.

He's looking at me with an intense look of sadness and something else. "I was one of your favourite people?" he asks me like he never knew how much he meant to me. How could he not have known?

"Well, you *were*, not now obviously." I quickly respond with feigned malice.

He laughs a self-deprecating laugh. "Oh, of course not *now*." he pauses for a beat. "This is so weird. When we were kids, we used to talk for hours. Damon would fall asleep early, and you and I would just stay up chatting shit until the morning. D'you remember?" *Remember?* I've thought about those nighttime chats every single day since the last time we had one. But I

don’t know where he is going with this, so I just nod and stay silent. I wouldn’t trust anything that comes out of my mouth right now anyway.

I wait, hoping he will elaborate, but he gives a quick shake of his head instead and says, “Ok, next question?”

Next question? What I want to ask is, was it just me? Was it just me who felt this connection between us? Is it just me who still feels it now? But I don’t ask that; instead, I take a deep inhale and train my eyes out to the ocean

“Are you happy, Jacob?” I direct my gaze at him.

Silence that stretches on and on is followed by a voice that barely resembles Jacob’s.

“I’m working on it, El’s, I’m working on it.”

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Chapter Ten

Jacob - Present Day

After the meet-up with Ella on Sunday, my stomach rolls with nervous anticipation of what I need to do. I have no idea how he's going to react to this, and for all I know, it could be ten times worse than Ella.

Me:
Hey man, how's it going?

I don't have to wait too long before I see the three lines jumping at the bottom of the screen indicating his response.

D-dog:
All good here, brother! Thanks so much for coming this weekend. I know it's a fucker of a flight. So I appreciate it, and so does Hol's

Me:
All good. No need for thanks. You working today?

D-dog:
Yeah! Just leaving now.

Me:
Nice. You free for lunch?

D-dog:
Huh? Aren't you back in Oz?

Me:
Not exactly no.

D-dog:
?

Me:
Meet me at the Willet and I'll explain then. 1 pm?

D-dog:
Sure thing. Mad confused but ok? You're not in some sort of trouble, are you?

The fact that Damon would immediately jump to the conclusion that I had somehow got myself into trouble in the forty eight hours since I last saw him is another reminder of why I need to get my shit together.

Me:
Me? Trouble? Of course not. See ya later 🤞

∞∞∞

"So, you've had my head reeling since this morning about why you're still here, dude. What's the sitch?"

Sitting down at a table near the window, Damon looks at me with an expression that's a mix of worry and curiosity.

"Ok, so there's not really an easy way to say this. So I'm gonna just jump right in and say it."

"Fuck, man, what is it? Are you sick or something?"

"No, no, nothing like that." *Well, sick in the head maybe, but that's a conversation for another day.*

"Ok, so spit it out… I only have an hour for lunch." He calmly takes a sip of his beer. The condensation that rolls down the glass makes my mouth water and my skin itch. I really shouldn't be in a pub right now, but I needed this to feel as normal as possible.

"Right, yeah, ok. I won't be getting a flight back to Aus. Not now, or ever. I actually left about seven years ago."

I flick my eyes up to look at him, and he's staring at me. *Fuck! I think he's gonna lose it with me.*

"Seven years? But how? Where the hell have you been all this time, if not in Aus?" I can see the hurt start to register on his face.

"Here in the UK. The last couple of years I've been pretty local."

"Local? Like how local, J?"

“Like about an hour and a half away,” I sheepishly say behind the rim of my glass.

“What the fuck, man! Seriously? Why didn’t you tell me before?”

I proceed to tell Damon an edited version of what happened leading up to me leaving Australia. I expertly skirt around the issue of me being a complete waste-of-space alcoholic who actually got kicked out, and didn’t just leave. He stays quiet through my explanation, just nodding his head every now and then. I knew telling Damon was going to be hard, and one day when I am strong enough I’ll explain everything. Right now I just need him to trust me.

He takes the last few gulps of his beer, having downed most of it during my confession. The sight of the condensation dripping down his pint glass is like looking at a fresh glass of water when you’ve been stuck in the Sahara Desert for weeks.

Wiping the back of his hand across his mouth, he looks at me, then asks, “Why now? Why has it taken you this long to tell me?”

“I don’t know, dude. I just wanted to get settled and make something of myself. The longer it went on, the harder it felt to tell you. Like I said to Ella-”

“Ella? Wait, Ella knows you’ve been here this whole time?”

“No, I only told her on Sunday when I saw her for lunch.”

“So hold on, let me get this straight: you took her out for lunch to tell her before you told me?”

Shit, shit, shit!

“It’s fine,” he says, getting up to leave. “Actually, you know what, J? For once, it’s not fine. You can go and talk to my sister but not me? What the fuck is that about? I need to get back to work; just give me some time to digest this.”

“Damon, mate, I never meant to upset you.”

“But you have,” he shoots back at me. In all the years I’ve known Damon, he has never looked at me like he is right now. Like he’s disappointed in me.

“It’s fine J. I’ll get over it. We’ll talk soon, but I gotta go.”

He leaves, and I’m left sitting there with my mouth half open, a response I was struggling to form hanging in the air.

Well, true to form, Jacob, you royally fucked that one up. Well done, mate.

I need to get out of here; the smell of stale alcohol is starting to turn my stomach, and I'm a heartbeat away from going back down a dark path.

∞∞∞

Later that night I lie on my sofa with my phone in my hand, contemplating whether or not to message Ella. After dropping her home on Sunday night, I quickly collected my things from the B&B and came home. No need to stay there any longer.

Her house was exactly what I thought it would be, quintessentially British with its thatched roof and cobbled brick. Something straight out of one of her books.

The thought of her all alone in that house is one I have often. Does she bring men back to her house? Is she dating someone right now? Is someone there with her, doing things that I've fantasied about with my fist clenched around my dick?

It's not like I could ever ask Damon these things. It's his sister, for one, and secondly, he would be pretty suspicious about why I would want to know.

But still, the thoughts plague me as I lay here, my cock starting to stir in my joggers.

Oh, now you wanna make yourself known?

Just as I'm thinking about dealing with this situation, my phone buzzes in my hand.

Ella's name lights up the screen. I shoot up and run a hand through my hair.

She can't see you, dipshit.

I fumble with the green accept button and answer.

"Hey! How's it going?"

"Better than you, I expect. Heard you saw D today."

Her chastising tone in my ear is one I crave. As long as she's talking to me in one way or another, I don't care.

"Uh, yeah, I did. Did he say much about it?"

"Just that you told him about living here. It takes a lot to piss him off so congratulations."

"Yeah, cheers, Ella. Is that why you called? To rub it in?"

“No, not really. Well, maybe a bit,” She laughs, and the sound is music to my ear. God, I’ve missed it so much.

“The reason I called was because we need to organise the stag and hen party weekend. So, I’m thinking of just a small group of us, a little bit of sun, but nothing too pricey.”

I interrupt her, “It’s fine, I got it covered.”

“You’re not paying for me, Jacob,” She stubbornly snaps back at me.

“Call it an apology for being an absent dickhead.”

“No! Absolutely not. Pay for Damon and Holly by all means. But I can pay for myself, thanks.”

Stubborn, beautiful girl.

“Ok fine,” I concede. “Where are you thinking of?”

“I don’t know. Maybe somewhere like Spain? The flight isn’t too far.”

“Sounds amazing. Are we keeping the destination a secret?”

“I think we’ve had enough secrets kept recently, don’t you?”

Touche.

“Plus, Holly will want to know *exactly* where we’re going so that she can pack according to the weather, or whatever Instagram landmark is around.”

I bark a laugh. “Yeah, you’ve got a point there.”

“Ok, so I’m looking at deals online now.” *Of course she is; I bet she’s surrounded by Post-it notes and organisers right now.*

“So, for three nights all-inclusive we could stay in a hotel right by the sea in Tenerife, for just under five hundred each.”

“Sounds like a plan to me. I could use a bit of sun on my face. So when are you thinking?”

“Well, the wedding is in June, so if we do the party in May, that breaks things up a little. What do you think?”

“Yep, I’m down, just send me the details and links for where I need to book, and I’ll dust off my swim shorts.”

“I’ve never been abroad, so I really need to go shopping.”

“Really? You never went on girls' trips or anything?”

“No, Jacob, I didn't. I was too busy getting my degree and working every hour under the sun to save for my house.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you.” *Jesus, I just keep putting my foot in it everywhere I turn.*

“It’s fine. Ok so that’s agreed then. I will send out the invitations this week to their crew. Get an idea of numbers, and then we can start booking. I’ll

also look into some fun activities to do when we're there too."

"Definitley, need a boat day or something."

"That's what I was thinking."

"Ok, tell you what, you do invitations, and I'll source some fun shit for us to do."

"Really? That would be great if you could; it would take a job off my list," she says, sounding tired all of a sudden.

"Sure, no problem. With work at the shop, I can pretty much do what I want and when. Just let me know if you need anything. I'll happily be your errand boy."

"Oh, don't tempt me. The mischief in her voice is apparent.

"Go get some sleep. Tomorrow, make a list of everything that needs to be done, and we can share it out between us."

"Ok, thanks, Jacob."

"No problem, El's Bells."

The line cuts off, and I sit there looking at the blank screen. The thoughts going through my head are all ones that I know I shouldn't be having. Not about my best friend's little sister anyway.

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Chapter Eleven

Ella - Present Day

The incessant sound of a car horn jolts me awake.

What the hell!

Groggily, I roll over to look at the clock on my bedside table, which reads 9:40 am. Sunday is the only day I get to sleep in, drink coffee, and read my books. With absolutely no one to answer to and no schedule to keep. *So who the fuck was making all that noise?*

Begrudgingly, I get up and peek out my bedroom window. Parked right outside my gate is a familiar, all-black SUV, with an equally familiar tattooed arm resting out the driver's window.

Jacob honks the horn one last time before I see him jump out and start striding towards my door. I leap away from the window. Oh *shit, oh shit, oh shit! Why is he here?*

With my back flat against the wall, I carefully pull the curtain back to see where he is, only to come face to face with him through the glass.

“Morning, sunshine! You gonna let me in? Or shall I just stay out here looking like a peeping tom?” he says, grinning from ear to ear. *No one should be that happy, or look this good at this time of the morning.*

“Wh-what are you doing here, Jacob?” I say whilst trying to discreetly pull my extremely small bed shorts out of my butt.

“You said you needed to go shopping for holiday clothes, so let’s go!” He hikes his thumb over his shoulder towards his car.

“Ummm, I’m not even dressed yet.”

“That’s cool, I’ll make coffee whilst you get ready.”

Realising I’m not going to be getting rid of him anytime soon, I nod my head towards the front door, indicating for him to meet me there. I almost break my ankle running to my dressing table mirror to assess the damage that my sleep has caused. Quickly dragging a brush through my dark

strands, I realise I'm beyond saving. I head to the front door opening up to see him casually waiting for me.

God he looks good. All 6ft something of him. With his tight t-shirt that clings to his muscled body, dark jeans and a baseball cap backwards. *Lord have mercy, this man was too good looking.*

I tear my eyes away from his bulging arms to see him looking me up and down, staring at my legs.

"Are you coming in, or are you just gonna stand there staring?" I ask with far more confidence than I'm feeling right now.

Shaking his head, he apologises and walks through the door into the hallway, he looks like a giant in my small space.

"The kitchen is through there, and the coffee stuff is next to the bread bin. Give me like twenty minutes and I'll be with you."

"No rush, I know you weren't expecting me. If you want me to come back a bit later I can."

"It's fine, you're right, I really need to get myself organised. I only get one day off a week so I need to make the most of the free time."

"Great! Ok, go get ready and I'll make the coffee."

"Thanks." Turning back towards my room I make a dash for my ensuite, feeling his eyes burning my backside. Once inside I lean my forehead against the locked door and breathe. Desperately trying to slow down my racing heart.

Jacob bloody Danielson is in my kitchen making coffee. Looking like sin in a baseball cap. I really need to get it together.

Shimmying to the bathroom I jump in the shower making quick work of shaving all the necessary areas–*don't ask me why* and washing my hair.

Stepping out and wrapping a towel around my body, I realise that I've left my hair brush in my room. Poking my head out, I check that the coast is clear and run back to my dresser to grab it. Spinning back around I see Jacob standing in my doorway, a steaming cup of coffee in his hand and a look on his face that is so heated it's making my skin crawl.

"Sorry, I just thought you would probably want to drink this as you're getting ready."

"Oh yeah… umm thanks. Let me take that." Reaching my hand forward I take the mug from him, whilst also clinging desperately to my towel to maintain my dignity.

Jacob turns to walk back out, but not before giving me another once over. I can feel the heat coming from my cheeks as I watch his retreating back.

∞∞∞

We were now three shops down, and I had managed to buy absolutely *nothing*.

The pressure of trying to pick holiday clothes whilst in the presence of Jacob was too much for me to deal with. I was going from item to item, looking at them and then putting them back. The mere scent of him was dizzying, his casual nearness was making me lose which way was up and down.

“Would it maybe help if you tried some stuff on?” Jacob says with his arms full of identical black and white t-shirts and a handful of swim shorts.

“Yeah, I guess, I’m just not good at choosing at all. I *hate* clothes shopping,” I say angrily, putting another basic co-ord back on the rack.

“Ok, I have an idea. Go and find a dressing room and I’ll bring you some stuff to try. Trust me, I’m good at this stuff.” He winks and gets on with his mission. His infectious smile is hard to deny, so I head to the changing rooms to await my fate.

I didn’t have to wait long in there under the horrific fluorescent lighting and mirror that didn’t do justice to *anyone*.

“Ella? Where you at?”

I poke my head from behind the curtain to see Jacob standing there with an armful of clothes and his other hand over his eyes.

“Jacob, there’s no one else here,” I say with a laugh.

“Oh, ok cool.” He says, dropping his hand from his eyes. He gives the young female worker a panty-melting smile, as he confidently walks towards me. She dutifully smiles back as she rakes her eyes over him.

“You don’t mind if I help my friend pick some clothes do you?” he says to her over his shoulder.

“I mean… you’re not really supposed to be in here, but I guess as no one else is, it’s ok.” She blushes.

“Thanks beautiful.” He shoots her a wink before handing me the clothes and taking a seat on the sofa opposite.

Assessing the clothes he gave me, I shake my head. *Who exactly does he think he's dressing here?*

Short summer dresses and tiny denim shorts assault my eyes, and don't even get me started on the bikini's. I turn a pair of the bottoms around in my hands. Which is the front and which is the back?

I decide I need to be brave and start with one of the more modest summer dresses. Pulling it over my head and turning to the mirror, I'm surprised by my reflection. The buttermilk yellow makes my skin appear more tanned and my eyes deep and rich.

I step out of the cubicle to show Jacob, who lifts his head from his phone. He fumbles with it and I could swear I see the flash go off.

"Fuck!"

"You don't like it?" The confidence I felt a moment ago suddenly disappearing.

"No! Oh God no. You look," I watch him swallow, his adams apple bobbing in his throat. "You look amazing."

He holds my gaze for what feels like forever. The intimate truth of his words hit me straight in the chest. The feeling is so intense I have to break our connection by turning away and hiding back in the changing room. Taking another look at myself in the mirror, I decide that if that is the kind of reaction this dress evokes from him, then I am definitely getting this one.

With my decision made, I grab the hem of the dress to pull it over my head, determination spurring me on ready to try on the next one. Maybe something a little more revealing this time. But when I realise it isn't going to budge past my breasts, I drop the dress back down, twisting around to see if there is a zipper that maybe I missed. But I can't see one. *How did I get this thing on?*

Starting to panic, I remove both straps from my shoulders and attempt to shimmy it down my body. Yet again coming up short when it will go no further than my boobs.

"Everything ok in there?" Jacob's voice comes from the other side of the curtain.

"Yep! Fine, totally fine," I call out from beneath the fabric that I now have thrown over my head.

"You sure?" There's a hint of amusement in his tone, which is only making this situation worse.

“I’m stuck in the damn thing,” I admit in defeat.

“You need some help?” He’s not even trying to conceal his laughter now, his voice just on the other side of the curtain.

“No! Don’t you dare come in here. It’s fine.” At this point, I’m glad I like the damn dress because it looks like I’ll be wearing it for the foreseeable future.

Attempting one last tug down of the fabric, I slump to the floor, exhausted and sweaty. My head hangs between my knees when I see the tops of Jacob's shoes come into view by my feet. He extends his hand out to me with a soft, non-judgmental look on his face.

“Come on, El’s, I got you.” His beautiful eyes look so sincere as they crinkle at the edges, another sign of the years we have been apart.

Taking his offered hand, I rise to my feet, keeping my focus on the floor.

“Lift up.” He says, raising the hand he’s still holding, and encouraging my other hand to do the same.

“Jacob, please, it’s fine. I feel embarrassed enough as it is. The last thing I need is you seeing me half naked.”

“Close your eyes then and turn around.” He says steadily, his voice low and thick.

Turning slowly, I do as he says and squeeze my eyes shut so that at least I don’t have to watch him do this. That’s when I feel the faintest brush of his fingertips on my outer thighs, his breath just at my ear. My body erupts into goosebumps at his touch and my heartbeat is hammering in my ears.

Clearing his throat, he takes a firm hold of the bottom of the dress and begins to lift it. Exposing my thighs and backside to him. *Thank God I wore my good underwear today.*

Giving it a firm tug up, he pulls the dress up and over the top of my head, freeing me. The rough movement makes me stumble, and I fall back slightly onto him. He wraps a steadying arm around my middle, and that’s when I feel it. The evidence in his jeans of what this little moment has done to him. *He’s hard as fuck!*

For me?

Because of me?

It has to be my imagination conjuring up the fact that he still hasn’t let me go and that he is still holding on, the softest caress of his fingertips on my ribs. I can feel the impressive bulge against my lower back, and his warm breath on my neck.

“I,” he exhales the breath caressing my oversensitive skin. “I think the dress is a winner,” he rumbles into my ear.

“Yeah, I think you might be right.” I exhale.

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Chapter Twelve

Jacob - Present Day

Nothing and no one could take this smile off my face. Sitting in one of the big comfy chairs at my studio, I scroll through the endless messages Ella has sent me regarding the upcoming stag and hen weekend. Question upon question, all of which I have answered, but in the most vague way possible. She's so damn cute, getting all flustered that I haven't kept up with my end of the bargain. What she doesn't know is that I have ticked off all of my 'to-do' list that she sent me via a PDF file. I could put her out of her misery and let her know that it's all been sorted, but where's the fun in that? Also, it's the only way I can think of to keep a constant line of contact with her.

After the changing room incident, she's kept her distance. I have tried several ways to get her to see me under the ruse of needing help with my 'list.' But she's come up with excuses as to why she's busy every single time. Thankfully, I only have a few days to go until the getaway, and I have a shit load of clients to tattoo in the meantime. Speaking of which, I really should be drawing up the stencil for my client, who should be walking through the door any moment, but instead I stare at the blurry image I managed to capture on my phone of Ella in that yellow dress. She looked so beautiful; I thought I was going to have an aneurysm. Seeing her defeated and sweaty on the floor after being stuck in the dress reminded me of the Ella I knew from childhood. The one who would nearly kill herself trying to keep up with mine and Damon's antics. For it to go from childhood memories to a not-so-childlike Ella's tight, firm ass near my crotch was something I needed to store away for a later date, preferably one where I can see to the already half-hard dick in my pants. *Not now!*

My phone pings with a new message, and when I see her name come up asking if I have secured my seat on the plane yet, I can't contain my excitement. I have indeed secured my seat and taken the liberty of pulling some strings, spending a stupid amount of money to change hers to first

class and to sit next to each other. I told the older lady from customer services that under no circumstances should she be told this was done by me, and that when she gets to the boarding gate, she should be told she has been randomly upgraded. I mean, I know it's only a four-hour flight, but still, it's four hours side by side.

Responding to her message, I tell her that no, I haven't got my seat yet and that I will do it later. As I put my phone back in my pocket, I feel it vibrate with another incoming message. I just know she's chewing me out over leaving everything to the last minute, but the idea of her getting all hot and bothered over me, in any capacity, sends a thrill through me.

∞∞∞

After finishing my last client for the day, I decide I need to bite the bullet and go and see Damon. We've talked over the phone, but it's been a little frosty, and as his best man, I want to clear the air and get back to how things used to be.

Pulling up outside his house, I take note of just how well my buddy has done. The house is nothing fancy, but it's his, and I know how hard he's worked for it. Taking the steps up to the door two at a time, I have barely wrapped my knuckles once when the sound of Dolly barking her head off greets me. You would think she was a bloody Dobermann behind that door, serious 'short man' syndrome that one. I can hear Damon cursing the unruly dog to *'shut the fuck up'* as he makes his way down the hall. The door swings open, and the she-devil dog launches herself at me, jumping at my leg and seeming to want to take chunks out of my kneecaps.

Through a half-laugh, I say, "You gonna get this bloody dog off me or not?"

"Haven't decided yet," he responds with a smirk. "You know she wouldn't be like that if she knew you. If only you had been a bit closer these last few years. Oh, wait, you were!"

"Ok, ok, I get it, you're still pissed at me. Can I just come in, and we can talk about it?" I say whilst still trying to remove Dolly from my leg.

"I don't know, Doll. What do you think?" The fur monster makes her feelings abundantly clear by amping up the volume on her barking whilst simultaneously trying to bite at my boots.

“Dolly, come!” Damon clicks his fingers, and the dog immediately stops her onslaught and follows him down the hall. He’s left the front door open, so that’s an invitation enough for me.

Walking into the kitchen, I see Damon retrieve a bone for Dolly and throw it onto her bed. She jumps in like the little angel she’s pretending to be, but not before side-eyeing me. *Yeah, same to you, scrappy!*

“So D, I just wanted to come and chat, you know, clear the—”

Damon cuts my rambling off with one hand raised. “J, it’s fine. I told you I needed a minute, and I’ve had one. I do have some questions, though.” I nod and gesture for him to continue. He asks me questions about how I left Aus and why, to which I was stereotypically economical with the truth. Not outright lies, but also nothing that is going to make him see me differently. He listens to everything I say, never interrupting or giving his opinions. I choose not to tell him about my issues and how eventually they were the reason for me being unceremoniously kicked out on my ass. For the first time in my life, I am dealing with my problems head-on and feel no need to drag anyone else down with me. There is a beat of time where he just looks at me; Damon has always had that ability to make you feel like he’s looking into your soul and seeing all your truths without you having to spill them. It’s never with malice; he just watches and waits. Giving you that beat of time to come clean or stick with your version of events. Then, seeming satisfied, he leans back in his chair and gives me a warm, brotherly smile. That’s just Damon to a T, he is the most loving, laid-back guy I’ve ever had the pleasure of meeting. Which only adds to the guilt I’m feeling. I’ve really missed my friend.

After that, we catch up and shoot the shit about where I’ve been, all the places I travelled around the UK for work, and of course we inevitably talk about all the girls.

When I’m all out of stories to tell, I get up and make my way to the door. Luckily, Dolly is out cold in her bed after chomping her way through the bone that was almost as big as her.

“This weekend is going to be epic, mate. Me and El’s are going to make sure of it.” We hug, and I leave feeling lighter than I have done in such a long time.

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Chapter Thirteen

Ella - Present Day

Securing the penis tiara with a veil attached to Holly's head, we giggle in the toilets of the airport. Having already drunk two gins in a tin, I'm already feeling buzzed.

"I can't believe it's finally here!" She says whilst reapplying her trademark red lipstick in the mirror.

"It's going to be amazing, Holly, I promise. It's going to be everything and more than you dreamed of." Looking at my best friend, I realise that I have never been happier for two people in my life. Damon and Holly are so perfect together, and the fact that I get to share all of this with them is everything to me.

"Thank you for everything, El's. I know it probably hasn't been easy having to work on this with Jacob, but it means the world to me that you're my maid of honour." I can see she's starting to feel the effect of the gin punch too; she always gets sappy when she's had a drink.

"Right, come on then, you, let's go find those boys and have the best four days of sun, sea, and well, for *you*, sex!" I grimace at the image that conjures, as sometimes I forget she's marrying my brother.

Giggling, she says, "You never know, El's, you might meet some gorgeous Spanish barman that will give you your very own Shirley Valentine moment." She knows that's one of my favourite movies of all time; the idea of meeting someone whilst we are away hadn't even crossed my mind. Not when I know the only person in the world who I would want showing me any sort of 'good time' is none other than the best man himself.

We leave the ladies' toilets arm in arm and head towards the check-in desk where the rest of our group is waiting. I spy Jacob immediately, not that he's hard to miss. He's talking to one of the women from our party, a pretty girl with dark hair and glasses. She's fully rocking the 'geek chic' look and is nervously twisting a strand of her hair around her finger. *Brilliant, and so*

it begins. Four whole days of having to watch Jacob and his many admirers.

That's when he raises his gorgeous head and catches me staring, giving me one of his sinful smiles. He winks at me, and just like that, my insides turn to mush. He nods his head to the right, indicating for me to look at something. I cast my eyes in that direction and see my brother in a bright yellow T-shirt with 'Property of Holly' emblazoned at the top, and an image of her holding a set of keys. On closer inspection, it also shows Damon's head on a stick man's body, standing behind prison bars. I bark out a not-so-feminine laugh at it. He's sporting the most awful multicolored '80s-style shorts and a black curly wig. *Ok, so item number six on Jacob's list-make Damon look as silly as possible is most definitely checked off.*

Jacob gives me a look like '*did I do good?'* to which I smile and nod my head once, just once; I don't want him to get too excited.

After checking our bags and spending way too much money in the duty-free shop, it's time to head to the boarding gate. I see Jacob scowling at one of the big boards showing which gate everyone needs to head to. Laughing, I decide he can work that out for himself and head in the direction of my gate. Luckily, we don't have to sit and wait too long, and soon we are queuing up to board our flight. When I get to the front of the line, I hand my passport and boarding pass to the smiling assistant, who taps away at the computer in front of her with her acrylic nails.

"Thank you so much, Miss Graham," she says as she checks the details on her screen. "It appears to be your lucky day; your seat has been upgraded to our first-class lounge."

"What! No fair." Holly interrupts from behind me. "It's my hen do, any chance I can get an upgrade too?" She bats her eyelashes.

"I'm so sorry, madam, it's not something I can control here, but maybe if you speak to the cabin crew once you board, you can see if they can help." The assistant responds.

"I mean, you can take my seat if you want, Hol," I say, trying to take the attention away from myself.

"So I have to sit on my own then, looking like this, seriously, babe?" Damon interjects to Holly, looking down at his clothes.

"No, it's fine, leave it as it is," Holly says, giggling and kissing Damon on the cheek.

“Ok, so if you follow the walkway and turn to the left, the stewards will help you to your seat.” The assistant says, handing me a freshly printed boarding pass and my passport.

“Enjoy!” Holly calls out to me.

I can’t help the butterflies in my stomach. Not only is it my first time flying, but I get to do it in luxury first class. *Lucky me.*

∞∞∞

Settling into my seat near the window, I take note of the empty space next to me. *Maybe Holly can come and at least sit with me for a bit if no one takes it.*

Leaning forward, I start organising all the things I brought to distract me from getting nervous while flying. I have my earbuds, Kindle, and sleep mask out when a set of jean-clad legs stops at my row. Looking up to identify my seat buddy, I’m met with ocean blue eyes and a smile that could knock any woman on their ass.

“Is this seat taken?” Jacob asks.

“Well, it’s assigned seating, so if it says 4a on your boarding pass, then yeah, I guess it is.”

His smile is wicked as he stows his expensive-looking leather holdall in the overhead locker. As he reaches up, I catch a glimpse of tanned skin and a dark, happy trail leading into the top of his waistband. *Delicious.*

Taking his seat, he buckles his belt and shifts around to get comfortable, his smell wafting over me once again. *Jesus, what is that smell? It’s addictive.*

The cabin crew starts to move around the aisles doing the safety brief, and I wipe my sweaty palms down my thighs. All of a sudden, the nerves are starting to take their toll, and I’m so anxious I can’t quite get my breath. The plane jerks to life and starts to roll towards the take-off area. I chance a look out the window and see that we’re starting to really pick up speed now, so I squeeze my eyes shut and grip the armrests.

I feel his hand gently cup the back of my head and pull it to his chest, bringing back memories of that one and only night we were alone together watching a movie. He places his other hand over my ear, so that all I can hear is the steady beat of his heart.

“Breathe, Els’s Bells, you’re ok.” His voice is right near my ear, his breath ghosting my neck. The sensation of having him so close is exactly the distraction I need.

“Just focus on my voice.” I wish I had the courage to open my eyes right now so that I could look at him, but they just won’t open.

“We’re up, El’s, open your eyes,” he says, squeezing my hand.

Slowly, I pry my eyes open and will my head towards the window. I see nothing but beautiful blue sky and fluffy clouds.

“Holy shit, I’m in the sky,” I say, pressing my nose to the glass.

Jacob laughs, “Yeah, that’s kind of the idea, El.”

Starting to relax now, it dawns on me that he hasn't released me from his hold. Clearing my throat, I reluctantly pull away.

“You need a drink,” he declares, lifting his arm in the air to get the stewardess's attention.

She makes her way over to us and focuses her attention straight on Jacob. “Can I help you with something, Sir?” The effect this man has on women, *and probably men too*, should be studied.

“Hi, yes, can I get a glass of champagne for the lady and a Diet Coke with lemon and ice for me, please.”

“Of course, Sir, right away.” She sashays away with an exaggerated swing of her hips, which, looking at Jacob’s face, he doesn’t miss but seems completely unaffected by.

“Are you not going to have a drink too?” I say, taking in his profile.

“No, not today,” he answers whilst readjusting himself in his seat.

The stewardess returns with our drinks and some snacks.

“Ohhh. Yummy warm nuts,” I say, scooping a handful and putting them in my mouth. Jacob bursts out laughing, spraying the mouthful of Coke on the back of the seat in front of him.

“What?” I ask, genuinely confused.

Wiping his face and then the chair with a napkin, Jacob turns his head to look at me with a raised eyebrow that says, *really?*

Clasping my hand to my mouth in realisation of what I said, I can feel my cheeks heat.

“Grow up, J. Jesus, what, are you twelve?” Being embarrassed makes me snappy.

He shakes his head, still laughing, and I take a sip of the crisp, bubbly liquid.

“God, that’s good,” I say, going in for more.

“I’ll take your word for it. I’ll be right back; I’m just gonna go say hi to Damon.”

“Ok, cool. Tell Holly if she wants to come sit up here with me for a bit, she can.”

“Will do.” He stands up and makes his way towards the back of the plane.

I signal to the stewardess that I would like two more champagnes, please, and she nods in recognition.

The warm feeling that overcomes my body from the alcohol is beginning to soothe my nerves, and I relax further in my seat.

“Hey, first class, how we doing?” Holly says as she plops down next to me, snatching up one of my glasses of bubbles.

I give her a lazy smile, the alcohol from earlier combined with the one and a half glasses I just sunk, really starting to take effect.

“I’m gooood.” I respond to Holly’s grinning face.

“Oh, babe, are we going full 'Bridesmaids’? I’m ready to paaaarrrtttyyyy.” She says, lifting her glass high in the air, quoting one of our favourite girls' night-in movies.

I laugh at her silliness. “I was nervous on take-off, so Jacob got me a drink to help me calm down.”

“Did he indeed?” she says with a mischievous look on her face.

“What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“No, nothing, just seems to be one hell of a ‘friendship’ you two have got going on recently.”

I pray that my cheeks aren’t as red as I think they are, and I'll definitely be blaming that on the alcohol if she says anything.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Jacob and I have been mates forever, and obviously, with all the wedding-y stuff recently, we have had to see and talk to each other more than usual. Nothing wrong with that, is there?” I ask defensively.

Holly beams at me, “I knew it, you fancy him, don’t you?”

“Keep your voice down for fuck sake,” I whisper-shout to her.

“That wasn’t a no, Ella Graham. Spill it, what’s going on with you two?”

“Nothing, and there never will be either. Jacob doesn’t think of me like that. Yeah, he flirts and stuff, but he does that with every female with a pulse. So I really don’t think that’s anything to write home about.” She’s

ruining the delicious buzz I had five minutes ago with this line of questioning, so I take a few more gulps of my drink.

"Ok, but you would want there to be something if you could choose," she continues, stealing more of my drink.

"I'm going to need to be far more intoxicated for this conversation."

"What conversation?" Holly and I both freeze like two kids that just got caught stealing treats from the kitchen at the sound of Jacob's voice.

"Absolutely nothing, just girls talk," Holly says as cool as a cucumber, whilst I sit here with my mouth hanging open.

When did he get back here? How much did he hear?

"Well, on that note, I'm going back to my seat. Catch ya later, you two." Holly says, shooting me a wink from behind Jacob.

"What was all that about?" he says as he sits back down.

"I don't know, just Holly being Holly," I say, downing the last of my champagne.

The feeling of being gently nudged is the next thing I register. My head is resting on something warm and hard, and it smells incredible, realisation dawning on me, I lift my head from Jacob's chest and sheepishly wipe the drool from the corner of my mouth.

"Morning, sleepyhead." He says with far too much enjoyment.

"When did I fall asleep?" I say, trying to regain some of my dignity.

"Not long after your fifth glass of champagne, you kinda passed out with your head on the tray. So I thought I should make you a bit more comfortable," he says, smoothing down his crumpled T-shirt.

"Well, um, thanks. Jesus, what do they put in the alcohol on these flights?" I mumble, rubbing my sore head.

"It's the altitude, basically. Any alcoholic drink you have, double it. So, you had like ten glasses of champagne," he says with a laugh.

"Why didn't you stop me?"

"I actually did try, but you told me that I was being...and I quote, 'a party pooper'.

I cringe. *God, I'm such a lightweight.*

"Anyway, they just announced that we will be landing soon. So I thought you would want a bit of time to get your bearings."

"Yeah, thanks. Ok, I'm gonna go sort myself out." Taking my makeup bag with me, I head towards the plush-looking toilets.

Damn, if I hadn't been so drunk, I could have actually enjoyed this finery.

I lock myself in and immediately relieve myself. After doing my business, I wash my hands and look up at the mirror.

What the actual fuck!!

My hair looks like a bird has tried to make a nest on one side, and my make-up is now so patchy that I look like the guy from 'The Texas Chainsaw Massacre.' *Oh my God, this is mortifying.*

I quickly wash the remnants of makeup off my face and replace it with a new layer of tinted moisturiser and a quick flick of mascara. Knowing that's as good as that is going to get, I run my fingers through the tangles on my head and put it up into a messy bun; nothing can save that.

Going back to my seat, Jacob is wearing the biggest shit-eating grin I have ever seen.

"Oh, fuck off," I snark at him whilst trying to shimmy into my seat past his legs. He grips my hips from behind to steady me, and it takes everything in me not to 'accidentally' fall into his lap.

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Chapter Fourteen

Jacob - Present Day

"Sorry, I don't understand what you mean," I say to the bored check-in clerk at our hotel. "I booked this room weeks ago."

"Yes, Sir, I understand," he says in broken English. "But because we are only a small hotel and your party is big, some rooms come as adjoining rooms."

Ella is looking at me wide-eyed, the realisation dawning on both of us.

"Ok, look, it will be fine." I turn and tell her. "I'll keep my side of the room locked, and so will you. It's not a big deal." The fact that I now know that if she 'forgets' to lock her side, I could easily just walk right into her room is making my head spin with possibilities.

"I suppose that will be ok," I concede.

"Also, you have the private pool for your rooms, as they are part of the villa complex."

Now you're fucking talking, Ella and me naked in a pool late at night. Sign me up.

"Sounds amazing, thanks very much," I say, taking the two key cards from him.

Heading in the direction he showed us, we take in our surroundings; the main lobby has huge marble columns with gold accents. Everything is beautiful, with the sun reflecting off every surface. Next, we walk out through large glass doors that lead directly out onto a massive patio area where people are taking in the last of the sun for the day, the golden hour heat just right. Some people are snoozing on sun loungers, and others are taking a lazy dip in the pool. Being an adults-only hotel, the only sounds to be heard are the gentle lapping of the water and low chit-chat amongst the guests. *Heaven.*

When we get to our little block, we see two doors and stop in front of them.

“You wanna go into both and see which one you like best?” I say to Ella.

“No, don’t be silly. I’m sure they are both beautiful. I’ll take this one.” Picking the door on the left, she holds her hand out for the correct key card.

Handing it to her, I tap mine against the one on the right and open the door, pausing in the doorway to turn back to her.

“Ok, so we are all meeting in the lobby at seven pm, right?”

“Yes,” she smiles at me. “Go take a nap, Jacob; you look exhausted.” Turning to head into her room, she shuts the door while I still stand here.

The truth is, I am exhausted. Having only been sober for such a short amount of time, I didn’t realise what a toll it would take to see pretty much everyone around me getting drunk and having fun.

The unfairness of the situation hits me as I pull my bag into the room and see a welcome basket on the vanity. Fresh fruit and packets of snacks alongside a bottle of traditional Spanish red wine. Now, the old me would have had that cracked open and would be chugging it straight from the bottle. But having made that promise to myself all those weeks ago that I would no longer live like that, I take the bottle and hide it at the top of the walk-in wardrobe.

After unpacking and hanging up my clothes, I plop onto the bed and lay my head back. The noise in my head is so deafeningly loud. Thoughts of Ella, thoughts of breaking my promise and drinking alongside my friends. But mainly the thought that just behind that flimsy door, she is probably sleeping off the rest of that hangover, or maybe she’s in the shower. *Oh, for fuck sake, Jacob, do not be thinking of her wet and covered in slippery suds. Great, now I’m hard again.* It took everything in me on the plane to restrain my boner; having her head on my chest and smelling her was almost too much to bear.

I need a shower and then maybe a nap, anything to try and distract me from my racing thoughts.

Thump. Thump. Thump–the heavy beat of music stirs me from the most realistic dream; Ella was riding my face, and dream me was licking up every drop. However, in reality, as my dream slips away from me, I’m licking the bottom of the pillow I had put over my head to try and drown out the noise.

Fully awake now, I can hear the unmistakable beat and heavy vocals of *INXS’s* “Need You Tonight”. Famously used in the movie Coyote Ugly, I

know without even moving where it’s coming from.

My body starts to move involuntarily; I’m up on my feet and moving straight towards that prohibited door. Taking a chance, I twist the handle, fully expecting it to be locked. When it turns easily, allowing the door to crack open, I’m graced with the most delicious sight. Ella, fresh out of the shower. Towel on her head and another wrapped around her mouth-watering body. She’s lip-syncing into her hairbrush and shimmying her body like she’s one of the girls on that bar top.

It takes all my willpower, but as quietly and as gently as I can, I shut the door and lean against it. My smile is as wide as can be. She’s just so cute.

We have played every single Mr&Mrs game known to man, every single one of them getting the soon-to-be newlyweds more drunk than humanly possible. Ella is beaming as she whacks a stick against a large piñata in the shape of a cock. The men have one too, which is an ample set of tits; one of Damon’s mates from work is currently doing a shit job of hitting. Sitting back in my chair sipping on my seventh lime and soda, I’m trying to judge the moment that might be acceptable to leave and go back to my room, that is, until Damon’s mate finally hits the tits straight on, smashing them to pieces. Tiny bits of paper flutter to the ground, and everyone cheers. Ella removes her blindfold, looking defeated, knowing that the Stags have beaten them.

“Ok, ok, you guys won, big whoop,” she says with a pout, *adorable… She's always hated losing.* “So on those bits of folded paper you will find a truth or a dare. Each Stag has to take one and read it to another member of their group.”

One by one, each stag takes their turn; I see way more ass and dick than is ever necessary in one night. I’m just watching one of Damon’s mates emerge from the pool after being dared to do a naked swan dive, when I hear my name.

“Jacob,” Damon says, grinning from ear to ear. His eyes are bloodshot, and there is a light layer of sweat on his forehead. “Ok Jacob, you’re up. Truth or Dare, mate?”

“Dare,” I say without hesitation. I definitely need alcohol to spill any truths, and that in itself is a problem.

“Ok, I dare you to kiss the girl you think is the most attractive here,” he says, still grinning.

All the girls at the party perk up, some even ‘discreetly’ preening themselves in preparation. But the girl I zero in on has stopped laughing now. She’s dropped her head and seems to be finding something very interesting near her shoe.

Licking my lips, I slowly stand and walk towards the group of girls. Holly starts giggling loudly, shouting things like ‘Don’t be breaking my friends' hearts now, J.’

I have no intention of breaking anyone's heart. Moving closer to where Ella sits, the pretty girl with the glasses that I was chatting to earlier at the airport stares at me like I’m her last meal.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Holly’s outraged face as I move in that direction. I give the girl with the glasses an apologetic smile and step in front of the only girl who could get my attention, a satisfied smile now on my cousin's face. Ella tips her chin up just slightly, looking at me through her lashes. She gives me the subtlest of head shakes and starts to look frantically around the group.

“It’s just a dare, El’s,” I say to her, but we both know that’s a lie.

She tentatively takes my still-open hand and stands, her dark eyes imploring me not to do this, and especially not here. But you know– what I don’t fucking care; I *should,* but I just don’t.

As gently as I can, I put my hand to her face, cupping her jaw. Her intake of breath makes her chest shake. Slowly she closes her eyes, and I’m now doubting myself. Is it because she wishes this wasn’t happening, or is it because this is literally everything she wants?

I lean forward and meet her so we are nose to nose. I feel like I should probably savour this moment, as I might be dead soon if Damon isn’t happy about me picking his sister.

Still doubting myself, I remember the ‘ninety-ten’ rule. So, I move ninety percent of the way and pray to all the God’s that she closes the final ten percent.

She does.

Our lips brush, and every fibre of my being comes alive. The softest moan made only for my ears slips from her, and I deepen the kiss in response. She brushes her tongue with mine, and we both jolt apart when we hear a loud clearing of a throat. I turn to see Damon looking at me with so many

questions in his eyes. There's no anger there, but I worry that the look is hurt. I pull away from her begrudgingly, and she stumbles forward at the loss of me. Steadying her discreetly, I turn around fully and hold my arms out at my sides.

"Dare accepted and executed," I announce with my old air of cockiness.

Holly is fighting for her life when I look at her, something between a swoon and an outright laugh.

"Ok, gang, on that note I think it's time we go to bed." She goes to Damon and shakes her head, willing him not to bring this up right now. I have never been more grateful for my cousin than right now.

The walk back to our rooms is a quiet one, both of us seemingly going over the night's events. I catch Ella touching her mouth on more than one occasion and wonder if she is replaying that kiss in her head. *I know I am.*

When we get to our block, we just stand there for a few awkward moments, neither of us knowing what to say; the silence is deafening.

"You good?" I eventually ask. I've never been very good at prolonged quiet.

"Yeah, fine, you?" She's not looking at me, and it's making me anxious. *Did I read this all wrong this whole time?*

"El's–"

"I'm gonna head to bed; it's been a long day," She says, cutting me off.

"Sure ok, no problem. Sleep well." I fumble in my back pocket for my key.

"You too." She chances the quickest look at me before tapping her card and entering her room, leaving me standing there staring at her door.

I go into my room full of a thousand different feelings, but as I close the door behind me, my eyes land on the wardrobe that houses the welcome wine I hid there earlier. I slump to the floor, desperately trying to remind myself of all the reasons I shouldn't yank that door open and demolish the bottle to hush the noise in my head. Because if I'm honest, I'm scared. Scared of what comes next and how the people I love most are going to react to what I did tonight.

Love…

Who am I kidding? Am I even capable of loving? I have no clue. It's not like I had parents to show me the blueprint of what love should look like. The closest I've been is Mr. and Mrs. Graham, and they are an old-school

kind of love, not loud or in your face. A quiet kind of love that rolls through the days without pretense.

My heart is yearning for an all-consuming, can't eat, can't sleep kind of love.

And I have a suspicion that the girl next door is just the girl who can give that to me. Because we feel like fate, inevitable. I just need to stay strong and show her that I'm worth taking a risk on. Rising to my feet, I pull the wardrobe open and, grabbing the neck of the bottle, I walk to the patio door, swing it open, and smash it to the ground, the Crimson liquid flowing out onto the pale stone. I make a mental note to myself to clean it up before Ella wakes up and head back inside. Today I won the battle; I just need to find the strength to keep winning.

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Chapter Fifteen

Ella - Present Day

I got next to no sleep last night, having the night's events playing over and over in my head. The way Jacob held me, the feel of his lips on mine, all of it was way too much and not enough all at the same time.

I want to revel in the moment, but I can't help worrying over what Damon is going to say about it. Will he see right through me and call me out as the shit sister I am, going after his best friend? I don't have time to dwell on this situation because we have another jam-packed day ahead. Starting with a late breakfast on the beach, and then the private catamaran boat trip around the island.

Securing my bikini top around my neck, I scrutinise my reflection in the mirror. I am by no means a skinny girl, anything but. My hips are curvy, and my breasts have always been bigger than I would like, but it's my butt that I have the biggest problem with. It sticks out and makes me far more noticeable than I feel comfortable with. With that in mind, I grab one of the cover-up sarongs I packed and tie it around my waist. *Well, that's as good as it's gonna get.*

I hear movement from the other side of the wall, meaning I need to hurry up if I want to get sat down for breakfast before Jacob. I don't think I can handle a one-on-one chat right now. Grabbing my key and sunglasses, I throw them into my beach bag and head out.

After the last golden pastry is eaten and everyone is sitting quietly with full bellies, I wonder, not for the first time, why Jacob isn't here.

"Knowing J, he probably stayed out and picked up some random girl," Damon says, shooting me a look.

Well, that I know to be false because I heard him pacing around his room until the early hours, never leaving once.

“Or he’s just insanely hungover like the rest of us and decided to be a normal human and sleep in.” Holly quips back from behind her oversized sunglasses.

Rising from my seat, I wordlessly excuse myself and head towards our rooms to freshen up and to see where he could have got to.

The sound of splashing water is the first thing I hear when I get inside my room. Heading for the patio door, I peel the blackout curtain back just enough so that I can peek out at the pool we share.

The sight before me makes my knees weak; Jacob swimming lengths of the pool like it’s his last mission in life. His golden skin shining in the midday sun, his hair is slicked back from the water and as dark as night.

Christ on a cracker, King Arthur himself couldn’t pull you from me. I think to myself whilst still staring at him through the door. Jacob comes to a stop at the side of the pool nearest to me and pulls himself up and out of the pool. Droplets of water trickle down his toned chest and stomach, making my mouth go dry. He dries himself off with a towel set out neatly on one of the loungers as I pull the door open. His head lifts slowly in my direction; his expression is guarded, like he’s expecting an ear-bashing over last night.

“Morning,” I say, stepping out onto the patio. His eyes drink me in, starting from my feet and pausing when he gets to my tits. I watch him as he swallows hard.

“Good morning to you too.” His voice is gruff, like it’s the first time he’s spoken today, and it sends a bolt of electricity between my legs.

The awkward silence rings between us; Jacob continues to towel-dry his hair.

“Umm…so are you still coming on the boat trip this afternoon? I think it will be a lot of fun and I spent a lot of time organising it, and you are the best man-”

“Ella, chill. I’ll be there.” He cuts me off mid-ramble. “I just needed a little time to myself this morning, that's all.”

Time to think about how stupid it was to kiss me last night, I presume.

As if he can hear my thoughts as always, Jacob walks towards me, places a hand on my hip, and leans in close.

“Whatever it is you’re thinking, you’re wrong.”

Then he walks back into his room without a second look.

My God, did I need this…

Lying on one of the two decks on board the catamaran, I roll over onto my stomach like a rotisserie chicken. I've always been the type of person who can never get enough sun on my skin. The vibe on board is incredible. The low music mixed with chatting and laughing is everything my soul needs. Grabbing my Kindle from my beach bag, I go to fire it up when a shadow forms over me, instantly taking the glorious vitamin D with it. Swivelling my head around to see who the culprit is, my eyes land on long, lean legs that belong to my best friend. Holly stands before me like a model holding out a frozen margarita. The refreshing drink makes my mouth water, and I go to grab it.

"Uh-uh," she says, pulling it back. "You get the drink when *I* get the tea on last night." I knew this would happen at some point today. Rolling my eyes, I make room for her to sit down next to me.

"Ok, girl, let it out because I just know your head must be all over the place right now. That kiss was a lot to, let alone be on the receiving end."

"Shit, Holly, it really was. But then when he skipped breakfast this morning, it made me think that maybe he was just playing the game and it actually meant nothing to him." I don't say out loud what Jacob said to me at the pool because I'm not sure what that even meant.

"Babe, out of all the girls there was to choose from last night, do you really think he would pick *you*, his best friend's sister, if it didn't mean anything to him? Come on, El, I know you can be a bit naive when it comes to this stuff, but you're not bloody stupid."

I bite my lower lip in contemplation of what Holly is saying to me. She's right, Jacob wouldn't kiss me in front of Damon and all his friends if it meant nothing. Would he?

"What has Damon said about it?" I ask tentatively; I'm not even sure I really want the answer to this.

"Oh, you know D, he hasn't said anything. He won't because that's what he's like. Don't get me wrong, he looked fucking shocked at the time, though. Luckily, he was so close to black out drunk that I'm not even sure if he remembers it."

I give her a look that says 'bitch please.' Movement from the side of the deck catches both our attention, and we look to see Damon and his friends jumping from the side of the boat, but no Jacob. Which only fuels my thoughts of him regretting what he did last night. *So why did he say that to me at the pool this morning?*

“I can hear you thinking from here,” Holly says, taking a sip of her drink. “Look, babe, you have two options: option one is you can sit here going over and over what happened last night and never coming to a definitive answer. Option two is you stop being a miserable bitch and come get drunk with me.” She stands, ready to leave. “Oop, speak of the devil,” she says for only me to hear.

I look over my shoulder and see Jacob coming out of the saloon. He starts to head in our direction, and with a split second to think this ridiculous plan over, I leap to my feet and run across the deck and jump straight into the ocean below. The cool water is refreshing on my heated skin and frazzled mind. When I emerge at the surface of the water, I rub my eyes and look up to find Jacob casually leaning on the railing, a smile playing on his lips and shaking his head. Pulling his T-shirt over his head and throwing it on the deck, he lifts one leg and then the other over the edge of the boat.

“Don’t you dare!” I shout, knowing exactly what he’s about to do. The playful smile now turns into a full grin as he launches himself off the side, crashing through the water's surface and sending a wave right over my head. Treading water, I try to right my hair, but a tug on my leg takes me down once again.

The feel of his hands running up my bare legs and the grip he takes of my waist sends heat all over me. Coming up for air once more, he breaks the surface shortly after.

“You shithead!” I say with a smile.

“Says you who jumped off a fucking boat rather than talk to me,” he says, rubbing a hand over his face.

“I’m not doing this right now; today is about Damon and Holly,” I say over my shoulder as I swim back to the rope ladder.

“Ok, so when, Ella? We need to talk about last night.” I pause on the ladder and look at him.

“When we get home, we’ll talk, ok? But for now, let’s just do what we came here to do and give Damon and Holly the weekend they deserve.”

He doesn’t say anymore, but I don’t have time to dwell on that, as once we are dried off, it’s time for dinner on the deck.

∞∞∞

The rest of the day and evening went as well as it could have gone. The sun on our skin as we ate, talked, and laughed. We all decided after last night's festivities that we would have an early-ish night so that we could feel fresh for tomorrow.

So after showering the salty water from my skin and getting into bed, I allow myself to think about the way he touched me in the water, and the kiss from last night. The ghost of his touch is still so real to me even now. Getting more and more turned on, I reach down to the suitcase that is pushed under the bed, unzipping it and locating my vibrator, which is hidden within a spare beach towel.

Turning it on, I slowly bring it down my body over my nipples, making me gasp at the sudden sensation. Once it's between my legs, I let it do its thing on my clit whilst conjuring up thoughts of Jacob. *How would he be in bed? Would he be passionate and rough? Would he make love to me or dominate me?* Whichever one it is, I know that sex with Jacob would ruin me forever in the best possible way. The thought of him only on the other side of the wall is bringing me closer and closer to orgasm; I wonder if he's doing what I'm doing? Touching himself, his strong hand wrapped around what I'm sure is the most beautiful cock anyone has ever seen. With that thought in my head, my lower belly clenches, and a wave of pleasure rolls over me. I come with the thought of him clear in my mind and his name tearing from my lips.

My breath still coming out heavily, I throw my vibrator back in my case and flop back down, satisfied and exhausted. My phone buzzes on the bedside table. Picking it up, I see a text from the man himself.

Jacob:
Are you grinding your own coffee beans in there?

Me:
What?

Jacob:
I heard a strange noise and then I thought I heard you call for help.

Oh my god! You have got to be kidding me.

Me:

Nope, all good here, Night

Jacob:
Laughing face emoji

I*’ve always wondered how I will die and now I know, embarrassment.*

Me:
Fuck off J, go to bed!

Jacob:
No

Me:
I’m ignoring you now

Jacob:
Fuck, Ella

Me:
What?!

The ‘typing’ dots bounce on my screen for so long I think maybe he won’t respond, then;

Jacob:
Open the door.

I go to the door that joins our two rooms together, wrapped in only the sheet from the bed, opening it just enough to peek through the crack. I look up at him.

“What’s wrong?” The air is thick with tension.

“Do it again,” he says, no hint of the playful Jacob I usually get.

“Do what?” I feign innocence, clutching the sheet around me.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about, Ella.” he guides the door open fully and starts to walk forward. Every step he takes forward, I take back until the back of my legs hit the bed.

“What are you talking about, J?” The hunger in his eyes is making my palms sweat.

“Did I stutter?”

“I–I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I know that the blush that is creeping up my neck is giving me away.

“Yes, you do, and this time I want to watch as you come undone with *my* name on those gorgeous lips.”

I suck in a breath. *He heard me? He listened to me while I did that, and now he wants to watch? This can’t be real.* Any minute now I’m going to wake up, and this will have been all one amazing dream.

“Jacob, we can’t. Kissing me last night is one thing. But doing anything else would be a huge mistake. Damon would never forgive us.”

“I know, and I really should feel bad.” That wicked smirk on his face that always has me drooling. “But Ella, I don’t. I don’t feel bad at all. Kissing you last night was something I’ve fantasised about for longer than I want to admit to.”

Cupping my face with his strong tattooed hand, he tips my chin up to look at him.

“Ella, tell me you don’t want this, and I promise I will go back to my room. I’ll shut the door, and I’ll never bring this up again.”

I can’t say that to him, because I can’t watch him walk away from me again.

Inhaling deeply, I bring my eyes to his, searching for even a hint of him teasing me. But there is nothing but lust in his eyes when I stare into them. Rising up on my tiptoes, with every bit of courage I have, I whisper in his ear, “I want it all, Jacob.”

I don’t get a chance to second-guess my words. Jacob unleashes what can only be described as an animalistic growl and, with both hands, hoists me into his arms, whipping the sheet off that I had wrapped around me and tossing it to the ground. I wrap my legs around his waist instinctively as he buries his face in my neck.

“Holy shit, El’s you smell incredible.”

I’m delirious, lost in this intoxicating moment where Jacob and I are finally taking what we want from each other.

Laying me down on the bed like I’m something fragile and precious, he looks down at me like he’s about to devour me.

Instead, he turns and walks towards the small table and chairs near the balcony window. Grabbing the back of one of the chairs, he drags it towards the end of the bed, the noise jarring in the near-silent room. He sits in it like he doesn’t have a care in the world, whilst I lay there, chest heaving,

wondering what exactly he's doing and all too aware that this is the first time that Jacob is seeing my naked body. I try to cover myself and he tsks at me, shaking his head subtly.

"Now, be a good girl, Ella, and do– it– again."

"Jacob, I can't. Just come here," I stutter, reaching out my hand for him to come to me.

"Oh no, Ella. You had me nearly going out of my mind next door listening to your dirty little moans and then…" he says, leaning forward, his tanned, muscular arms resting on his thighs. "Then you called for *me*. So now that I'm here, show me what I was missing."

His penetrative gaze leaves me weak, and I can feel my resolve breaking. If it's a show he wants, then I guess that's what he'll get.

I lay back and squeeze my eyes shut, willing my body to relax. Knowing that Jacob is watching me do this is thrilling and terrifying all at once. Running my hand down and over my breasts, I let out a breath, trying to imagine I'm alone again. Slipping my hand between my thighs, I find the evidence of my play from earlier. As if he knows exactly what my fingers just felt, Jacob groans long and low–his eyes landing where my hand is.

"Taste yourself," he says, his voice rough.

With a shaking hand, I bring my fingers to my mouth and do what he says and taste. The flavour fires up a heat beneath my skin, and I moan around my fingers.

"Fuck me," he exhales harshly, his pupils dilating as I look at him. "Look at you, being such a good girl and doing what I tell you. Now dip those fingers back into that pretty pussy and come give me a taste."

I suck in a breath, but again I'm powerless to do anything other than what he says. So, taking another swipe between my legs, I tentatively hold my hand out towards him.

"No. Crawl to me and bring me what I gave you."

Oh my God, this is officially the hottest night of my life. With every ounce of strength, I raise myself to kneel and then slowly move towards him, holding my hand out in front of me, like I'm offering a wild animal a treat.

He takes hold of my wrist firmly and brings my hand to his face, never taking his eyes away from mine. Parting his beautiful lips, he puts my index and middle fingers slowly into his hot, wet mouth. My clit pulses as I watch his pupils dilate.

“God El’s, you taste like heaven,” he says as he drops my hand and slowly rises to his feet. “I’m gonna need a better taste, just to be sure.”

He crawls over my body, my breath hitching with every inhale. Before he has a chance to do anything else, I sit up and do the thing I’ve wanted to do for so many years. I take his lips with mine and put everything I’ve never had the nerve to say into a scorching kiss. His mouth meets mine, and it feels like electricity is being shot straight through my veins.

His tongue rolls with mine in the most delicious way, and before I know it, the little clothing he’s wearing is being torn off. I take a moment just to drink him in, his defined shoulders and chiselled abs that flow into the most mouth-watering V shape, with the lightest of hair trailing down towards what can only be described as the most gorgeous dick I have ever seen. Long and thick, with just the right amount of hair, but that’s not what takes my breath away. The thing that’s making me salivate is the steel bar going straight through the tip of his cock.

“It’s called a reverse Prince Albert; trust me, you’ll like it.”

I swallow hard and continue to stare unashamedly at the glorious sight before me. Tentatively, I reach my hand out and run the tip of my finger over the bar. Jacob sucks in a breath like I’ve hurt him, but the way his cock jolts tells me I haven’t

“My eyes are up here, sweetheart.” I look up to find him staring down at me like a tiger about to hunt its prey.

Leaning back on my forearms, I inhale a shaky breath. The reality of this situation is finally crashing over me. Jacob is here, with me, and he’s naked, and I can’t shut the noise up in my head.

“Ella, stop thinking so hard. I think you and I have both wanted this for a very, *very* long time. But if you’re changing your mind right now, you need to tell me. Because I’m about three seconds away from taking everything your incredible body has to offer.”

Well shit, when you put it like that.

All I can do is nod and bite my lower lip. I scoot back on the bed to make room for him, and he doesn't hesitate to take my offer.

Picking up my foot, he begins peppering the softest of kisses all the way up my calf, to the back of my knee and on my inner thigh stopping just at the point that is screaming for his attention.

Bypassing it completely, he starts kissing his way up my stomach and eliciting moans from me, as he prowls up my body. I watch mesmerized at

the rippling muscles of his shoulders, the delicious way they move as he snakes his way towards me. Finally, he cups my breast in his strong hand and seals his lips over my nipple, causing me to throw my head back at the sheer pleasure of it. Jacob moans and growls like I'm the best thing he's tasted. Trailing his other hand up my thigh, he stops again just before he gets to my needy clit.

"Jacob, please," I moan.

"Please what, baby? Use your words, or I won't know if I'm taking this too far." *Holy shit, he just called me baby!*

"Touch me, please," I almost beg.

Jacob removes his mouth from my breast and begins to move back down my body, causing goosebumps to appear on my skin. With his head between my thighs now, Jacob runs his tongue up my slit and then swirls it around my clit.

"Oh, God," I cry out, my back arching off the bed.

Jacob runs his free hand up my stomach, pushing me back down, all whilst licking and kissing and nipping away at my pussy. Just as the sensations between my legs climb to all new heights, he inserts his fingers inside me, bending them at the knuckle, reaching a spot that makes me see stars. Still with his other hand on my lower stomach, he gently presses whilst rolling his fingers in me. The intense feeling it's bringing makes me feel like I'm going to pee myself. Trying to push his head away, he growls and continues his onslaught. Pumping his fingers into me all whilst sucking on my clit with the most incredible rhythm.

"Jacob-" I gasp, just as he pulls his fingers out abruptly and bites my clit. White-hot heat erupts over me and my vision blurs; I feel my release gush out of me, and he doesn't hesitate to lick up the mess I'm making. The realisation of what just happened hits me, and I throw my arm over my face.

"Did I just-" I can't bring myself to finish that sentence.

"Fuck yeah you did, all over my face and it was incredible."

I'm going to die of shame; my first time with Jacob, and I squirted all over his face. Kill me now.

"Oh, no, no, you're not gonna hide from me now," He says, climbing up my body and licking his lips. He pulls my arm away from my face and kisses me fiercely. Tasting myself on his lips brings a new sense of heat to me, threading my hand through his thick hair. I kiss him back with as much

need as he's giving me, rolling my hips and moaning into his mouth. The feel of his rock-hard length pressing on my clit has me nearly feral for this man.

"How far do you want to take this, sweetheart? I'm not gonna lie– I'm going crazy here." He's looking at me with such a fierce longing, and my body is screaming at me to take what *I* want, do this for *me*.

Second-guessing has been the driving force of my whole life, putting other people's needs and wants above my own. When Jacob left, he took my heart with him, and it was never the same again. Until now, with him looking at me like this. Those blue eyes that I would sneak looks at under the stars when we would chat for hours. The wrinkle in his nose that I wanted to press my finger into and smooth it out. He's my Jacob; he's my home and my safe place. I've never had to be anything other than myself with him. So there is only one answer to his question.

"I want you, all of you, always."

"Thank fuck for that," he says as he proceeds to devour my neck with kisses. Stealing my breath.

My head is spinning; all earlier thoughts of what-ifs are gone, and I drink in the feeling of being beneath Jacob. His strong arms on either side of my head, holding himself up just enough to take my lips in another bruising kiss. I run my nails up his back and over his shoulder blades, squirming beneath him. All the while he doesn't stop kissing me.

"I'm on the pill, but are you–" I trail off, not really wanting to finish that sentence, but at the same time needing to know he is safe.

"Baby, I'm clean if that's what you're asking. But I can use protection if you would rather."

"No, I need to feel you, all of you."

"Jesus, Ella, what are you doing to me?"

But I don't get the chance to respond; Jacob pulls away from me just enough to look down between our bodies. I can't help but look down too. The sight of our naked bodies together slick with sweat only makes me hornier. Jacob runs the tip of his cock over my clit and down to my slit over and over, dipping inside me just the tiniest bit. The delicious friction from his piercing makes me throw my head back; I'm so close again. He picks up the pace before plunging inside me with one hard thrust. An animalistic growl comes from deep within him.

“Fuuuuckkkk. Jesus, baby, you feel incredible,” he says whilst slowly rocking his body into mine. If I thought the feeling of his piercing was good on the outside, it has nothing on the feeling of it rubbing against my G-spot.

I can’t form words. I just look up at him as his moans and growls take me further and further to the point of ecstasy. It’s right there, and I close my eyes in anticipation.

“Open your eyes, Ella, keep them on me,” he says, pumping into me faster and harder.

My eyes open lazily, rolling into the back of my head as my orgasm crashes over me.

“Oh, my God, Jacob, shit! I’m coming.”

“Fuck yeah you are,” he says through gritted teeth. “Come all over me, sweetheart, make a mess on me.”

Higher and higher I soar, my inner muscles squeezing him, as if they are trying to keep him inside me.

“Shit, baby. Fuck! I’m coming, do you want me to pull out?” he says, going harder and harder.

I answer by digging my fingers into his ass cheeks, encouraging him to keep going.

Jacob roars his release, his body jolting and jerking over me. I lean up and kiss his neck and collarbone anywhere I can get my lips on.

Jacob slows his pace, now just merely rolling his hips on top of me. I take in his blissed-out expression, the small satisfied smile that plays on his lips.

Finally, he opens his eyes, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen them this blue before.

“Hey you,” he says breathlessly.

“Hey, yourself,” I say back.

“Stay right there,” Jacob says, kissing my forehead tenderly and then getting up to go to the bathroom.

Two seconds later he’s back with a hand towel which he uses to clean me up. Usually something like this would mortify me, but in the state of euphoria that I’m in, I just can’t seem to care.

Getting back into bed with me, Jacob holds his arm out so that I can snuggle into his side. Never taking his hands off me, he kisses the top of my head. Slowly, the questions and worries from earlier start creeping back in just as I’m about to voice them. Jacob blurts-

“Please don’t, El’s not right now. Let me just enjoy this, this feeling of finally having you in my arms. Right where you always should have been.”

I have nothing I can say to that, or at least nothing I *want* to say. So I cuddle deeper into his chest, taking in his heat and scent, and slowly drift off into the best sleep I’ve had in years.

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Chapter Sixteen

Jacob - Present Day

Before my eyes have even opened, last night's deeds flow through my mind. Last night I slept with Ella Graham, *the* Ella Graham! Peeling my eyes open, I turn my head to look at her sleeping form still cuddled up in the crook of my arm. I study her face while she sleeps, the way her mouth forms into a pout, and her brow furrows slightly. *I wonder what she's dreaming about.* Surely no other human being has ever looked as beautiful as she does whilst not even conscious.

Today is the only day the Stags and Hens are splitting off to do separate activities. We Stags are off paintballing, whilst the girls are off to the spa. Which really couldn't have come at a worse time, as that means Ella will have far too much time to think, and knowing my luck...*regret*.

I, however, don't regret a thing. If anything, the thought of there being a Jacob and Ella makes me feel something I'm not sure I've ever felt in my whole life–hopeful. Normally, at this point in the proceedings of a hook up, me and my hangover are coming up with a strategy for how to get the fuck out of this situation without waking the person, or in some cases, *persons*. So this is a whole new development for me. To be waking up after hands down the best sex of my life and wanting to stay, wanting to wake her up by kissing that gorgeous face and then continuing on to something a lot less sweet. But somehow I know I should wait; I need to gauge Ella's reaction to this when she wakes up. Neither of us were drunk last night; *again, another first for me*, so at least that can't be used as an excuse. But whatever she was about to say before we fell asleep is making my stomach twist with anxiety. *Had she regretted it that soon?*

As if the noise from my thoughts were too loud, she begins to stir next to me, groaning and grunting in protest. *So fucking cute.*

It takes her way too long to register that not only is there another person in her bed, but that someone is me. Her face pulls an adorable, shocked

expression as she pulls the covers high on her chest.

"Morning," she says sheepishly.

"Good morning, beautiful. Sleep well?" I already know she did because of the snoring.

"Yeah, really good, thanks. You?" She adjusts herself to sit, still desperately clinging to the sheet.

"Babe, I saw everything last night, so there's really no point in hiding from me now."

Her cheeks blush, and she nods her head slightly. Turning back towards me, she looks at me through her lashes.

"Please don't say you regret last night, El's. Because I sure as shit don't."

I hold my breath in anticipation for her response, praying to a God I don't believe in that she isn't about to break my already fragile heart.

"I don't," she says, biting her lip coyly and shocking the ever-loving shit out of me.

"Really?" I sit up fully now and get closer to her. "Look, I know all the reasons why you're nervous about this, but trust me, baby, I'm a master at fucking up and getting people to forgive me. So if Damon or anyone else has a problem with this, I got it covered."

She laughs a full-body laugh, turning her body towards me.

"How do you think he's going to react to this, though, seriously?" she says, her eyes wide.

I exhale; the mention of my best friend's reaction feels a lot like someone has just poured ice-cold water over me. *But I fucking want this; I want her! And I'm not going to go down without a fight.*

"Leave Damon to me, ok?" I say, grabbing hold of her hands. "In all honesty, I don't know how he's gonna take this, but I would much rather he take out any negative feelings about this on me than on you."

Her response to that is to climb into my lap, the sheet long forgotten. Wrapping her arms around my neck, she kisses me fiercely. I kiss her back with everything I have, grabbing the back of her head. I spin our bodies so I am lying on top of her. Drinking in every single feature I am awarded at this angle.

"Have I told you how beautiful you are?" I say, kissing the tip of her nose.

She blushes again and looks away.

"Oh no way, you definitely can't play coy with me now, babe. Not after you came all over my face."

“Jacob!” She swats at my chest, but she’s smiling, and it makes my heart skip.

“Seriously though, Ella, you are and always have been the most beautiful girl I have ever seen.”

I don’t let her pull away from me again; I crush my lips to hers and kiss her in a way that I hope shows I mean everything I say.

A loud knock on the door makes us pull apart.

“Ellaaaa!” Holly singsong from behind the door. “Get your lazy ass up; we have relaxing to do.

Ella gasps and begins pushing me out of the bed.

“You need to go!” she whisper-shouts.

“The door's locked, baby; she can’t get in here.” I chuckle.

“Seriously, Jacob, get out,” she says, still pushing at my chest.

“Ok, well I’m going to wake up Jacob, then I’m coming back for you, missy,” Holly calls through the door again.

That makes me move. Grabbing as much of my stuff as I can, I quickly kiss Ella once more and make a dash to the adjoining door.

I make it just in time to hear the tail end of Holly’s not-so-friendly wake-up call.

Catching my breath, I open the door, narrowly missing Holly’s fist midflight.

“Oh, good you’re up. Damon is waiting for you in the lobby with the rest of the Stags.”

I don’t even get a chance to respond before she turns on her

heel, heading back to Ella’s room.

With the world's biggest grin on my face, I begin getting ready for the day.

Sweating profusely in the Spanish heat with protective gear on was probably one of my more stupid ideas. Seeing the joy on Damon’s face as we shot paintballs at each other mended another piece of my heart. All of a sudden we are kids again, not a care in the world. Well, I had loads of them, but none of them existed when I was with Damon and Ella.

Sitting down on one of the benches in the shade, I gulp down a bottle of water.

“Well, I have officially sweated out all the alcohol in my system,” Damon says as he sits opposite me. “Speaking of alcohol, I haven’t seen you

drinking this whole trip. What's going on with that?" he asks.

"Oh, you know, just trying this whole 'my body is my temple' thing. It's working, right?" I stand and pull up my shirt, revealing my abs.

"Fuck off!" he says, laughing and throwing his now-empty water bottle at my stomach. "Seriously though, J, you good?"

That's the thing with Damon: although he's quiet and rarely gets himself involved in other people's business, he is always hyper-aware of how people may be feeling or if they are going through something. Maybe that's why he attached himself to me all those years ago.

Every part of me wants to laugh this off and give a stereotypical Jacob nonchalant response. But if I'm going to tell him about me and Ella, the last thing I need is for him to still think I am the absolute hot mess that he's known for so long. I need him to see that I am trying to get my life sorted.

So I decide to go somewhere in the middle of the full truth and a need-to-know level of truth.

"I don't want to make this a big deal or anything; I'm just seeing what life can be like sober for a change."

He looks at me, shocked. "And how's that going for you?"

"Not fucking pretty to start with, but it's definitely getting better." My thoughts immediately go to Ella, and how I can hardly wait to get back to the hotel to see her.

"How long's it been?"

"Nearly two months," I answer, only realising this now myself.

"Shit! That's amazing, brother. I'm proud of you."

"No, please don't," I say, shaking my head. "It's still a work in progress."

He laughs and hangs his head low as if gathering his thoughts.

Here we go.

"So where does my sister come into this?" That's Damon, straight to the point.

Suddenly I feel like there is something lodged in my throat and I can't speak.

"Jacob, listen to me. If you think I haven't noticed the crazy chemistry between you and my little sister, then you are stupider than I thought."

Rude!

"Having said that, it's my duty as her big brother to say to you, best friend or not, if something does happen between you two and you end up hurting

her in any way. I will never forgive you for that." He gives me a look that shows he means exactly what he says.

Nodding my head, I answer without speaking. Not one part of me can even fathom the idea of having something as precious as Ella and then doing something to destroy it.

"I'm not gonna get in yours and Ella's business; that's not my style. But just do me one favour–"

"Anything," I blurt, before he's had a chance to finish his sentence.

"Don't do anything with her if this is just another one of your flings. I've seen the way she looks at you, and Ella doesn't do half-arsed. If you think you can be as good as the men she reads about in her books, then go for it; you have my blessing. But if you have any doubts in your head, leave her alone. She pined for you for ten years. She'll be ok a bit longer."

With that, he taps the table and walks away, leaving me with my thoughts.

Can I be enough for her? I really want to be.

No, I have to be.

Because now I've had a taste of what Ella and I could be, the addict in me is roaring his head off and beating his chest.

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Chapter Seventeen

Ella - Present Day

"He's my cousin, so I don't need *all* the details," Holly says to me as we sit in the hot tub at the spa. We have had the most amazing, relaxing day, and now with the other girls off having their treatments, it's just us two. Holly only had to take one look at me as we took the elevator down. She had the most wicked smile on her face the whole time we had our pedicures, and now that we are alone, she's been grilling me for all the details of last night.

I sigh. "It was nice," I say, coyly searching the bottom of my now empty cocktail glass.

"Nice?? It was nice? Girl, brunch is nice. A cold glass of wine after a long day at work is nice. But sex with the man you have been crazy about since you were old enough to walk- do not insult my intelligence and just tell me it was nice. Unless, of course, it really was just that and now you're wondering why you made such a big deal out of him?" She looks horrified on my behalf.

"Oh, trust me, not even my wildest dreams could have conjured last night up," I say with a mischievous smile.

"Eeekkk, this is so exciting, and also crazily cliché. The Maid of Honour and the Best Man." She takes another long sip of her cocktail and then gives me a soft look. "But in all seriousness, you ok? Was it everything you wanted it to be? He better have treated my best friend right"

"And so much more, Hols. I'm just so worried that Damon isn't going to be ok with it. Or worse still, we ruin our friendship completely."

"You won't. Anyone with eyes can see the connection you both have. And as far as Damon is concerned, I really wouldn't worry too much. You know how laid back he is. Plus I'm Jacob's cousin, so he doesn't really have a leg to stand on."

"God, it all sounds so incestuous when you say it out loud." I grimace.

“So I’m guessing you haven’t really had a chance to talk much about what happened or where you go from here?”

“Well, actually, we were just about to before you came bashing on my door.”

“Shit, I’m sorry, I totally cockblocked you. You should have told me to fuck off,” she says with a laugh.

“I’m not going to tell you to fuck off. Well, maybe if you had come about five minutes later, I might have.” I splash water at her, making her spill her drink in an effort to cover her face and hair.

“Bitch!” she snarks, but there’s no malice in her words.

After our pamper day is over, we all head back to our rooms for a siesta before dinner tonight.

As I’m walking to my door, my stomach starts to flip in anticipation of seeing Jacob again. Butterflies dance low in my tummy as I get there to find the most beautiful white carnations leaning against the frame. I pick them up, my heart so full I think it’s going to burst right out of my chest. There is a note nestled in the middle. With a shaky hand, I pluck it out and read.

E, meet me in our pool.
J xx

My legs can’t get me in my room quick enough. Once inside, I throw my bag on the bed and check the mirror. *Jesus, what did they do to me in that place?* I look at it. But I can’t wait another minute. Hoisting my boobs up in my bikini top, I do one last look over and open the patio door.

The sight that greets me takes my breath away. With the sun setting low in the sky, it casts a magical glow over the pool, making it appear like it’s glittering before me. The haunting vocals of Abe Parker’s *Butterflies* is playing from the speaker. The lyrics ‘Am I the only one catching butterflies,’ make me look straight at Jacob, who is standing at the end of the pool; his expression is soft but serious. Slowly, one foot in front of the other, I climb down the steps into the water. I make my way to him, never breaking eye contact until we are chest to chest. His breathing is heavy, just like mine, the weight of the words making the moment feel like something from a movie.

“Hey, you,” I say, running my hands up his bare chest.

“El’s Bells.” His smile is so warm as he tucks hair behind my ear. The nickname, along with this moment, makes my knees weak. “I missed you. I feel like I’ve been missing you for so long now I barely believe you’re here with me.”

For so many years I have dreamt about Jacob saying words like this to me, nights where I would be curled up on my sofa at home watching all my favourite romantic comedies, replacing the main characters with us. Now that it’s actually happening, it’s like I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop, for someone to come bursting through the door and tell me it’s all been some sort of joke. Or worse still, I will wake up and be at home in my bed, and this will be yet one more of my dreams.

Jacob clears his throat, and it snaps me back to the here and now. “Sweetheart, if I’m going in too fast right now, tell me, but what you need to understand is that I have been dreaming about this for years. Do you remember that night at your old house when it was just us two on movie night?” I nod my head, still not able to form coherent sentences. “That night I was so close to kissing you, so close to finally giving in to temptation. Now we’re here though, and the last two nights have been so perfect I’m glad I didn't. Because now I’m able to tell you all the things I was too scared or too young to say. And this time I promise I’m not going anywhere.”

“You swear?” I croak out. “Because I don’t think now that I can see what we can be, I don’t think my heart could take that.”

Jacob puts both hands around my face and rests his forehead against mine.

“Baby, I swear I’m not going anywhere.”

The last few hours have been amazing; we swam and kissed and then eventually made it to Jacob's bed where he laid me down and made love to me.

Now we are in our separate rooms getting ready for dinner, and once again the butterflies are swirling in my stomach. I decide tonight is the night for the yellow dress that sort of feels like it started it all.

After blow drying my hair and putting on some light make up, I look up at my reflection in the mirror happy with what I see. *The perks of being on holiday and having a tan*

I tug the dress over my head and then slide my feet into some pretty sparkly sandals. Just as I’m putting on my lip gloss, someone knocks on my door.

Jacob leans casually against the door frame, one leg crossed in front of the other. He has a loose white shirt that's unbuttoned almost to his stomach. His tanned chest and silver chains are on display, making me suck in a breath.

He looks me up and down and smiles, "I was wondering when I got to see the yellow dress again, it looks better than I remember." He steps forward and wraps his arm around my waist pulling me to him. His other hand snakes round my body and cups my ass.

"Fucking delicious," he says into my neck, then kisses me like he hasn't seen me in months let alone an hour or so.

"Ready to go?" he asks.

"Yep, all good, let's go." I close and lock my door and walk beside him down the pathway to the main hotel.

As we're walking, he goes to take my hand in his, and I jerk back.

"J, we can't go in there holding hands. I haven't even had a chance to talk to Damon yet." He looks hurt at the rejection at first, but then understanding seems to dawn on him.

"No, you're right. I'm sorry, it's just that now we are… you know, what we are," he says shyly pointing between us. "I just don't want to have to keep my hands off you, and I want everyone to know you're mine," he says that last part much quieter, like I'm going to correct him.

Pulling him to the side of the path into a darkened area, I reach up on my tip toes so that I can speak directly into his ear.

"Baby, I'm yours and whether I'm holding your hand or not, nothing is going to change that." I pull back smiling.

His eyes are ablaze "Call me that again," He says looking down at me.

"Call you what?" I'm confused; I can't remember what I called him.

"You called me baby; I really fucking like that. Say it again."

I smile sweetly but as I lean in towards his mouth just a breath away I add with heat "Kiss me– baby."

He's feral pushing me against the nearest tree which luckily is completely out of sight of anyone who walks past. Holding my face in his hands he kisses me fiercely and with his other hand he trails up my thigh to the juncture between my legs.

"Can you be my good girl and stay quiet?" He says to me in a low rumble that goes all the way to my toes.

"Mmhmm," is all I can manage.

Pushing my underwear to one side he gently strokes my swollen clit, it pulses with need at his touch and already sets a fire at the bottom of my stomach.

“Jesus El you’re so wet for me,” He says, planting scorching kisses down my neck and over the top of my cleavage.

“Jacob!!” I moan.

“Yeah baby, that’s my name. Fuck being quiet, scream it so everyone knows who’s making you feel this good.”

I push my face into his neck in an attempt to stifle my moans, the orgasm he pulls from me hitting like a freight train.

As I come down from my high, Jacob pulls back and puts the fingers he used on me into his mouth.

Groaning, he says “That’s the finest appetiser I’ve ever had.”

I swat his chest and once I right myself we continue our walk, giggling all the way to dinner.

Dinner is full of laughter and lots of wine. Our plates are just being cleared when the tinkling of a fork on glass catches everyone's attention. I glance up to see Jacob standing with his glass raised in the air.

“Good evening everyone, I’m fairly confident over the past few days I’ve got to know everyone here so introductions aren’t necessary but in case you don’t know, I’m Jacob, and somehow I’ve been trusted enough to be chosen as best man. Which either says a lot about mine and Damon’s friendship or very little on his judgement.” Everyone around the table laughs, my brother included.

“I just wanted to make a quick toast tonight and thank everyone for being here this weekend, to celebrate the legends that are Damon and Holly.” Loud cheering and whoops come from us all and Jacob smiles.

“I’m not going to say too much tonight because I’m saving the good stuff for my speech on the day. But I just wanted to say a massive thank you to you both, for allowing me to be a part of your day and for letting me be here to celebrate you both. Damon, you’re one of the best people I know, and you both deserve every happiness. So please, everyone raise your glasses to Damon and Holly, and to us all surviving this incredible weekend.”

A chorus of ‘To Damon and Holly’ rings out amongst the group and Damon gets up from his seat to hug Jacob. I sit there just watching him and

wondering how in the space of just a few days I could possibly have got this lucky.

The rest of the evening is mainly spent dancing under the stars to the DJ I booked for our last night. Looking around at all the smiling faces I wonder if it's even possible to sustain this level of contentment, but I'm going to try. Jacob promised this is for real this time and all I can do is trust his words. Trust that he won't run from this.

Trust that he won't break my heart…again.

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Chapter Eighteen

Ella - Present Day

For you,
It's been a while…
I didn't think I would ever write to you like this again.
To be honest I thought this diary was closed forever.
Then you came back…you came back to me.
I didn't dare to ever dream of a time where you would feel the same, but then this weekend happened.
My head is spinning, I don't know what's up and what's down.
It was a dream.
I'm terrified I've imagined it.
You feel like sand slipping through my fingers, I'm desperately trying to hold onto the idea of us.
You gave me that this weekend, an idea of us.
I guess now, I can say your name…
Jacob.
My Jacob.
This weekend was everything to me, I hope you feel the same.
I had a taste of what we could be and now, I never want to let it go.

I guess TBC…

Yours forever,
Your El's Bells

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Chapter Nineteen

Ella - Present Day

Closing the diary and returning it to its hiding spot I look at the pile of dirty washing on my bedroom floor. We got back in the early hours of the morning and all I wanted to do was shower and crawl into bed.

The flight home was a lot different to the flight out there, sitting next to Jacob again we snuck kisses in the dark cabin and held hands whilst sharing headphones watching a movie I had downloaded to my phone.

We didn't talk all that much and seemed to come to the same decision just to enjoy these last few hours before going back to reality.

Well, reality is looking right back at me in the form of a day full of housework before going back to actual work tomorrow–*joy.*

With great effort I get out of bed and set about my tasks for the day, deciding I definitely need music to inspire me. I queue my phone up to play *Kiss Me More* by Doja Cat and before long the jobs are getting done without much effort, my mind never straying far from Jacob and the last few days.

My brain is at war with itself on whether or not I should text him, my fingers twitching at my sides. The problem is I don't want to come across as overly keen.

Just as I'm about to pick up my phone, there's a knock at the door. I glance at the clock and see it's midday already; my heart leaps at the thought it might be Jacob, and I rush to the door.

Swinging it open, I'm greeted by the easy smile of my brother, standing with both hands in his pockets. I try to school my face not look as disappointed as I feel.

"Damon, what are you doing here?"

"Hey Sis, can I come in?" He moves his weight from one foot to the other and I don't miss the look of apprehension on his face.

"Of course," I say, pushing the door wide for him and he steps inside.

“So what’s up? I thought you would be at home with Holl’s today recovering,” I say, flicking on the kettle.

“Yeah she’s in bed, turns out that continuing to drink on the flight home was not the best idea for her.” He huffs a laugh as he takes a seat at my modest kitchen table.

I can feel the tension rolling over me like a second skin, so much so I spin around to face him and blurt–

“Why are you here Damon?”

“Jeeze El’s.” He looks shocked at my outburst but also a little amused.

I sigh, “Sorry, I’m just a bit frazzled from the weekend.”

“Yeah I bet.” He lifts one eyebrow at me. “Hooking up with the man you’ve been in love with for nearly twenty years will do that to you.”

My head snaps up and I look to find him really smiling now.

“You–”

“Yeah Ella, I know, and just for the record you are both absolutely shit at being inconspicuous.”

I hide my face in my hands and groan. He gets up from his seat and stands in front of me.

“Ella, stop it,” he says, pulling my hands from my face. “I’m going to tell you exactly what I said to him. If you think I haven’t always known something was brewing between you then you are nowhere near as bright as I thought you were.”

“Wait, you already spoke to Jacob about this? When?” *Why wouldn’t Jacob have told me about this? It’s a pretty big deal.*

“On the paintball day, after the truth or dare kiss it really wasn’t that difficult to put the final pieces of the ‘Jellie Bellie’ puzzle together.

My forehead creases in confusion, “*Jellie Bellie?*”

“Yeah, me and Holl’s came up with it on the plane home after a few drinks. Jacob and Ella smushed together.” He pauses frowning. “Actually now that I say it out loud and sober it doesn’t make any sense at all.” We both laugh at that, taking a seat together at the table.

“But seriously, Sis, this is why I’ve come to talk to you. I know that you and him have had this thing going on between you since we were teenagers, but you need to know Jacob isn’t the same as he was back then. I’m not saying he’s bad or anything, it's just there are things that could potentially hurt you in the future if you don’t know about them now.”

My stomach plummets and my hands begin to sweat. I have no idea what Damon is about to tell me, but what I do know is my gut instinct is saying it’s something I’m not going to like.

“Jacob is my best friend and even I don’t know half of the shit that went down in that hell hole he called home when we were kids. But what I do know is there was nothing good there and it fucked him up big time, I don’t think he even realises the extent of the trauma it’s caused.”

“Damon, can you just spit it out for god's sake.” I can’t take anymore of this build up.

“He has demons, El's, and they cause him to go into a really dark place.”

That doesn’t sound like the Jacob I know at all, he’s always the fun guy and the life and soul of the party. Come to think of it, I don't think I’ve ever seen him even remotely sad.

“Just because someone is always smiling doesn’t mean they’re happy Ella,” he says, seeming to read my mind.

“In fact in my experience the ones that are always smiling are the ones you need to look out for the most.” He looks down at his hands and I know there is more he wants to say, but he’s battling with it in his head.

“Damon, I appreciate you coming to me, and I love you so much for having my back but I feel like whatever it is you can’t say is something Jacob should probably share with me when he’s ready.” I squeeze his hand over the table and then get up to make tea, because *would I even be British if I didn’t make tea in a heavy situation?*

“El’s, just promise me one thing,” he pauses waiting for me to turn around, but I can’t, because if I do everything that has happened in the last few days is going to float away and the magic will be lost forever. So with my back still to him I nod my head once.

“If it gets too much, you’ll tell me. You won’t try and deal with this all on your own.” His eyes are imploring when I finally do turn around. That’s the exact moment I hear the metaphorical bubble pop and a single tear falls down my cheek.

“He’s everything I’ve ever wanted,” my voice comes out rough and just above a whisper. The rational side of my brain knows I should just hear what Damon wants to tell me, but the other side–the one that listens to my heart–can’t bear to hear it.

Damon gets up from his seat and strides towards me, holding me by the arms he crouches slightly so we are eye level.

“And maybe it will be fine, but what kind of a brother would I be if I didn't at least warn you it might not be the fairytale you always dreamed of?”

“I understand. But Damon, I'm not a little girl anymore,” I say as the tears come a little more freely now.

Damon swipes them away with his thumb and plants a kiss to the top of my head.

“We know he’s a good man Ella, unfortunately life just hasn’t been good in return.”

With that he leaves and I stand staring at the door for a long beat of time.

I’ve always known Jacob had demons, I used to be able to see it behind his eyes. Sometimes I would catch him in a trance, looking like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders, but then he would catch me watching and smile his beautiful smile–the one that made his nose wrinkle–and all would be well again.

Now I need to decide between letting this play out or talking to him about it. Because one thing’s for sure, I haven’t waited this long to have a relationship with him that feels like it has an expiration date on it.

No, if Jacob and I are finally going to be together we have to be all in, no secrets, no lies. I meant what I said to him, my heart won’t survive if I get to have him only to have to let him go again.

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Chapter Twenty

Jacob - Present Day

We've been back in the UK for three weeks now, and juggling work and helping with the wedding has left next to no time for Ella and I to actually spend time together in a normal setting. Being this busy has also served an even greater purpose in keeping me from doing something stupid, I have crammed as many clients into my day as humanly possible and when I'm not working or preparing sketches I have been hitting the local boxing ring to work out some of the tension that has been progressively building.

But today is the day. She's coming to the shop to meet me after my last client. We have been tasked with making the favours for the wedding guests and up until now Ella has handled most things, but this one she needs my help with. She's putting together lottery tickets with illustrations of the happy couple on them, hence her need for me.

I shouldn't feel this nervous, but there's something about being in our normal environment, no longer in the bubble of being on holiday, where normality and routine don't exist, that has my anxiety climbing. Something about being home makes it feel altogether more real. Not that I regret what happened, or the things that I said, but when I'm home and facing all the demons I deal with on a daily basis, it makes me scared of bringing her into this. Neither Ella or Damon know the full extent of my struggles, I've kept a tight lid on the ugly truth of it all. But something is telling me that I am either going to have to come clean (*no pun intended)* or suffer in silence. Something I am altogether too familiar with but that has never ended very well for me.

Contact between us has been consistent, and, unless you count the time she drunk called me after a night out with Holly demanding I go and tend to her needs, it has been relatively platonic. I found it all too amusing the next day when I recalled the conversation to her and got to listen to someone else live through their drunk shenanigans rather than me.

The annual shop BBQ is coming up soon, an event in which everyone usually gets so shitfaced we don't actually eat any of the food. Instead, we drink our body weight in alcohol and discuss our worst clients of the year. I made this event, but now I'm at a point where I'm not sure if I want to go. It's messing with my head. Everywhere I go there are temptations, it feels like it's suffocating me at the same time as drawing me in. I'm losing my grip on my self control, and to be honest, everyday feels like I'm slipping closer and closer to failure.

"Earth to Jacob." A familiar voice snaps me from my thoughts. I look up to see Indie, my long time friend and colleague waving her hand in front of her to get my attention.

"Shit, sorry Inds what's up?"

"There's an extremely pretty brunette who is on her second lap of the shop window and looking in nervously. Do you know her?"

I lean back as far as I can in my chair to see who she's talking about. I catch familiar brown eyes looking back at me just at the point my chair gives out and sends me crashing to the floor.

Indie bursts out laughing and makes her way to the front door.

"Sweetheart, you coming in or are you planning on patrolling out there a bit longer?"

Ella walks through the open doorway with a blush to her cheeks as I get back on my feet and try to compose myself. *Smooth Jacob, really smooth.*

"Hey you," she says as she rounds my station nervously. Her head is on a swivel looking left and right at all the art work on the walls. My biggest achievements in life hang here and something in my chest swells at her seeing it for the first time.

"Jacob, it's incredible in here." Her awe strikes me, and again, something I rarely allow myself to feel warms me from the inside out–*pride.*

"Thanks. I'm so glad you finally get to see it."

I don't miss the way she's not only looking at the artwork, but also at Indie. It doesn't take me long to work out why Ella is looking at her. Indie is gorgeous, anyone with eyes can see that. Her platinum blonde hair that is shaved at the sides revealing intricate mandala art on her head, her blue eyes that look so surreal that you would think they are contacts. But mostly it's her vibe, her effortless confidence and way of making anyone who's near her feel like they have always known her. Ella's eyes cut to me, the

question lingering there without being spoken. I close the space between us and whisper in her ear “She’s probably way more interested in you than she is me sweetheart.”

“Probably?” Indie cuts in, obviously hearing what I said. “Baby just look at her, she’s stunning.” She winks at Ella flirtatiously.

That adorable blush returns, starting at the base of Ella’s neck and working its way up her cheeks. Just seeing that makes me forget the reasons why I was nervous to see her again and instead makes me want to get her the fuck out of here.

I smile at Indie. She’s a menace that woman, but she’s a great friend and shit-hot at her job.

“I’m all done for the day, so I’m gonna head off,” I say whilst packing away the last of my equipment.

“Ok, sweet, no worries, It was nice to *finally* meet you Ella,” Indie says sweetly. She may be a rockstar at tattooing, but if she carries on, she’ll be out of a job. I give her a look which she just chuckles at and continues sketching on her ipad.

Once we’re back at my place and have all the equipment laid out on my kitchen table, I notice how tired Ella looks. She’s still busying herself putting things into piles when I go to stand behind her, tentatively wrapping my arms around her waist. She breathes out a soft breath, like she had been holding it for too long.

“I have an idea,” I say, resting my chin on her shoulder. “How about instead of doing this tonight, we order pizza and watch a movie. Like old times.” She turns in my arms to face me, a hesitant smile playing on her lips.

“But we really need to get these done,” she pouts. “Holly has been on my ass all week with different jobs she keeps adding to the already long list.” She looks so defeated, Ella has always been a perfectionist so now adding that to the fact it’s for her brother and best friends wedding, she’s putting too much on herself–or rather Holly is.

“I’ll make you a deal, we have movie and pizza night tonight,” I say, smoothing her hair back from her face. “You can stay over, and then we get it done tomorrow. I know it’s your day off so you can’t give me excuses.” She looks away for a minute and for a moment I think she’s going to say no.

She gives me my answer by kissing me, *hard.* She steals the breath straight from me and I wrap my arms tighter around her. The kiss becomes heated so fast it sends blood rushing from my head down to my dick. Her arm stretches out behind her, swiping at the neat piles sending them crashing to the ground. I smile and lift her onto the table. Frantically her hands go to my shirt pulling and tugging making her wants known, I oblige her by yanking it up and over my head, her hands land on my now bare chest. Dark brown eyes full of lust explore over my body, fingers travelling over every muscle, every crease, like she's trying to memorise it. Her palms skate down my body sliding around to my back where she runs her fingers down over my skin. I groan into her mouth, from the pain of her nails raking my back, mixing with the pleasure. Pulling her top off, I take in the glorious sight of her tits, *they really are a thing of beauty.* Slowly, I push her top half to lay on the table, bending myself over her kissing her neck and down her chest, her back arches off the table offering herself to my mouth. I peel the lace covering her breasts down and seal my mouth around her nipple, she moans and yanks at my hair. Pulling it at the root, the pain mixed with the pleasure of feasting on her makes my dick ache and press hard against the zipper of my jeans. Her hands go behind her back and her bra springs free, I snatch the middle and rip it from her body, throwing it over my shoulder.

She giggles, but stops abruptly when I bite her hip bone, just hard enough to make her squirm and she hisses at the delicious sting. The laugh is replaced quickly with a groan that comes from deep within. I rise and flip her over so her ass is rubbing against my throbbing cock, I give it a short sharp smack and her head lolls forward. Peeling her jeans down her legs I place open mouthed kisses down the backs of her thighs and over her backside. One hand on the small of her back I snake the other around to her front, teasing the sensitive skin near her underwear. She’s panting and rolling her hips, silently begging me to do something other than kiss. I rise to my knees and pull her legs apart, I can see how wet she is through the lace and it makes my mouth water. I blow gently on the spot and she writhes. As quietly as possible, I open my fly and pull my erection free, giving it a slow stroke. Without warning I pull her underwear to the side and push my face between her legs. Her scent overwhelms me and I feel her thighs shake under my palms.

“Jacob-” she gasps as she pushes back onto my waiting tongue.

She tastes delicious and I feel like a man on death row being handed his favourite meal.

With only a few more laps of my tongue and nips of my teeth I know she's close. I run my fingers up to her entrance and slide in easily. With my tongue still on her clit I scissor my fingers inside her, stroking the spot that will make her come. That's all it takes for her to unravel on my tongue, contracting and pulsing around my fingers.

I stand with her legs still shaking in front of me and don't even give her a chance to come down from that high. I gather her hair in my hand and pull her head back to smash my mouth to hers as I slam inside her. With her back bowed and her head thrown back in pleasure, I fuck her hard and slow. I watch the way her small waist snakes in time with my thrusts. The words that fall from her mouth are incoherent, making me wild for her. The familiar pull low in my stomach lets me know I'm not going to last long, but that doesn't matter we have all night.

"Oh my God Jacob, I'm gonna come again."

"Not yet, hold on baby," I say, doubling my efforts to get us there at the same time.

The sounds of her wetness and the feel of her tight pussy around me makes my balls draw up and I know I'm coming.

"NOW baby, let go. Come with me," I roar.

A few more pumps of my hips and I'm emptying inside her. She comes so hard her body doesn't know if it wants to keep me in or push me out. My thrusts become stilted and sweat is trickling from my hairline.

Both of us collapse to the floor, panting and exhausted. I pull her close, her head landing effortlessly on my chest.

"I really hope we didn't mess the favours up too much," I say into her hair.

She laughs and the sound is music to my ears.

"Pizza's here," I call up the stairs to her. She's been relaxing in my bath for the last twenty minutes whilst I cleaned up the mess from earlier and got everything ready for our movie night. I have the wide-screen TV all set to hit play and a large Texas BBQ pizza for us to share–I prefer pepperoni, but BBQ chicken has always been her favourite so that's what we've got.

The soft pad of Ella's feet pull my attention to the door where she stands awkwardly pulling at the hem of the t-shirt I left out for her. It comes to about mid-thigh and paired with the white tube socks she has on, she looks

far more appetising than the pizza. Her hair is pulled up in a messy bun on top of her head, damp curls caressing her neck. But the icing on the cake is she has her thick tortoiseshell glasses on, *I'm a complete sucker for a girl in a slutty pair of glasses.*

"Well, *fuck!"* I can't help but exclaim.

She walks towards me with a shy smile and gives me a kiss so gentle I almost don't feel it.

"So what are we watching?" she asks nonchalantly, making her way over to the sofa.

"Well currently I'm watching your delectable ass sway in my t-shirt," I say biting on my fist.

She grabs one of the cushions and throws it at my head.

"Seriously, Jacob." She rolls her eyes at me as she gets comfy on the sofa.

I grab the remote and hit play, the familiar production company intro blares through my surround sound, she looks at me confused not knowing what we are watching. The first scene is a pretty hard watch and not anything like what I remember from the book, she stares at the screen her brow furrowed. Then as soon as the Yorkshire Moors come on the screen she swings her head to me with the most adorable grin.

"Is this what I think it is?" she beams.

"The new Wuthering Heights, yeah."

"But how the hell did you get this? It's not even out yet?" Her eyes are so comically wide it makes me laugh out loud.

"I have some clients that work in film, they managed to get me a copy."

She leaps into my lap, covering my face in kisses . We stay like that for the rest of the evening, holding onto each other exactly the way I had wanted to hold her all those years ago.

The next day, I'm up long before Ella, already making good progress on the art work that she wanted on the lottery tickets. She wanted it to be something personal but fun, so I have chosen to use some of the photos taken from the stag and hen weekend. Making each photo into an endearing caricature of them; exaggerating Holly's lips and making Damon's floppy blonde hair look like he has a professional blow dry.

Art in all its forms has always been my way of release, a way to quieten down the noise in my head or to shut out the chaos around me. So many nights I would sit in my room drawing fantasy worlds where there was no

shouting and swearing. No bottles being smashed against the walls and above all, no bruises to hide the next day. Flashbacks from my childhood aren't as regular these days but when they do come it feels like the air in my lungs has been punched out. Vivid memories of coming home from school and not knowing what I might find when I walked through the door. I shake my head, shaking the voices loose. They don't control me anymore, they're gone and I'm still here.

"Good morning." Ella's sweet voice pulls me from the lingering sickly feelings.

"Good morning sunshine, you sleep ok?" I ask as I get up from my seat to pour coffee.

"So good, you should have woken me up though, so I could help." She moves towards the chaos on the table and picks up one of the illustrations I've been working on. Turning it over in her hands she traces the drawing with her index finger.

"Jacob, these are amazing," she says in awe, but the compliment doesn't hit the way it should. For too many years I heard the opposite, and now those voices are only getting louder. The voices of my parents telling me I'm 'no good' and 'worthless'.

Ella seems to see the shift of emotions in me, she's always been that way. A lot of the time it's pretty inconvenient, because as someone who tries to hide so much of themselves, having someone be so acutely aware of what you might be going through internally makes it that much harder to pretend.

I pass her the cup of fresh coffee and take the drawing, tossing it back on the table.

Recently, the ghosts of my past seem to be knocking louder and louder and it's getting increasingly harder to ignore them. I have successfully *and literally* drowned them out for ten years, so now that I'm sober it feels like they are haunting me.

We work together for the rest of the morning, putting together something I hope Holly and Damon will be pleased with.

When I drop Ella home and give her a kiss goodbye, the dark thoughts return and I only know one way to make them quiet.

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Chapter Twenty One

Jacob - Aged Eighteen

My biggest fear as a child was that one day I would walk in the house and they would be gone, that it would be me that finds them and once again have to pick up the pieces.

The relief that would wash over me when I would find them huddled up together drinking and taking drugs was soon replaced with an overwhelming need to run. Run far away from the life they had placed me in.

As I've grown up that fear has slowly gone away, like my mind has become complacent to the goings on and in its place is a sense of resignation to it.

I suppose that's why it felt like such a gut punch to walk in today to actually find them both dead, I've been staying at Damon's for a long weekend and had only come back to grab some stuff. At first I thought they were just sleeping but when I came back to the living room after getting my things I noticed how still they both were. I stood there staring at them surrounded by bottles and pipes and tiny pieces of foil. The house felt different, a sort of quietness that can't be described.

Had my fear as a child actually been a premonition of what would transpire? Who knows.

I don't feel sorrow or grief but instead a wave of relief washes over me.

I'm free.

I need to get as far away from here as possible. I go back to my room, pack everything that hasn't been destroyed by squatters and remove my passport that was taped to the back of my wardrobe for safe keeping, my past paranoia over my parents exchanging it for cash now no longer necessary.

Then I do something that makes my blood run cold. I take the stash of money from my fathers pocket giving them one last look, My Mother still

clings to the crack pipe in her lifeless hands and my Father is slumped beside her.

I don't bother calling the police. One of their druggy friends will be here soon I expect and it's not like they aren't known to authorities for their behaviour.

Grabbing my bag I do the thing I have been dreaming of my whole life.

I run.

I run and don't look back.

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Chapter Twenty Two

Ella - Present Day

With only two weeks left until the wedding I'm seriously contemplating blocking Holly's phone calls. She has sent me no less than three updated spreadsheets today alone. The worrying thing is, I know that if I was to block her she would just turn up wherever I am and that would be far scarier than a phone call.

The shop bell chimes and I happily put my phone back in my bag, having had enough of looking at the seven different ways a sash can be tied around a chair. Although, a fleeting sense of dread runs through me that Holly may have *actually* come to the shop.

When I step onto the main shop floor I'm surprised to see Mr and Mrs Jones, the shop owners, looking at the recent display window I dedicated to romantic summer reads.

"Ella, this is just lovely. I love a good holiday romance, don't you?" Mrs Jones swoons and Mr Jones just looks on lovingly at her nodding his head.

In all the years I have worked for them I have never thought about calling them by their first names, they're just one of those traditional couples that if you call them by their real names they become human, if you know what I mean. Like when you would see a teacher out in the wild and be shocked to find that they wear jeans and actually have a life that doesn't revolve around giving us homework or looking disappointed.

"Yeah, I do. And they are going down a storm with all the women in town getting ready for summer break."

Mr Jones shifts uncomfortably from foot to foot and clears his throat.

"Well dear, there was a reason for us popping in today-" he clears his throat several times nervously. "Ella, you've done such a wonderful job of turning our little bookshop into something the younger generation wants to actually visit." My stomach begins to drop, this conversation isn't going anywhere good.

“Thank you Mr Jones, I love my job and your book shop so much, honestly it’s a pleasure.” I already can feel that nothing I say is going to make the outcome any better for me.

“That’s very sweet of you to say. But as you know, our grandchildren are all grown up now and living their lives out in Australia and we feel it’s that time to head over there and retire completely.”

Australia again, *what is it with that place?* I’m desperately trying to hold in the tears, I didn’t wake up thinking I would be out of a job today.

Mrs Jones obviously picks up on my distress and rounds the counter to where I’m standing, She reaches out and gently rubs her bejewelled hands up and down my arms, the strong scent of her perfume invades my nose.

“Oh now lovey, please don’t cry. We really hate to do this, trust me–”She looks over towards Mr Jones for help as though she isn’t one hundred percent sold on this idea herself.

“This shop has been in our family for generations, but we really wouldn’t be able to keep an eye on it from the other side of the world and to be honest, the extra cash from the sale would be helpful.”

My mind races for ways that I could try and fix this, to find a way of saving my job. This town isn’t filled with endless possibilities, and being a creature of habit, the idea of starting fresh in a new job terrifies me.

“I understand,” is all I can choke out.

“We haven’t put the shop on the market yet, we are just starting to put the feelers out there, but we wanted to come to you first as you have been so wonderful and you feel like a second daughter to us,” she carries on and then pulls me into a hug, one that if I’m honest I don’t really want right now.

“Come along darling,” Mr Jones says gently to his wife. “Let’s give Ella here a little time to digest. We’re only a phone call away if you have any questions, and we will of course update you when things start to move along.”

Mrs Jones releases me reluctantly and gives my shoulders one last squeeze before following her husband out the door, pausing ever so slightly to look over her shoulder and give me a sad smile.

I slump onto my stool, feeling utterly defeated, the exhaustion from everything going on in my life hits me square in the face. I look around the shop that has been like a second home to me. The book nook in the corner that is strung with fairy lights and comfy cushions so people can enjoy

reading the blurbs of potential purchases. But above all I look around and see nothing but the possibility of what this gorgeous shop could be. How I would have it set out if it were mine. But it’s not mine, and soon I won’t even get the joy of dreaming of all the ways I could make this a place people would drive miles to see; book lovers who don’t just want to have a next day delivery book. But an experience of trailing their fingers over the spines and taking in the beautiful art work on the front covers.

Standing on wobbly legs I go to the front door and turn the sign to ‘closed’.

In all the years I have worked for the Jones’ I have never closed early, but when I crawl into bed with a giant bucket of fried chicken, chips and a bottle of rose, I have zero fucks to give.

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Chapter Twenty Three

Jacob - Present Day

Sitting in my car outside of the local supermarket, I rub my sweaty palms over my jean covered thighs. Watching people coming in and out seems like the most ordinary task, but to me it feels like I'm making a choice between life and death. The devil on my shoulder is already sitting back with his hands behind his head and a smug grin on his face, because he knows that he's won.

Tonight is the night of the work BBQ, and not only have I been dreading it, but I've lied to Ella and told her that I'm away for a tattoo convention. All the usual tactics in preparation for a decision that feels less like one I'm making, and more like one taking possession.

Things between us couldn't be better; it's everything I've wanted, and yet here I am sat outside a shop with every intention to make a choice that is going to fuck everything up.

My whole life has consisted of making mistakes and then running from the consequences. I genuinely believed when Ella and I got together that I had stopped running, but lately, it's becoming more and more clear that this is a sickness in my head that can only be cured and silenced by one thing. The devil has been knocking on my door louder and louder and it's becoming impossible to ignore it.

"Jacob!!" Indie slurs at me, leaning over the outdoor bar I had built in my garden and clumsily handing me another shot of tequilla.

The world around me has gone blissfully quiet, the noise in my head a distant memory, any care or worry I had has disappeared. Now all that remains is the warmth that seeps into my core and I release a breath that feels like I have been holding for far too long. I take the shot gratefully and throw it back, the instant burn in my throat feels like someone wrapping

their arms around me, the warmth seeps through my chest like lava and I welcome it with open arms and a crooked smile on my face.

My phone vibrates on the table in front of me, I flip it over in my hand and try to get my eyes to focus on the screen.

El's Bells:

Hey you! Hope the convention is going good and you're not missing me too much :)

Bile rises in my throat as I read the sweet words written by my all too innocent girl. The heavy feeling of guilt trying to eat its way into my conscience. But I'm too far gone for that now; no amount of back pedalling can save me from the damage I have already caused tonight. So, I pocket my phone without responding and signal to Indie to pass me two more shots. My behaviour tonight is nothing new to her, she has no idea that she is practically handing me a death sentence and tomorrow maybe I'll feel bad for that. But right now all I want is peace.

Tomorrow I will be fine, I'll stop drinking again and no one will ever know the difference.

That's the beauty of keeping my inner demons a secret; when I fuck up nobody knows to care.

The sound of banging has me peeling my eyes open, my head pounding and my limbs feeling like lead. The pulsing thrum behind my eyes matches the erratic rhythm of my heart, every two beats my heart skips causing anxiety to rack through me. I clutch my chest and sit up finding the familiar black and white tiled flooring of my bathroom floor. I take in the rest of my surroundings, empty bottles litter my floor and several lines of cocaine are wracked on the counter top. My head begins to spin as I try to get to my feet and pull the door open to my bedroom, my bed in disarray. I stop dead at the sight of two naked female forms amongst the sheets, tangled limbs entwined with one another. Neither of which are my girl. My breath stutters and I drop back down to the ground, my knees giving out with the realisation of what I'm looking at.

What have I done?

The banging continues and I realise it's coming from my bedroom door. Dragging my useless body towards it, I reach up and let it swing open. Indie

stands there in her underwear, a motherfucking sombrero and a shit eating grin.

“Finally decided to join the party then boss?” she says looking down at my pathetic excuse of a body and holding a bottle of water in each hand.

“What the hell happened Inds?” I managed to choke out. My voice doesn’t sound like my own.

She saunters in like she has every right to be in my room and half naked no less. She looks over at the still passed out girls in my bed and throws her head back laughing.

“Don’t shit yourself J, they’re with me. You said you were coming to watch, but you passed out in the bathroom, so we just left you there. I went to get some water from downstairs and your door got jammed so I’ve been banging on it for the past twenty minutes. Guess my sleeping beauties were fully satisfied." She looks at me and winks.

I think I’m going to throw up.

“So I–” I try to get my thoughts together but everything is muddled. “So I didn’t touch them or anything? Not even a kiss?” I can’t even look at her.

“No Jacob, you’re good, I promise. You were pretty fucked up last night though. Way more than I’ve seen you before, you good?” She squats down on her heels and places a gentle hand on my shoulder.

I shake my head sadly, but can’t form the words. I just look up into her icy blue eyes that are usually full of such mischief, but now all I see is deep concern from a true friend.

“Ok, it’s ok J. I got you.” She stands and strides over to the bed and claps her hands loudly over the sleeping girls. “Get up bitches, it’s time to go.”

I don’t look up at the grumbling replies, or when I see them scrambling around my room for their discarded clothes.

When I finally see two sets of feet leave, I tentatively look up and see Indie stripping the sheets from my bed and throwing them in the hamper.

“Where do you keep your sheets J?” she asks softly.

I point towards the airing cupboard on the opposite side of the room.

I hear her busying herself with new covers and pillow cases but I remain frozen on the floor, unable to do anything but sit in my misery.

I jerk back to reality when I feel the gentlest kiss to the top of my head.

“I’ll check in later, boss. Try and get some rest.” She leaves without waiting for a response from me.

I momentarily wonder where my phone is but I don’t have the strength to care. So I heave myself off the floor and crawl into bed and pray when I wake up that this has all been a horrible dream.

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Chapter Twenty Four

Ella - Present Day

The now all too familiar sound of Jacobs voicemail plays in my ear, it's been two weeks since he came home from the conference and my instincts have well and truly gone past suspicion. I open the text thread between us and my un-answered messages sit there 'read' and mocking. Message after message, starting with calm 'where are you?" to "are you ok?" Gradually leading up to more insistent ones like "what the fuck is going on, Jacob?"

We have less than a week until the wedding, and although everything is done, we have the rehearsal dinner tonight and with no sign of the best man my nerves are fraying. I have been making excuses for him to Damon and Holly for the last fourteen days and I'm running out of reasons for why he hasn't answered his phone.

I can't concentrate on anything, my whole day to day life has been turned upside down. I go to work and obsess over what could possibly have happened between us that he feels like contacting me isn't a priority. I've gotten into my car more times than I care to admit, determined to go and find him. To hunt him down and demand an explanation as to where the fuck he's been and why he's been ghosting me. Memories of all those years ago come flooding back time and time again. Of the summer where one day he was there and the next he was gone. After everything that has happened in the last few months I can't stomach the thought that history is repeating itself.

Simple tasks within my day are becoming mammoth moments, I know in my heart that this isn't healthy. It's a borderline obsession and there's nothing I can do about it. Jacob has been under my skin since we were young and now that I know what it feels like to be loved by him I can't stomach the idea of losing him.

Walking into the venue I check my reflection in one of the many mirrors in the lobby. Eyes that have seen little to no sleep in the last week or so are now covered in make up to hide the tell tell signs of exhaustion. I smooth my hands down the silky fabric of my dress, if for no other reason than to ground me.

I still have no idea if Jacob will turn up tonight, but I hope for Damon and Holly's sake that he does. Speaking of the bride to be, she comes hurtling towards me, already with a flute of champagne in her hand. Her smile is beaming and it selfishly makes my heart hurt that little bit more. Pushing those feelings aside for tonight is my main goal, ensuring that the evening goes without a hitch and they both have the best time.

"Here she is! My Maid of Honor looking stun-ing." She grabs at my free hand and spins me on the spot.

I chose an emerald green strapless dress. The green is so dark that it almost looks black. My dark hair is loose but pulled back off my face and falls in waves down my back. It's the most dressed up I've been since graduation, and the way my feet are already starting to ache is testament to how often I wear high heels.

"You look beautiful Holly, is everyone here already?" I try my best to ask casually, but I know that my best friend sees right through me.

"No, Jacob isn't here yet. So at least you can have a second to breathe. Maybe have a drink, loosen up a bit, you look so tense." She gives me a warm smile as she breezes off to go and mingle with the other guests.

Taking her advice, I make my way over to the bar and order a large glass of wine, scanning the room as I wait. I see my Mum and Dad trying to call me over so I take my drink and head towards them.

Movement from the front entrance catches my attention as I desperately try to listen and engage in conversation with my parents and their friends. When I cast another glance at the door, dark sunken eyes are staring directly at me. My breath catches in my throat. Jacob stands in the doorway looking like a villain from one of my books. His black suit only seems to emphasise the dark shadows under his beautiful eyes. The usual ocean blue has been replaced with a stormy grey, and his full pouty lips are tipped up at the side with a self deprecating smile. My feet are moving before my brain has even given them permission. I'm drawn to him like a magnet and something inside me knows instinctually that he needs me.

“Where’ve you been?” These are the first words out of my mouth. I didn’t want to sound needy or possessive when I saw him, but now that the moment is here I can’t help myself. I want to launch myself at him but his appearance is holding me back.

On closer inspection he looks like he’s been dug up, dragged from some hole in the ground and made to put on a fancy suit.

“I’m sorry,” is all that he chokes out, catching me off guard with the roughness of his voice. It sounds like he hasn’t used it in days.

Before I have a chance to respond, the delicate sound of silverware being tapped on crystal pulls both of our focuses over to the happy couple.

“If everyone could take their seats please, we will start.” The wedding co-ordinator says into a handheld microphone.

I feel the ghost of his hand at the small of my back, but he doesn’t touch me. I wish I knew why, I wish I could stare into his soul and extract the demons I now see lurking within him.

The evening is beautiful and the meal is delicious. We roughly go through the order in which the wedding party will do their speeches without actually having to hear them before the day. I see the smiles on my loved ones faces and make the decision to dig deep and find out once and for all what has been going on with Jacob.

I scan the room for him but I don’t see him, my heart is hammering in my chest. The nausea from earlier making a violent comeback, I can feel the tears prickling the back of my eyes. I’m desperate and there is nothing I can do to pull it back.

“He left.” My brother whispers in my ear. I turn to look at him and I see the same sadness I feel mirrored back at me.

“Tell me what to do Damon. What am I missing?” My voice cracks and I clench my fist at my side, my nails biting into my palm in an attempt to stop myself from breaking.

“Ella I wish I bloody knew.” Damon looks defeated too. He shouldn’t be feeling like this right now. This should be the happiest time of his life.

“Go back to Holly, I’m sure it will be fine.” I pray that my face isn’t betraying me and that it shows a strength that I absolutely do not feel. He gives me a look that I can’t pick apart right now.

“Be careful El’s, he might be my best friend but you’re my little sister first and foremost ok? Don’t forget that.” He leans down and places the gentlest of kisses to my cheek and turns back to his new life.

Despite his comforting words I know I am on my own with this one. If anyone is going to get through to Jacob it's going to have to be me.

I just need to work out how.

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Chapter Twenty Five

Jacob - Present Day

My fingers fumble on the tiny buttons of my shirt, and I try to shake them at my sides to get them to stop.

I would love to say that seeing Ella's face at the rehearsal dinner last week stopped me in my tracks of going back down this dark path, but I can't. The remorse and the guilt for what I have done, and continue to do, only make me want to numb these feelings more and so the cycle continues.

I went home that night and drank like I have been for the last month. Stumbling from room to room opening every cupboard and drawer to see if I had any coke left. I didn't, so instead of seeing that as another sign that I should put the brakes on this before it gets any more out of hand, I called my dealer and he was here quicker than Deliveroo.

Maybe just a little bump will help the shaking. I woke up yesterday with every intention of not drinking or using today, because Damon and Holly deserve better. But when sleep evaded me and I spent hours pacing the floors of my house, my willpower broke and I drank until I blacked out.

With only two hours until the ceremony I need to get my ass into gear.

My phone lays on the nightstand next to a baggy that has enough inside to get me straight for a while. Ignoring the missed calls and messages that I know are from either Damon or Ella, I book an uber to be here in fifteen minutes and empty the white powder onto the glass top, inhaling deeply and then licking my finger gathering the substance, rubbing it into my gums.

Smoke rises steadily from the end of my cigarette, the paper burning away in a soft, red glow. I'm transfixed, watching as the ash floats from the end, but it's not enough. Once upon a time, this was all it would take; a silent moment alone with my thoughts and a steady source of nicotine. But now the relief is as fleeting as the smoke drifting away on the air.

I pat down my jacket, the rustle of paper nestled inside settles the building irritation slightly. *Don't fuck this up. Do. Not. Let. Them. Down.*

Taking one last pull I drop the cigarette to the ground and crush it beneath my shoe, *useless.*

It's game time and I need to pull off one hell of a performance today.

"Good evening, everyone. For those of you who don't know me, I'm Jacob the best man, and for those who do…thanks for acting surprised when I actually showed up on time… sort of." The guests chuckle politely and I look down at my crumpled notes. My hand noticeably shaking again. I reach forward and take a sip from my glass. Trying desperately to ease the nerves that are racking my body, I look briefly out to the beautifully dressed guests–their eyes are all trained on me expectantly. The usual internal dialogue that plays on a loop, *"You're useless and everyone thinks so."*

"Nobody really wants you here, Damon just feels sorry for you."

Clearing my throat awkwardly I continue.

"It's an honour to have been chosen to be Damon's best man, as all of you know, he's a pretty popular guy. We've known each other for nearly all our lives, and we have been through some of the best and worst times together.

When Damon said that he was going to come to Australia with me I thought that this was going to be the start of our new lives. But Holly here had other ideas." I tip my glass at her and she gives me an awkward smile.

"When Damon told me he had met someone, I knew it had to be serious as we didn't tell each other about girls unless it was on a need to know basis. It was for sure a need to know basis, as the girl in question wasn't just anyone, she's my cousin." Damon looks at Holly and she gives him a genuine wide smile, one that had been lost just moments ago. I chance a quick look to the other end of the table, *her* eyes finding mine instantly. Ella looks breathtaking today, her hair is pulled up in an intricate style with tendrils of that dark hair falling around her beautiful face. My breath stutters and I completely forget what I'm supposed to be doing. Ella raises her perfectly groomed eyebrows just the slightest and nods towards the paper in my hand, the softest smile playing on her lips. Taking another long drink from my glass, I remember to school my face as though I'm only drinking water… newsflash, I'm not.

"So yeah," I scramble, trying to find my place in my speech, the burn from the vodka clawing at my throat. The words on the paper are melting

together and I squeeze my eyes closed to try to refocus.

"Holly is to Damon, what bacon is to eggs. You can enjoy one without the other, but we all know that when you put the two together it's a combination that will last forever." I'm going off script and the heat beneath my collar is becoming stifling. I run my index finger between my throat and shirt, desperately trying to gain air in my lungs.

"It's clear to see by looking around the room tonight just how loved these two are." I need to wrap this up so I don't make a fool of myself.

"So with that in mind I would like you to all raise your glasses and toast to the new Mr and Mrs Graham." Lifting my glass high in the air, I take a sip and sit down.

A chorus of 'to Mr and Mrs Graham's' rings in my ears, but my head is swimming and I'm struggling to focus on anything.

My skin is too hot and my neck prickles, I need to slow my rapidly increasing breath. It feels like every set of eyes in the room are on me and I swear I see people leaning into each other and whisper. I stand quickly, trying to leave without drawing too much attention to myself. The voices in my head getting louder and louder, persistently telling me that I fucked up.

I shoulder barge my way into the mens room and thank god it's empty, locking it behind me. My foot slips on the tiled floor and I crash down, my head reverberating off one of the urinals. I sit slumped on the ground, time seems to skip ahead of itself. I have no idea how I got here or how much of a scene I created. I loosen the noose around my neck that is my tie, taking in deep lungfuls of much needed oxygen.

The world around me begins to right itself and I hear the faint tap on the bathroom door. The noise becomes more persistent and my already fraying patience is about to snap until I hear it–*her*.

"Jacob, it's me. Please open the door." I know Ella is standing out there, probably worried out of her mind. I just can't find the strength to see the look of disappointment on her face. It will end me.

The sound of the lock being forced and then the crash of the door against the basin has my head snapping up.

Ella stands there with a look of determination on her face that I've seen so many times before. She bends the hair pin back and slides it into the top of her hair, looking every bit the badass I know she can be.

"You taught me how to pick locks, remember?" She waits for my response but I don't have one.

The cocaine is making it feel like my teeth are glued together.

She looks at me now, and it's a look I know I'm going to remember for the rest of my life, *pity*.

"Get out Ella," I manage to choke out. A look of hurt strikes across her exquisite face and I hate that it's me that put it there. But there's only one way out of this and it's to *make* her leave.

She stands in front of me and I can see the war happening in her mind.

"I said…GET OUT!" I bellow at her, I'm back on my feet now, barely, my legs trembling beneath me.

"No," She shoots back defiantly, crossing her arms.

Her hurt has switched to rage so fast that if I were of a sober mind, I would be impressed. But instead, I laugh. A loud obnoxious laugh that makes her look at me like she's never seen me before. *Here we go…*

"God it was so easy," I say, pulling my cigarette packet out of my suit pocket. "So fucking easy to get you to fall back in love with me, that's if you ever stopped of course." I grin mercilessly through clenched teeth.

I just need her to go, she deserves so much more than all this, and the fact that I'm saying these God awful things to her is making me want to hurl. Lighting my cigarette, I exhale long and loud, almost obnoxiously.

"You can't smoke in here, Jacob." her voice is quiet and timid, all her bravado has been knocked out of her, *by me*.

"I shouldn't do a lot of things Ella, but here I am doing them all anyway. Like the weekend I was 'away' for business for instance. I wasn't by the way." My tone is mocking and sounds like it's coming from someone else entirely. "I threw a party at my house and woke up the next morning with two naked girls in my bed." I throw my arms wide. The fact that those girls were nothing to do with me and I had spent the next few days curled in bed riddled with shame and anxiety that I had merely lied to her is neither here nor there. Right now this seems to be doing the job.

She continues to look at me, really studying me and her scrutiny is making my skin crawl, unsure of what she sees as she looks at me.

"Go away Ella, go back to the party." I turn my back on her like I don't care, when in reality it's the very opposite. I can't look at the expression on her face a moment longer–she looks broken. I know what I'm doing is the right thing; pushing her away, I can't let her get too close. But it hurts, it physically hurts and I need her to leave so that I can numb that pain and forget this ever happened.

“I guess at least this time you had the decency to say how you felt to my face and not just up and leave,” she says, and it takes me by surprise. “You’ve made your feelings crystal clear, Jacob. And you know what? I thank you for that, because you’re right, loving you has always come so easily to me. Saying goodbye however, well I never had the opportunity until now.” Her voice cracks and I desperately want to turn around and go to her. Every fibre of my being is screaming at me to tell her the truth, all of it. But I can’t drag her into this, I can't have her swallowed up in my darkness.

So when I hear the door close behind her and the sound of her sob from the other side of the door, I break. Balling my fist, I smash it straight into the mirror above the sink needing to feel something, anything close to the pain I just inflicted on her. Pain erupts through my knuckles and up my arm. But I know it has nothing on what I just did to Ella. I look down at my hand, blood trickling from my knuckles and dropping to the floor, picking out a large piece of glass from my knuckle. I throw it into the sink and leave.

Stumbling into my house I don’t even know how much time has passed since I spewed those disgusting words to Ella. The combination of drugs and alcohol are still doing their job in numbing any impending remorse I have over my actions tonight, but in a moment of clarity, I have a flash of her face. The way her eyes looked so sad, and the way her chin wobbled with the force of holding in her tears.

Before I can even think about it clearly, I grab my keys from the rack and head to my garage.

Time begins to skip again and I see the trees whirling past as I bomb it down the back roads on my motorbike towards her house. My hands are numb and I fight to keep my eyes open. I just need to get to her, apologise and explain. Tell her the truth, all of it.

I just need to get to her.

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Chapter Twenty Six

Ella - Present Day

Billie Eilish - I love you

Kicking off my shoes, I finally allow myself to succumb to the emotions that have been sitting on my chest. Holding it together and putting on an act for the last few hours has been the most exhausting thing ever.

After collecting Dolly from the dog sitter, I pour some of her food into a bowl and watch numbly as she eats.

I hear my phone buzzing in my clutch bag but have zero interest in finding out who it is or what they want.

Whilst she's busy having her dinner I go to the fridge, praying that there is some wine in there.

With no luck there, I start raiding the cupboards for anything remotely alcoholic. My phone continues to vibrate and I reach for my bag, digging around until I find it. Just as I'm about to turn it off without looking at who's been blowing it up, another incoming call comes through from an unknown number.

I frown wondering who could possibly be calling at this time of night.

"Hello?" I answer suspiciously.

"Good evening is that El?" An unfamiliar female voice says.

"Yes this is Ella, who is this?"

"Oh my apologies hello there Ella, my name is Debbie and I'm calling from the Royal Dorset Hospital."

My throat seizes and my stomach drops.

"We retrieved your number from a Mr Jacob Danielson's phone."

My ears begin to whoosh and I fall onto the nearest seat in my kitchen. She's still talking but I can't hear what she's saying.

"Ella? Can you still hear me? Are you still there?" The woman says in a kind voice.

“I’m still here, wh-what’s happened? Is Jacob ok?” I grip the phone so tightly I’m surprised it doesn’t break in my hand. Mindlessly I watch Dolly as she mooches about without a care in the world.

“Unfortunately Mr Danielson has been in quite a serious motorcycle accident and the only number I could find that was a regular contact to him was yourself. Are you a relation of his?”

The question is simple enough– who am I to Jacob? Well, until a few hours ago I thought I was something to him, but now I guess not.

“I’m his g–I’m his friend.” I fall over my words. The tears that have been threatening all night rise back to the surface.

“Ok, well he didn’t seem to have an emergency contact so we called the last person on his call log. I must emphasise Ella, Jacob’s accident was very serious. Is there a parent or another family member we could call?”

Without hesitation I say, “I’ll be there shortly.” I grab my bag and keys, and go to start dialling a taxi when Dolly barks at my heel, clearly picking up on the tension and reminding me of her presence.

I can’t just leave her, so I hang up the phone to the taxi service and call my Mum and Dad. They aren’t big drinkers so I know they will be safe to come and help.

∞∞∞

Kissing my Dad on the cheek I swiftly get out of the car and run towards the emergency department. The fluorescent lights assault my eyes as I head straight to the reception area. Two middle aged women sit behind the desk, both taking calls. I don’t see anyone else around and as politely as I can muster, I try to convey on my face that this is indeed an emergency. A tap on my shoulder has me spinning around and coming face to face with an attractive blonde lady in scrubs.

“Ella?” she asks softly.

“Yes that’s me, I had a call to say that my friend had been in an accident.”

“That’s right, it was me who called. I’m Debbie, one of the nurses on shift tonight. Would you like to follow me and I’ll get the doctor to come and

speak with you as soon as possible.” She leads me down a long corridor and then stops in front of a room with a sign that says ‘Friends and Family Emergency waiting area.’

“If you’d like to take a seat, the doctor will be with you soon.” She gives me a warm smile as she leaves me alone in the room.

The smell of old coffee and disinfectant curls around me and I take a seat on one of the burgundy plastic covered chairs. The walls are covered with posters offering help for different things, from drink and drug problems to help with depression. I mindlessly read them one by one, picking at my fresh manicure, but not really taking in any of the information. Every time someone walks past the door my heart leaps, after about fifteen minutes of agonising wait the door finally opens and a tall man with grey hair walks in holding a file in his hands.

“Hello there Ella, so sorry for keeping you waiting. My name is Dr Lane and I have been looking after your friend, Jacob.” He takes the seat next to me and begins to look at the paperwork in his folder.

“So sorry to take you away from whatever occasion it is that has you in that pretty dress.” He looks at me with a sympathetic smile, it’s only then that I realise I’m still in my bridesmaid dress. Of all the things that have happened tonight, that’s the thing that has me breaking. A small sob escapes me and I fumble in my bag for a tissue, but a handkerchief appears in front of me.

“It’s clean I promise, I’m a little old school when it comes to drying tears.” He sits patiently and waits for me to get myself together and then continues.

“So as you already know Mr Danielson was involved in a motor-cycle accident tonight which caused severe blunt trauma to the head.” He says every word carefully and slowly, like he’s taming a wild animal and it may attack at any moment.

I think I’m going to be sick. The words blunt, trauma and head flashing like neon lights in my head.

“Are you ok for me to continue?” he asks gently and places his hand on mine.

The door to the room opens again and we both look up, my Dad stands awkwardly still in his suit.

“Dad!” I say on an exhale and launch myself at him.

“Sorry sweetheart, parking was a nightmare. So what do we know so far doc?” My Dad, ever the pragmatic no nonsense type always needs the facts before he will react.

Dr Lane stands and introduces himself to my Dad and runs through the small amount of information that he’s given me.

“Along with the trauma to the head, Jacob has also sustained some significant injuries to his body. He has fractured the top three vertebrae in his spine along with some fractured ribs, his wrist, hand and his femur bone. Due to the substantial damage to his body, and more importantly his head, we have placed him in a medically induced coma, so we have him in the ICU at the moment. Now I know that sounds scary, but we do this so that we can manage any swelling to Jacob’s brain that much easier. It’s like putting the brain in a state of pause, giving it time to recover from the trauma.” Dr Lane isn’t directing any of this at me anymore, he’s talking to my Dad because I can’t process anything he’s saying.

“Will he be ok Doctor?” My Dad asks and I can hear the emotion in his voice, my Dad doesn’t get emotional about many things. I can count on one hand the amount of times I’ve seen him cry. So to hear him like this only intensifies the panic in me.

“Unfortunately it’s too early to make promises, but I have a good feeling that a young fit man like Jacob should make a good recovery. But as I said it’s very early and I wouldn’t want to give false promises.” He stands and leaves the room after explaining that a nurse will be along with any updates.

My Dad immediately wraps his arms around me and holds me tightly, like if he holds me tight enough he can make all this go away. I wish he could, I wish it could be like it was when I was a little girl when I would go into my Mum and Dad’s room in the night if I had a bad dream. My Dad would take one of his pillows and put it at the side of the bed closest to him and cover me with a blanket. He would whisper about how if there was anything scary lurking they would have to go through him first. I always slept so soundly in that little nook next to him, knowing without fail he would chase all the horrors away.

I wake a little while longer with my head on a pillow and an NHS standard blanket spread over me. My Dad sits opposite reading a dog eared magazine on classic cars, his glasses perched on the end of his nose. My mind runs

like the tape from an old movie, all the important events from the last twenty-four hours flashing in front of me. Damon's beautiful wedding, Holly's smile, Jacob saying hateful things and then the call.

Oh god that really happened, I didn't dream it, my Dad couldn't chase this away.

"How long have I been asleep? Is there any news?" I sit up abruptly making my head spin. Wiping a mixture of tears and drool from my face, I try to get my bearings.

"No news yet sweetheart, and you've only been asleep for an hour or so. Your Mum and I have made the decision not to tell Damon and Holly tonight. Let them enjoy their wedding night." I nod in agreement and he stretches his legs in front of him like he's been too scared to move in case he wakes me.

"I'll go and get us some of that god-awful coffee and let you come-to a bit," he says as he kisses the top of my head and leaves.

Absent-mindedly I fold the blanket and stack it neatly on top of the pillow. Looking down at my now creased dress, I can't get my head around how a day can go from being so beautiful to so earth shattering so quickly.

Dad returns a little while later holding two magnolia coloured plastic cups and a nurse in tow

"Ella?" she says with a pretty foreign accent.

"Yes," I respond on high alert.

"Dr Lane has got Mr Danielson comfortable now, he's stable but still in what we class a critical state. If you would like to, I can take you to go and sit with him for a little while?" She has the kindest face, probably a good thing considering her chosen profession.

"Go darling, I'll wait here. I need to call your Mum anyway and fill her in." Dad reassures me with a stroke on my back.

Following the nurse with the kind face, my attention is drawn to the swishing sound her scrubs make as she walks–the gentle swish-swoosh distracting me momentarily. After walking down several long corridors, stopping every once and a while to enter through doors that can only be accessed with her security pass, we eventually see the sign for the Intensive Care Unit and my steps falter.

"It's ok lovely, if it's too much just come and find me and I can take you back to the waiting room with your Father." She waits to see if I'll bolt, but

when I continue to say nothing but stare ahead she presses her badge to the security lock and holds the door open for me.

I don’t really know what I was expecting to see but when I walk in behind the nurse to a large area with four rooms laid out in a semi circle it takes me by surprise.

Each separate room has the door shut and blinds down for the patient's privacy.

She heads towards the room on the left hand side and that’s when I see the sign in a clear plastic box, ‘J. Danielson’. My heart lurches, and I grab hold of the nurse's hand without thought.

“It’s ok sweetie, I’m right here if you need anything.”

She opens the door and it takes me longer than I would like to admit to get my feet working. Slowly, I walk to the open door, the sounds of monitors and whirring machines already reaching me.

My eyes land on Jacob’s form, laid flat on his back, his neck in a brace and a metal cage around his head. Bandages cover most of the top half of his face. Both of his eyes are closed and severely bruised and his left leg suspended in the air with a cast up to his hip.

“I’ll leave you two alone, if you need anything I’m just outside ok?” The lovely nurse leaves and I’m alone in the room with Jacob and all the noises from the machines.

Tentatively I get closer to the side of the bed that is relatively free of wires. Although utterly battered, Jacob still looks so beautiful. There is a smear of blood on his bottom lip and I gently use my finger to rub it off.

Sitting down in the chair that has been placed by his side I put my hand through the rail and stroke my fingers softly over his exposed arm

“Don’t you dare leave me Jacob,” I sob. “We’re not finished yet.”

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Chapter Twenty Seven

Ella - Present Day

The next forty-eight hours go by in a whirl wind of talking to Jacob's sleeping body, watching the bruising around his eyes change from an angry deep red, to a black so dark it rivals his hair. His body makes involuntary movements every now and then which I had to quickly get used to. I stroke the crease between his eyebrows, even in this state Jacob seems to be troubled. Dr Lane has since had an honest conversation with me about Jacobs level of intoxication at the time of the accident. Starting to put the pieces together in my own mind, it's clear to see now what's been happening.

I read to him quietly as I sit here, stories of survival, and of overcoming the worst possible lows.

Tala, the beautiful Filipino nurse who looked after me on the first night comes to see me when she's on shift. Sometimes she adjusts Jacob's tubing, and on other occasions she just sits with me.

On the second day she enters Jacob's room the same way as usual.

"Good morning sweetie, how is your man doing this morning?" She looks at his chart as she asks, I've looked too but nothing makes sense to me.

"No change, Tala, he's still resting., I say through a yawn.

"Yes, good boy. Now I want you to go and do the same. In the kitchenette I bring you sinangag and eggs, it's delicious trust me. You need to eat and you need to shower! Because you cannot be sat smelling like a foot when your man wakes up. You can use the bathroom down the corridor. Just don't tell anyone," She says with a conspiratorial wink.

I glance at Jacob again. Due to the lack of sleep, sometimes I swear I see his long eyelashes flutter. His usual groomed to perfection stubble is now only a day or so away from being a beard. I ask Tala if it would be ok to give him a shave once I've sorted myself out. She says she will speak with the doctor in charge, but doesn't think there will be a problem.

After managing to eat half of the delicious food Tala prepared for me, I took a quick shower and changed my clothes before heading back to Jacob's room. Standing around the bed, Dr. Lane, Tala, and two other senior-looking members of staff are congregated, nose-deep in files and charts.

"What's happening?" I ask urgently as I enter the room.

"Good morning Miss Graham, we've just been going over Jacob's recent tests and thankfully the swelling that was initially on his brain has come down considerably. It also shows on his latest x-ray that by some miracle, Jacob didn't sustain any spinal cord injuries. I must stress, Ella, that with the type of fractures Jacob incurred, this is almost unheard of."

I swallow thickly. The thought of Jacob who has always been such a force of nature, with his big build and larger than life personality being paralysed is too much to think about.

"I'm really happy with the progress that Jacob is making, so, what I would like to do is gradually reduce the sedative that he is on today and evaluate how he is doing. Now I want to manage your expectations here, Ella. It doesn't mean that Jacob will wake up straight away, we are going to do this bit by bit, ok?" The doctor then turns to his colleague and explains something in medical terms that my frazzled brain can't comprehend.

When he turns to adjust something on one of the monitors, my heart is in my mouth, saying a silent prayer that they don't hurt him in any way.

The monitor next to Jacob's head begins to beep loudly, and Tala steps beside me, wrapping an arm around my back.

"This is all normal, sweetie." Her voice is soft and comforting; she has become almost like a Mother figure in the last few days.

I sit back down in the seat next to Jacob and pick up his hand, placing gentle kisses to his knuckles.

"Come back to me now."

I stand, leaning over the bed and lay my head gently against his chest. Using my free hand, I cover my ear, listening to the proof that he's still here with me.

The soft, gentle rhythm of his heartbeat grounds me, but I can't stop the tears that fall and pool on the groove of his chest.

Twenty four hours pass quickly, so far Jacob is responding well to the reduction of his sedative.

Dr Lane and his colleague stand next to me as they explain how the next big test will be removing the breathing tube from Jacobs mouth.

“It’s not the nicest of procedures, so I would suggest stepping out for this part. Perhaps go and grab yourself some fresh air and come back in around thirty minutes?” His tone is kind, like he’s looking out for my best interests, but I’ve done this whole journey holding Jacob’s hand and I’m not about to leave him now.

Dr Lane seems to see the determined set of my jaw and my unmoving hand wrapped around Jacob’s.

“Ok, very well.” He adjusts the levels on the monitor again and a warning sirens shrills. After inputting more information onto the screen, the ventilator begins to slow until it stops altogether. The silence that spreads across the room becomes stifling. We wait, every set of eyes directed at Jacob’s chest. The seconds tick by in slow motion. A hand curls around mine and I look to see Damon has entered the room and is standing next to me.

Seeing my brother here after everything that has happened, threatens to pull me under into the desolation I’ve been fighting.

A steady beep comes, and I watch in bewilderment as slowly, Jacob’s chest begins to rise and fall.

“Very good, that’s very good indeed, Mr Danielson,” Dr Lane says as he scribbles frantic notes on his file.

“We will monitor Jacob this way for the next hour or so to ensure there are no complications. Once we know he is definitely in the clear, we can move forward from there.”

The doctors leave and I heave a sigh of relief, falling into Damon's side.

“Hey Sis, what the fuck has he done now?” A humourless laugh comes from both of us. There is so much more to discuss, but for now, we sit in relative silence just watching the steady rhythm of Jacob’s breathing.

A couple of hours later, Tala and her colleagues come in to readjust Jacob’s position, sitting him up ever so slightly. Once he’s situated to their liking, they remove the tube that was helping him to breathe. That’s something I never want to see again, but Damon held my hand tightly throughout.

Jacob’s arm spasms and I snap my head towards him. He’s still fast asleep, so I try willing myself to relax. The doctors have explained that the ‘waking up phase’ can take a while.

The doctors form a circle around Jacob's bed, after hours of monitoring and tests, Dr Lane said he should be coming around from the heavy sedation any time now.

"Ok, Mr Danielson, wakey wakey, time to rise and shine." It takes me longer than I would like to comprehend that Jacob will be awake at any moment, my brain is now conditioned to seeing him in a sleep-like state. The doctors are all looking at Jacob. Standing up, I do the same.

Slowly, his stormy eyes are on me, unseeing and scared.

"Jacob?" I say with all the emotion of the last few days coming to the surface.

"Hey you," I say through tears. He frowns and his eyebrows pull tightly together. "Does he know who I am? Why is he looking at me like that?" I ask the doctors frantically.

They all continue to talk to Jacob asking him simple questions. My eyes bounce from one person to the next.

A flick to my palm has me startling, I look down to where I felt the contact and see Jacob's index finger shaking and outstretched to my hand.

Something that I hadn't dared feel until now surges through me; it feels a lot like hope as I look up at his face and smile. But he remains expressionless, eyes that were once so familiar staring right through me. The fear of what is ahead is almost overwhelming. Not knowing if everything we have built until now could come crashing down around me. All those months of relearning each other and finally getting everything I had ever dreamed of seems to hang in the balance, like sand slipping through my fingers as he continues to look at me as though trying to piece his world back together.

He blinks, slowly. When his eyes land on mine, it's all there– every afternoon we spent under the tree, every movie we sat through, every day we spent apart. But most importantly, I can see the Jacob that came back to me, and as one single tear rolls down his bruised cheek, I know he sees his Els-Bells, too. I track it as it rolls slowly down his unusually pale skin and down the column of his throat.

I see everything I need in that look, his apology, his pain and most importantly his love.

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Chapter Twenty Eight

Jacob - Present Day

Floating–floating, I can see her just in front of me. I'm desperately trying to grab her hand but she keeps slipping from my grip.

Am I drowning?

Voices above the water come in and out as I strain to hear them.

'Wakey, wakey.' A deep, unfamiliar voice is saying. I'm not drowning, I'm dreaming. How do I wake myself up?

Just open your eyes, Jacob!

But I can't, they feel like they're being weighed down by something.

'Useless boy,' a hard female voice says. I try to find the owner, my mother. The tone is so familiar it makes me go cold.

I reach out again to the outstretched hand, the one I can feel the warmth from.

'Jacob.' The voice is different; warm and comforting. I like this voice– I know this voice.

The atmosphere around me is shifting and changing, bringing with it clearer images of people right here.

Her.

She's not looking at me though, pain is etched all over her face. I want to comfort her, but I still can't reach her.

I focus my attention on my hand and will it to move, just one finger makes contact with her and this time she doesn't drift away.

She grabs hold of my hand– her face is crystal clear now.

It's my Ella, she's here. I don't know what this place is, or how I got here, but the pain mixed with relief on her beautiful features jolts me.

I put that there, she's in pain because of me. I know it deep in my bones as flashes of reality try to take me back under.

Loneliness, a chair jamming the door closed, my parents laying lifeless, alcohol, drugs, scenery flashing past, my bike…I'm going too fast.

And then, nothing.
I feel the tear fall free, the desperation I feel to communicate to her.
I try to get my mouth to work, to speak to her and tell her.
I'm so sorry, sweetheart. Please forgive me.

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Chapter Twenty Nine

Ella - Present Day

It’s been three days since Jacob regained consciousness, but I’m not sure which is worse; him being in the coma, or him being awake and seemingly unable or possibly unwilling to speak past the odd word or acknowledgement.

The doctors who have been running tests periodically to check on him are perplexed as to why he has hardly communicated. The tests on his brain activity have all come back completely normal, in fact, yesterday when Dr Lane came in to check his vitals, he mentioned that when I spoke to Jacob his brain activity increased. He advised to keep trying, as the likelihood is that Jacobs' lack of communication isn't due to inability, rather, he just doesn't know what to say.

Jacob stares at me with an intensity so deep I feel like he’s trying to communicate through our souls, rather than use his words.

Friends and family come and go. Damon especially, has become a regular visitor as he and Holly decided to postpone their honeymoon in light of the accident. A decision I knew Jacob was not happy with by the look on his face. My suspicion was promptly confirmed, when the first time he spoke since waking was to ask ‘why the fuck they were here?’ The pull of his eyebrows and the hard line of his mouth showing he was not pleased with them changing their plans because of him. Damon simply laughed, calling him an ‘ungrateful prick’ and Holly stormed out. Something about the normalcy of this moment makes me emotional, and so grateful that balance in our little world is restored.

This morning, Indie came to visit, and her usual no nonsense bravado flew out the door as soon as she set eyes on him. For the first part of her visit, Jacob was asleep– or at least she thought he was.

When she began crying uncontrollably, I didn’t miss the flicker of his closed eyes and the slight clench of his fist.

She filled him in as best she could on how the shop had been coping with his absence and the usual gossip, but I could tell that she felt uncomfortable.

Walking her out the door, I decide that enough is enough.

“Jacob, I know you can hear and understand everything that has been going on here and I’ve given you time to come around, really I have. But so help me God if you don’t start talking to me I’m leaving and you can stew in your own self pity on your own.” I’m not entirely sure where the bite in my voice came from, maybe the lack of sleep, but it felt good.

I continue to stare down at him as he slowly opens his eyes, tears pooling in his lash line.

“I–I’m sorry,” he chokes out. His voice is rough and brittle from lack of use and emotion. I choose not to answer and let him gather himself, allowing him the space to say what he needs to say.

“I tried, Ella, I pr-promise I did.” I go to him and help him drink from a straw.

Clearing his throat he continues, “I really tried to be everything you deserved. And I think I was– for a little while anyway.” He brings his good hand up to his face and wipes at his eyes. Not giving the tears a chance to fall.

“You have put me on a pedestal since we were kids, but I never did anything to deserve it.”

I go to interrupt him but he stops me with a look, so I take a seat and wait to hear what else he has to say.

“I tried setting you free from my shit by leaving that summer. You’ve always been so full of hope and love. I’m nothing but a parasite El’s, I’ll suck the life out of you because I’m no good. And God knows I’m not good enough for you.”

His words hang in the air like a bullet that’s just been set off. His exasperated voice breaks my heart

“I wasn’t raised the same as you, sweetheart. Your hopes and dreams have been shaped and nurtured by a family who loves you unconditionally. Why do you think when we were growing up I was always at your house?” He doesn’t wait for an answer, he just continues like all these thoughts and feelings are coming out without a choice. “My parents were addicts, Ella. Actually, scratch that, they were junkies. Junkies that couldn’t have given less of a shit if I was alive.” He laughs humourlessly. “And as far as

dreams of a future, they just consisted of making it out alive." He pauses for a beat, closing his eyes and taking deep breaths.

"I swore the day that I left that house I would be better than them, that I was going to live a full and happy life despite them and their constant attempts at dragging me down. But do you know what happened?"

I don't answer; I know that this is just rhetorical, and I need him to be honest.

"I ended up just like them." The look of pain and defeat on his face is too much.

"No!" I say firmly, standing up from my seat. "No, Jacob, you did not. You have something they never had."

"Oh yeah, what's that then?" He looks at me, bemused.

"A soul, and a really fucking good one thank you very much. Because do you know what? I take it as a personal insult that you think I could fall in love with someone soulless or unlovable." I'm pacing in front of his bed now, trying to calm the anger inside me.

"Why though, El's?" his voice is quieter now, unsure.

"Why what?"

"Why do you love me? *How* can you love me? I'm broken Ella. I'm an addict just like them." His voice cracks on a sob. "I won't drag you down with me, I refuse. But I'm just selfish enough to ask you to not give up on me completely. I'm going to get help because I can't do this on my own, I tried to, really I did."

"Well you need to try harder, because whether you accept it or not, Jacob Danielson, I have been in love with you since I knew what the word meant. I am so fucking sorry that you were failed by your parents, but you are a grown man now and you get to decide what happens in your life." I turn to leave the room, my emotions threatening to get the better of me. I have to stay strong in this, he needs to know I can deal with this. I pause briefly, and look over my shoulder at him. He looks so broken, nothing like the great hulk of a man I've always known."Oh and in case I wasn't crystal clear, when I say 'your life' that includes me. Got it?" He merely nods and I see the flicker of hope in his eyes. "So you go and do what it is you need to do to give *us* the tools to deal with this moving forward. I'll be here waiting for you when you're ready." He bites the inside of his mouth in an attempt to hold off tears. Everything in me wants to go back to him and he sees it. Schooling his beautiful features again, he nods once more.

That’s enough for me.

Hope is all I need. I will get him through this, there is no other choice, he and I have been a foregone conclusion since the first day he held my hand.

Now it’s my turn to hold his through this and I won’t let him down.

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Chapter Thirty

Jacob - Five months later

"Well Mr Danielson, we are extremely impressed with your progress and the way you've committed to physiotherapy. Considering the extent of your injuries, I would say that you, son, are one very lucky man." Dr Lane, or Richard as I found out after seeing his signature on some of my paperwork, has actually turned out to be a really sound guy.

"Ok, well that's brilliant news, Dick." Dr Lane raises an eyebrow that very much says 'Do not call me that again.'

"Moving on, I know we have had brief discussions about where you will be going back to once you leave here next week, but I wondered if you have made any solid decisions?" He takes a seat at the end of my bed and looks for all the world like a friend visiting, rather than one of the lead doctors.

The mood in the room shifts as realisation dawns about what he means. He's talking about the conversations we've had regarding rehab. I've been clean and sober for five months now, but the thought of going back into the big wide world unequipped and unprepared scares the shit out of me. The conversations around my intoxication levels at the time of the accident have so far only stayed between myself and the experts. Maybe one day I'll have the strength to tell people, but for now it just isn't something I want to discuss. Dr Lane seems to think that going back home and rehabilitating there would be good for me. To adjust to my new sense of normal as quickly as possible. But I'm not ready yet. Before I step foot back into my old life, my house, my work and–*fingers crossed*–a future with Ella, I need to have all the tools available to help me cope. I refuse to raw-dog it this time.

I'm already having to use a cane to help me walk, which might be a permanent thing– no more fast cars and no more bikes. Not that there is one to go back to anyway after the crash.

“I’ve made up my mind,” I finally answer. “I’m going to the inpatient facility near home. I need to do this the right way, doc. I’ve been white knuckling this on and off since I realised I had a problem. This time it has to be for good.”

Richard merely nods his head and when I look at him expecting to see disappointment, it’s not there. Instead, I see the smallest hint of pride skate across his weathered face.

“Very well, Mr Danielson. I’ll make the call to Lilly Lodge now and set up the transfer date.” As he gets up, he straightens his tie and runs his hands down the front of his perfectly pressed trousers, pausing– but not looking at me. “When you came in here that night–” he clears his throat and pulls the corner of the bed sheet he’d crumpled back into place, an uncharacteristic nervousness about his movements. “When you arrived that night, I didn’t have much hope in keeping you here. It felt like everything I did to try and save you was being pulled in the opposite direction. But Jacob, don’t ever be under the illusion that you aren’t a fighter. Because what I’ve witnessed you fight through in the last five months is nothing short of a miracle. So, when you go to this place, you go there and you keep fighting. And every time you think you can’t do it anymore– just do an old man a favour? Just take it one more day, that’s all you have to do. Take it one day at a time, and when you rest your head on the pillow at night and you’ve made it through another day, use that feeling and thank God or whoever it is you believe in, that they are there in your corner. And for what it’s worth, so am I.” With that, he leaves my room.

My throat is thick, and my eyes sting as I watch him close the door and disappear down the corridor. Dr Lane is now another name to add to the rapidly growing list of people that I will prove I can do this to.

It only took three days to finalise the details of my stay at Lilly Lodge rehabilitation facility. After saying goodbye to my favourite doctors, nurses and healthcare assistants, I hobbled my way out of the same doors that I was being rushed through only five months prior. Once I had filled in all the check-in paperwork stating that I was here of my own free will, I was introduced to a tall, dark-haired guy named Michael who was one of the main counsellors.

“Your room will be just down the hall and to the left, here’s your key and once you have yourself settled in, come upstairs and join us in the sun

room.”

“Uhhh-” I said, unsure. Michael was kind enough to see that I was struggling to juggle my bag and the cane, so very gently and without fuss, he took it from my shoulder.

“Cheers, mate, I appreciate it.”

“No worries at all. When you're ready, the sunroom is up the stairs and then turn left once you get there.” He hesitates for a moment looking at my cane.

“You know what, fuck the sunroom. We’ll meet you in the snug which is that room right there,” He says pointing over his shoulder.

“Ok, cool, thanks Michael.”

After getting myself settled into my clean, but extremely minimalistic room, I take a moment to really take in the enormity of what I’ve done. The last few months have been a whirlwind, and up until now, I’ve managed to keep my emotions at bay. As I look at my surroundings and the place that will be my new normal for the foreseeable future, I can’t help but wonder how I let it get to this.

Running my hands over the starched white bedding, my mind begins to drift back to a time not so long ago when I thought I had everything under control. But I guess it was a version of events that I’d dreamed up. The real truth behind it was that my ending was inevitable if something didn’t change.

Using the NHS issued walking stick, I rise to my feet, studying my reflection in the long mirror attached to the back of my door.

My hair is longer than it has ever been, curling at the bottom and sitting snug at the nape of my neck. My skin, although less grey than it has been in years, is now tighter, and against the sharp lines of my face, the evidence of my weight loss is obvious. But the thing that draws my attention the most is the cane. My body now instinctively leans to the side, relying on the aid to hold me up. The doctors had already put into place an extensive physio programme that I would continue to follow, but they couldn’t give me any guarantee that I would walk unaided again. Therefore leaving me with a constant reminder of the fuck up I had become. But, today is a new day. It’s also the first day that I choose not to be a complete drain on society.

“What you hear here. What you say here. Who you see here. When you leave here, let it stay here.” Michael’s deep voice leads the small group of

men and women sitting on comfy chairs in a small circle, repeating the unfamiliar words to me out loud.

After some polite chit chat about each of their days and progress they feel they have made, Michael turns to me.

“Group, I would like to introduce you to our newest recruit. If you feel comfortable introducing yourself and speaking a little on what brought you here, please feel free. But if not, no worries at all, ok? You share when you feel you’re ready.”

My neck prickles with unease as so many pairs of eyes turn to me. Some are warm and comforting, and speak of how long they have been here working on themselves. Some are jaded and mistrusting, giving the feeling that they were perfectly fine with how the group was before I arrived. But one set of eyes catch my attention the most, a young girl whose eyes are so dark they’re almost black. The shadows underneath only exaggerate the shade of the most expressively haunted eyes I’ve ever seen. Her deep pools of hurt steal the breath from me, and when our eyes meet, she averts her gaze immediately, like a small wounded animal retreating back into its shelter. Her body coils into itself as she raises her feet to rest on the chair, tucking her knees up to her chest, A curtain of black hair now acts as a physical barrier between her and the outside world. Something about this girl makes my heart beat an unsteady rhythm, like a soul crushing sadness emanating from her affecting anyone in her immediate orbit.

I realise that everyone is still looking at me, expecting me to give some sort of answer, so I clear my throat and try not to let my eyes coast back to the girl.

“H-hey my name's Jacob, and I guess–” I trail off, not really knowing the right thing to say, clearing my throat to buy myself some time. I’ve seen this sort of thing in movies and tv shows, where they all declare themselves and the issues that brought them here–usually resulting in some sort of half hearted applause. I make the decision to go with what I think is right and pray to god they don’t clap.

“My name's Jacob, and I’m an addict.”

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Chapter Thirty One

Ella - Present Day

Alan Walker- Faded

For you,

You've been gone for nearly three months now.

Three months of special occasions missed.

Three months of memories we could have been making together.

But instead you're there and I'm here.

I know you're safe,

I know that you are being looked after, but I miss you.

'It's a family illness.' That's what they say to me in the group I've been going to.

An illness that infects all those that come into contact with it.

You told me not to contact you whilst you're there. Not to be cruel, but so that you can try to get better without distraction. But the silence without you is deafening.

It's too late to shield me from this now. I'm in it, I'm in it with you.

You asked me to hold on and wait for you– if I could.

I feel like I've been waiting all my life for you at this point, so what's a few more months?

I hope you're ok?

I've been learning in my group about setting boundaries, to say no to things that do not align with what I believe to be right for me.

What I've also come to learn, is that with you, my love, there are no boundaries–there never have been.

I've been reading a book called 'Just for today' by Kenneth L. Holmes, have you read it where you are?

It's good, and it gives me some peace on the days where I want to go against your wishes and see you or talk to you.

“Just for today, I will not be afraid of anything.
If my mind is clouded with nameless dreads,
I will track them down and expose their unreality.
What happened yesterday need not trouble me today.
This is a brand new shining day,
And I have it in my power to make it a good one.
Just by the way I think about it, and what I do with it.”

So, I choose for today to be a good one.
I really hope it’s a good one for you too.

Yours always,
Ella

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Chapter Thirty Two

Jacob - Present Day

Eminem-Cleanin' Out My Closet

The sting of the water as my hand slices through the lake is a welcome feeling, the refreshing feeling of the water caressing my skin is the wake up call I needed today. When I woke up this morning, I said my prayers and ate breakfast with the rest of the gang, but the reality of today's task is weighing heavy on my chest.

Michael explained to me that during step eight of the twelve step programme, we make a list of all the people we have hurt, either intentionally or not. Names have been rolling through my mind like a flight information system, each time getting longer and the reasons for them being there more wounding–and today's the day.

I needed this swim, it's become one of my favourite things to do. Mainly because I'm literally the only one who makes use of the beautiful lake at the bottom of the grounds. Therefore, giving me a much needed respite from talking about all things recovery and about the people we are missing back home.

The early morning sun reflecting off the water sparkles as I wade through and drop to the shore. The spring season is nearly upon us and I can't quite believe it's been nearly a year since all this came to a head. This time last year I was making every bad decision there was to make, and generally acting like a human tornado; ripping through people's lives and leaving the destruction behind me.

I understand this is an integral part of my recovery, and up until this point, I have taken on every single milestone head on. But to make a list of people you have hurt and think about all the shitty things you've done goes against human instinct.

Towel drying my now nearly shoulder length hair, I run my hands through the damp strands and relish the feel of my fingers running over my scalp. The feel of it only brings my thoughts back to the same thing it always factory resets to– *her.*

Fuck I miss her. I miss her touch, her smell, and her taste.

I know that everything I'm doing here is mainly for myself, but there is also a big part of me that is hungry to get this new version of myself back to her. However, there is still the fear that she won't be there when I return, or maybe she won't want me. Maybe this version of me won't be who she fell in love with...

Walking back towards the main house, I try to focus on the feel of the cold grass beneath my feet, making sure that I remember to put this feeling on my gratitude list. Remembering your five senses is one of the tools they teach you to help with anxiety.

Something you can smell, hear, feel and taste. Once again, I try to focus my mind on what I can actually feel, rather than what I wish I could.

Come on, J, focus. What can you smell? I can smell the fresh grass that has been recently cut, the aroma only made stronger by the April showers that fell this morning.

I can hear the sound of the water gently lapping behind me and the low hum of chatter within the main building.

The feel of the soft towel between my fingers and the slightly irritating feel of cold, wet material wrapping around my legs from my swim shorts.

Slowly, my breath comes easier, steadier, as I climb the steps up to the door that leads to my room at the back of the building. *This too shall pass,* I remind myself.

I no longer need the cane, which my physio says is amazing. I'll always walk with a slight limp, but I will take that and use it as a constant reminder of how far I've come.

As I make it to my door, I bump into a familiar dark haired form attempting to scuttle past undetected.

"Gen-Z where you off to?" I ask, catching hold of her arms.

The girl that I saw at that first meeting all those months ago finally started to speak after about three weeks of me desperately trying to get her to come out of her shell. When she finally did, she managed to tell me that her name was Imogen and she was nineteen years old. Hence the *Gen-Z nickname.* It

made her face slant in the tiniest hint of a smile– *that was my biggest win of the day.*

Since then, slowly but surely, she has been making more and more effort to attend the optional meet ups that we do in the sun-room. They chose Saturday nights as a lot of us get a bit twitchy around the weekend. It serves its purpose as a good distraction from what we may have been doing if we were still living our old lives.

Imogen fascinates me, though. Her love for literature makes me think of another brunette, and paired with her love of art, my crazy brain makes me think that if Ella and I ever had a daughter, would this be what she's like? Hopefully not the troubled addict part, or the part where when Imogen gets really frustrated that she cuts herself, but the part that seems so drawn to all things artistic, it takes her away from her reality.

Today she's wearing her usual long-sleeved, oversized t-shirt and leggings; both worn so much they have permanent imprints of her kneecaps and added thumb holes. But it's not that that steals my attention, it's the fresh red wound that travels from underneath her many silver bangles to her forearm peeking out from her cuff. Her naturally olive skin bears the silver scars of moments in time where she felt like she wasn't in control of what was happening around her.

"Imogen, what happened?" I ask gently, taking hold of her hand and raising her arm.

She desperately attempts to snatch it away, but I don't let her. She's so young and so vulnerable looking. Like a baby bird that has been kicked from the nest.

"Just a bad visit from my parents, that's all," she says, her voice so quiet I have to strain to hear her. "They were actually in town this week, so they decided to take my brother's place and visit. Fuck knows why, I'm surprised they even remembered I was here."

She told me once about her parents. How her Dad made a boat load of cash in IT or something, and her Mother is the stereotypical socialite who's more interested in parading around parties than the wellbeing of Imogen and her older brother.

I don't need her to go into detail about what happened during her visit, it's not my place to ask. *See… growth.*

"Listen I have to go and do some step work, I'm gonna be seriously in my head about it and I promise I'll be quiet. Why don't you come join me? I

could do with the company to be honest.” That’s really all this girl needs; to feel needed, or at the very least wanted. I can give her that.

Ella

Damon

Holly

Robbo (Oz)

Mr & Mrs Graham

Indie

I sit staring at the short list of people I have written down and I already know I haven’t done this right, that I haven’t dug deep enough. To write a list of people I have harmed just feels so huge. I know the immediate people, the obvious ones, but if I was to write down the names of every person I had mildly inconvenienced with my being alive. Well, we don’t have enough time in the day for that.

“What about your parents?” Comes Michael’s familiar baritone over my shoulder.

I turn to look at him with an expression I hope shows the outrage I feel.

“My parents? What the fuck did I ever do to them? I never asked to be born!”

“No, of course not,” he says with such patience it’s borderline infuriating. “But if you look at the bigger picture as you grew up, did you do anything at all to help them stop? Did you try to talk to them or reason with them? Can you honestly say that you never said anything cruel to them, even in the heat of the moment?”

“No, I didn’t. And to be honest, Mike, it’s pissing me off that you’re even bringing this up.” It took me months to fully open up about my parents. It’s one subject I swore I wouldn’t talk about, with anyone.

“I’m not trying to piss you off, J, and I’m sorry if that’s how it’s making you feel. But to really get the most out of doing this exercise, sometimes you have to realise that we can allow our external world to mirror our internal.”

What the fuck is he on about?

As if reading my mind he continues, “When we are feeling a type of way, we can often project that out into the world, allowing them to be swallowed

up by it. Therefore the internal becomes the external." I nod, slowly starting to understand,

"I'll leave it with you as food for thought, but you know where I am if you need me."

As I watch him leave, I think about how much time I've spent here hoping and praying that people will grant me grace and allow me to be a part of their lives.

My parents were too far gone, but maybe, if they had done what I am doing now, they would feel the same way as I do.

But that's something I'll never know for sure.

I look at Imogen's now sleeping form in the corner of the room, curled up with the book she was reading flopped on her chest and for the first time it really hits me.

Everyone deserves forgiveness. If we all just gave up on one another, it would be a very sad world.

Imogen is the prime example of that, this young girl who through no fault of her own has been all but thrown away by her parents. They aren't the same as mine, they're at exactly opposite ends of the scale, but the level of neglect is the same. Hers may be wrapped in fancy things and money, but at the end of the day she's getting no more love or attention than I did growing up.

Now look at her, nineteen years old and already thrown into a facility because her parents would rather throw money at the situation than actually listen to what she has to say. I don't know her full back story, I might never know, but what I do know is she deserves better than this.

Ella

Damon

Holly

Robbo (Oz)

Mr & Mrs Graham

Indie

Mum and Dad

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Chapter Thirty Three

Jacob - Step Nine

"Made direct amends to such people wherever possible. Except when to do so would injure them or others." The Big Book - Alcoholics Anonymous

My Ella,

I am writing you this letter not only to apologise for my spectacularly questionable life choices, but to take full accountability for all the hurt I've caused you in the last twenty-five years.

Words on paper have never been my thing, they're yours. But I'm going to really try, so bear with me…

When we were kids, I think I was always aware to some degree of the hold I had on your heart, and to have that much power was intoxicating. I'd never felt anything like it. Especially with someone as fascinating as you. I was so lonely, Ella. Lonely in a life of pretending to be something or someone just to fit in. But then, I met you. It was as if my soul saw yours and said 'Yeah that's her" and let out the breath that it wasn't even aware it was holding.

But I wasn't ready for you, I wasn't anywhere close to being the person you wanted or needed. I wasn't equipped for it, I was never shown how to love someone or be loved. I never really told you all the things that were going on back home and I promise I will, one day, that's something I'm still working on. Just know that although I tried desperately to fight it, those years shaped and molded me into someone I never wanted to be.

I can't rewrite the past or predict the future, but what I can do is tell you that I love you, because <u>you</u> showed me how. Without conditions or even really needing to receive the same back. You never wavered. But I feel it now, the same as you always have…

I love everything about you, my El's Bells

From the way your cheeks blush when you get shy, to the way your hand has always fit so perfectly in mine.

How you always put everyone's needs above your own.

How you make the noise in my head quiet, even if only for a moment.

And how just the sound of my heartbeat can calm you in your scariest moments– knowing that I can bring that comfort to you, brings comfort to me, too.

Three words that are brandished around in so many different scenarios have never held as much weight as they do when I think of you.

I went to the other side of the world to attempt to give you the opportunity to move on, but every shitty decision and mistake I made, only led me back to you.

And for those things, I can only believe that there was a force far greater than us at play, pulling us back to where we were always supposed to be.

Together.

In step one and two of my programme, I admitted that I'm powerless over my addictions and a power greater than me was the only thing that could restore me back to sanity.

But, as I've moved through the steps I've come to realise that I'm not just addicted to drugs and alcohol.

I'm addicted to you, Ella, in the best possible way.

I'm powerless over my feelings for you, I always have been, and that's one addiction I never want to overcome.

Thank you for loving me when I felt unloveable, thank you for loving me through the times when I know I was difficult to love but you chose to anyway.

I'm so sorry, El's. Please forgive me and I promise to spend every day making it up to you.

I love you,

I love you,

I love you, always.

Jacob

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Chapter Thirty Four

Ella - Present Day

Tears blur and distort the words in front of me, Jacob's words. Frustration flows through me, angry at my inability to get my shit together enough to read it. I swipe furiously at my eyes and the words come into focus.

Sitting at my kitchen table, I read and reread the words scrawled on the paper in front of me. His confessions and his love bleeding from each line. My throat feels dry and my chest aches as I bring the pages to my nose to get the slightest hint of his scent.

It's the closest I can get to the sense of calm I feel when he rests my head on his chest and the whole world seems to fade away— just like he said.

When I got home today from my last shift at the book shop, I had already been full of emotions about it finally closing, but when I saw Jacob's letter sitting on the mat it was the last straw.

I need him and I miss him desperately.

I had torn through the envelope like a woman possessed at seeing his distinctive handwriting, and the words he had penned broke open my chest.

Without a second thought, I grab my keys from the side table and rush through the door.

It's been long enough now.

I'm coming baby.

I won't let you be on your own anymore.

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Chapter Thirty Five

Jacob - Present Day

The red and gold hues that hover above me move with the gentle April breeze. The leaves of the old oak tree are just coming to life and promising a fresh start after a cold winter, the spring air bringing with it the smell of freshly cut grass.

It's one of my favourite things to do these days, to lay underneath this tree and watch as the branches dance in the wind.

Ella would love this, the peace of it. She would watch with quiet fascination and romanticise over where this tree began. Of all the people that have sat beneath it.

Lovers or friends. People going through the toughest days of their lives but choosing to still sit here and take in its raw beauty.

A presence to my right steals me from my thoughts and catches my attention. I watch as she moves gracefully down the widespread lawn, her eyes fixed on mine. At first, I think I imagined her, like I conjured her up from sheer will power alone.

Then without words, she lays gently beside me and rests her head on my chest, a movement that feels as normal to us as breathing.

"I missed you." Is all she whispers. The subtle smell of her shampoo wafting over me as her hand makes lazy circles over my stomach. I wrap my arms around her, not only to pull her closer, but to allow my brain to realise that she really is here. That she not only waited for me, but that she came back to me.

"I missed you too," I choke out. Tears are already threatening to fall at her mere presence, guilt and remorse trying to overtake this incredible moment. But I don't let it, instead I allow myself to get lost in the smell of her, which is intoxicating and comforting at the same time. I was never given the luxury of a blanket or a special toy to hold as a child, but I think holding Ella is what it must have felt like.

She doesn’t move from her place on my chest. She lays there like she’s been here the whole time.

“Please don’t leave again– in any way,” she says into my t-shirt that I now realise is slightly damp from her own tears.

I do the only thing that comes naturally to me, I lift my hand and cover her ear. Allowing her to hear the steady thump of my heart, that after all these months seems to have finally found its rhythm now that she’s here.

Her shoulders heave as she breathes me in and I bury my nose in the hair on top of her head.

“I’m not going anywhere this time El’s Bells, I swear.”

I will never understand how a fuck up like me could be as lucky to be loved by a woman like Ella, but if this whole ordeal has taught me anything, it’s that I will never be selfish or stupid enough to let her slip through my fingers again.

I’ll always have to put in the work, that much I know. Because this disease doesn’t just go away.

It lurks in the corner, only getting stronger if you ignore it. Like a leech sucking on your blood; it gets bigger and stronger if you don’t remove it and take precautions for it not to happen again.

This disease wants me dead, its insidious nature by definition spreads gradually, secretly, and without notice and before you know it, it has you. It took my parents and thousands of others, but I won’t let it take me.

Not when I have her and a life that can be filled with joy.

I look over the top of her head and out to the water where I’ve spent so many mornings and then back to the main house.

Michael stands in the doorway looking at us with a serene smile playing on his face. I nod my head at him, and he does the same in return before retreating back inside.

“Come on, let's go home,” I say, kissing her forehead, her nose and then her lips.

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Epilogue

Ella - Seven months later

Slotting the key into the door, I take a moment to breathe in the smell of fresh paint. The once traditional brown door is now the colour of my childhood dreams, the prettiest pastel pink with gold hardware. The butterflies dance in my stomach at the thought that only a few months ago, I believed that this would be the last time setting foot in this gorgeous little corner of my world. Now, with fairy lights strung from every corner and a new name above the door, *'Ella's ink and desire bookshop'* it's officially opening day.

The once quite frankly drab interior, is now designed to welcome you in like a hug. Soft lighting, but bright enough to read. Seating areas placed in corners– my favourite being the side window seat, and genres to fit all wants and needs.

The bell jingles above the door and I turn to see a very pregnant Holly entering– or more accurately, *waddling* in holding two coffee cups.

"Sorry we couldn't do champagne on opening day babe, but you know I'm preggers and Jacob's an alcoholic– so it just didn't feel right." She twists her mouth in a 'is it too soon' expression.

I laugh despite the still painful truth of her words, reassuring her that it's all good.

Jacob has been doing amazingly, he's back at work and busier than ever. Which is how I'm standing in the bookshop of my dreams in the first place.

It all happened on a regular Sunday morning whilst lying in bed drinking coffee.

Jacob passed me a small black box with red ribbon. I thought for sure he was going to ask me to marry him. Instead, when I opened the box, nestled inside was a key. A key that I had held so many times it felt personal to me, I would know its shape anywhere. The intricate detail of the Victorian style

brass ‘bow’, welded and shaped to look like a heart, the long shank smooth on my fingertips.

“Why do you have this?” I asked whilst still running my fingertips over every detail.

“*I* don’t have it, you do. It's yours.” He looked at me with so much joy and excitement that all I could do was look back questioningly.

“Don’t the new owners need it? Or did they change the locks? It always did stick when it was cold…”

“No, I believe the new owner likes the lock just the way it is. She’s a creature of habit.” The look on his face was like I was missing the punchline of a joke.

“Oh, do we know her?”

“Jesus, baby, it’s yours. The bookshop is yours. I started negotiations with Mr and Mrs Jones whilst I was still at Lilly Lodge. But because it’s such an old building we couldn’t go ahead without a million different surveys and checks. Not gonna lie, this place needed a lot of work. There was so much damp in the walls I’m surprised it’s still standing let alone that it didn’t affect the books.”

I just stared at him in disbelief.

The bookshop is mine?

“Wanna go see it?” he said, wiggling his eyebrows.

“No.” His face dropped, replaced by a look of trepidation and a physical deflation of that boyish charm that I love so much.

“No? You don’t wanna see it?” He looked so sad that I had to quickly put him out of his misery.

“No, I don’t want to go and see the shop– *yet*.” Climbing into his lap and straddling his legs I kissed him with all the gratitude and heat I felt for my beautiful man.

“Oh, I see… is this my thank you?” he asked trailing kisses up and down my throat, his hands roamed up my back and swept the oversized t-shirt off in one swift motion, leaving me completely naked.

“There are so–so many ways I want to thank you,” I breathed, rolling my hips in a circle.

“Well, don’t let me stop you,” he laughed and flipped me over.

We made love amongst our rumpled sheets with the scent of coffee hanging in the air and then came to view the shop for the first time later that day.

My Jacob:
Hey beautiful!! What ya doing?

Me:
I just served my first customer!! Baby, I can't believe it there are actual people in MY bookshop!

My Jacob:
That's amazing, sweetheart. I'm so sorry I couldn't stick around after opening.

Me:
No worries. You can make it up to me later ;)

My Jacob:
Devil face emoji

The shop bell jingles again and when I look up, the postman is there with a box of special orders for the shop. I giddily take it from him and sign where I need to.

"Oh and this one is addressed to you personally," he says handing me a shoebox sized parcel.

All orders for the shop have been addressed as such, so I have no idea what this could be. After thanking him, I take the package to the back room, taking a seat at the cute table and chairs I have put here for when I have lunch.

I carefully take off the outer parcel paper in case it needs to be returned. Lifting the lid from the box, inside is familiar black paper and blood red ribbon. Exactly the same as the wrapping Jacob had chosen for the key.

Gently, I undo the bow and peel back the paper. Exquisite brown leather greets me and it takes me a while to comprehend what I'm looking at.

I hold the extraordinary rare book in both hands, turning it around so I can read the spine.

'*Wuthering Heights by Ellis Bell 1847*' How did I never put the two together? I knew that Jacob always had this quirky way of giving everyone he meets a nickname but this one makes my heart swell. All this time he noticed everything.

It's a first edition copy of Wuthering Heights with Emily Bronte's male pen name.

I open the front cover and a slip of paper floats to the floor. Picking it up, I read out loud to myself–

"To my very own El's Bells,
I love you beyond any words that have ever been written.
I could only think of one place to do this that would be appropriate to us. So I ask you, amongst all your favourite words written…"

"Will you marry me, Els?" Jacob's deep voice cuts through the silence. I lift my head to see him on one knee in the doorway, a ring box in his hand.

With my eyes still on him I place the book on the table and make my way to him.

Kneeling on the floor, I place my hands on either side of his face.

"What was it Heathcliff said? 'I cannot live without my life.' I can't live without you, my love. So yes, I'll marry you, because I've definitely been waiting long enough."

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Epilogue 2

Jacob - Two years later

The wrought iron gates squeak as I push my way through, making my way to the traditional, gothic brick building that leads to the rows and rows of headstones. The surrounding gardens are beautiful and wildflowers are scattered amongst the tributes.

Holding Ella's hand tightly, I lead her in the direction of the stone that bears both my parents' names. The granite slab stands to the left of the main path, and as we approach, I feel the nerves begin to creep in. In all the years that my parents have been gone, I have never once come to see where they rest. Instead, they emailed me a map of the crematorium with a pin for where to find them.

Ella instinctively holds my hand tighter as we stop in front of it, looking down at the basic tribute that I had paid for years ago.

I swallow hard, "Now that I'm here I don't know what to say." I look to her for guidance on what it is I should say or do.

I've spent so many months in therapy discussing how I should go about forgiving the people that brought me into this world. But now that I'm here, all the things that I wanted to say either don't come, or no longer feel important.

Ella crouches down, not letting go of my hand. With her free hand, she rummages in her bag and pulls out a clean cloth and some cleaning spray.

"Is this ok?" she asks my permission. Nodding my head, she kisses the back of my knuckles before letting go. Diligently, she sprays and wipes the years of neglect off the stone, dusting off stray leaves as she does.

The lettering becomes clearer as she works, and as I see their names appear, the years and years of bottled up emotion bubble to the surface. I stay standing as I let my tears fall, but I don't think I'm really crying for them. I'm crying for the little boy who deserved so much more. I've spent so many years with their voices in my head telling me I'm no good and I

never will be. Now, I look down at the only thing that represents they were once here and allow myself to grieve, knowing it was never me that was no good, it was them.

They were the problem, one thing they were right about is that they should never have had me. Not that I don't deserve my place on this planet, but *they* shouldn't have been the ones to give it to me.

With my parents headstone now presentable, I turn to Ella and ask for a moment alone. I watch as she walks towards one of the many memorial benches and takes a seat.

"I'm not going to stand here and tell you that everything is ok, because I can't. I am going to say this though, I forgive you. I deserved better, but I understand now that you weren't able to give me what I needed. I've had to learn by making plenty of shitty decisions myself about how I want my life to look. So, I choose to live a really long, and really fucking happy life inspite of you, or maybe even for you. Either way, I just want to say that I get it now. Look after each other, see you on the other side." Laying the flowers I brought with me down, I turn and keep walking up the row.

Heading towards the newer stones at the back, I scan the names as I walk, taking in the beautiful flowers that have been left by loved ones. On the second row I stop, the name I came here for stands before me on pure white marble, the script black and fresh.

Imogen Rothschild

Seeing her name here is the thing that cracks open the dam.

I hunch over, trying to catch my breath as the reality that she is really gone hits me full force.

"Fuck sake, Gen-Z," I sob. I think I knew the first time our eyes met in that meeting that she was too good for this world. There was something about her that told me she just wasn't meant for this life. But when her brother reached out to me after finding my name and number on a piece of paper I had given to her, I had to see it for myself.

She had been released from rehab not long after me and was doing well, but then a particularly bad run in with her shit-head parents had sent her hurtling back down into depression. Her brother hadn't heard from her in a few days, and when he had gone to find her in their summer house in Devon, she had finally achieved what she wanted.

My heart aches as I think of the girl that I met, her incredible creativity and the way she let me into her world after spending so many years shutting people out.

I lay the single rose at the base of her memorial and kiss my fingers, brushing them gently across her name. Carefully, I get to my knees, the gravel biting through my jeans. A painful reminder that I'm here, and she isn't. Bowing my head, I recite the words we spoke together all those months–

"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Sleep well, sweetheart."

Turning to head back, Ella is stood just a few steps away, her hand resting on her swollen stomach. The diamonds I put on her finger shimmer and sparkle in the sunshine, almost as bright as the smile she aims at me– like I'm her entire reason for living.

Which is lucky, really, because that's exactly how I feel about her and our baby that's growing inside her. I know I'm going to make mistakes as a father, but one thing is for sure– I will never stop showing up, and I sure as shit won't leave.

I'll still attend regular meetings, and when things get a little too dark, I'll spend time at Lilly Lodge leaning on Michael for support. I know now, that everything is a work in progress and that recovery is possible.

I just need to take it One Day at a Time…

The End

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With Thanks...

To my very own Jacob, my husband Jonathan. I hope I made you proud with this one. Every page was written with you and I in mind.
Loving you has always come easily to me.
All my love, forever.

To two of the most important women in my life, my Mum and Nanny. For passing on their love of books and for teaching me how to read them.

To my beautiful girl, thank you for always being patient with Mummy and for your drawings of how you see Jacob and Ella.

To two incredibly important men no longer with us. My big brother Daniel, writing Damon was easy because I just wrote you. I miss you terribly.
My brother-in-law Michael, who I know had things been different, would have helped people just like the Michael in this story.

To Katie, Meg, Astra and Adele thank you for being there every step of the way and for your constant support and advice.

And finally to my amazing Street team and ARC readers. Thank you for taking a chance on me.

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