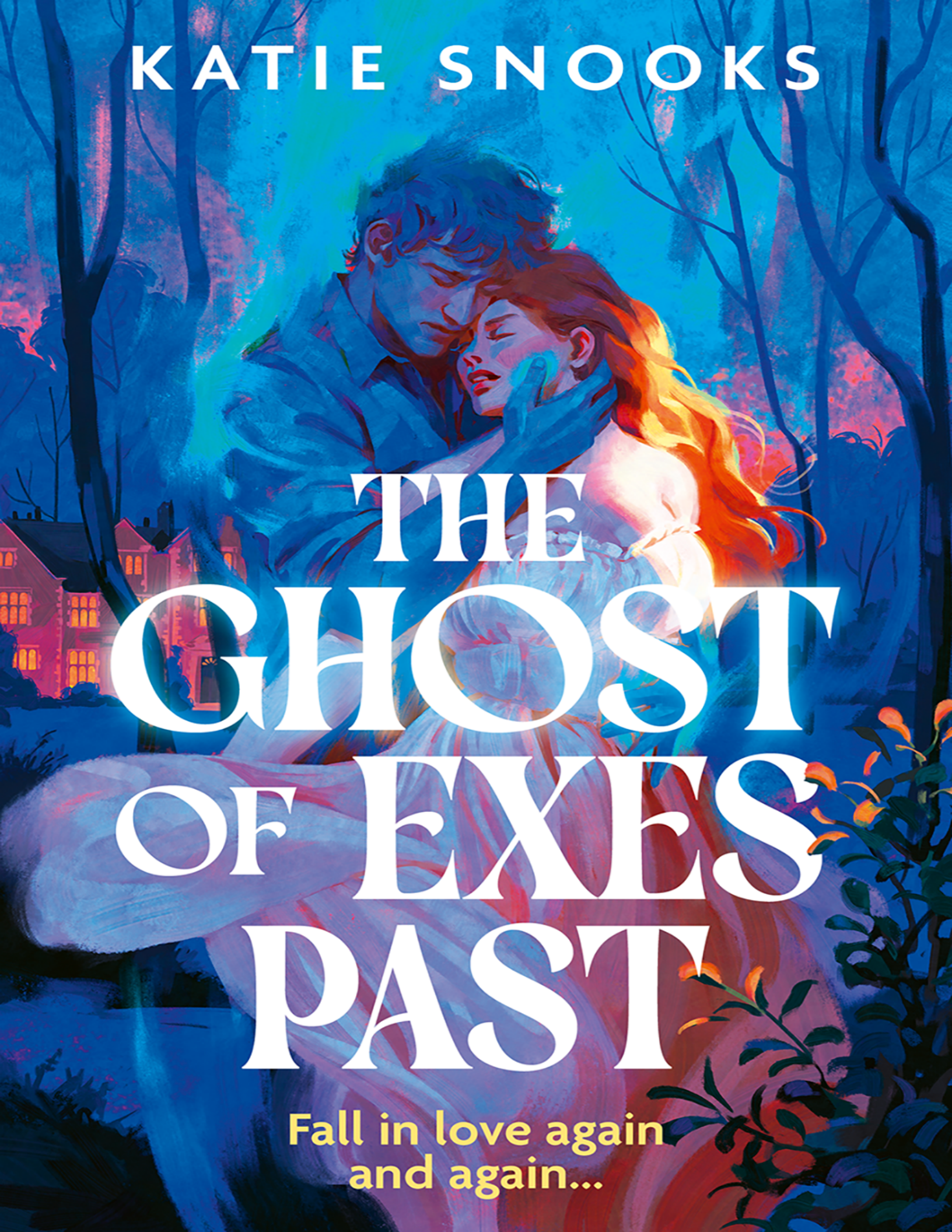




KATIE SNOOKS

THE GHOST OF EXES PAST

Fall in love again
and again...

The Ghost of Exes Past

Katie Snooks

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DEDICATION

For Genie.

Never be afraid to change your mind. x

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EPIGRAPH

‘Do you believe in destiny? That even the powers of time can be altered for a single purpose? That the luckiest man who walks on this earth is the one who finds . . . true love?’

Bram Stoker, *Dracula*

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CONTENTS

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Note to Readers](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty.](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)
[Chapter Thirty](#)
[Chapter Thirty-One](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)
[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)
[*The Ghost Of Exes Past Playlist*](#)
[About the Author](#)
[About the Publisher](#)

[*OceanofPDF.com*](#)

CHAPTER ONE

Belle

The four-poster bed is absurd. It's the kind of bed that someone might have died in. Consumption, probably. Or a broken heart. Hopefully, not the plague. It's the kind of bed where you could conceal a body, with plenty of room underneath for you also to hide. It is, according to the wedding coordinator, 'original to the castle'. Yes, I'll be consummating my marriage in a bed that's definitely *seen* things.

When I told my friends and family that we'd chosen a manor house in Whitby as our wedding venue, they all made the same joke about Dracula: 'Let's hope there aren't vampire bats!' I laughed every time. What else was I supposed to do?

But it's also near the hometown of my love (as a born-and-bred Southerner, marrying a Yorkshireman was not on my life bingo card) and standing here now, looking out over the sea towards the abbey, something in me settles. Everything in my life has led to this moment, and I'm exactly where I need to be.

Weeks of fittings, tastings, group chats, and the usual family carnage, and suddenly, it's just me and my reflection. I turn to the floor-length oval mirror with its ornate wooden trim – it's probably also original to the castle and, note to self, undoubtedly also haunted. Next to it is a dressing table buckling under eighteen months' worth of skincare; proof that self-improvement is an ongoing project.

The woman staring back at me is doing her best. White silk midi-dress: check. Blazer tailored to her curves and buttoned exactly where the stylist said: check. Long, bouncy, reddish curls cooperating for once in their life: check. I lean in closer, studying her face, hunting for disasters. The small freckles are staging their usual rebellion through the foundation. The left eye is starting to water slightly, which means I'm more stressed than I'm admitting. But the lips are good. The lips are actually perfect.

It's taken a while – therapy, trial and error, and more re-watches of *Sex and the City* than I care to admit, but I am proud of the woman I've become. The woman in that mirror is smart, reliable, and successful. She knows what she wants, and she gets it. And because of that, she'll make the perfect wife tomorrow.

A wife! The fact this is actually happening still hasn't fully sunk in. Tomorrow I am marrying the love of my life. The ring on my finger sparkles in the reflection, and I catch myself smiling like an idiot. I kissed some frogs, sixty-nined some toads, and had sex with worse, but I found my prince – and in fewer than twenty-four hours from now, I'll be walking down the aisle to my Timothy. Timothy, with his dark brown eyes that crinkle when I crack a joke, who holds me like he means it and makes me feel safe. Timothy, whose hands are always steady, assured, and never shake, even with a full restaurant watching. Timothy, who cuts vegetables like he's performing surgery. Timothy, who is kind, successful, and wants the same things I want. The algorithm finally got it right.

Behind me, the wedding dress of my dreams hangs on the door of the antique mahogany wardrobe. An off-the-shoulder, long-sleeved, beaded bodice gives way to a buttery soft, floor-length, silk gown – accompanied by a white, faux fur shoulder shrug. I checked the forecast one last time on my way here, and it's true: I'm going to get the white wedding I always dreamed of, with snow expected at midday tomorrow.

But I can't get too carried away – we still have this evening to go first. Tonight's the wedding rehearsal dinner slash party in the grand dining room of the manor house. This place is gloriously romantic (in a *Wuthering Heights* kinda way) and the chapel on its grounds, with its domed ceiling and huge stained-glass windows, looks exactly like one in my secret 'wedding' Pinterest board that I've had saved since 2015.

Alongside all the excitement, I'd be lying if I said the idea of everyone we love being in the same room didn't terrify me a bit too. What if no one gets on? What if it's skin-crawlingly awkward? What if no one even turns up?

I lean towards the mirror and reach for my lipstick. Neutral ground, something I can actually control. I reapply a light layer and blend it out with my fingers, when there's a knock at the door. I check the time: I'm only halfway through my allotted thirty minutes for getting ready. So who could possibly want me? Timothy knows better than to go off schedule – his

industry press are here to shoot our first look at the rehearsal and things need to go perfectly. My wedding is the one occasion I get to make an exceptional entrance (or three), and I plan to milk every single one.

The door handle starts turning, so I run over before it opens, shouting, ‘Who is it?’ while sweat prickles at my pits.

‘Only me!’ calls the one person I would want to hear from right now – the cosiest, most familiar voice, full of that soft Scottish lilt that makes even a shouted warning sound like a hug. It’s Grandma Jules (although I’m the only one allowed to call her that – to everyone else, she’s Juliet). She barges in at just under five feet, but enormous in every other sense, wearing a yellow dress covered in something between flowers and chaos, her signature rose-shaped earrings already jingling before she’s fully through the door.

Jules is the complete opposite of a stereotypical granny; she always has the latest smartphone, loves social media more than I do, and is fiercely independent. She doesn’t need anyone to help her put up a shelf, just a good old YouTube tutorial and a hearty mug of tea. As she struts into the room, her silver hair almost creates a disco-ball effect on the walls (she hates a purple rinse and never misses an opportunity to gossip about the old dears in her book club who rely on them).

She stops dead when she sees me, one hand pressing flat to her chest, then puts down the papers clasped under her armpit on the haunted bed.

‘Well, don’t you look beautiful, Belle. Just like your namesake.’ I notice her lip quiver a little, and she blinks hard like she’s annoyed at herself for it.

‘Oh, please don’t set me off!’ I laugh and my hands rush to either side of my face, a desperate attempt to stop myself tearing up.

‘Sorry, sorry, hen! You know what I’m like, a sucker for love!’ I pull her into a hug and breathe her in – that herby, citrus scent she’s worn as long as I can remember, nostalgic in a way that takes me straight back to childhood and also exactly how I imagined the Sixties to smell.

She seems small in my arms. Grandad used to call her slim, used to say she had the energy of three women, despite her size. He’d have loved today – any excuse to get his good suit out and embarrass everyone on the dance floor. I press my cheek to her silver hair and don’t let myself think about the gap at the top table tomorrow, where he should have been.

Sensing her still, I step back and hold her at arm’s length. ‘Is everything okay, Grandma?’ I study her face. ‘Are the photographers downstairs

getting ready?’

‘Oh yes, yes! They’re setting up now, some very fancy lights they’ve got ...’ she says, waving her hands in the air.

‘I can’t tell you what a stress it’s been, knowing the press are photographing it. As if I wasn’t nervous enough already! I mean, it’s very flattering, of course, but *Fork Yeah* catering magazine isn’t exactly *Vogue Weddings*.’ Jules nods, but I can tell she’s distracted.

‘I wanted to just run something past you quickly first,’ she says, picking the papers back up.

Between the two seating plans – one for tonight’s rehearsal dinner and one for tomorrow, because Timothy insisted they both be ‘proper’ – and *Fork Yeah*’s photographers lurking downstairs, I’ve spent the last three days drowning in place cards and table numbers.

One of my brows (yes, just the one – she has a mind of her own and we call her Browelle) raises as I watch Jules leaf through her stack of papers: the colour-coded timetable for this evening, guests’ dietary requirements and, on a separate page, the handwritten table plan for tonight. I roll my eyes and turn back to the mirror, smoothing out the crease left by Browelle on my forehead.

‘How many times do I need to say it, Grandma? No, Great-uncle Norman can’t have another plus one.’

I watch her reflection in the mirror, bringing the paper closer to her face to inspect it again. With her other hand, she nervously twirls the rings on her ring finger. ‘It’s not that, hen. Something is very strange, is all,’ she mutters under her breath, her perfectly manicured nails, painted neon pink, flicking through the sheets.

‘Here, let me see,’ I say walking over, ‘I’m sure it’s nothing.’ She holds the papers out in front of me and I lean closer. I scan the page for a moment, and everything seems in order: Mum, Dad, future family, my besties – all written in Jules’s neat script ... Until I notice it, and my heart drops.

I see the scrawl first, before my brain catches up.

Jake Marleigh.

It’s not just the name, it’s the handwriting – the scribble of it, two words that I haven’t seen written down in years. The slant of the J that hooks too far left and the E that almost disappears within the K, like whoever wrote it was in a rush. My fingers trace the letters – muscle memory from past

Valentine's Day cards, love notes, and that time he wrote 'I love you' on the back of a receipt, which I kept in the back of my phone case for two years.

I lean in closer, blinking in the hope that those two words disappear like invisible ink. They don't.

Jake Marleigh. My ex-boyfriend.

I turn, cheeks burning, and can't quite look Grandma in the eye. 'Well, that is a surprise. Who would do such a thing?' My voice is wobbly.

'I know, sweetheart, I know,' Jules replies. 'I've had these next to me all day ... I don't know how this could have possibly happened.'

My eyes dart around the room, heart now hammering in my chest as I run through every person who could have done this.

'I always liked that Jake, I did,' Jules snuffles.

'Grandma!'

'But imagine the babies! They would have been so cute! All blue-eyed and—'

'Grandma.'

She stops, presses her lips together, the picture of innocence.

She's trying to lighten the mood, trying to stop me from spiralling, I know – but she always had a soft spot for Jake. And if she weren't my grandma, I might have been jealous of the flirty banter they had. I know she means well, but this isn't helping, especially as I'm marrying a wholly different man tomorrow.

'I'm struggling to process this right now,' I say, my voice quivering. 'Please could you take his name off and – if at all possible – figure out who did this? It's probably just a silly prank, but it's one at my expense and that feels cruel. I'm not sure I want someone like that at my wedding.' I look down to my hands, which are trembling.

'I'm on it, sweetheart. Leave it with me.' I follow Jules to the door, and she kisses my cheek on the way out. 'Don't let this worry you, lovely. I'll get to the bottom of it.' And with that, she saunters out of the room and down the long wood-panelled corridor.

I shut the door and lean against it, pressing my forehead to the cool wood.

There's a theory – I think I found it on some blog at sixteen, hunched over my dad's computer in the dining room – that people have three true loves in their lives. The first one is puppy love. It's idealistic, all-consuming, but, ultimately, completely unsuited to the real world – that's

Jake. They say the second love is the difficult one – the one that teaches you what you actually need by getting it spectacularly wrong ... And the third is the one I have now with Timothy: the one that's mature, unexpected, built on deep connection – the one that makes sense. Which means I should be fine.

I met Jake when I was twenty-one, fresh out of university. I'd just moved back in with my parents after three years of hard work and mayhem. I needed a year after I graduated to find myself, which mainly consisted of working at my parents' bed and breakfast. I felt equally like the world was my oyster and totally unsure of where my path would take me next – until the day I saw him.

I say 'saw' like it was the first time, but it wasn't, not really. Growing up in the same town, you know most people, or at least you think you do. Jake was in the same year as me at school but always on the periphery, never in the same form. A name attached to rumours and a face that I'd never properly studied.

But that afternoon, as he waltzed past the B&B while I was sweeping the porch, the July light catching his face, I looked – properly.

Jake was tall. Not just tall, but the constantly-having-to-duck-under-doorframes six-foot-four kinda tall. He had thick, dark hair that looked great wet or dry, and whether pushed back or falling over his face. His jaw was verging on too strong, too sculpted, but his mouth softened him – his (gorgeous!) lips held the permanent ghost of a smirk. And his eyes ... Light blue and fringed with lashes that were wasted on a man, they never failed to make me melt.

Jake had a reputation. The consensus among my friends was that he was fit, but not worth the hassle.

'He's easy to look at, but those are usually the ones that are bad news,' my mum warned me, cradling a cup of tea between her palms, when she heard we'd been on a date.

Jules, on the other hand, didn't seem to have any reservations about how handsome he was. 'He's a hunk. A real heartbreaker,' she'd said approvingly, like that was a selling point. She wasn't wrong on either count. Even then, I'd surprised myself. Turns out there are things that *can* compete with a jaw like that. London, for one.

And now his name is on my perfectly curated seating plan. I need to move past this. Surely, it's just a prank and nothing more. An attempt at a

joke gone horribly wrong? Maybe they didn't mean to upset me. Maybe it's my cousin Harry trying to wind me up.

Ground yourself, Belle, don't get flustered. I turn, leaning my head back on the door. This room really is stunning, and that's what I should be focusing on. I stare at the carved, floor-to-ceiling overmantel that probably costs more than my first flat. It looks like Donatello could have carved it. The fireplace is framed by two plush cream velvet armchairs and in the centre of the room is a cosy sofa covered with plump, embroidered cushions. I can't wait to curl up with Timothy here tomorrow night, drinking champagne while dissecting our wedding day, laughing about whatever chaos our families have caused.

I push off the door and cross back to the mirror. I'm halfway there when I realise two reflections are looking back at me.

My brain does that thing where it refuses to process what the eyes are clearly reporting. I blink. The second reflection doesn't move, doesn't shift, it just stands there, behind me, wearing the expression of someone who has been waiting an unreasonably long time and is finding the whole situation mildly entertaining.

Jake.

Jake, who was not just my first love, but the worst heartbreak of my life.

Jake Marleigh, who died ten years ago.

Ten years of carefully folded grief comes undone in a second.

Somehow, here he is, glowing faintly, his statement smile sweeping across his face ... But he's supposed to be dead.

I stare. He stares back. I run through a list of things this could be, because it can't possibly be what this looks like.

Is it someone who looks like him? A secret twin I didn't know about? Except ... it can't be, not all six foot four, with that jaw and those eyes and that infuriating smirk.

Maybe he didn't die? Was there a mistake? A mix-up at the hospital? I've heard it can happen – I saw it, a whole documentary ... Except, I helped identify him. I stood in that room and identified him, confirmed what clothes he had on, and there was absolutely no way I was wrong. What in the *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* is going on? Is this his ghost?

I turn and stagger backwards, voice caught in my throat, while simultaneously grabbing for anything to help protect me from my supposed-to-be-dead ex-boyfriend standing in the bridal suite in which I'll

be consummating my marriage, in just over a day's time. Am I losing my mind? Is the stress of this wedding causing me to hallucinate? Did my sweet little grandma secretly poison me when she kissed me goodbye?

I trip, heels caught in my dress, and crack my head on the nearest post of the four-poster bed. I crumble to the floor and rub my head. *Please don't be a lump, please don't be a lump.* I don't want to walk down the aisle with an egg on the back of my skull. What if Timothy feels it during our first kiss as husband and wife? What if it means my updo won't sit properly? What if I'm actually losing it and spend tomorrow in a padded cell instead of at the altar?

But when I reopen my eyes, he's gone. It's just me reflected in the mirror, sitting on the floor, rubbing my head and looking very much like someone who's just seen a ghost.

I look up at the wall where Jake would have been standing and see only the fireplace, the brass poker hanging crookedly off its stand. One of the velvet armchairs is pulled very slightly forward from where it was before – or was it already like that? I can't tell. My hands are still trembling, shoulders quivering, and the tips of my fingers frozen.

I was just having a moment.

It's this room. It's Whitby, with the whole gothic, brooding, 800 years of vampire-soaked history. I'll be okay. Someone played a prank, and my mind went into overdrive, but I'm okay! I just need to take a deep breath and think happy thoughts: Timothy, dream wedding, his speech, my first kiss with Jake— I sit bolt upright.

What is wrong with you, Belle? You're fantasising about your first love and mistaking shadows for ghosts. I may love a horror film, but I'm not about to discover I'm clairvoyant on the eve of my wedding. I move my hands to dust myself off, and something catches my eye: a hand outstretched next to mine. The nails bitten down, a small scar across the palm from clumsily cutting an avocado while making me brunch that one time ...

My eyes bolt upward in terror, and there he is, with those hands I loved reaching out to help me up.

'This can't be real,' I stammer and everything goes black.

CHAPTER TWO

Jake

On the twelfth day of Christmas, my psychopomp gave to me: an ex-girlfriend out cold in a haunted manor house.

I feel weird. Exposed. A little bit naked, even. This is the first time I've been seen in ten years. Years of invisibility, loneliness, and no one but a grumpy angel of death to keep me company – and this is my welcome?

I stand here for a moment, shuffling and waiting for a fanfare, another sob, anything. And nothing comes, at least not from Belle, who's out cold.

The thing is, I've had ten years to feel things, and I've not been able to, which seemed fine until about thirty seconds ago.

It's not like I haven't tried to connect with my emotions. I've tried a lot of things: revisiting the scene of my death, listing out all my regrets (there weren't many – mainly swapping my shiny gold Charizard Pokémon card for a tuck shop Twix at school), experimenting with extravagant, ghostly pranks on family members. But none of it worked. It turns out that it's really hard to knock things off shelves and flicker lights on and off. Gabriel says it can take centuries to learn Poltergeistology ... Ah, yes, him.

Gabriel would like to be introduced as my spiritual guide or soul chaperone. Still, he's really just a super annoying life coach (or, rather, inter-life coach) who likes to pontificate about purpose and missions in a really cryptic way that feels more frustrating than encouraging.

I blame him for my ten years of purgatory ... Okay, technically, not the actual purgatory. I've been in the 'in-between', as Gabriel calls it. Which I always thought *was* purgatory, but apparently not; there's another in-between bit. This bit. It's something I *still* haven't fully got my head around.

I've spent ten years waiting to cross over to the afterlife. But, apparently, before I can do that, I have to have a nice little chat with my ex – who is currently regaining consciousness after passing out at just the sight of me –

and explain why I'm here. I must have been really bad in my earthly life to deserve this kind of torture.

So here I am with Belle. Belle, with her perfect life, her perfect family in this perfect manor house, and that perfect face, which has hardly changed.

Focus, Jake. Can't get distracted. I need to get this over and done with quickly so I can move on to whatever comes next – preferably, a version of eternity without *her* in it.

'Jake ... Is that you?' she asks, groggily.

'Hi, Belle. It's me. The ghost of your ex-boyfriend, Jake Marleigh.' I resist the temptation to add a 'woOOoOOooo' on the end. There's no easy way to say it, is there? I look around. 'Cool room,' I add. 'Scary as fuck, though. Loving the plague bed.'

She looks less scared now. In fact, she's looking scar-y. She's angry. With me? After everything? I take a step backwards. Her brow is doing that thing where one of them points up sharply, and now I know I'm in trouble. I used to tease her about that all the time, but this isn't the time for teasing – she's up and marching over.

'What the actual fuck, Jake?' she growls. 'You're not real.' She's swiping at me, and I'm dodging her. The button from her blazer is dangling by a thread, and she'll be fuming once she notices. Even more than she is already. What's that Shakespeare quote ... Though she be little, she is fierce? And fierce she is, so I try to slip off out of her sight, but I can't – I'm not invisible now.

'Nice to see you too, Belle.'

'Fuck you,' she screams, her hands batting the air, so I dodge to my left, just as the tip of her nail catches my chest, and it hurts. Wait. She can touch me? I look down in disbelief. So not only can she see me, but she can touch me? I'm solid!

She crumbles to the floor, again, her head buried in her hands, sobbing. I squint and make out 'Why ... my *bedding* (or could be wedding) ... ruined.' My eyes flick to the white gown hanging on the door of the wardrobe behind her. It's not what I expected for Belle; it's so structured, formal, and ... posh. We spoke about weddings – of course we did. We were young and in love. And when I imagined ours, she was in something more rustic, flowy, a flower crown in her hair or something. I guess styles have changed since then. She quietens down and straightens up, still looking furious.

‘For what it’s worth, I’m just as unhappy about being here as you are,’ I mutter, rubbing the spot where she caught me, but also savouring the feeling of being touched after so long. As she stands, her long auburn hair falls over her face, her mascara smudged under her eyes. It reminds me of that scene from *The Ring*, but I decide not to mention it – I might be the ghost, but she’s far more petrifying than I am. I stifle a laugh as she walks towards me, glaring.

‘You’re supposed to be dead,’ she growls. She says it again, louder this time. I scratch my head, about to reply, but a guttural scream erupts from deep in her chest as she picks up a vase from the fireplace opposite me. ‘YOU ARE DEAD! WHY ARE YOU HERE?’ The vase flies from her hand, almost in slow motion, but just as I predicted, it misses me and instead hits the wall to my side. She always was bad at sports, I think, tutting, as the last of the glass shatters.

‘Belles, calm down—’

‘Don’t “Belles” me and don’t tell me to calm down,’ she snarls back. ‘You’re enjoying this, aren’t you? Enjoying ruining the best weekend of my life.’

‘Well, if you just let me explain ...’ I say, shrugging, as she paces back and forth, her steps getting quicker. She’s shaking her hands as if hyperventilating ... Oh, please, don’t let her have a panic attack now, I’d be useless and I’m not sure that googling ‘what to do if someone is having a panic attack after seeing a ghost’ would help me much.

‘This can’t be happening. This can’t be real! I’m getting married tomorrow!’ she pants, this time leaning forward and pausing to take deep breaths.

‘Yeah, and you’re turning into a right bridezilla by the looks of it.’ At this she turns and marches towards me ... Uh-oh.

‘Why. Are. You. Here?’ she spits in my face, furiously.

I open my mouth to tell her, but the truth is, I don’t really know.



I was twenty-five when I died, too busy actually living to have really given much thought to what came after. I just assumed you died and then your soul evaporated and that was it. I liked the idea of heaven or life after death – who wouldn’t? But I never expected there would be this much red tape.

The in-between limbo thing isn't a specific place – I can move around the real world – it's more ... the effect it has on you. I've been utterly numb. To emotions, to touch, to art, to sound – nothing penetrates.

I've mostly spent the last decade in the back row of the Curzon, watching films I can never properly feel. I can't smell the stale carpets, and I have to imagine the sweet waft of popcorn or the gooey nacho cheese. December is the worst time. The lobby must reek of mulled wine and cinnamon, and everyone's in cosy jumpers and stamping their feet and rubbing their hands and breathing it all in, while I just sit there, watching, when outside, some guy is down on one knee in the snow and I feel ... nada. Nothing feels good, but nothing feels bad. Life has lost its colour and I'm not allowed to move on from it.

Gabe said (we got on nickname terms after about four years) that I'd get used to it if I didn't want to do the other thing – this thing I'm doing now – and it's been a toss-up for a decade about which I'd hate more. Loneliness has won, though. Honestly, it's been shit living in a world where everyone is thriving but I'm just there, looking in. Watching people live a life that I have lost. What I'd give to taste the stolen cola bottles from Belle's pick'n'mix cup one more time ... I wish I'd nicked more while I had the chance.

I've had no one to talk to, joke with, touch. Well, no one apart from Gabe.

Gabe isn't what I imagined for a kind of grim reaper. He looks more like a bouncer for one of those really rough nightclubs in Soho. He's a big guy, roughly six foot six, and burly, with arms as thick as my legs. His beard is well maintained, with patches of grey, and he has a shaved head. He looks like he'd pick you up by your elbows and throw you out of heaven if you hit on a foxy archangel. I didn't tell him this until years later, when I was confident he'd find it funny ... which he never did.

It wasn't until after we became properly acquainted that I began to notice he has incredibly kind eyes. They're framed by deep-set wrinkles, so I'd age him at fifty, and that hasn't changed (I too haven't aged a day since I died). He's also a moody bastard to be around. He drags his feet when annoyed, and his low and gravelly voice booms when frustrated, which he often is around me. His humour is catty and sarcastic, so on paper we *should* get on better.

I'd been dead for three days when Gabe finally bothered to show up. I'd spent most of that time walking – couldn't tell you why, exactly. Couldn't tell you much about those three days at all. It wasn't because I had anywhere to go but, I guess, I didn't know what else to do. Apparently, when you die and you're so shocked and can't process it, and don't want to believe it, your legs just keep going ... and since I was in Kent, London was the direction they'd picked. I was slumped on a bench in front of some old docks, in a place called Wapping, when he casually waltzed over and plopped himself down next to me, interrupting a perfectly good stare at some ducks I couldn't feed.

'Who the fuck are you and why are you sat so close, mate?' I muttered to myself, thinking he couldn't hear, but then he turned, a smirk on his face.

'Cheery fella, aren't you, Jake? Thought you'd be happy for the company and the explanation, but I can leave ...' So then, obviously, I begged him to tell me what kind of hell I was living in. I followed him back to his 'house' and nearly lost it when I saw where he was taking me. I asked him if he could be any more of a cliché, haunting an old woman's attic. He looked at me, annoyed and hurt in equal measure, and mumbled something about having had plans to convert it. But when I got to the top floor, the place was actually impressive – well beyond my limited IKEA tastes. A wooden writing desk was nestled under the eaves; embroidered tapestries hung perfectly aligned and spaced on the walls; and, as if to show off, Le Creuset bowls were dotted around for decoration. Light poured in from a skylight above the desk, making the whole place look like something from an oil painting. Even *I* found it a beautiful space.

'Really bucking the horror-film aesthetic,' I quipped.

'Thanks, love,' he replied with a covert wink.

Once I'd made myself at home on his sofa, it didn't take him long to start hinting about my 'mission'. How I needed to work out why I was being held in the 'in-between' and what my punishment would be if I wanted to get out of it.

I honestly thought one of the best things about being dead would be not having to have a job anymore. I told him I just wanted to swan my way around London, riding the Underground and getting into nightclubs for free, but turns out, thanks to Gabriel, I can't rest easy – as if real life and dying weren't tough enough. He's like the annoying parrot that my grandad once had – except, instead of repeating the *Eastenders* outro drums, it's always

‘mission’ this and ‘righting your wrongs’ that, and ‘you should be spending more time working that out’ instead of ‘dicking around’. And only then would he let me pass on to the next life.

Years passed and I simply couldn’t be bothered to work it out. It’s been like the worst escape room ever: confusing, lonely, and unending. He promised that – depending on how successful my punishment is – passing on to the next life will be better than the limbo we’ve been living in, but how in sweet hell does he know that, since he’s only ever been to the gates and never inside?

And what’s limbo life without a little bit of rebellion? So instead of getting on with the deeply tedious business of righting my wrongs, I’ve spent the last ten years winding Gabe up as much as possible, which, unsurprisingly, has been way more fun.

‘What if my life’s mission is to watch every film ever made?’ I teased him one afternoon, and that turned out not to be such a bad idea. I blitzed through IMDB’s top 250 films in just two months ... but that started to become boring, so I changed tactics.

Maybe my mission was to haunt and prank ghost hunters. I’d start small, just trying to appear in their peripheral vision when they had stopped recording. I spent a whole month haunting this particularly posh podcast duo (they had matching fleeces embroidered with their logo, *Ghoul Talk*, and everything – took themselves way too seriously). I’d wait until the woman was alone and then try to appear right in her eyeline ... Ta-dah. She never saw a thing. But once, I knocked a lamp by accident and she screamed so hard, she dropped her camera down the stairs. Three years of haunting yet a lamp did more damage than I ever could.

Gabe would always have me meet him at his favourite pub, The Bell & Hound. The kind of place that puts tinsel up in November and you can still spot remnants of Sellotape stuck to the ceiling come July. I’d fill him in on my antics, but he was never impressed and, with a potty mouth just as bad as mine, he’d grumble, “Stop fucking around!” He didn’t even look up from his needlepoint.

‘Well, just tell me what the hell to do, then,’ I’d reply.

‘Is it really so hard,’ he’d say, pulling his thread through, ‘to think about what you did wrong in life, Jake? And don’t use hell’s name in vain.’

I’d retort with something clever. He’d ignore it. And repeat.

So, I changed tactics again. What if my mission was to tap the shoulder of the world's top ten most beautiful women? Number one on my list was, obviously, Zendaya, who walked right through me in Harrods. Not past me, but literally ... through me. Like I was a draught from a shitty air-con unit. She got goosebumps and everything. Small win for this sexy ghost. Saying that, I've never felt as invisible as I was then, standing next to one of the most beautiful women in the world and barely registering as a breeze.

I went back to Gabe's attic after that and didn't leave for a month, until I decided it was time to try Margot Robbie, at which point Gabe flipped out at me. 'How about you focus on the one woman you actually fucked up?'

I spent a while trying to figure it out, I did. Did I bully someone at school? I didn't think so. I once overcharged a bloke for his MOT because he called me a muppet in front of the garage, but my spidey senses told me that wouldn't warrant eternal damnation. There was also the time I stole a tenner from Mum's purse when I was fifteen and also that time I copied someone's homework instead of actually reading *Of Mice and Men*, but none of it seemed soul-destroyingly bad. And I was always the perfect boyfriend so ... I went back to watching movies.

After nine years back and forth like this, Gabriel sat me down and stopped being cryptic.

'It's eternal damnation,' he said.

I told him that it would be way creepier if we were sitting in a dark attic filled with candles and cobwebs rather than bold woven carpets and faux-fur throws.

He told me that there are multiple afterlives. Not one. Several. He takes souls, like mine, to their gates by boat. Literally rows them up to the doors and lets them make their case for which afterlife they best deserve. Most people, he said, are decent enough that it's not much of a contest. But for people who've done something genuinely bad, he had another option. He could destroy their soul instead.

No doors, no boat, no case. Just nothing, for eternity.

Finally, an explanation. Delivered with the energy of someone reading a bus timetable.

I asked him how the fuck a guy his size managed to row a boat without sinking it. He didn't laugh.

Then he told me what my punishment was. The one I'd been supposed to be working on this whole time. He said that I'd taken *something* from

someone in my life – something that I had no right to take – and before I could pass through any river or door, I had to put it right. A trip down memory lane, he called it. Something about revisiting what came after me.

Just as woo-woo as the sage incense my mum occasionally burned or the tarot cards Belle and her aunt used to love, right?

He said I'd know the right person when I found them, because they'd be the only one who could see me. That I'd be able to touch them – like actually touch, not just float through – and that when I took their hands and got them to think of a relevant time and place, we'd go to that memory together. If it was irrelevant, nothing would happen.

I asked how I was supposed to know what was relevant. He looked at me like I was a drunk who'd walked into a glass door, twice.

He said there was a deadline: midnight on 12 December 2026.

'Well, you could have said all this nine years ago, mate,' I retorted, rolling my eyes.

'I left you clues everywhere, you daft sod. What was the only film on at every cinema in London the first time you wanted to sack it off and watch films?'

'Oh. I did think it was odd that there was a *Beauty and the Beast* marathon on everywhere ...'

'And those pub quizzes—'

'Always a Disney princess round, and the answer was always Belle!' I started to think I'd been an idiot.

'And everything else you saw and missed,' Gabe said, while peeling off Post-its emblazoned with 'VISIT HER' from his walls. I thought he was putting off seeing his mum or something.

So, it was Belle. Of course it was Belle.

Gabe went back to his needlepoint and gave me a year. I spent eleven of those months watching 300 more movies and then decided I should probably give it at least a try before being damned for eternity.

So, I've spent the past month standing outside Belle's house in Hackney. Not stalking, I'm not a creep – just researching. Gabe said I need to put right what I did wrong and the first step is obviously research to ... you know, make sure she's still alive ... and hasn't become a serial killer or something.

I saw she looked good, happy even. One afternoon I followed her and some swanky bloke to an overpriced French bistro down Bermondsey

Street. The woman I watched walk into that bistro wasn't Belle. Not the same Belle I fell in love with. The Belle I knew wore Crocs with socks without a care of what others thought, and nicked cigs from her dad's secret stash in his glovebox. The woman in front of me had a handbag she was so precious about that she carefully placed it on its *own* chair rather than on the floor.

I left before the starters arrived.

I walked towards London Bridge, through Borough Market, around the overpriced cheese vendors, under the hanging Christmas wreaths and past the guy selling tins of fancy fish in boxes that looked more like collectable cards than sardines. And then I was outside the greengrocer's – her greengrocer's, where I'd spotted her in the week – and I stopped like an idiot.

She'd been browsing artichokes. She used to hate artichokes. How do you even cook an artichoke? She'd put them, two of them, in a reusable tote – a fancy one, with a designer's name on that probably cost a tenner, alongside other fruit and veg: a plump red pomegranate, a yellow courgette, those cartoon-looking carrots with their tops still on. This girl, whose favourite dish used to be hedgehog mash – literally, a mountain of mashed potato with little cocktail sausages stuck in like spikes – now shopped for her five a day in a market instead of Asda, in a trench coat and cashmere scarf, all big smiles and red hair, humming along to Christmas carols ... in high heels. Could she now walk in those, then?

I didn't even know you could buy yellow courgettes. What's wrong with a green one?

I'd followed her back to her house – three stories, attic conversion, kitchen island, a hot tap instead of a kettle – and I left once I started feeling like an estate agent rather than a ghost.

That was twenty-five days ago and so now here I am, with approximately eight hours left to figure it all out, in Whitby, so close to the seaside arcade games I can't even play, ready to watch my ex get married to some random posh bloke who, according to a framed article on their kitchen wall, is an ambassador for caviar.

Twenty-five days of wondering when and how Belle became a literal alien.

And then she looked right at me.

Which means Gabe was right ... not that I'm going to tell him that.

*

‘ANSWER ME, YOU SHIT, WHY ARE YOU HERE?!’ Belle continues to scream.

This should be easy, I thought – turn up, make awkward small talk, do the memory lane stuff, and then fuck off to the afterlife – but now she’s raging at me and we’ve barely said hello. I dodge her again, hands in my pockets. I’ve been trying not to let her bother me, but she’s testing my patience.

‘You need to confront your past, Belle ...’ I say this in the sing-song way I know she hates.

I had planned to be honest with her, but I’m not sure she deserves the truth now. Does she really think that I want to be here? That I’m *excited* to watch my ex get married to some posh bloke called Timothy in this stuffy manor? She used to be so effortless, so chaotically herself, that being around her felt like a relief. Now it seems she’s had a complete personality transplant.

‘What are you talking about?’ Belle growls.

I pause, thinking, stuffing my hands deeper into my pockets. ‘I’ve been sent here by someone powerful ... to help you put something right, to save your soul ... but if you don’t want my help ...’ I say, shrugging, and take a step towards the door.

‘Wait, wait, what?’ Belle rushes after me, pure panic on her face.

There she is.

I knew she’d bite. Gabriel didn’t say that I need to share *exactly* why I’m here.

‘I’m here to take you on a trip down memory lane. It’s for your own good, Belle.’

CHAPTER THREE

Belle

I don't have time for this. I really need the ghost of my ex to *not* be here right now. How is it that he always riles me up like this? It's been ten years and we've somehow fallen back into the exact same patterns as when he was alive. Why do I turn into my worst self around him? Ten years of therapy and I'm back to being twenty-five-year-old Belle in under five minutes. I really thought I was better than this – I haven't cried like this in a month, since my last scheduled cry-session.

I turn away from him and face the mirror instead. I'm an absolute state. The woman who stood there just ten minutes ago is long gone. In her place: a mess. My hair is now knotty, my mascara smudged and, somehow, the button of my blazer has pinged off. *Deep breaths. Compose yourself. Think.* What would Beyoncé do? First things first, she would absolutely not let an ex get under her skin like this, especially when she's worked so hard to build her dream life.

I turn back to face him. Thankfully, he's found the decency to look sheepish. I'm composed. And I'm going to stand up for myself.

I clear my throat. 'If you hadn't noticed, it's my wedding tomorrow, so I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I don't have time for a trip down memory lane.' I smooth my hair down and look around for my brush. 'I have a hundred guests downstairs for our rehearsal, and press photography in fifteen minutes. So if it works for you, shall we reschedule to ... Hmm, let's see ... the twelfth of never?'

With that, I spot my brush on the dressing table, and as I walk over, I notice the smashed vase on the floor behind Jake. I sigh, shame washing over me, but I can't stress out about this too – one thing at a time.

I half-expect him to be gone when I turn back around, but he's still there, leaning against the far wall, with his arms crossed.

'I wouldn't ignore this, if I were you. Not unless eternal soul damnation is on your wedding itinerary.'

Something cold runs through me. ‘That’s really not something funny to joke about.’

I don’t believe in the devil or heaven and hell, but I *have* spent the last six months attending Sunday services at church and midweek Bible study in preparation for this wedding. Timothy was raised Catholic, and I respect his and his family’s beliefs, so I had to do that to be allowed to marry in a chapel. Still, I’ve often felt like a polite observer in the pews. I stand when I’m supposed to stand, kneel when I’m supposed to kneel and try to find comfort in the teachings.

Death comes up more than I expected. Not in a dramatic way – it’s as if everyone understands how to accept the inevitability of it. And if wedding vows are to be believed, I am committed to taking the oath to be married to Timothy till death do us part. But what’s after that? Heaven or hell? And how is Jake here?

My first encounter with death was my pet hamster, Barty. I was six when old age finally took him, and it devastated me. Is it very sad to admit that might be one of my earliest memories? I couldn’t get my head around the fact that he was there one day and gone the next ... that I wouldn’t be able to share a carrot with him anymore, watch his little paws working to stuff the orange sticks in his cheeks until his face was all pointy and hard.

Then my grandad, who died when I was twelve. That hit me hard. It was the first time I’d seen my dad cry, whimpering into a sleeve, through a crack in the bathroom door – a sight I’ve never been able to forget. And when Jake died ... everything went quiet for a long time. I stopped expecting things to make sense. It took a lot to get over that.

I love my life. I’m not ready to leave it. Death has always felt so final, so if there’s even a chance of heaven, I’m willing to try and secure my spot. Except ... Jake was twenty-five and solid and impossibly alive right up until he wasn’t – and now somehow he’s here, seemingly solid and familiar and very much alive.

‘What do you mean, *eternal soul damnation*? How come you’ve showed up, then?’ If he’s here, then death isn’t the end. It’s the most comforting thing anyone has ever told me, so I have no idea why, instead of relief, all I feel is the ground falling out from under me.

‘I’m in the afterlife – good news. Bad news: unless you follow me, your soul gets damned for all eternity. Ceases to exist entirely. So either do as I say or no afterlife for you. Your call, princess.’

How could this be happening? It's my wedding weekend! But I don't want to just stop living when I die if everyone else is going to get another existence. How did Jake manage to wangle his way into the afterlife, but *my* eligibility is being called into question? I say as much aloud. Jake shrugs, rambles something about being 'perfectly suited' to the job – his charm, how well he knows me – but it doesn't answer the question and I don't think he means it to.

'Okay but follow you where? How long will this take? I have ten minutes before I need to attend my party and I still need to clean up my mascara.'

I look down to check the time on my phone, which I've thrown on the sofa, and spot three text notifications from Timothy. If he sees me like this, he'll see the old Belle – the one who can't keep it together, who sees ghosts due to stress and who is a *really* ugly crier.

'I'm not sure.' Jake shrugs, avoiding an answer ... like always.

Why is he putting so much pressure on me if he doesn't even know how long it takes?

'Have you even done this before?' I feel my top lip curling.

'Of course I have,' he says nonchalantly, not meeting my gaze.

'Okay ... You said memory lane. Memory lane of what?' I ask.

'Well ...' Jake shuffles. 'Really, it's ...' He goes quiet, then opens his mouth again. 'Your journey. The ...' He stops and looks at me, jaw clenching. 'Your relationships. We go back through those.'

'What? Why?' I ask.

He bites his lip and I can't look away. *Focus, Belle.*

'Because that's what I'm telling you.'

'And this saves my soul because—?'

'Because that's how it works, Belle. And you have to do it, like, today. Anyway, I heard you're busy tomorrow.'

'I am very busy tomorrow. And I'm busy today, for God's sake!'

'Hey, do you want to go to heaven?' he says.

I do.

A journey of my relationships ... What, all of them? We might be here a while.

'Is time the same for you in your ... realm?' I ask, as I begin to count my exes on my fingers.

Jake frowns and rubs his brow, before replying, 'I guess it feels kinda slow?' He seems unsure. 'Like walking through treacle, everything is just a

bit more ... meh.'

Right now, Timothy should be downstairs with the photographers, having some portraits taken, and I'm supposed to be by his side in eight minutes. My palms are sweaty.

'Let's do a test. A quick one first, just to see if your time and my time pass at the same rate.'

'Yeah, I don't care. Whatever you want – you just need to get it done. And ... I think you're going to need to hold my hands.' He scratches the back of his neck. My skin crawls. Hold his hands? The ones that are meant to be skeletal and buried six feet deep in St Mary's churchyard?

Do we really need to hold hands? Like schoolkids? I expected something weirder, a séance circle, or a Ouija board.

He interrupts my thought process. 'Once we're hand in hand, you have to think of wherever it is you want to go to demonstrate your journey. In love. And then we'll go there.'

Why is he being so vague? Why is my eternal soul in the hands of a guy who doesn't sound sure of himself at all? And my journey in love? Really, does it have to be now? I've got a seven-course tasting menu downstairs in an hour and he wants me to ... mentally scrapbook my love CV? Then again, a ghost has showed up. On my wedding eve. That's not nothing.

'Really?' I stammer.

'Like you said, let's start somewhere short and come back quickly. A test run. Then you can see how much time has passed and we can figure out whether your soul is actually salvageable.'

I glance at my phone screen again – it's 3.55 p.m. now. I've had this day planned down to the minute for a year – colour-coded, cross-referenced, backed up in multiple places. There was no column in my spreadsheet for 'catch up with dead ex'.

'Jake, if I miss just a second of my wedding—'

'Belle, just think of a short one!'

'FINE!' It comes out louder than I meant it to, and he's not even hiding his smirk – we secretly both know I've already lost. I'm still losing arguments against Jake Marleigh and he's been dead for a decade. Honestly, it's just embarrassing.

The room suddenly feels huge, as I take the five steps over to him, counting them down in my head. He holds out his hands to me and I reluctantly reach out to touch them. Instead of cold, bone, and decay, I feel

their warmth. They are solid and calloused in the same places they always were. Bigger than I remember, and so familiar and somehow ... Somehow, they feel like home.

I shut my eyes, my palms in his, and we wait.

Nothing happens.

I crack an eye open.

‘Well, why aren’t we going anywhere?’

Jake frowns. ‘What did you think of?’

‘The Tesco on Bethnal Green Road.’

A pause. His hands still in mine, his grip steady and sure.

‘Why did you think of that?’

‘I don’t know, it just came to me. I fancied the cashier there once.’

‘And?’

‘And nothing. He scanned my Dairy Lea Dunkers and I never saw him again.’

‘That’s not a relationship, Belle.’

‘It could have been.’

‘Try again.’

Okay. Something more significant than a brief infatuation, but short enough that we can get back here quickly.

I shut my eyes again and think back to the evening of my first kiss.

Peter Cox

Greasy fingers mark the bottle. Nervous giggles fill the room. Belle sits cross-legged in her cousin's basement, silently begging and begging the bottle to land on Matty. Matty, with the bruised knees, bitten fingernails, and messy, scruffy brown hair that is swept half over his eyes. The plaster cast is gone from his arm – skateboarding accident, two months ago – and somehow the fact he broke a bone is sexy to fourteen-year-old Belle, whose eyes linger slightly longer than necessary on the faint white scar. She first met Matty at her cousin Harry's birthday party last year and has been dreaming of her first kiss with him ever since.

Now is her chance. She just needs fate to be on her side.

In her dreams it was to be perfect – stars exploding, time slowing, body melting. She didn't picture it happening in a room full of her cousin's mates. She notices she's shivering, not with cold but with nerves, adrenaline, and apprehension. She scolds herself, tells herself to pull it together, act cool, and prays once again that it's Matty.

The bottle comes to a stop, still rattling, pointing at ... Peter? Suddenly, the smell of sour cream and onion Pringles, salsa, and oven pizza becomes nauseating to Belle, but everyone is staring at her now, whooping and hollering.

She looks at Peter. His mousy hair is parted in the middle, his brownish eyes sit slightly far apart, and his skin is dusted with pimples. Unremarkable, but fine. She studies the mouth of her soon-to-be first kiss – thin but a nice blushing pink and Belle silently thanks God that the spots don't verge anywhere near it. Right on cue, Peter pulls out a tub of lip balm, dips his stubby finger into the pot and smears it over his lips.

Is it safe to kiss someone who's just applied a thick layer of Carmex? Belle wonders and then panics that maybe she should have done the same. Her arms are crossed, hands pinching the skin of her inner elbows, as she begins panicking that her breath smells.

The jeering is getting louder and everyone watching starts counting down.

'Ten ... nine ... eight ...'

Peter crawls past the bottle and over to Belle.

‘Seven ... six ... five ...’

Belle fumbles forward, closing her eyes, half-grimace and half-kringe.

‘Four ... three ...’

She opens one eye slightly and spots Matty behind Peter. He doesn’t look at all disappointed that he’s not the one getting this chance with her and she wonders what that twinge of pain in her chest is.

‘Two ... one ...’

And in that second the NOW Hits CD skips to the next track. It’s Black Eyed Peas’ ‘My Humps’. It’s too late for Belle to pull out now – everyone would think she’s frigid. She pouts and feels Peter’s warmth as their faces collide. Their lips touch just as will.i.am asks Fergie what she’s gonna do with all that junk.

Belle is mortified. She keeps her lips shut, but feels resistance as a wet, sloppy tongue tries to enter her mouth, like a slug squeezing its way between a door and its frame. She opens her mouth a little, hands still at her sides, fingers digging into the carpet. It’s over in a second, although it feels like an eternity. *Kissing has got to be better than that*, Belle thinks as she nervously laughs, scanning the room, and folds in on herself just as the person to her left reaches for the bottle.

CHAPTER FOUR

Jake

One second we're in Belle's hotel suite, the next ... marigold walls. A living room, aggressively warm. Belle lands beside me, exactly as she was a moment ago. So that's how this works, then.

Every part of the room is covered – the walls dense with family photos in mismatched frames, floor-to-ceiling bookshelves absolutely loaded with everything from Dostoyevsky to David Jason's biography. Wooden sideboards are home to incense holders and stuffed animals. A glass dome containing a small bird perched on twigs sits on a shelf next to a rat wearing a top hat.

'Wait, is this your aunt Susan's house?' I laugh. It has Susan written all over it. She was the wild child of her mum's siblings, with a hankering for hoarding and taxidermy.

I look down at Belle and realise we're still holding hands. Belle clocks it at the same moment I do and she pulls away sharply, wiping her palms on her dress. She avoids my eye and she's not looking at the room either. Her eyes sweep past the clutter and land straight on the mantelpiece. She's looking for a clock. There isn't one. Her wrist flips over, checking for a watch she's not wearing, and her fingers pat down her hips for a phone that isn't there.

She's flushing as she whispers, 'Shh, she might hear us!'

'Belle, I promise you she won't hear us. I'm a ghost, remember?' I say with cocky assurance, despite being totally unsure. Pans clatter from what I presume is the kitchen, and laughter floats up the hallway. Belle turns to a bookshelf and picks up a blue-and-white china teacup, home to two taxidermied mice.

'She taxidermied these two herself, you know.' Belle laughs fondly. I lean in, my face grimacing – it looks like the nose of one of the mice has been pushed in too far, and the other one looks scrawny, with wire poking out from its feet.

‘Hope she didn’t quit her day job,’ I remark.

My eyes flick to a photo on the wall of Belle as a baby. She’s lying on a red floral pillow, on her front, smiling into the camera, dribble leaking from the corner of her mouth, while her cousin Harry sits upright beside her, dummy in his mouth, clutching a baby blanket.

‘You look exactly the same.’ I nudge and wink at Belle, who scowls.

‘Let’s get this over with,’ she says, grabbing hold of my elbow and dragging me towards the door.

Out in the hallway, we stop with a jolt, almost colliding with Aunt Susan herself. I feel Belle’s grip tighten on my arm and she pulls back, but Aunt Susan has no reaction. She looks like the sort who’d be thrilled a ghost had come to visit – immediately usher you in, sit you down for a cuppa, dig out the Ouija board from the back of a cupboard. She’s certainly dressed for a séance – layered up like she’s expecting a chill from the other side: a floaty purple paisley blouse studded with brooches, over a long-sleeved peacock-print top, a long swishy brown skirt and a bright yellow scarf wrapped in her updo, accentuating her huge, oversized earrings. I hesitantly reach out and tap her shoulder. Nothing. She stands transfixed, peering through the open basement door under the stairs.

‘Oh my God, she was spying on us!’ Belle squeals, cheeks flushing. ‘I *wondered* why she made us keep this door open, but I thought it was because of a possible fire emergency!’ I smirk as Belle stands there, aghast. It’s my turn to lead her now, so we squeeze past Susan and follow the sound of laughter leading down to the basement.

As we walk down the stairs, I halt. Two teens are snogging at the bottom while a group of rowdy youths cheer them on. They pull back and I realise one of them is Belle. She looks flustered, her face flicking from ‘I’m having the time of my life’ to ‘I’m SO bored’ to ‘I hate you all’, in the space of a second – like she’s concentrating too hard on her appearance and can’t settle on which persona to wear.

I continue down the stairs and look over to Belle. ‘Look how young you are here! How old were you?’ I nudge her, teasing.

But she’s not with me – she’s looking back up the staircase, one hand gripping the banister like she’s about to bolt.

‘How long is this gonna take?’ she asks quietly.

Just then the lad she was kissing turns to sip his drink and ... ‘Wait, were you in love with Peter Cox?’ I stop.

Belle rolls her eyes. 'I was fourteen, thank you – and no, I was not in love with Peter. I wanted to snog Matty.'

I look over to Matty, with his silly fringe, so long I can hardly understand how he could see from behind it. Why do all teen girls love an emo skater boy?

I narrow my eyes. 'Why are we here, then? This is supposed to be about something important.'

'Because we said we'd try a quick one! Anyway, it didn't mean much,' she replies nonchalantly, twiddling with her earring.

'No, Belle, this is serious. You're the one worried about timekeeping but you're missing the point.' I face her now, throwing my hands in the air. 'This memory has to mean something or it wouldn't have worked, so what is it? What am I— are you supposed to be learning from this?'

We both turn as sharp howls rupture from the centre of the room. Two teens are making out so hard that they've spilled the Pringles tube and one has salsa on their knee. Harry is frantically trying to pick up crumbs from the carpet. Teen Belle helps him by sweeping them into her hands. She looks around, unsure of what to do with them, and sits, holding broken crisps in her sweaty palms.

I sigh. 'I don't want to watch a bunch of fourteen-year-olds snog if it doesn't even matter.'

We both watch as young Belle fidgets with the black choker on her neck, twisting it so much while staring at Matty that it's leaving a red mark. The adult Belle next to me winces with embarrassment.

'Stop looking at me like that,' she mutters.

I shake my head. 'Did something happen with Peter or not?'

She shuffles her feet on the dingy basement carpet, frowning and avoiding catching my eye. 'No, it's not like that.'

'Who was your first love, then?' I want to know what I'm going to witness as the night goes on. What the point of any of this is. And, honestly, I didn't think she'd be so embarrassed, considering I used to know every part of her.

'You're right, this is a waste of time. Can we just go back?' I notice she wraps her arms around herself, but she can't get away this easily. Surely, the hard bits are still to come – this should be the easy bit.

I cut in, almost pleading now. 'I mean, who was your first actual relationship?'

‘I have a wedding to get back to, Jake.’

There it is again. The way she says my name, like I’m a misbehaving dog. Like she’s the adult here and I’m just wasting her precious time. I step towards her now, jabbing a finger in her direction. ‘Right, and *I* think your first love would be a decent place to start.’

‘Jake, just take me back,’ she whines.

Why is she being so shitty? We used to be able to talk about everything and now she’s acting super shifty. Is there something I’m missing? I look back at young Belle, who has moved now, perched on the side of a ratty sofa, swigging Fanta from a chipped teacup, shoulders hunched like she’s trying to disappear into herself. She still keeps glancing over to Matty, who’s now trying to balance a can of Strongbow on his forehead. His tragic fringe keeps getting in the way.

‘Oh my God!’ I’m grinning now – I know I am, because Belle’s face is doing that thing where she shuts down when she knows I’ve got her. ‘You *were* in love with Matty!’ I bark out a laugh, a sound I haven’t heard in years.

Belle physically steps back. ‘I wasn’t!’ Her tone is climbing, like a hungry bird, the more we argue.

I don’t believe her at all. ‘Then why are you being so weird?’ I say, stepping forward and grabbing her arm.

She shakes my hand off and looks up at me. ‘Because my first love was *you*! Okay?!’

The voices drop away. The CD player clicks to silence. The only sound left is Belle’s flustered breathing. I watch as Harry walks over to put in another disc.

I’m her first love? That can’t be right.

I shake my head, confused. ‘But what about that guy from uni? What was his name ... Xavier?’

Belle’s face turns beetroot red. ‘Ugh! I made him up, okay! I made him up so *you* wouldn’t think I was a total love virgin! I was embarrassed.’ She throws her hands up and starts backing towards the stairs. ‘Now can we please go back to my wedding? I’m going to lose it if I have to listen to another second of smooching and shitty pop.’

I stand, genuinely stunned, for about five seconds. Then it hits me and I can’t help it. I start laughing. Properly laughing, belly deep, shoulder-shaking laughter. ‘Oh, that makes SO much sense!’

‘Jake.’ She balls her hands into fists at her side, jaw tight. ‘I am warning you.’

‘No, genuinely, I always thought it was so weird how much you clammed up when I asked about him.’ I feel my cheeks aching; I haven’t smiled this much in a decade. ‘What was that story again? Met in an art gallery, broke up because he was too emotionally unavailable?’

‘Shut up.’

Belle is practically vibrating with rage, which is only making this funnier.

‘Didn’t you give him a tragic backstory too? Lost all his poetry in a house fire? Had to live on the streets until his parents came to the rescue?’

‘I hate you.’

‘Oh, it’s coming back to me ... You even gave him a Facebook page, didn’t you?’ I can picture it now: Belle, aged twenty-one, hunched over her laptop at the kitchen table in her parents B&B, Photoshopping some random fit bloke’s profile picture to make it look like he’s in an art gallery. ‘How many mutual friends did you get in the end? Wait, didn’t you make him grow up in France, too, so no one could verify him?’

I’m still grinning but it’s slipping. The Tesco bloke didn’t work, but this – a basement full of sweaty teens and a first kiss – this worked. So it’s not just random memories, it’s ones that mattered. The ones where she actually felt something?

And Xavier wasn’t real, but I was. Shit. So is that what comes next?

‘JAKE!’ She lunges forward and grabs my hands, yanking hard enough that I stumble into her. Her eyes are squeezed shut, jaw clenched. The basement vanishes.

CHAPTER FIVE

Belle

I open my eyes and we're back in my hotel suite. Although I felt his hands in mine a second ago, the ghost isn't here anymore. Thank fuck for that. I frantically check the clock in the room and it's still 3.55 p.m. I stare at the clock face for a second longer than necessary, just to be sure. We were there, what ... fifteen, maybe twenty minutes? Long enough for me to have watched my fourteen-year-old self kiss a boy who used lip balm, and the clock sits unchanged. Time hasn't moved on at all.

Phew.

Outside, in the distance, Whitby is starting to glow. The harbour lights are flickering on and someone's strung Christmas lights along the pier. White, tasteful ones – the type I'd have chosen myself. Then I remember the fact I'm being haunted by my ex.

I do the maths quickly. Not every relationship, then, just the ones that count. And if time doesn't change here while I'm gone, I can do this. I can save my soul and still make the seating plan work. I've always been a brilliant multitasker.

I stand for a moment, both hands on the dressing table, to catch my breath. *Right, think*. If this is a test, and it feels like a test, then there's a right answer. There's a lesson in this. Something I have to take away from each one. If my soul is on the line, I need to treat it seriously and show whoever's watching that I'm actually learning something. And I do hope I'm not just stumbling through my worst memories for fun.

I hunt in the drawers for some paper and a pencil, and locate them – hotel branded, marigold stationery. I love lists. I have a list for practically everything: Christmas gifts I've bought people, dream clients to pitch to at work ... even a list of dates I've been on and their score out of five. But this is one I never thought I'd write. Hell, if it helps save my soul from damnation, I'm willing.

Things I have learned from my exes (working title, for reference only):

1. First kisses are not the point.
2. Expectation does not equal outcome.
3. Praying and wishing for someone to be Matty does not make them Matty.

I fold the paper into a tiny square and sneakily stuff it into my bra. Luckily, the pencil is small enough – and my bra big enough – to be stuffed inside too.

I straighten, blow my hair from my face and turn to the mirror.

He's behind me, leaning against one of the four posts of the bed, with an eyebrow raised. The smirk on his face tells me he's absolutely delighted with himself.

I press my hand to my chest, involuntarily. 'You didn't get left behind, then.'

'Apparently not.'

I turn back and resume getting ready. There's a twisted part of me, one I'm not proud to admit, that is glad he didn't disappear. How often do you get to time-travel through your past? Seeing my younger self was like finding an old diary I'd forgotten I'd kept. I wanted to look away, but also couldn't stop watching – the awkward gawking, the emo phase, every excruciating detail of which is now completely intact in my memory, thankyouverymuch. Turns out you can absolutely get the ick for yourself.

Though it's more complicated than that. Because alongside the cringe, there was something else – the urge to take her by the shoulders, not to shake her, but to tell her she's going to be okay, that she doesn't need to try quite so hard.

'What's the deadline?' I ask.

'Midnight ... tonight,' he replies confidently.

What?! I spin around. 'You're fucking with me.'

'Sorry, sweetheart, I don't make the rules.'

I feel my body erupting again and have to resist the urge to grab the nearest pillow and scream into it. Why can't anything ever go to plan? Can I not just *enjoy* the day I spent months organising? The amount of money we've spent on this, and I can't just let my hair down? I think of the wedding party tomorrow, the evening dress I have perfectly curated: long enough to be demure but loose enough to really let go on the dance floor.

Maybe if we can just get this over and done with now, then I can still have my dream wedding tomorrow. The clock reads 3.57 p.m. – three

minutes until I need to go down for the first look. I just need to see Timothy. A real, living, breathing man who will not appear uninvited in mirrors or ask about my exes. The one with an actual pulse. Then I can get back to this time-travel nonsense before midnight and my perfect day can resume ... with no ghosts in sight.

I face him sternly. 'Okay, here's the plan. I have to go now for the photoshoot, then we'll go down memory lane again, and I'll do whatever I have to do to save my soul from ... What was it?'

'Eternal damnation.'

'Right, eternal damnation. Then I'm going to my rehearsal dinner, and we can do some more. But we must get this wrapped up today so I can still walk down the aisle with the love of my life tomorrow. Got it?'

'Sure thing, boss,' Jake replies softly.

'Great. Now fuck off so I can finish getting myself ready.' I grab a wet wipe and very gently remove the smudged mascara under my eyes, and quickly open the tube to reapply. Thank God I'm so used to putting on makeup on the London Underground – doing this with shaky hands has become second nature. Then I grab my lipstick, dot a little onto my lips and cheeks, and watch his reflection in the mirror. It doesn't move. I widen my eyes at him, tilt my head pointedly towards the door as I blot.

'Can I join?' he says, straightening up.

'Me getting ready? Absolutely not, what is wrong with you.'

'No – the party.'

I turn to look at him properly. He's not joking. He's puffing his chest out and swaggering towards me. He's deadly serious.

'It might be nice to see some familiar friendly faces. Truthfully, I miss weird Aunt Susan. Will she still be layered to the high heavens? Plus, I'm already on the list ... People are expecting me.'

I brandish my lip gloss at him like a knife. It's the closest thing to a weapon I have and we both know it. 'Stay away from my wedding, Jake. I mean it. Promise me you'll stay here, and I'll come back as soon as I can so we can hold hands, pretend we're friends, and do the eternal damnation avoidance thing together.' He shrugs. 'Jake, promise me!'

'All right, all right ... keep your hair on.' He waves his hands and walks indifferently over to the sofa, picking up the TV remote. 'Do they have Sky Cinema here?'

‘Figure it out yourself, arsehole!’ I shout, slamming the door behind me on my way out.

Timothy’s arms are around my waist and his chin is resting on my shoulder, and the photographer is saying something I can’t hear because I’m too busy noticing how warm he is. How solid. How uncomplicated and present. Despite that, I’m shivering. Adrenaline? Or because it’s December in an old and proven-to-be-haunted manor house, and I couldn’t fix my blazer button in time so it had to go. The blinding flashes come to a stop, and Timothy, being the gentleman that he always is, shrugs off his jacket and places it around my shoulders.

The first thing that attracted me to him was his smile. Specifically, his deep dimples and the way that when you make him grin, time seems to slow; also, how that mole on his cheek lifts with his lips. Then his eyes: chocolate brown and kind. And yes, I might have a type, because Timothy is tall. Not Jake tall, but broad and solid and, crucially, not dead. A jaw covered in the perfect amount of stubble, the slightest suggestion of a moustache above his lip - the kind of face that turns heads when he enters a room. He’s also extraordinarily successful. Gets a lot of attention. I’ve decided to be gracious about that rather than smug, which has been an ongoing effort.

I look up at him as he sweeps a hair from my face and kisses my forehead, his hand still cradling my chin. I hear cameras clicking away again. Is it possible for a heart to beat so hard, it’s visible in a photograph?

Okay, everything is going to plan ... Apart from the fact my dead ex is in my bridal suite. I’m ignoring that for now and focusing on the night ahead. After our photos, we are making our big entrance into the saloon (think dark-wood panels, enormous fireplaces, gold chandeliers, a grand staircase, a Christmas tree in the corner – no tinsel in sight, thank God – and, most importantly, free-flowing booze) where all our guests are waiting.

Once everyone has a glass in hand, we’ll kick off with short speeches from the father of the groom and of course Jules, grandmother of the bride, before sitting down to a seven-course tasting menu, inspired by some of our favourite dishes from throughout our relationship ... a taster of things to come tomorrow.

The photographers reposition us in front of another fireplace. This one has a mantelpiece draped in ivy and holly, with a fat church candle at either

end. I'm handed a flute of Crémant from the Loire Valley – Timothy and I went on holiday there two years ago and I fell in love with this buttery fizz. So much so that although Timothy is a champagne snob of the highest degree, it was never really a question it would appear on tonight's menu. I take a sip, feel my shoulders drop for the first time in hours, and allow my body to melt into Timothy's behind me.

This is probably our last moment somewhat alone, before the big day tomorrow. I'm aware of it and want to soak it up. I've read enough about what brides say they regret – yes, I researched it, because of course I did – and it's always this: not stopping. Not taking ten minutes just to stand with the person you're marrying, among all the chaos. I'm determined not to be part of that statistic.

I feel Timothy straighten up as I take another sip.

'Darling, you and your surprises ... How did you magic up a floating bottle of fizz?' he whispers into my ear, amused, and I follow his gaze to just beyond the photographers, where Jake is helping himself to a glass without any urgency. 'Technology these days ...' He shrugs as I almost choke on my drink.

It's not technology. It's my dead ex-boyfriend. And I have approximately five seconds before the glass floats to and pours into an invisible mouth – and, oh God, the photographers. The photographers who have been pointing their cameras at everything in this room and have been for the last twenty minutes. Is it possible to photograph a ghost? Will there be orbs in my wedding photographs? Or some sort of blur, some unexplained flash of light, some smoky echo of Jake's face that will end up in every photo frame and slideshow for the rest of our lives and I'll have to explain to our children and to their children that no, I'm not haunted, it was just old and dusty in the manor and ... Oh, will they be able to tell looking back that *I'm* being haunted? Is being haunted visible? I've managed difficult press before, but I'm not sure even I could spin this. So I do the only thing I can think of – I grab Timothy's face and kiss him. A long, passionate kiss, tongues and all. I crack one eye open to make sure Jake has moved, but catch the photographers looking awkwardly into their cameras, twiddling their fingers instead ... Okay, good, they've stopped taking pictures but perhaps I'm going in a little too *Love Island* for a rehearsal dinner.

I pull away. Timothy is laughing and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, cheeks flushed.

‘Belle,’ he cringes, loosening the bow tie around his neck.

That’s when I spot Jake wandering over to Jules. My glass nearly slides from my grip. I lean into Timothy, tell him I need to reapply my lipstick – with a wink, for good measure – and then slip away across the room.

Jules is giggling. Actually giggling. Like a fourteen-year-old, hands hiding her mouth, eyes shut. Jake is typing on a random phone lying flat on the table next to Jules, looking stupidly pleased with himself. I watch as Jules swats the air, grinning, as a tinny robotic voice says, ‘*You look absolutely ravishing this evening, madam.*’

I grab Jake’s arm and yank him sideways. ‘What are you *doing*?’ I whisper through a tight-lipped smile, trying not to draw attention to myself.

‘Relax, it’s just Google Translate on some guy’s phone. His fault for leaving it on the front desk.’

‘Oh, stop it, Harold!’ Jules says, beaming at ... nothing.

‘Why! I gave you strict instructions to stay upstairs.’ I feel my nostrils flaring and make a conscious effort to keep my voice at a pitch that won’t alarm those nearby.

‘Bored.’ Jake shrugs.

‘You’re impossible,’ I say, dragging him by his T-shirt to the nearest bathroom, awkwardly smiling and waving to other guests as I run past. I push him into the powder room on the right and the smell of synthetic roses smacks me as we stumble in.

I can’t see anyone or hear anything in here, but better to be safe than sorry. I squat to peek under the bathroom stall doors. Jake preens in the mirror.

‘They can’t see me, remember?’

But there’s no lock on the main door and I’m not risking it, so I pull him into the nearest cubicle.

We’re standing chest to chest over a toilet. Jake kicks down the loo seat and holds out his hands.

‘Small.’

My hands hover over his. ‘What?’

‘The seating plan, out there.’ He tilts his head towards the door. ‘You didn’t tell me that was his surname. Timothy Small.’

I close my eyes. ‘Yes.’

‘You’re going to be Belle Small.’

‘Jake.’

‘Belle *Small*.’

‘Professionally, I’m keeping my name.’

‘That’s not the point.’

I open my eyes and look at him. His hands are still outstretched. The start of our relationship ... Of all the memories to revisit right now, stood over a toilet, about to become Belle Small.

I take his hands, close my eyes, again.

Think of falling in love for the first time.

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Jake Marleigh

Gravel crunches underfoot, birdsong fills the air and everything else is silent apart from their breathing. The woody and sweet aroma of lavender dances around them as they walk through the field, late summer's dusky sun beating on their backs. They're walking in step with one another, close enough that their arms occasionally brush, nervous glances stolen sideways. Belle tries to keep her face neutral but the flush is already creeping up her neck.

She hears him inhale beside her and feels herself wait. But he says nothing. She continues forward, counting the steps and the thuds in her chest. Jake brushes his hand through his hair, lost for words but racking his brain for something, anything, to say – he's anxious that the date is ending and neither of them is doing anything to stop it.

Belle stumbles over a rock and Jake grabs her waist, catching her mid-fall, and now as the heat between her legs grows, she allows herself to face him.

'This is ...' Belle starts.

'Yeah,' Jake replies, his free hand reaching up to move a strand of hair from her face. He doesn't pull back. He stays there, thumb resting under her jaw, and he looks at her the way people look at things they don't want to forget – slowly and like he has all the time in the world. Like he isn't going anywhere. She can feel her pulse where his thumb rests, how it throbs, how it's giving her away.

'Why do I feel so nervous around you?' she says, barely above a whisper. The eye contact is undoing something within her.

'I'm the awkward one, who keeps making stupid jokes to impress you,' he admits.

'I hadn't noticed they were stupid.' She grins.

Everything goes quiet. Even the birds seem to have muted their calls. Belle and Jake stand there, very close, neither of them moving. The lavender is warm around them, and she is acutely aware of every inch of the distance between them. How much of it remains and how little it would take ...

Jake breaks, his voice deeper than Belle has heard before, almost pained, whispering, 'I don't think I can keep pretending that I'm not—'

She doesn't let him finish; she can't contain herself anymore. She closes the space between them, wraps her hands around his neck and kisses him. The dampness between her legs grows. Their breathing gets increasingly heavier, and Belle pushes herself against him desperately. Jake senses the shift and pulls back.

'Do you?' he whispers.

'Yes,' she moans.

He takes her hand and leads her just off the path, through the rows of lavender to their side.

She watches as he removes the light shirt he has been wearing and places it on the ground, making a bed in a patch of lavender, surrounded by blooms but hardly hidden. He plants himself down, hungry eyes staring up, and says, 'Come here.'

Belle crawls on top of his lap and straddles him, kissing gently at first and then more hurriedly, hungrier. Her hips begin to move against his without her realising. She feels the swell of him through the layers between them – her skirt, his jeans – and she doesn't even care about acting desperate now; she can't contain herself as she rocks against him.

Jake slides his hands under the trim of her top and lifts it slowly, over her head, and in that moment she's the freest she's ever felt.

Jake kisses her chest, holding her breast in his palm, circling her nipple, which she feels harden under his touch. Without warning and with an arm still around her waist, Jake flips her around and places her on her back, her hair tangled in purple lavender. Her skirt has risen and Jake looms over her, planting kisses on her chest. 'You are so beautiful,' he whispers as she stares up at the sky, feeling exposed yet without a care, her fingers running through his hair.

Jake's kisses reach her stomach and his eyes find hers as his hands brush her inner thighs. She watches him, wide-eyed, has to hold back her moans as he cups her with his palm, feels the heat of his hand through the cotton of her knickers. He pulls the fabric aside. She hears his breath catch as he lowers his head and kisses her, slowly at first, then slips two fingers gently in – and her eyes roll back, mouth open, back arching as he works them deeper.

'I want you,' she whispers.

He doesn't surface. She feels the groan against her before she hears it, low and deep, between the licks and her stuttered moans. She reaches down, latches on to a crease of his top with her fingers and pulls. He emerges from between her legs, lips wet, eyes dark.

'I want you now,' she whimpers.

He moves over her. She watches him unbuckle his jeans, watches him emerge, and the sight of him – finally, all of him – makes her breath leave her entirely.

He lowers his body and enters her, slowly, and then ... Belle feels whole.

His elbows find the ground either side of her quivering body, his hands cradle her face and they look at each other, eyes hardly blinking. He moves deeper and she comes apart underneath him, her legs shaking, the lavender crushed beneath them, the scent of it enveloping them.

Belle thinks it's ironic that the most passionate sex of her life so far is happening surrounded by lavender, a scent set to soothe. She worries it'll evoke the feel of Jake deep within her, but that isn't a bad thing. It's something she'd like to be reminded of forever.

He collapses next to her, hair stuck to his forehead, and she curls towards him, skirt still lifted, her womanhood throbbing, still catching her breath.

'I love you,' she whispers as he pants beside her.

CHAPTER SIX

Jake

I know where we are before I even open my eyes.

Lavender. Fucking lavender. Not the old-lady soap kind or the stuff you'd find in the moth section at the back of a garden centre, but the real stuff – wild. Growing in the fields outside our town. The kind that used to stain my white shirts purple and that I'd pick out of my hair for days after. The kind that reminds me of her.

I can still feel the heat on the back of my neck, still sense the sun going down around us. I'm reminded of the feel of her bare skin under my fingers, how soft she was, how I kept finding excuses to touch her arm, her shoulder, the back of her hand. I wasn't subtle about it, but I was certain my hands hadn't truly *felt* before that evening.

Obviously, I'd had a lot of sex before Belle. Loads of it. I never kept count, exactly, but it was ... loads. I had a lot of fun, but when I met Belle, I realised what I'd been missing with all those bodies in the dark, and the awkward hellos come morning.

This felt different. This was the kind of sex where you're driven by pleasing the other person, needing to satisfy her more than you need the pleasure yourself. The kind where you'd want to stay the whole night, make sure she fell asleep okay, and be there when she woke up. I'd turned into the kind of guy who wanted to know what she was thinking; I'd walked home that particular evening, convinced I'd never need to sleep with anyone else ever again, ever. Embarrassing, really.

The lads took the piss out of me for weeks, but I didn't even care because ... Well, I didn't care. That's how far gone I was. I even googled 'men's aftershave with lavender in it' – which I'm still embarrassed to admit – purely because I didn't want to forget that evening, the feel of her, the taste of her ... I wanted to be reminded of her, always.

I squint my eyes open. Belle and I are back in the same field, with the same fading light, watching two kids entwined in front of us on a bed made

of lavender. And now I'm dead, and she's about to get hitched to another guy. This could not be more fucked up.

This flashback feels different to when we went back in time to Aunt Susan's, though. I scan the sky, the rolling hills of purple and ... Wait, purple? It's still tinged grey but ... it's there. Like someone's put the saturation up from zero to six. I should feel great, I should fist-pump the air, but I'm furious. Of course, my first hint of colour in ten years has to be right here, in this field, watching a younger and considerably more alive version of myself having the best sex of my life, like some sort of voyeur, which is not how I imagined getting my feelings back would go, if I'm honest.

This doesn't feel helpful; it feels like torture. I rub the back of my neck, trying to work out what I'm supposed to be taking from this. Some profound life lesson about love or loss or whatever Gabe's on about, but if anything, the only thing I've learned for certain is that Gabe is a dick. Because what is he actually doing? Giving me brief access to my senses from back then, so I fall back in love with a woman who is about to marry another guy? I can almost hear him enjoying this, from whatever smug corner of the in-between he's currently occupying, watching me stand in a purple field having feelings I haven't had in ten years about a woman I can't have. Really helpful, mate. Truly.

Belle takes a step away from me and, in doing so, slides on some gravel. I reach out to catch her elbow. She steadies herself, shakes off my pre-emptive grip and says nothing. Neither do I. In front of us, past me is oblivious to anything but her.

'I'm struggling to see why this is so important,' she says unmoved. There's no love in her voice, no wistfulness or longing. In fact, she says it as though in a meeting she feels could have been an email. Like she's politely questioning the agenda.

I've been dead for ten years. I haven't tasted food or felt sunlight for a decade, nor felt anything except greyness and the occasional spike of anger when Gabe infuriates me. But here I am, finally starting to feel something and she's ... bored. Fucking hell, Belle.

I look at her, really stare at the woman next to me, and it doesn't seem like she's putting on an act – she's her usual, bright self. But something in her eyes portrays a blankness. There's no softness in her face, no recognition of what we're watching. She's standing beside me, one hand on

her hip, the other holding up her white dress so it doesn't touch the gravel on the ground, and something in me cracks.

We could never be together now. Even if I were alive. Even if I hadn't died. We'd be strangers. I know nothing of this Belle. She's entirely unlike the one who'd ugly cry at Disney films with me, who'd laugh so hard she'd snort, and who'd make love in a lavender field – this Belle would be too worried about getting caught or messy. Too much has changed, or rather, *she* has changed too much.

But I haven't changed at all. I'm still twenty-five. My hair hasn't grown since the day I died – zero greys, same dark mess; my fingernails stopped growing when I did – still bitten down to nothing; and I haven't developed a single new smile line. The pecs remain, I can confirm, clenching them under my shirt now just to be sure. In fact, I've hardly done anything except watch a million films. But Belle – she's a champagne lady now, not the cider girl she once was. She's found her true love, her soulmate, and has planned a wedding with press photographers in attendance.

What happened over these years to harden this woman, with whom I had the most important, passionate relationship of my life?

Belle shifts her weight to the other hip and looks off, bored, into the distance. 'Is this really necessary?' she drawls.

I get it, she wants to get back.

'I don't really want to be here either ... but apparently you needed to see this.'

'Who even sent you?' Belle asks, still staring into the distance.

'The psychopomp.'

She looks at me now, frowning. 'What is that?' I can tell she doesn't believe me, thinks I'm making it up to annoy her.

'He's like a spirit guide. His name is Gabriel.' I sigh, rubbing the back of my neck again, because hearing myself say it aloud doesn't make it sound any less like something from a bad documentary. 'He delivers people between this world and the next via what he calls the "in-between".' I make air quotes with my hands and watch as her mouth twists up. 'I know. Trust me, I know. But here we both are.'

'So, does this mean that I'm going to die? Or am I going to be trapped in the in-between with *you* for eternity?'

One thing I'm learning about this new Belle is that she worries about logistics way too much. Only she would hear 'spirit guide' and immediately

want the terms and conditions.

‘No, it’s just for when you die – I’m the one on my way to the afterlife. But honestly, I don’t know why it has to happen *now* either.’ I watch her processing it, working through the logic. I need to move this on before she clocks it doesn’t add up. ‘Look, I’m just doing what I’ve been told to do and letting you know what will happen to you ... if you don’t go through with it.’

‘Okay,’ she says, nodding.

Phew.

‘I just wish the timing wasn’t so shit, you know?’

I turn away. ‘Yep.’

A laugh draws us back to the field and we watch our younger selves emerge from the crops. Belle pulls her knickers up as I – I mean, younger me – throws her strappy little top back at her.

‘Stop,’ Belle says besides me.

‘I’m not doing anything.’

‘You’re watching.’

‘So are you.’

‘Yeah, but you’re watching *her*.’

‘Okay, I’ll just watch myself, then.’ I roll my eyes and redirect my gaze, very pointedly, to young Jake as he does up his belt buckle.

The buckle catches the light as he threads it through the loops with ease. Tanned hands. A move done a thousand times before. I’m watching this younger version of me take for granted his body, his hands. That stupid grin, like he’s got all the time in the world. Four years left. This idiot doesn’t have a clue.

Young Belle stops and stares at him, unable to keep her eyes off his bare chest. He catches her looking and pretends to cover himself, telling her to stop perving. Belle giggles and stumbles forward as he joins her, smoothing her short floral skirt down around her thighs. I look away, focus on the nearby bees buzzing, and swallow.

Belle, next to me, sighs. ‘God, I was skinny.’ She says it like a complaint, her eyes fixed on her younger self. But she’s not really seeing. She hasn’t clocked the way he’s looking at her. Nor the way I’m looking at her beside me, now.

‘Awful hair, though, I never suited blonde. Those eyebrows were way too dark too.’ She looks on disapprovingly.

I turn towards young Belle and stare at her fondly. She looks shiny. Her skin glistens under the setting sun. She picks up a stem of lavender and tucks it behind her ear.

I really wouldn't have changed a thing.

'Everyone was rocking the blonde hair and dark eyebrows back then. It was a great look at the time.' I kick the dirt around my feet.

'Well, I know you loved it. You had such a type,' she says. 'All the girls you ever went for looked *exactly* the same.' She rolls her eyes. 'Why do you think I dyed my hair?' She catches herself, mouth snapping shut, like she's annoyed she let that slip.

'You're kidding,' I say, confused.

'Jake, look at it – fresh! No roots in sight.'

I'm not sure why I'm so surprised, given that I was doing exactly the same thing from the other direction without telling her – not the hair, obviously, but changing myself to impress her in small ways I thought she wouldn't notice. I look at her blonde hair and think about the bracelet I started wearing at the same time, only because I knew she thought men wearing jewellery looked hot. I also wanted to text her every day; I would have, happily, all day without stopping, but I knew how that would look, so in the early days I'd force myself to wait at least twenty hours before replying, so as not to appear so eager.

'As Oscar Wilde said, youth is wasted on the young.' Belle sighs next to me, watching her younger self tie her hair into the kind of topknot that resembles a bird's nest.

Younger me doesn't care. He reaches down, holds her face in his palms and kisses her gently.

'Shaw,' I say.

'What?'

'It was Shaw. George Bernard Shaw.'

'Are you sure?'

'I'm dead, Belle, not stupid.'

She pulls a face and turns back to watch them.

I watch too, for a moment. She's changed – visibly, completely, in ways I'm still working out – and I *look* exactly the same. But I don't feel the same – not really. Ten years of films will do something to a person ... even a dead one. I'd clean up in the movie round of a pub quiz now, for a start. Whether that counts as growth is another matter.

‘Hey, if I’ve been a dead twenty-five-year-old for ten years, am I emotionally twenty-five or am I now thirty-five?’

Belle rolls her eyes. ‘Without a doubt, you are still emotionally twenty-five. Probs always will be,’ she adds, not missing a beat.

‘I don’t feel it, but sure. Anyway, you’re the one who threw a vase at me earlier, like a stroppy teenager.’

Belle cringes. ‘Because you bring that out in me.’

Our younger selves are wrestling now. What started as Jake untucking Belle’s skirt from her underwear ended up with Belle thinking he was winding her up, the pair of them throwing handfuls of lavender at each other, until she launches herself onto his back. He catches her legs without missing a step, her arms wrapping around his neck, kissing the back of his head as he walks, completely unbothered. A smile is plastered on his face, like this is just how they get around. They set off back towards the car – my car, I should say – laughing, his shoulders shaking underneath her.

‘Do you think we’ve got the picture now? Can we get back already?’ she says.

‘Sure, okay. Where to next?’

‘You’re the one with the guardian angel. You tell me.’

‘He wasn’t very clear ... He just said to go down the journey of your love life.’

‘Right.’ Belle twizzles the engagement ring on her finger, lips pursed. It’s very big and very shiny and silver. I always thought she was more of a gold girl.

‘Journey implies two different points. A to B. The start and end. So to tick the right boxes, maybe it’s safest we do the start and end of each relationship?’ She shrugs.

Thank fuck this was a tour of her relationships and not mine. They’d almost all start with, ‘Hello, you’re sexy, wanna fuck?’ and end with, ‘Have a great life.’ She was truly the exception that proves the rule. Christ, I was such a twat.

‘God, this is gonna be torture,’ Belle cringes.

‘Not as torturous as eternal soul destruction!’

‘I know, I know. This feels very particularly unfair, the timing of it all.’

‘Let’s get it over with, then ... To the end?’

‘To the end.’

We reach out and hold hands, her palms warming mine.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Belle

It's 2016 and we're in my childhood bedroom. I was twenty-five, twenty minutes away from something I've spent ten years not thinking about. I know exactly where we are before I've even looked up – it's the smell of it: toasty radiator warmth and something synthetic sprayed from a bottle shaped like a stiletto. I don't look at Jake beside me. I look at the room instead.

Fairy lights half-peeling from the walls, stuck up with dusty Sellotape and Blu-Tack, inspired by the backdrops of my favourite beauty vloggers at the time. The bedsheets are those white floral IKEA ones that everyone and their mum had, and a pair of muted green cushion covers have been thrown onto the floor.

On the old dresser beneath the windowsill sits an acrylic tray of lipsticks, pens, pound coins, and false-lash strips. The mirror beside my wardrobe is cluttered – photobooth photos from a trip to London with Jake, a Polaroid from a friend's birthday party, a gig ticket to see Lucy Rose play the Tunbridge Wells Forum the year prior, a birthday present from Jake. A lone cactus bows on the window ledge. A dog barks outside. I look at Jake now. He's looking at the gig ticket.

My younger self sits on her squeaky bed, back up against the wooden headboard, frantically scribbling in her journal that's balanced against her thighs, stopping only to bite her lip, tap her nails on the pen, and look up towards the door. She knows what's coming. I can see it in the press of her lips, the way her wing-lined eyes have smudged in the corners, and I remember exactly what she felt. The dread of it.

Still, she's made an effort with her outfit, wearing her favourite skintight Topshop Joni jeans – the faded black ones with rips on the knees (she has them in every colour) – and a navy polka-dot off-the-shoulder top, tucked into the high waistband. A tiny love heart tattoo is visible on the side of her foot – a drunken dare with Jake outside a neon-lit parlour in Soho. She went

first to prove she wasn't scared, but then immediately regretted it. She used to fill it in with glitter liner on nights out, telling people she had a glitter tattoo, that yes, that's a thing now – but tonight it's bare.

My younger self looks up from her journal as the doorbell rings. Jake and I look with her, all three of us frozen for a moment, listening to the familiar weight of his footsteps on the stairs. He had such a rhythm to it, two steps at a time, heavy, the weight of him.

'Christ, this is brutal. Whose idea was this again?' I say, going for jokey, which I suspect isn't fooling anyone, least of all the dead man standing next to me.

'Yours,' Jake replies bluntly. This ghost has no empathy.

'And who brought me here?' I retort.

'Do you need me to state it again? Gabe sent me. You agreed. If you back out, your soul is wiped for eternity,' he says, antsy.

'I can hardly watch.' I put my hands over my eyes, leaving just a slit open to see as the doorknob turns.

The Belle on the bed shuffles, closes her diary, composes herself. She's self-soothing, I can tell now that I'm watching from the outside – the pulled arm hairs, the jittering leg, the nail biting. She's trying to regulate her emotions, cycling through every nervous habit she knows, and none of it is working. If anything, it's a sure giveaway, each fidget announcing exactly what she's trying to hide. She's panicking.

I spent a long time in therapy learning to name what was happening in my body instead of just picking myself apart through it. Deep breathing. Grounding. Focusing on what I can see, smell, touch. It has helped, genuinely. I'm better than I was. I'm still not sure if better *actually* means calmer, but either way, I've become a pro at composing myself over the last decade.

Young Jake walks in. The lemon and lavender scent of his signature aftershave arrives first. He looks a little dishevelled, not quite as polished as usual. He wears a black long-sleeved top tucked into similar skintight jeans. He closes the door and sits on the end of the bed – no kiss, hug, or warmth. He knows what's coming.

'You wanted to talk.' He sighs.

'Jake, I ...' Belle stares at the bed, picking her thumb. The radiator clicks on in the background. 'You know the other night, our chat ...'

'Yeah.'

‘The thing is ... Do you want a cup of tea? I can go get you a—’

‘I didn’t come for tea.’

‘Sorry, I know you’ve driven over here.’

Jake sits and watches her, still. The girl in front of me is picking her skin apart. I remember the sensation – I can almost hear my heart pounding in my chest from here, ten years in the future.

‘The thing is, Jake ...’ She looks to the bedsheets. ‘Sorry, can I start again?’

‘Sure.’

‘Like I said the other night, I just feel like I’m watching everyone else’s lives move forward and I’m just here—’

‘Right, so we’re doing this again?’ Jake rolls his eyes.

Young Belle continues, ignoring him. ‘Do you think we’re ... I just wonder if we want the same things.’

Jake shrugs. ‘You know what I think, Belle.’

Belle looks to the side, frowning, pushing her hair away from her face.

‘Where did you go when you left, after our chat?’

‘What’s that got to do with anything?’ Jake says.

‘It’s just ... Sorry.’

Jake clears his throat.

‘I don’t think you think I’m good enough to make it on my own.’

‘I haven’t done anything wrong,’ Jake says.

‘You haven’t done anything wrong,’ Belle repeats, almost a whisper, testing the words in her mouth.

‘So what, you’re saying I’m holding you back? I’m the reason you’re miserable?’

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘OK, well, what have I done wrong, then?’

‘Really?’ Belle sounds surprised. Jake frowns.

‘I’ll never be good enough, I get it. Do we have to repeat this again and again?’ His jaw tightens, eyes to the cushions on the floor.

‘You know it’s not that.’ Belle’s eyes are glassy now, filling with tears.

‘Well, what is it, then?’

‘You know what? Actually, I need to ask you something.’ Belle shakes her head and Jake waits. She reaches for a cup of water on the bedside table and sets it down again without drinking. ‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘What doesn’t?’ Jake asks.

‘Forget it.’

‘Okay.’

‘It’s just, whenever I try to take some time and space for myself, you kick off, and it ends in a fight. It’s like – do you want me to be happy?’

‘So, I’m ruining your life?’

‘I didn’t say that. You always twist it around! All I’m saying is I don’t know who I am or what I want. And I thought you cared enough to support me, not make it all about you and how you’ll *never be good enough*.’ She swallows, audibly, like she’s trying to force it down. Jake ignores the lump in her throat. ‘I want someone who supports me and my goals and wants me to succeed. I want someone to want more for me than ... this!’ Belle holds her hand out to the room. ‘I’m twenty-five, and I live at home in my childhood bedroom – I want more than this.’ A tear drops to her lap.

There’s a pause and I can taste the tension in the air.

‘Belle, I don’t know what else you want from me. I haven’t cheated; I haven’t slept with anyone else. You said yourself that I haven’t done any—’

‘You haven’t done anything, yeah, right.’

‘Well, I’m sorry that I’m not good enough, that this town is not good enough.’ He shrugs, eyes wide. ‘You’ll realise what you had.’

Young Belle’s face goes blank.

After a moment she nods, lips twisted to one side.

‘I’ve seen the video, Jake.’

Young Jake goes pale, his face set in stone. The room is silent.

Belle’s tears stop like someone has turned off a tap, but her lip is doing that thing, that subtle wobble in the corner.

It was always going to end this way, this conversation. I called him round to have the London talk again and I thought I could keep what I knew under wraps, but I couldn’t. It was bubbling away on the surface, on the tip of my tongue.

I glance towards the Jake beside me and he’s looking away, studying the wall beside him.

Young Belle’s nails are pinching her arm and I realise I’m doing the same, so hard that there are indents left above my elbow. I had been sitting on the sofa downstairs when the video had come through. A Facebook message from Jake’s best mate. I’d opened it with a grin, expecting a funny dance, a joke. But there was Jake, wearing the same T-shirt he’d worn the

day we'd argued, the big fight when I'd told him I wanted to move to London. He was swinging a whisky bottle and raging.

I feel that familiar drop in my stomach, like it's happening all over again. The words he'd said. I'd watched the video so many times, I could quote it by heart.

'Let her fuck off to London, she'll never find anyone better. Her life will be nothing without me ... Not even that good in bed.' A swig of whisky, a palm to wipe the drip from his chin. 'Hope she has a great fucking life ... alone.'

Young Jake shuffles on the bed and there it is: the look – the one thing I didn't expect. The one image I've had plastered in my mind for the past ten years. His lips twist up, the dimples on his cheeks deepen. It's not a grin, but a sort of tight amusement. A disbelieving half-laugh, the patronising one.

'What video?' He tries his luck.

'Jake.'

'You're not actually upset about that, are you?' He shakes his head, eyes closing slowly. 'Belle, come on, that was a joke.'

'Didn't sound like a joke.'

Jake's mouth is still upturned at the corners, hands running back through his hair.

'Saying I'll be alone forever isn't a joke,' she stutters, swallows. 'Saying I was a shit shag isn't a joke. It's not funny.'

A laugh escapes his throat now; his brows are raised, and he's still shaking his head in disbelief. 'Everyone takes the piss out of their girlfriends – it's what lads do.'

Young Belle turns away from him, covers her face with her palm. The video wasn't venting. I didn't recognise the boy in it; he wasn't the Jake I thought I knew.

'Who even sent you that? Vik? So he's shit-stirring and I'm the bad guy.' Jake slaps his palms to his knees.

'Do you know how hearing that made me feel?' she cries.

'It's not that big a deal, Belle.'

Belle flinches.

'Did you mean it?'

He laughs now, properly – his face can't contain it, isn't even trying to hide the laughter.

Belle's face breaks. The tears continue to fall, dark spots blooming on her jeans.

'Come on, Belle, I thought you could handle a joke.'

I thought watching the video was the worst part, but really, it was watching him laugh when I told him I'd seen it. The video was for an audience – lads, bravado, a performance – because he was scared, showing off. But the laugh, that was just for me. The laugh told me he thought I was being ridiculous. He was sober, in my bedroom, and he'd looked at my face and decided that what I felt wasn't real enough to take seriously.

I carried that laugh with me for longer than I carried the video. For years afterwards, every time something hurt and I opened my mouth to say so, I'd hear the laugh first. A little checkpoint before every feeling. A warning to ask myself: is this actually a big deal, or are you being Belle about it again?

But the laugh and the video weren't the only things that broke us. There was London underneath all of it. I did want more, more than Maidstone, more than the bedroom I'd slept in since I was twelve. I wanted a career, a flat, a life I'd built for myself. I wanted him to want those things for me. I could have made it work – an hour on the train, weekends, all of it – but he didn't have it in him to wait. We loved each other, but we hadn't figured out how to love each other well, and neither of us had the words for that yet. I know that now. I'm not sure he does.

I look at Jake next to me. He clears his throat just once, rocks back and forth, from the toes to the heels of his feet, hands in pockets, eyes to the floor. Is he even watching this? It almost looks like he's bopping along to music.

Catching my eye, he dramatically yawns, hand clapped over his mouth. 'We all know how this goes ...'

My eyes well up before I can stop them, tears spilling down my cheeks, landing on my dress. Is he really that heartless? Can ten years have passed without him giving this a second thought? I used to tell myself this was just what Jake did when things got too much – the avoidance, the yawn, all of it, but I'm less sure now. I've just watched him laugh while I cried, again, and I can't tell where the coping ends and the not caring begins.

We both know how this ends, but I didn't think I'd have to relive it.

'Don't laugh at me,' young Belle says quietly, but something in her voice has changed. Jake's smile falters just a little. 'I sat in my room and watched

that video on repeat. On my own, over and over, trying to work out if the person in it was the same person who tells me he loves me every night.'

She wipes her eyes with the teddy bear she's had sitting on her childhood bed for the past twenty or so years and continues. 'You said my life would be nothing without you and now you're sitting here, laughing at me for being upset about it.'

Jake's face shifts, he opens his mouth and closes it again.

'Who else was there?'

'It doesn't—'

'Was it funny when you said it? Did they all laugh after?'

He's silent again. Dead still. No longer laughing but instead retreating, which at the time felt just as catastrophic. His leg bounces against the bed, his eyes somewhere distant.

She tries again, softer this time. 'Did you mean it?'

He says nothing, but I catch the muscles in his jaw working away now.

'It hurt me, Jake.'

Still silence.

'I'm not trying to make you feel bad, I just wanted to ... Can you see why I'm upset?' I look away, unable to watch as young Belle has to ask permission to be hurt. She's checking with him that her own feelings are reasonable and he's giving her nothing, not even a nod.

I watch her make herself smaller in real time, not just physically – although that too, arms wrapped around her knees, shoulders curling in – but also the words. The anger she'd found thirty seconds ago is gone and replaced with something softer. She edited herself mid-conversation because the silence was worse than the lie and the laugh.

'Please say something. Can we just ... Can we talk about it properly? Please? I don't want to fight.'

I feel sick in my stomach. Not at her, but at how familiar it is. The apology for having feelings.

He shakes his head, words still lost. I hadn't noticed at the time how pained he looked. I remember thinking he looked more angry than sad.

Silence stretches and younger me fills it in the only way she knows: picking at the hem of her top, looking to the floor, looking at him and back away again. She's waiting for him to give her something, anything to work with, and the longer he doesn't, the more her panic rises. I know what's coming, not just because I've lived it, replayed it on a loop in my head for

years after, but because it's what she always did when she couldn't stand the quiet anymore.

She gives him a way out.

I mouth along to the words as she says them, like lyrics stuck on a loop.

'Well, if you're not going to say anything, maybe you should just leave ...'

It isn't what she means. She just wanted him to say something or fight for it. But he doesn't know that and she didn't say it, and so he takes the door she unknowingly opened and walks through it. Younger Jake storms out of the room. The door slams shut. He doesn't look back.

The girl in front of me sits frozen for a moment. Then it hits her. Her body starts shaking first, her mouth turned downwards. I remember the specific feeling – my pulse in my ears, chest so tight that I struggled to swallow. How my vision blurred and how I couldn't clear it. Jake and I watch as she crumbles onto the duvet, hands gripping the bedsheets.

The door creaks open behind us, and my dad enters the room, still in his work clothes, holding a cup of tea. He places it on the bedside table and sits awkwardly on the bed next to young Belle, frame creaking under his weight. The smell of cigarettes engulfs the room as we watch him pat her on the back. She curls up next to him, head in his lap.

I wouldn't wish this on my worst enemy. Does everyone get this – some quiet audit of every person they've ever loved? Does it happen when you cross the threshold of some big milestone, like a wedding, a moment when your life is about to change – and suddenly you're there, watching yourself fall apart in your childhood bedroom?

And if so, why does nobody warn you or actually talk about it? Instead, it becomes something difficult you just don't mention, like tax returns, or the fact that your metabolism suddenly stops working at thirty-five.

I force a look at Jake beside me and catch the way his mouth is twisted. I say nothing, turn back to young Belle, both of us sobbing. We stay like that for a long time, Dad and I. My father doesn't say anything, doesn't try to fix it. He just lets her cry into his lap while the room gets darker and the too-sweet tea on the bedside table goes cold.

The phone lights up on the bed beside her; Grandma Jules's name flashes on the screen. I understand now that my mum must have texted her after Jake left, getting Jules on the phone while Dad came up, drink in hand. A cup of tea and talking to your gran will fix everything, they always said.

Young Belle looks to her dad, mascara now smudged into his shoulder, and he wipes away her tears, kisses her forehead, and hands her the phone. She answers, voice rasping as he slips quietly from the room and leaves her to find comfort with Jules.

‘Gran, he ... I can’t ...’ Snot drips from her nose.

‘Right, love, slow down.’ The sound of her voice and the kettle boiling can be heard through the phone.

‘He just ... We were ... I told him.’ Belle wipes her nose on the bedsheet.

‘Take your time, hen, you’re all right.’

‘What if I’ve ...’ Belle sits there, sobbing, clutching the phone to her ear.

‘He’ll be back, so he will.’ I can hear a teaspoon tinkling, stirring around a teacup, tapping one, two, three times.

It’s like watching a devastating movie, one whose ending you know, and it’s morbid, but you can’t look away – why is that? Aristotle suggested that we learn from it – that it’s like a vaccination: a small dose of pity and fear here and there will build up your immunity, protecting you later. I think there’s truth in that, as I watch young Belle look down at her phone.

Jake’s name is now flashing on the screen, waiting on the other line, trying to get through.

I watch Belle decline the call.

I notice, distantly, that I’m back to it, picking the skin around my nails. I can’t watch this part.

Because that was the call Jake made to me while his car sat overturned on the road. The last one he’d make before he died.

And I didn’t pick up.

I make myself look at him now. His eyes are on the phone, on his own name fading from the screen. I watch his jaw tighten. Then nothing. The silence in the room feels loud.

I know I’m not supposed to say that it’s my fault. I know the lines: you couldn’t have known, Belle; you didn’t cause it, Belle; it was an accident. But I still hear my phone ringing that evening. His name flashing up on the screen for the last time has been implanted in my brain.

I didn’t pick up. Didn’t get to say goodbye. And now he is here, next to me, somehow alive enough to touch. Close enough that I could reach out for his hand and say ...

What exactly would I say? Would it do any good to say, ‘I’m sorry I didn’t answer. I’m sorry I confronted you and we argued and then you died

on the drive home, and I spent two years barely functioning and another seven rebuilding myself, thinking I was fine.'

I'd rehearsed that conversation so many times. In the shower, on the train, at 2 a.m. when I couldn't sleep. And in my head, it was perfect. I was graceful. He was kind, he didn't laugh. We both cried, and then it was done, and I felt better. Now I watch as his eyes darken, while young Belle sets the phone down on the duvet.

'Jake ...' My voice comes out raspy, sore.

'I know,' he says.

He's blinking more than usual, the insides of his cheeks clenched between his teeth. I want to delve into his brain and know what he's thinking.

He opens his mouth again. 'You couldn't have known.'

The guilt doesn't go. I've been carrying it for so long, it's become a permanent part of my being – something so ingrained in me, it's like an extra rib.

The years of work, this hatred for myself, the 'if-onlys' and the 'what-ifs', and all I wanted was for him to know how much it ate me up – and now he's here, next to me, and I got my wish, and he gets it and my body is shuddering and my heart is breaking.

'I can't be here anymore.' The words escape from my throat like a howl. 'We need to go back.'

Silently, he reaches out and takes both of my hands.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jake

‘Is my makeup a state?’

The toilet cubicle snaps back around us and this time we’re still holding hands, which doesn’t surprise me – I wanted to get out of that horror show as quickly as possible. The same buzz of voices vibrates through the door, same pitch, same energy. No time has passed. Her hand moves from my palm to her chest – fingers pressing there briefly, like she’s checking for something – then it drops. The tears that were spilling down her face a moment ago have vanished, replaced by the slightest hint of a flush. She still can’t quite look at me.

‘You look great.’

She doesn’t trust me. She crouches to the floor, holding her dress, to peek under the stalls. Seeing no one is there, she opens the door and heads straight to the sink, inspecting her face in the mirror. She’s doing some weird thing with her lips, sucking air in through her nose and out through her mouth.

‘Thank fuck for setting spray,’ she mutters, voice monotone, no emotion, not like how she was in the bedroom just then. She’s a robot in comparison, all composure, all business. Like the tin man, except at least the tin man was looking for his heart. This Dorothy has already clicked her heels and gone home, leaving her red shoes in the past.

She reaches into her bra, pulls out a folded square of paper and scribbles something quick against the edge of the sink.

Her eyes flash to mine as she tucks it away again, long enough to know I’ve spotted it, before she looks back at her own reflection.

‘Can I trust you to go back up to the bridal suite and stay out of the way?’ she says to my reflection as I stand behind her. There’s no warmth in her tone and she can’t even be bothered to face me. Who has she become? I’d have thought she’d at least have wanted a hug. I feel like I need one ...

‘Absolutely!’ I chirp. ‘Don’t mind me, I’ll get out of your hair.’ This comes across as more patronising than I expected, but who cares? This robot before me doesn’t seem to have a conscience anymore.

‘Thanks, I appreciate it,’ she calls out as I leave the room.

Outside, I’m hit by a bustle of activity – waiters carrying champagne flutes on silver trays, their waistcoats and shirts making them look like waddling penguins. Timothy is still standing by the photographers, making small talk, big teeth flashing white. His suit is a bog-standard tux, no personality, which screams that he’s either very confident or very boring and traditional, and I’m gonna go with the latter. What does she see in him?

I spy a line of wine bottles by the bar and dodge my way through a crowd of women in sequins that I don’t recognise to grab one, stuffing it under my arm. New mission: find out if I can actually taste anything yet. Just then the bathroom door opens and Belle waltzes out, head held high. Her face lights up when she sees Timothy. She doesn’t see me.

I head for the saloon next door, where the majority of the crowd are waiting for the happy bride- and groom-to-be to make their entrance. There’s a sprig of mistletoe hanging from the doorframe between the two rooms and as I pass, a couple swoop in next to me, his hands on her waist, her fingers in his collar, kissing like they’ve forgotten where they are. I stand there for a moment, right next to them, close enough to hear her laugh into his mouth and I feel ... absolutely nothing.

Deflated, I move deeper into the room, scanning the crowd eagerly, looking for anyone that looks familiar to me. Then I spot her, Aunt Susan. Just as superb as I was expecting. She’s dolled up in an emerald dress that reminds me of those shiny two-tone suits blokes used to wear in the office, the ones that changed colour when they moved. Camera flashes go off in the room next door as I slip through the crowd, catching snippets of conversation.

‘I can’t wait to see her dress tomorrow! What do you think it’ll look like?’

‘Oh, it has to be a Disney-style ballgown, doesn’t it?’

I move deeper into the room.

‘Does he have a girlfriend? Can you introduce us?’

‘Kelly, we’re at a wedding, not a fucking speed-dating event.’

‘Same-same.’

Finally, I spot a crowd of faces I know. The majority of Belle's family are standing at the bottom of a large staircase. I watch as Belle's dad takes a sip, too large for the occasion, like he needed it, while her mum straightens his tie. I loved those two. They always made me feel welcome in a way that didn't require effort. They probably think this absolute circus of a wedding is just as silly as I do. That may or may not be true, but it makes me feel better, so I'll go with that.

To the left, Grandma Juliet is deep in conversation with Harry, Belle's cousin. He has his hand around the waist of a blonde-haired guy about his height, good-looking, relaxed – clearly a permanent fixture – both of them keeping a careful distance from Aunt Susan's shiny dress, presumably. I spot one of Belle's oldest friends, Anisa, laughing into her hand as she chats to ... Vik?

Vik was my best mate. *Is my best mate?* Can you still call someone that when you've been dead for ten years? Belle wasn't a fan of him at all ... Bad influence, bit of a twat, a player – the usual stuff. So, since when have they become mates? In what realm is Vik here, chatting happily away, at my ex's wedding, like he belongs in this crowd? I suppose a lot can happen in ten years.

He looks good – tall and broad – he always was a big lad, but Christ, he's massive now. Proper grown-up, impressive. The kind of geezer you'd want on your side in a fight. I almost want to go slap him on the back, squeeze his biceps like I used to, though I suspect the comparison would not be in my favour these days. He's also removed the big blingy diamond stud earring he used to wear – thank God. I loved the guy, but that thing was tragic. A real ick, as I hear the girls say now. Without it, he looks like someone's husband, which, as it turns out, he is.

A woman approaches him now, tall and striking in a vibrant pink dress, her nose stud catching the light and a beaded clutch under her arm. Vik grabs her hand as she reaches him, pulls her close and introduces her to Anisa as his wife. I watch them all standing there – laughing, making small talk, completely at ease – a part of Belle's life now. They all got to stay when I had to leave. I make to turn back to the bar.

Chatter grinds to a halt when a small, svelte and well-dressed man with teeny-tiny glasses taps a fork on a glass three times and everyone turns as he shouts, 'Let us all welcome the newlyweds-to-be!'

Belle and Timothy – or the soon-to-be Smalls, should I say – enter the saloon as the guests erupt in applause. They walk hand in hand, and I lean slightly to the side to better see them as they come in. Timothy's grinning like he's won the lottery, the smug bastard. But Belle's smile is all wrong. It's polite and demure. The kind of smile you give a coffee-shop barista, not the man you're marrying tomorrow.

I remember her smile when it was real – toothy, dramatic, her whole face involved in it. This one is careful. She is performing happy, rather than feeling it, and I know, because I spent four years being the reason for the real smile.

My jaw tightens, but I force myself to keep watching.

The tiny-glasses man makes his way to the staircase with the couple as I dip behind a group of lads beside me. He clears his throat into a microphone, feedback reverberating as he starts.

'I'm aware this isn't strictly traditional, but when your son is Timothy Small, you find you simply have things to say. And so, a little speech for my son, to say how proud I am of you today, this weekend, and always.'

I roll my eyes. *When your son is Timothy Small ...* I mouth the words back to myself. The man's been waiting to say this his whole life, I'm sure.

'I always knew you were destined for greatness, Timothy. Since you were young, your mother and I have been completely in awe of you. We both agree that one of our favourite memories is when you took your first step outside the Eiffel Tower on a family holiday – we captured that moment on VHS and the tourists' reactions were priceless. I have the tape in our room if anyone wants to watch it later.'

Blimey. My first steps were probably in our council flat on the Shepway Estate, no video evidence taken, no tourists to impress.

'I also fondly remember the first time you baked the family a cake at the age of eight but used salt instead of sugar ... We're glad you've not made that mistake since. Also, of course, when you ran the London Marathon at the age of twenty-two, raising over £20,000 for the Stroke Association, as a tribute to your late grampa Bertie.'

My eyes widen. At twenty-two I was still working out how to pay my phone bill.

'We are constantly amazed by your determination, loyalty, and commitment in everything you do. From completing culinary school at the

young age of nineteen, to opening your first restaurant and receiving a Michelin Bib Gourmand just a year after opening.'

My fists are clenched so tight, my knuckles ache. I don't know why this is winding me up so much ... Is it the fact that his dad is reading the speech from his phone? He could at least have printed it off.

'The first time we heard you talk about Belle, we knew you'd fallen in love. And when we saw how you both laugh together as a couple, well ... we wish that for you both forever.'

Bor-ring. My eyes sweep the room, looking for anyone else to focus on, and they land on Grandma Juliet. She's close by, standing next to a high table at the bottom of the stairs. Her phone is beside her and she's all distracted – laughing, cooing, and nodding in all the right places. Of course she is, she's thrilled – her Belle is getting hitched to a Michelin-star chef who runs marathons and baked cakes at the age of eight, instead of getting detentions for cheating in tests. Soon, though, Juliet starts looking nervously at her phone, once, twice – I'm guessing she's up next.

An idea forms. It's probably a bad idea. Definitely a bad idea, but now in the background I can hear something about the proposal, about hiring out the Natural History Museum after hours, just the two of them under a blue whale. I actually don't care and maybe it's time to make this party livelier.

I inspect the room once more and it's dimly lit, candles flickering. Everyone seems half-cut on booze already. No one's paying attention. Juliet is mid-laugh, head tilted towards Aunt Susan. I crouch down by her side, level with the table, and tilt the screen of the phone up just enough to catch her face – carefully, the way I've seen people do it. It's a shame I died right before everyone got to unlock stuff with their faces rather than their fingers.

The home page snaps open, unlocked. Too easy.

I stay ducked down, thumb hovering over Juliet's Notes app. Her speech is right there, but let's make it better, shall we? Juliet always did love a bit of chaos. She'd find this funny, I'm sure.

My thumbs remember how to type before my brain is able to catch up with them – muscle memory, or a sign from the universe that I'm exactly where I need to be: editing a Scottish grandmother's speech in a manor house in Whitby at a party I wasn't invited to. I grin as I scroll, changing words here and there – nothing obvious or mean, I might be a ghost but I'm not a monster – just some small improvements to make things a bit more interesting.

As I slip the phone back in place, my hand brushes a piece of paper on the table next to it: the seating plan for the evening. Juliet's handwriting is a neat, Shakespearian scrawl that I just know Gabe would die for. Guest names, table numbers circled ... and there, at the bottom, Jake Marleigh, in my own handwriting. Still funny. I fold it and slip it into my pocket as applause dies down.

I shuffle backwards. This is it, Grandma's turn. She makes her way up a couple of steps, adjusting those flower-like chandelier earrings she always wears, and clears her throat into the microphone.

'I don't usually get to stand up and make speeches, but when your granddaughter asks you to, you say yes, and so, firstly, I want to say congratulations to my beautiful Belle and her tiny Tim—'

Juliet stops. Blinks into her phone. The room falls silent.

'*Handsome* Tim. Handsome Tim, I do apologise.' She laughs it off, the familiar Scottish trill that used to fill Sunday dinners, but I catch the flicker of confusion across her face before she covers it. I have to bite down hard on the inside of my cheek. Tiny Tim. Brilliant.

I watch as Belle's hand flies to her mouth. Timothy's smile has gone a little rigid. Absolutely worth it.

Juliet clears her throat again and soldiers on.

'Even as a wee girl, Belle was kind, thoughtful, and bossy—' She stops, squints at her phone. '*Brilliant!* I meant to say brilliant – this phone is too small!'

A ripple of laughter runs through the guests. Belle's cheeks are flushed. I'm grinning now, can't contain it.

'She would often dream about her wedding day,' Juliet continues, voice warming back up, 'and to be here now, celebrating that she has found a love in her life ...' She pauses, frowning at the screen. 'A love? I mean, *the* love of her life ... It fills me with joy.'

Whispering starts. I watch as Belle's eyes narrow – she's scanning the room, looking for me. She knows.

'And a Michelin-star chef at that! I can tell you now, he cooks a mean roast dinner, better than mine!' She's rushing now, eager to get through it. 'Belle, I hope you know how loved you are by us all and how excited we are to witness this new chapter of your life.'

'My best tip for love is that marriages are built on kindness and laughter. It's not about grand gestures every day but choosing each other again and

again. And Belle, my love, I'm so glad you've found someone who made you happy again after J—'

Juliet stops dead.

The room goes silent. Oh shit.

She looks up from her phone, eyes wide. Her mouth opens, then closes as she scrolls up and down the screen, checking what she just read. 'After all this time ...' She's improvising now. '... All this time being so focused on your career.' Belle's gone pale, her hand gripping Timothy's arm. She motions to Juliet to hurry up.

Juliet squints at her phone again. 'And to my new grandson, Timothy. You're a bonnie wee—' She stops. Looks up. 'Oh, for heaven's sake, I think someone's been mucking with my phone! Bloody technology! Please excuse me! Let's just raise a glass together instead now, shall we?'

Worth it.

Totally worth it.

Belle is scanning the crowd again, looking like she's contemplating murder. Good thing I'm already dead. She finally catches my eye. I steal the glass on the table next to me and raise it in cheers. That'll teach her to be so uptight.

I feel bad for Juliet, genuinely, as she descends the stairs, shaking her head, still muttering something under her breath that I suspect is directed at her phone, specifically, and technology, generally. Timothy materialises at her elbow to relieve her of her microphone, smooth as anything, and ushers everyone through to the dining hall for the rehearsal dinner, with the confidence of a guy who has never once not known what to do in a social situation.

In the flurry of bodies, Belle cuts through the crowd and storms towards me. She reaches me and hooks her arm through mine, stern and purposeful – the kind of gesture you'd use to steer your drunk uncle away from the buffet – and starts walking. To anyone watching, we look like a couple having a private word, a little dig at each other. Except I'm invisible and she's steering thin air towards the corner by a fireplace.

She stops when we reach an alcove, drops my arm and turns to face the wall. Hands at her sides, she's staring at eighteenth-century panelling like it's the most fascinating thing she's seen all evening. I'm still facing out towards the room; a woman in a fascinator glances over, clocks Belle's odd position and frowns, but keeps walking.

‘This looks a bit *Blair Witch Belle*.’ I smirk as her shoulders go rigid. Without turning around, she reaches out and grabs both of my hands. Now she’s a woman in a white silk gown, facing a wall, holding hands with ... absolutely no one.

Timothy’s mother stops – actually stops – and does a full double take as she passes. She stares at Belle and then looks at Timothy, who is standing ten feet away, talking to one of the caterers. He hasn’t noticed yet. I should feel worse about this than I do.

‘People are staring,’ I say, which is true, but also deeply unhelpful.

Her grip tightens, her voice low and furious. ‘Shut. Up,’ she says, closing her eyes.

Vik Parshad

‘You sure you want to do this?’

Their breaths are hot and heavy. Belle sits with her legs either side of Vik’s lap, her knees bracketing his hips in the passenger seat of his car, an old silver Audi with a grey interior. A faded Jelly Bean scent diffuser wafts a subtle lemon-drop fragrance that hardly masks the stink of takeaway burgers and chips, whose discarded packets crunch under his foot as he repositions. He’s a big guy, wide in a way that leaves no room for anything else.

She doesn’t remember who moved first. She’s not sure it matters.

Her fingers find handfuls of his inky black hair, and she holds on as he rolls back the seat as far as it can go. His other hand grips her arse hungrily. ‘Yes, yes ...’ she says, reaching down to pull her top over her head.

He takes a swig from the bottle of whisky on the seat next to them, before handing it to her. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand as she drinks. He watches her swallow. The hot liquid burns her throat, makes her head spin a little faster, but also quietens her brain; she was not expecting anyone to see her naked today. Her thoughts drift from concern about how her faded blue knickers don’t match the black cotton of her bra, to what his dick looks like. Whether it’ll feel different. Whether she’s capable of feeling anything at all anymore.

She watches now as Vik unknots his tie and tosses it back without looking, not caring where it lands, because his eyes are on her – on the way her breasts are filling out her bra – and she feels it, the weight of his stare. He unbuttons his shirt, their warm chests now touching. He makes a sound low in his throat and pulls her closer.

‘Ugh, this feels so wrong,’ she says to the ceiling as he busies himself unbuckling his belt, his mouth on her chest, her hand against the cold window, fingers splayed out.

‘That’s why it’s so fun,’ he grunts, and she recognises that: the lightness of it, the jokey deflection. She doesn’t call him on it, instead just moves onto her knees, hitching her skirt up, making way for him to slide his trousers down. She catches a glimpse of his boxers. They’re bright blue,

ordinary. There's a tiny hole in the crotch. He wasn't expecting this either. Neither of them was.

Her leg slips off the seat, and her heel hits the glovebox, which opens; old phone charger leads, a walkie-talkie, and protein bar wrappers tumble out.

'Shit, sorry,' she says, turning to look behind, but he takes her chin in his hand and turns her face back to his.

'Fuck, you're so sexy,' he whispers, his chin dropped to his chest, eyes tracking down her body, mouth falling open slightly in a way he probably doesn't realise. Belle leans forward to kiss him before he can finish looking, and also to stop him from talking. It's wet and sloppy.

Belle had always wondered what car sex would be like. Passionate, intense, steamy, she thought in her fantasies. His tongue slides into her mouth. In reality, it's clumsy, poky, and a little smelly. *The car looked bigger from the outside*, she thinks. He attempts to nibble her lip.

What if someone walks past? Sees them. Recognises them. She pulls back, breathless, and she motions to the bottle. He hands it over and she drinks a desperate gulp. He finds the back of her bra strap. He fiddles with it – the strap – excitedly, like a kid unwrapping the bow on a present. Except he's unable to open it while also planting kisses on her cheek, her chin, her neck. She ends up unclasping it herself after throwing the bottle aside, neck hitched forward so as not to bump it against the ceiling.

'There should be a condom in the glovebox,' he manages, voice low, as she grinds on his lap.

Handy, she thinks, but doesn't answer, just reaches back, fingers finding the shiny wrapper in the dark. She presses it into his hand without looking, and he takes it.

She watches as he blows into the end of the rubber, shimmies his boxers down and places it on his cock. She closes her eyes as he sorts himself out. Her hands move over her own skin, her body whisky-warm and wanting. She touches herself properly, one hand in her knickers, and she rubs, her head thrown back, her other hand bracing on the ceiling when she hears, 'Oh fuck.' He stumbles.

His eyes are wide, his dick hard and pulsing, and she rises. She lowers herself onto him. They both exhale at exactly the same moment, collapsing into each other with a sound somewhere between a moan and a sob – her

forehead against his shoulder, his hands guiding her thighs, the car rocking with them.

The windows are steamed up now; Belle thinks back to the car scene in *Titanic* that she loves so much, his body shuddering beneath her.

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CHAPTER NINE

Belle

‘Why are we in a car park?’ Jake walks around with his hands in his pockets, his shoes crunching tiny pebbles. It’s pitch black and I shiver, waiting for him to notice.

‘Who are you here with?’ He’s circling the cars parked up like a bird of prey, but he’s walked in the opposite direction from where Vik’s is parked, in the corner. If he stood still for just a moment, he’d see it bouncing.

I peel my eyes away and smirk. ‘Work it out,’ I say glibly.

Why is it that some men are incapable of spotting things right in front of them?

He shrugs. ‘Honestly, this is already better than the last one. It’s nice to be in a part of the movie of *your* life that I haven’t already seen. Didn’t enjoy my cameo much, let’s put it that way.’ He stops abruptly in front of the hall.

There’s a sign on an easel just inside the doorway, half in shadow, the corridor dark enough that I almost missed it. Jake’s dad must have forgotten to take it home. It’s an A1, cream-coloured card with a display of white roses neatly placed at the top. The sign reads: *Remembering Jake Marleigh*.

I watch the light from the hallway catch the side of his face as he reads it. Watch his face process it all. Confusion first, brows raised, and then something else underneath it, something heavier, the line between his brows deepening as it lands.

‘The fuck? We’re at my funeral?’ He rubs his forehead. ‘I thought we’d got to the end of our relationship already?’ I shrug and watch as, right on cue, there’s that little head tilt he does when playing the tortured soul. Ten years dead and still thinking he’s the main character.

This is supposed to be my time. My weekend. My wedding. Can’t the ten years I spent rebuilding my life since he left – since he *died* – be enough to secure my spot in the afterlife? Surely, I’ve earned it by now.

I hitch my silk gown up off the floor and look around the car park. I want to be eating course one of seven – a cheese cornetto served standing in a bowl of popcorn kernels – not standing outside in the dark, having an existential crisis about my soul.

I think back to my Excel spreadsheet, the one with thirty colour-coded tabs and a timeline planned down to the minute for my dream day. The time I've spent choosing napkin colours, researching wedding bands, the countless Zoom calls with caterers.

Jake thought I'd be happy with a small wedding. Fuck, he'd probably have chosen this depressing hall for our party. He had our whole life mapped out for us: helping my parents with their bed and breakfast; Sunday dinners at his mum's; children and a house by twenty-seven. I realise I've been biting the inside of my cheek as I sense the tang of copper. I press my tongue against the roof of my mouth. Now I watch as he skirts around the perimeter of the hall, peeking in windows, trying to count the mourners. Right.

I hope Timothy can't taste the metal when I head back. What would he think, knowing his future wife has been holding hands with a ghost? Would he even have liked me like this? Shagging some guy in a car, swigging whisky from a bottle. No, I'm different now. I don't mix my spirits and dance on bar tops anymore. Instead, I host beautiful dinner parties with friends, can draw a swan in my latte art, and go to Reformer Pilates once a week.

I have a job title that makes my mum emotional at dinner parties. A career I built from nothing, a life in London I fought for, a house that I furnished, mostly alone. I also always take my makeup off before bed ... most of the time. I definitely did last night, but maybe not the night before.

But I do sometimes wear the same socks two days running and eat cereal over the sink, and I'm not going to apologise for it. Timothy doesn't know that yet. There's quite a lot that Timothy doesn't know. Like the fact that I love nothing more than a full Sunday sofa rot, or that my favourite thing to listen to while doing my makeup, when he's not around, is *My Favorite Murder* podcast ... But, ultimately, I'm a better person now. I think.

I need to remember how far I've come. I need to stand here tall and proud of everything that's led me to become the person I am today, even if that means this: watching twenty-five-year-old me having sex in a car with my dead ex's bestie.

Jake has his face pressed against the hall window, staring into his wake. The glass doesn't steam up with his breath. 'Jeeez, that's embarrassing. Not many people there ...' He leans in closer. 'Oh, wait, there's a clock. It's 11 p.m. so it must be over and these are the stragglers ... The numbers aren't that bad, considering the time.'

Just then, behind us, Vik slams the car door. Jake turns sharply. He watches in silence, squinting, as younger me comes into the light, pulling down her top, patting her skirt, heels in hand. She leans against a lamppost – I remember the feeling, dusting off gravel from the soles of my feet, the stark light blinding my eyes as I put my shoes back on – and Vik appears beside her, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, shirt untucked. They walk towards the hall together, flushed, not quite touching. Jake watches it too and catches it: just as they reach the entrance, just next to that sad sign, Vik's hand finds her arse, then winks at her and she shoves him back. Playful and familiar.

Jake looks stunned. 'I'm sorry, what is going on here?'

I shrug, letting him figure it out.

'You slept with my best friend?' He stumbles back against the wall, hands on his knees, head low. 'You slept with Vik Parshad?'

I straighten, lift my head.

'He didn't seem to think I was a shit shag.' I let it sit in the air.

Jake almost flinches. His face tries to recover but his mouth can't quite form the smile it's reaching for.

'Touché,' he cringes.

It's my turn to have some fun. It's my turn to watch him crumble, and I'm enjoying it more than I expected to, more than I'd like to admit. Trying to keep my face very still, I walk over to lean on the wall beside him, arms crossed, both of us staring out towards the car park.

'Anyway, it's part of my story,' I say, casually.

'What? But how?' His voice is higher than usual, whiny almost. 'You two never got on.'

I shake my head. 'Well, we didn't, but then you died, and he helped me ... We helped each other through it, actually.'

What I don't say is that I spent seven days in Jake's oversized black hoodie that he'd left at my house, the one that still smelled like him; I couldn't get out of bed or brush my teeth or eat, and Vik started calling to check in, and it helped in a way I wasn't expecting.

‘This night was the first time I’d smiled,’ I say instead, keeping my voice even. ‘The first time I’d laughed properly since it happened, and it came out more like a bark, it caught me so off guard. I felt guilty about that at first, but then I didn’t, and then one thing led to another.’ I pause. ‘And, well, here we are!’

I turn and look through the window now. It’s just Jake’s mates left, the last hangers-on, polishing off the remaining booze. They’re sitting in a line on the small, raised platform that doubles up as a stage. I watch as younger me swigs from a bottle of prosecco, walks over to Vik, sits on his lap and leans into him. My stomach drops, watching as she swings an arm around his neck and laughs hysterically at something he says. I look so desperate. Such a mess. His mates look on, confused. I turn away. Yeah, I definitely wasn’t doing so well. Why are you making it so obvious, Belles?

Jake turns now and watches as she leans her head on Vik’s shoulder, his arm around her waist, a hand resting on her thigh as he takes a sip from the same bottle.

‘Oh God, Belle, what the fuck? Why—?’ He doesn’t finish the sentence. He’s already running to the grassy patch to the side. I wince, hands flying to my ears against the sound of it. Some things you can’t unhear. A ghost being violently ill is one of them.

Now’s as good a time as any ... I reach into my bra and pull out a very slightly warm folded square of marigold paper and the hotel pencil. I smooth it against my thigh and add:

Things I have learned, visit 3:

1. Grief does not have a system.
2. Vik was kind to me when he didn’t have to be. That counts.
3. ~~I was not in my right mind.~~

Note: Jake threw up. I’m choosing not to take that personally.

Jake groans. His hands are reaching out towards me. I roll my eyes, fold the paper and tuck it away before moving to the side of him. He grabs both my hands.

‘Think to the end of this, please, I’m begging.’ His eyes are glassy.

‘To the end,’ I say, closing my eyes.

CHAPTER TEN

Jake

No. Absolutely not. No!

I lift my hands instinctively, not wanting to touch anything, my legs almost up to my chest, as I feel completely cramped and claustrophobic. I swallow, the back of my throat still stinging.

‘No, you said we were going to the end! Why the fuck are we now in the back of Vik’s car?’

The windows are steamed up and there’s a funk in the air. I can’t tell if it’s old kebab or the smell of my supposed best mate having fucked my ex in here. I pull my T-shirt over my mouth and wipe the window with the back of my hand.

We’re outside Belle’s house. It’s all dark, apart from the hallway light; Belle’s parents must have left it on for her. I think back to the many times I sat in this exact spot in my car, waiting for that light to flick on, Belle appearing at the door, pulling her coat on, before date nights, like she’d forgotten time was a thing.

Next to me, Belle sits with her hands in her lap, picking the skin around her fingers.

In the front, young Belle and Vik sit in silence. Vik is at the wheel, arms outstretched, shirt on with the top four buttons open, chest hair like snakes trying to escape. Next to him, Belle is in a black top, hair loose, and ... Wait.

Is this the same night?

I didn’t go to my funeral in the end. Once Gabriel found me, he said I should attend, at least drop by, since it might help. But I wasn’t ready to watch people bury me, didn’t want to watch my mum crying. If I’m being completely honest, I was too scared to leave Gabe’s attic, which is not something I like to admit.

Thanks to Belle, now I got to see part of it anyway. That sign with my name on it, with the sad, limp roses on top, stopped me dead.

I'm gutted now that I missed my funeral. I would have quite liked to have heard the eulogies – nice to know you were liked, you know? Fuck, I hope there weren't any hymns. I had a song picked out. It was the only thing I'd ever thought about in relation to dying. Had always said that when I went, I wanted them to play 'Bolero': Fulham's entrance song at Craven Cottage – my team, despite having grown up in Maidstone, which is a long story involving my dad and a 1983 FA Cup that I won't get into now. It also happens to feature on the *Moulin Rouge* soundtrack, which I maintain makes it a legit cinematic choice, not just a football thing. It builds and builds and never quite resolves, which, frankly, feels appropriate. Would have been a laugh and probably given my mum a heart attack, which feels like a fitting send-off.

I wonder now if anyone remembered to tell them. About the song. I picture the lads at the wake just then – finishing the dregs of the booze – sitting in a row on that small stage, which the next day was probably going to be home to a toddler's birthday or something. They were playing some of my favourite tracks on their phones, singing along to the chorus, out of beat and tone.

All that's left of remembering Jake Marleigh: a bunch of lads swigging flat fizz, singing out of key to an indie track I once liked, and watching my mate comfort my ex ... If that's what you can call it. What a legacy.

I get another whiff now of booze. There's an almost empty bottle of whisky knocking about near my feet.

'Vik, you fucking idiot,' I mutter. 'I die in a car crash, and two weeks later you drive home drunk?'

Belle shakes her head next to me. 'Grief changes people, Jake.' She's inspecting her nails now. 'Makes you act in ways you normally wouldn't, I guess.' I assume she's not apologising for sleeping with Vik here and ... There it goes again, my stomach churns. How am I going to get through the next ten years of her love life with *her*?

I can just imagine Gabe saying, 'I did mention it wouldn't be a spa day ...'

Fuck off, Gabe, you stay all nice and cosy up there in your attic, with your nice pots and pans, and don't worry about me, sat here inhaling sex fumes. A fox screams in the distance while I force down a bitter taste. Great, now I'm having an imaginary argument with another ghost. I go to

crack open the window but pull back, remembering I don't want to touch anything.

Vik fidgets in the front seat, causing the car to gently sway. He shifts his hands on the wheel, drums his fingers once. I know that energy. That's the energy of a guy about to say something he's been rehearsing.

Vik clears his throat. 'I think you're a great girl ...' Vik says.

Suddenly, I perk up. Classic breakup line, that.

'But ...'

Is what I think is going to happen actually going to happen? I lean in closer.

'I think we both know this was a mistake.' My jaw drops as I watch how young Belle up front twiddles with her skirt, lips pursed, nodding her head.

You've got to be kidding me. I open my mouth, close it again, try to process what I'm witnessing. Vik, you naughty, naughty boy – you're worse than I was! You only just shagged an hour ago! At least let her have a good night's sleep before breaking up!

Vik sighs. 'You know, we're both sad and drunk ...'

A tear drops and lands on her top. 'Yes, I think we're going to regret it in the morning,' Belle whimpers, her shaky voice contradicting the eager nodding of her head. I watch her continue to nod ... Still nodding. The nodding does a lot of the heavy lifting here. I've never watched someone agree themselves into being broken up with before.

'Why are you crying? It was only a shag!' I nudge Belle next to me as she inspects her nails. I feel that comforting thrill of a laugh erupting from my belly.

'Was his dick that good?' I splutter.

'You're disgusting.' Belle frowns.

'Yeah.' I wipe my eyes, almost crying with laughter. 'Yeah, I am.'

There's a pause. Then I swear I see the corner of her lip curve up. A little smile, almost.

'I admit I had forgotten this part.' Belle rolls her eyes.

I can't believe this – Vik, of all people, who has known Belle almost as long as I have, has just dumped her on the night of her ex's funeral, before she's even had a chance to sober up, and I somehow bagged front-row seats for the show.

'Well, this definitely makes up for the fact that I have to sit in this car that stinks of what you two just did. It almost makes it worth it.'

‘This car stank like this before I got in it, Jake,’ Belle snaps back.

Vik starts up again as Belle’s nodding softens. ‘I’m sorry, Belle. We can still be mates, right?’ He leans in and pats her on the back ... *Pat pat*, like he’d give me after we’d done something we probably shouldn’t have. He grimaces as Belle’s sobs get louder and he goes in for a hug to calm her.

It’s awkward as fuck. Belle’s hands stay limply in her lap while Vik shuffles around the gear stick, unable to decide which side to lean into. He goes in right, then pulls back, tries left. Classic Vik – lead with action, then work out logistics. I watch as he stares at the headrest behind her; patting her back while hugging her. Great. After a few seconds, Belle shuffles, leans back and collects her bag from the floor, before whispering bye.

A wash of cold air hits us as she opens the car door, slams it shut and stumbles into her house. All three of us watch as the hallway light turns off. On one second, off the next. I watch the dark windows for a moment, then turn to Vik, who is doing the same thing. There’s a part of me who feels sad for Belle, in her house, in the dark, on her own after a hard day, but also, it seems like she got over me and under someone else quickly enough.

Vik lets out an awkward sigh and turns around, and out of instinct, Belle and I duck. We’re halfway down before we realise we’re doing it, pressing ourselves down in the backseat of the car like teenagers hiding from our parents.

‘He can’t see us,’ I say.

‘I know,’ she whispers back.

But we both stay down anyway, as Vik reaches his long arm behind him, hand sweeping the floor for the whisky. I watch it for a second, his hand getting closer, then stick my foot out and nudge the bottle across to Belle’s side of the car floor, just out of reach. His fingers just find a crumbly carpet instead. He gives up after a moment and turns back to the wheel.

Belle twists to face me. ‘Okay, show’s over. On to the next?’

‘Honestly, I’d rather get a replay of that instead.’

Ignoring me, she continues, ‘I’ve counted, and we’ve still got five more to get through before Timothy. Before I can go back and *marry* Timothy.’

I notice the way she corrects herself there. Did she almost forget the fact that she’s marrying him? I don’t say anything, but I notice.

‘Five more?’ I smirk. ‘Hope they’re all as good as this one.’

‘Didn’t you just vomit?’

‘I could throw up again just from laughing at that tragic scene.’

‘Hold my hands, you dick. On to the next.’

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Nathaniel Hope

Belle's eyes are shut. Head thrown back. Breeze skimming her skin. Her hair is draped over her shoulders, stuck across her back with sweat and sun cream. One hand points to the sky, where the sun is pressing down, bleaching everything white. A piña colada is clutched in her other hand and, as she sways, the condensation drips down from her glass, along the now freckled skin of her arm, and lands on her sunburned shoulders. Her body moves to its own beat, without her mind interfering. Without caring what people think.

She cracks her eyes open as one song bleeds into the next and she shimmies towards Molly, who mirrors her movements. They dance together, in time to the heavy bass. Molly clutches Belle's free hand and leans in, shouting over the music. 'That guy, there, the fit one, he's checking you out.' Rachael and Daniela hear this and swing round, using their hands as binoculars to spot him.

Belle flaps her hand at them, laughing, and glances around as Molly motions to the bar behind her. Belle slides her sunglasses down to the tip of her nose and lowers her chin. Tall, glistening, an actual Adonis – and he's already smiling at her. He raises his glass with a slow, confident dip of the head, and she raises hers back, smiling, like she'd been expecting him.

The girls form a line behind her, watching. He pats his friend on the back and starts making his way confidently through the crowd, unhurried, towards the blonde dancing at the centre of it.

'Would it be too forward to say that I can't take my eyes off of you?' He reaches down to say it into her ear, close enough that she can feel the warmth of him, his breath tickling her neck.

Her girls have already melted away, exchanging looks over their shoulders, mouths aghast as they go, barely containing themselves. Belle doesn't watch them leave, she's too busy processing the accent, which is rough and warm and charming.

'A London boy?' Belle flutters her lashes, finding herself a little lost in his dark brown eyes.

'Brixton. Yourself?' He grins, unable to stop himself, his teeth stark white against his dark skin.

‘Ah, I’m East London, this could never work ...’ she flirts.

‘I’d ride to the end of the Victoria line for you.’

‘Wow. True love. Although the Central line would be the real test.’

The sun drops lower, turning the sea amber. Belle’s glass goes from empty to full, to empty again. The groups have merged now and a full dance battle is underway. The girls are pulling out all the stops. Rachael backs everyone away to clear a circle and, on cue, Daniela worms across the floor – her party trick. The girls whoop, the boys cheer, high-fiving Daniela once she’s taken a bow in the centre.

Belle, meanwhile, grinds against Nat, his hands around her waist. Then he grabs her hand and bows, like he’s asking her to dance at a ball. She curtsies and lets him lead her into the centre of the circle, where he spins her around with ease – the hot sea air catching her hair – before pulling her in with a kiss. The girls lose their shit at this; the screaming is feral.

She melts into it, without caring about the many eyes watching – his lips are soft, the kiss is good, and she chooses to ignore the fact that his breath tastes of sour milk. Like too much beer. Mixed with wine. Mixed with rum.

With her hands around his neck, she nibbles his lips, feeling his grip on her waist grow tighter. He groans into her mouth and she pulls back, her smile naughty and wanting. Around them the crowd has closed back in, everyone dancing, nobody paying attention anymore – except the girls, who are still ogling.

‘You’re trouble, y’know that?’ he whispers into her ear.

She shrugs playfully, still swaying her hips.

‘Do you want to go somewhere a little more private with me, Belle?’

‘Follow me.’ She puts her hand in his and leads him towards the hotel.

They wait impatiently, giggling, for the lift doors to shut. As soon as they close, she’s on him. Hands to his chest as he reaches for the back of her head and pulls her towards him. The lift passes floors one and two. Pings at level three, where they peel themselves away from each other, wiping their lips, and the doors open ... to no one. Belle hurriedly presses the button to level seven. The doors close again and he corners her to the wall, cupping her breast in his palm as her hand wanders frantically between his legs, where he is already hard.

The lift chimes at level seven. She grabs his hand and they run to her room. She pulls her key card from the pocket of her denim shorts as he

kisses her neck, hands running over her waist. He reaches between her thighs, which makes her stop, her hands braced on the doorframe, unable to press the card to the right spot on the lock as he finds the right spot between her legs.

Finally, she manages. The lift whirs and starts to move again.

The door swings shut behind them as the air-con swallows them whole. They waste no time making it to the bed, almost tripping over her suitcase, surrounded by clothes strewn across the floor, in the process.

On the bed, he fumbles with the ties on her bikini top, which falls as she kicks off her shorts. She tugs at the ties at her hip, lets her bottoms drop and watches as his eyes go dark, his breath catching.

He flips her around. Impressive. Definitely rehearsed. She leans into it anyway, a smirk on her face.

On all fours, she leans towards the makeup bag on her bedside table, locates a condom, and throws it to him. She listens to him unwrap it as she arches her back, ready and waiting for him to enter behind her.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Belle

‘Oh ... I like it here.’ Jake nods along to the kick drum like a bopping parrot, arms spread wide, face tipped up to the sun with his eyes closed. I know that feeling – the summer warmth on your skin, when you want to soak it up, bathe in the golden rays, truly let go. He would have loved Ibiza. Too bad he never got to experience it.

‘Where are we? Surely not Great Yarmouth?’

‘We’re in Ibiza, Jake.’

Sometimes when I’m walking through London on a warm day, I’ll be pulled back to this memory without warning. It’s always something small that does it: any heat on my skin, the smell of salty air from the chippie down my high street, sun cream on someone passing, or the perfume I wore that summer catching in the back of my throat.

I’ve always thought nostalgia is the oddest sensation: the pleasure of the memory and the ache of it, sitting tight next to each other, inseparable, since the happiness of it only exists because the moment is gone.

For that one long weekend, it was us girls against the world. Twenty-seven, feral for life, experience and, well ... dick! I’d picked myself up, polished myself off and packed up my belongings. I’d moved to London and, with help from Vik, perfected my CV, landing me my first PR job. Life was truly starting.

We’d booked this trip as colleagues, using it as an excuse to actually get to know each other. I’d arrived a little reserved, holding myself slightly apart the way I did back then, not wanting to embarrass myself, get things wrong. We left Ibiza as friends for life. I have vivid memories of feeding each other ham straight from the packet at 2 a.m. to sober us up, wetting ourselves laughing over first-kiss stories in the hotel with pre-drinks, and then, of course, skinny-dipping in the sea at midnight, howling under the moon, tits out. We were one step away from sunning our vaginas to charge them up on the hotel balcony. Daniela wore the evidence of our blossoming

friendship as a badge of honour – in the form of a bruise on her chin from her worm on the dance floor – for the next week and a half.

I don't need to crane my neck to know exactly where we are. I thread through the sweaty, half-naked bodies, past the jacuzzi, the swimming pool, and towards the balcony of the beach bar overlooking the sea. We pass girls draped across sunbeds, plastic boobs in the air like coconuts lined up in a shy. A lifeguard is standing close by. He isn't watching the water. Jake is following close and I don't need to turn around to know he's fallen behind somewhere around the sunbeds.

Fuck, I'd love another drink right now. Beach bars are great when you're slightly tipsy, but when sober, they're ... a lot – all Lynx Africa and sticky sun cream, mixed with Malibu and Coke. My heels stick a little to the floor, as drinks gets spilled while people dance, but nobody cares.

I stop, letting a girl trying to take a selfie pass. She repositions, spinning, trying to catch the light on the best side of her face.

'I actually don't think I like the party scenes in this film,' Jake shouts behind me. 'Why is everyone so jacked?'

I turn as he reaches out and tries to touch the bicep of some hench lad who is standing next to us, wearing nothing more than Speedos and a gold chain around his neck. More men are stationed nearby in groups, gripping beer bottles by the necks, peeling off labels to distract themselves from conversation.

'No one looks like they're actually having fun?' He shrugs. 'Fuck, if this were me and I was alive ...' He shakes his head, doesn't finish the thought. Something across the pool has grabbed his attention – a man whose tan abruptly ends at his collar and the tops of his arms, like he's wearing a pasty T-shirt somehow embedded with chest hair.

Jake stares for a long moment, squinting. 'Why is his head a different colour to his body?'

'If you were partying here, you probably would have hated it,' I say. 'Too loud, too many people doing this ...' I mime someone checking their reflection in their phone screen, pouting.

He laughs, nodding. 'Yeah, exactly.'

I don't point out to him that he'd been doing the exact same thing moments ago, checking out and mentally comparing himself to every guy at this bar.

'Come on, we're just over here.' I wave him forward.

We stop once we reach the balcony. It's hard to miss us.

As the sun sets golden amber over the sea, us girls are wild and free. Arms outstretched, jumping to the beat, spinning each other around, Cheshire Cat grins on our faces. We are truly alive and living every minute of it. The surrounding crowd watches jealously, too in their own heads and aware of their appearance to fully let go, heads bowed towards black screens, taking posed group pics, making small talk with the opposite sex.

These girls, though, they are without a care in the world. No camera phones in sight, they dance truly like nobody's watching. I watch as young Belle pulls an impressive slut drop to the floor, tongue in cheek, literally, with her friends cheering around her, whooping and hollering. I wonder if my knees could still do that now? They chant to the music, hand in hand.

This girl – younger me – stands out like a disco ball: shining bright, in a way that makes everyone around her catch the light too. Her skin isn't bronzed but dusted in freckles; her bleached hair has grown out to sandy roots, an unintentional ombré she'd never have chosen deliberately, but that she's grown to love. Thank God I finally ditched those bleach-at-home box-dye kits – they made my head itch like ants had taken up residence there.

I'm beaming at her, I realise. She's still grieving, deep down, but underneath it all, she's just present. Living for the moment. Chasing her dreams, not forgetting to make the most of every second along the way. My jaw is clenched – I find this out by unclenching it.

What is that? Jealousy? I'm jealous of myself, apparently. That's new.

The girls are clinging to each other now, in a four-way bear hug, laughing as they go, and I find myself trying to remember the last time I danced like that with them. Not just the polite bopping you do at a work Christmas party when someone drags you to the dance floor after only two mulled wines. I reach for the memory but can't find it; it must be further back than I expected. A birthday? Whose? I can't remember.

Why did I decide not to do a hen party, again? Why would I miss an opportunity to have a proper, wild, and rite-of-passage send-off, with these queens by my side? I know the official answer: I was busy. Wedding planning is relentless if you're doing it properly, which I was, mostly alone.

I remember thinking it wasn't necessary. That a weekend trip would have meant more money and more time spent away from planning the actual dream day. More time off, plus logistics on top of logistics, so I just pushed it aside. That's the excuse I gave Rachael, anyway, when she'd asked – the

first, second, and third time. Then she'd stopped asking. Timothy had said that it all felt like a lot, too, given everything we had on. I actually think I might have been the one to say it first.

Either way, it feels like such a shame. I wanted one last hurrah with these girls. I wanted penis piñata, penis straws, penis sashes. I wanted the lot and I wanted it with them.

Younger me does a spin, grabs Daniela's hands and they turn in a circle like they're nine years old and playing ring-a-ring o' roses, except to a Diplo track instead of a nursery rhyme.

I'm still trying to relax my jaw, actually massaging it with my palms now, as Jake hands me a drink. It's bright pink and garish, with a layer of blue at the bottom and complete with an orange slice and straw.

'Cheers,' Jake says, raising his glass as well as his brows.

We clink glasses, very politely, which feels ridiculous given the setting. The drink tastes chemically sweet.

We stand still and sip for a moment, until a woman in a neon-yellow bikini walks past and does a double take at us – or rather, at our glasses: two garish drinks hovering in the crowd at chest height, occasionally tilting. She turns to her friend. We watch her friend's face do the same thing.

I reflexively back away, grabbing Jake by his sleeve.

'We should probably—'

'Yep!' Jake agrees.

We shuffle into a gap between the bar and a speaker, loud enough that no one will pay much attention to anything other than themselves and their end goal of trying to catch the barman's attention.

Jake winces next to me, lowering his glass. 'Terrible drink, this,' he says, one hand massaging his jowls.

'It's an Ibiza beach bar, not a cocktail championship.'

'Tastes like that time Vik put four bags of Skittles in a bottle of vodka and then set it off in the dishwasher.'

'I think that's basically what this is.' I grimace, dragging my tongue across my teeth.

Jake looks at his drink, takes another sip and then scans the crowd. 'Who were you here with, anyway?' he says. I can see him analysing, still comparing himself to the men around us.

'That guy.' I point with the straw in my glass. There stands Nat. God, he was hot.

Jake follows my eyeline just as Nat approaches younger me, places his hands on my hips and we sway side to side. I lean my head back on his chest, eyes closed, and we grind like something from a Nineties R&B video.

‘Him!?’ Jake’s eyes look like they’re about to eject from his head like some cartoon character.

‘I know you thought I’d be alone forever but, please, don’t act too surprised.’

‘No, yeah. He’s very ... very chiselled. Good for him. Great jawline. Excellent work on the jaw.’

My eyes aren’t paying attention to Nat’s jaw; they’re instead fixed on that chest. I remember the feel of my hands pressing down on that chest as I rode him. The way my skin had goosebumps from the too-cold air conditioning, even as everything else was warm. The sound of his laugh when I’d knocked the hotel phone from the bedside table with one arm, and how neither of us had stopped to pick it up, the dial tone becoming the soundtrack to our night. Along with the sound of our skin slapping together.

It wasn’t meaningful in the way that true love is meaningful, but that evening with him felt like the relief my body needed. I’d been so careful for so long, with who I let in and let close. Especially after Vik, who I can admit now was a mistake born out of grief. This felt like something else, completely freeing. To be enjoyed without apology. I have to stop myself from blushing.

Jake’s still muttering along to himself beside me. ‘I’m not threatened! Why would I be threatened? Just because he looks like that, and I’m literally deceased ... Fine. This is fine!’

Nat spins me around, kisses me intensely, and I feel the balcony shift around them – not slow motion, exactly, more like the volume dropping and everything else fading in the background, the girls screaming at the edge of it all. The whole thing narrows down to the two of them in the middle of it.

‘Rebound holiday shag. Classic. I get it.’ I slap him lightly on the arm, and he laughs, nudging me back. ‘So, apart from him being a walking advert for protein powder, why was this so significant? An Ibiza one-night stand was important to you, was it?’

I get goosebumps. Not from the question, but from knowing the full answer.

‘You’ll find out.’ I smirk. ‘To the end?’

Jake exhales in the humid heat. ‘To the end.’

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Jake

One second, we're basking in the warm glow of the sun, and the next, we're standing under stark white sterile lights. There's a bookshop to the right of us and the unmistakable smell of reheated fast food. I dodge backwards to avoid my toes getting rolled over by the wheeled case of a suited-and-booted twat who's barrelling past like he's late for a divorce hearing. A screaming kid lies across hard plastic chairs in the distance, and I watch, grimacing, while two exhausted-looking parents try to ply them with crackers from a resealable sandwich bag.

'I hear Ibiza airport is lovely this time of year,' I say, side-stepping a hen do in matching pink trackies. The bride-to-be wears a white feather boa around her neck and a very orange belly button decorated with a butterfly charm peeks out from her crop top. The maid of honour and mother of the bride, in their sashes, look like they've had a falling-out. Either that or they're very hungover.

Belle gives me a withering look, rolling her eyes before scanning the crowd again.

'We're in arrivals, Jake. Use your brain. We're not going back to the start of a holiday romance; we're going to the end.'

'Right. Obviously, I knew that.'

'You didn't.' She's doing that thing with her eyes, the one that means she's mentally adding this to the list of reasons why I'm insufferable.

'Absolutely did.'

Where is young Belle, then? I scan the crowd properly this time. To my left a rammed coffee shop. Outside it, a tearful reunion – elderly parents greeting backpacking teens like they've returned from war rather than a week in Europe.

Nearby, a man drops down on one knee before a very attractive, leggy blonde in denim shorts. For a horrifying second, I think I'm about to witness a proposal at Stansted arrivals. Then he reaches for his shoelace.

False alarm. I glance at Belle. She's already looking at me with that one brow raised.

'Thought we were about to get a show?' she says.

'Imagine proposing at Stansted. In front of Greggs.'

'So romantic.'

'Will you marry me? Also, do you fancy a sausage roll?'

Belle snorts, like properly snorts. An ugly, involuntary pig noise I haven't heard in years. Who knew I'd miss the sound of a pig snorting? She's surprised; her hands fly to her mouth, but it's too late.

I grin. 'Did you just—?'

'Shut up.'

'Belle, that was a pig noise. An actual pig,' I tease. But that sound of her laughing ... Why do I want to crack another joke? Make her laugh again? I open my mouth to try something else, but Belle cuts in. I shut my mouth and swallow instead.

'Oh ... there!' she points over to the big double doors leading into the arrivals lounge.

Finally, in comes 2018 Belle, flanked by the girls. They're strutting like it's a catwalk. Supermodels, but with a hangover. *Hangover's Next Top Model*. *Hangover's Got Talent*. *Hangover's Angels*. They have sunglasses on, hair bunched at the top of their heads, baggy hoodies and skintight leggings. Behind them swagger Nat and his 'boyz'. One looks almost green with queasiness; the others jeer but keep their distance. Nat is walking much faster than his crew, trying to keep up with young Belle and the girls. Belle and I follow them to the exit.

As the girls leave the airport through the double doors, Nat grabs Belle and spins her around, recycling the same move from the beach club. I roll my eyes. Get a new move, mate.

'Am I gonna get your number, then, or what?' Nat says. He looks smitten. Proper head over heels. Did I look that stupid too, when Belle and I first started dating?

Young Belle laughs. 'And what would you do with that?'

'Uh ...' Nat laughs nervously. 'Call you? Text you?'

'And what would we talk about?' Belle is still smiling, not in jest, but kindly. There's something different about the look behind her eyes.

'I dunno ... stuff?'

‘Look, Nat, I think you’re gorgeous, and this was fun. This was what I needed, but I think we both know it was just a holiday thing, yeah?’ Nat looks devastated. ‘Honestly, I wish you the best, but it’s best that we leave this here!’

I raise my eyebrows. That was actually good. Not a disaster. In fact, it was the opposite of a disaster – she didn’t cry, didn’t raise her voice, didn’t throw anything; no sugar-coating, no ‘let’s stay friends’ bullshit, no ‘it’s not you, it’s me’. I cough, thinking of all the times I used that one.

This Belle said the thing, and she meant it.

And Nat is taking it! Reluctantly, but he’s nodding. He’s not even arguing back.

When did Belle learn to do that?

I look at her, how her shoulders are back, chin up, not even flinching as Nat’s face crumbles – she’s holding eye contact, for God’s sake! The girl I knew would have cried, apologised for crying, then apologised for apologising. This one stands her ground and says it how it is. I’m impressed.

‘That was ... actually handled well!’

Belle spins around to look at me, surprised. ‘Was that a compliment?’

‘Don’t get used to it. You’ve still got questionable taste in men. Present company excluded, obviously.’

‘You’re dead, Jake. Technically, not company. You’re haunting me, remember?’ Fair point.

Belle turns back to the scene. Nat is standing there, backpack strap sliding off one shoulder. He readjusts, rubbing the back of his neck.

‘Yeah. Yeah, it was worth a shot, though, right?’ He flashes that smile of his.

‘Always.’ Belle grins up at him. She squeezes his arm and walks off to join the girls.

‘This was the first time I’d felt properly in control of my own life ... like, ever. And especially in control of my own love life.’ Her voice beside me is almost shaky – with pride maybe, or relief, I can’t quite tell which.

I nod, watching Nat run to catch up with his lads, and I can tell he’s not thrilled, but at least he’s not making a scene. Still, I wouldn’t have given up that easily.

Belle’s gals are waiting just outside the sliding doors, hands on hips; soon, Rachael starts pointing like she’s witnessed something historic and

Daniela is somewhere behind her, talking at the same time.

‘This is good. A-star for past Belle,’ she says beside me, proudly.

‘You go, Glen Coco.’ I raise my hand for a high five.

She stares at me. ‘Did you just quote *Mean Girls*?’

‘I’ve watched a lot of films. Don’t make it weird.’

She returns the high five and exhales, long and deliberate, then she does something with her shoulders – a shimmy, like she’s physically shaking something off – before straightening up completely.

‘What a relief! Right. Rehearsal dinner. Shall we?’

‘After you.’ I bow.

‘Oh, one more thing. Don’t go to my room without me there. You’ve lost room privileges. Lie low in a cupboard or something,’ she adds.

‘Gotcha,’ I reply and take her hands in mine.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Belle

I'm back in the corner of the saloon, facing the wall, exactly where we left. Jake's hands are no longer in mine. I turn – he's not here at all. Guests drift past me towards the dining hall, champagne in hand, hopefully oblivious to the fact that I've been facing the wall, muttering to a ghost. I reach into my dress and a woman I don't recognise catches my eye mid-rummage, so I smile brightly until she walks away. I smooth the paper against the wall and quickly jot down:

Things I have learned, visit 4:

1. Knowing what you don't want is still progress, I think.
2. One-night stands are fun? No need to be more significant than that.
3. I was fun once.

NOTE: still not sure how this saves my soul but ... noted!

I fold it back up, tuck it away, and straighten my dress. Okay, back to the rehearsal now. Back to normal.

As I turn, I almost collide with Timothy. He's right there – close enough for me to catch the scent of his cologne. Something woody but floral, reassuring, one I helped him pick out especially for the wedding.

'What are you up to, crazy lady?' His eyebrow lifts – that quizzical look I usually find endearing. I feel myself stiffen. Is it obvious? Am I flickering when I leave and arrive, like a dodgy lightbulb? I should have been more careful.

Game face on.

'Oh, I was just thinking about you!' I place my hands on his chest and flutter my lashes. Nat and Jake: deleted. 'I was just having a little breather – those speeches got to me!'

'I was thinking we could get Juliet a new phone after the wedding,' Timothy says. 'A thank you for her ... speech.'

I laugh. Of course, that's where his mind went. Not 'are you okay', not 'you seem distracted', just straight to the practical solution. And, honestly, I love that about him. I do.

'This is exactly why I love you.' I press two fingers to his chest.

'Shall we?' He holds out his elbow like a Disney prince. 'We can't miss the caviar bumps.'

We walk arm in arm to the dining hall. I try not to think about the fact that I just lied to him three times in thirty seconds.

As we enter the hall, I stop in the doorway for a moment, taking it in.

Long tables stretch the length of the hall, lit by candlelight flickering against the mahogany panelling. I breathe in, and ... there it is – the smell I'd imagined for months. Woodsmoke from the massive fireplace at the far end, still crackling, and underneath it the warm, herby char of the three-wick Diptyque candles I'd insisted on (Feu de Bois, £200 and worth every penny). Except I'm also getting whiffs of something heavy, a musky scent from somewhere nearby. Who is wearing that? It's like someone was attacked by duty-free.

The tables look just like my Pinterest boards ... Better, in fact.

Arrangements of winter florals – poinsettias, trailing ivy, purple hellebores and, my favourite, red amaranthus – tumble from gold vases of varying heights like a waterfall of velvet tassels. 'Love lies bleeding,' the florist called it. I remember laughing the first time she'd said it, thinking it was perfect – romantic and dramatic, all at once.

It doesn't feel as funny now.

Gold candelabras. Red taper candles. Everything I asked for, exactly as I asked for it.

So why do I feel like I'm watching it from outside myself?

Timothy moves his hand to my back as we work our way to the top table, past plinths either end holding vases of deep burgundy amaranthus. The hum of polite conversation rises around me, chairs scraping along the floor, glasses clinking. Someone laughs too loudly and it lands wrong, feels jarring for some reason. I smile and wave to Timothy's colleague and his wife – a woman I've never actually met – and find myself hoping that the photographers don't get her in too many pictures. God, that's unkind. I'm just tired. That's all it is. Tired and nervous.

My eyes scan the rehearsal seating plan. It's printed in calligraphy on a glass mirror with a frame that almost matches that of the mirror in my

bridal suite – except there’s no ghost in this reflection. Good. And Jake’s name isn’t there either. At least I don’t have to talk my way out of that one.

I smile and wave to Vik and his wife as they sit with some of my friends from home. I hope Kelly didn’t switch places with Miranda. I’ve told her three times not to come on to any of Timothy’s cousins. I know she’s been keen for a shag this weekend; I can tell she still is by the way she is already surveying the room.

I catch a snippet of conversation between the Davises – old neighbours from back home.

‘Gosh, Michael, if this is the rehearsal, what is the actual wedding going to be like?’

‘These flowers alone must be worth a fortune, never mind everything else.’

I look down, avoiding anyone’s gaze. Is this all too much?

No. It’s what Timothy wanted. The logic was sound – get the press shots done tonight so tomorrow could be ours. And honestly? I want a rehearsal too. A chance to iron out any creases before the real thing. Check the florals aren’t dangerously close to the candles. Make sure the DJ knows that ‘no requests’ means no requests, especially from my cousin Harry after four pints. Make sure Great-uncle Norman’s plus-one situation is firmly resolved. I like a plan. I like knowing what’s coming. That’s not a flaw, that’s just ... sensible.

We approach the top table, which seats eight and looks out across the whole room. Faces turn as we arrive – all of them and all at once, and I briefly, for the first time, understand what it must feel like to be famous. We hug our parents and sit, Timothy pulling out a chair for me like the perfect gentleman, without being asked. My parents are to my left, Jules next to them. Timothy’s parents to his right, with Nana Maude at the end – one remaining grandparent each, which had seemed like neat symmetry on the seating plan, but feels more weighted now.

My dad turns to introduce himself to Timothy’s uncle, Mum following his lead.

I reach to nudge Jules as I clock her tutting at Maude’s lilac rinse.

Jules leans in, lowering her voice. ‘I had another look into that name on the seating plan, by the way. Asked the co-ordinator, the staff, nobody can explain—’

‘It’s fine, Grandma, I’ve forgotten about it already.’ I laugh, eyes wide.

She holds my gaze for a beat, then lets it go. She turns back to her phone, scrolling through the speech on her Notes app as if checking for damage.

‘Shame your girls aren’t up here, hen,’ she says, a quick nod towards the corner, placing her phone face down on the table. ‘I still think you should have let them fuss over you.’

‘We talked about this, Grandma. No maid of honour, no bridesmaids.’

‘Yes, I remember.’ Jules sniffs as she takes a knife to a bread roll. ‘Shame about that. I was looking forward to my first hen do.’

I look to the corner of the room where my girls are sitting. Daniela and Molly are posing, flutes in hand, while Rachael takes their picture. They fall about laughing when inspecting the result; I can see them zooming in on the frame, teasing each other’s pouts. They look like they’re having more fun than us on the top table, where my dad is trying to make small talk with the new in-laws.

My girls should be up here with me tomorrow. That was the original plan when I thought of my dream wedding. Molly as maid of honour, Rachael and Daniela as bridesmaids. Matching dresses, embarrassing speeches, crying during the toast ... the whole thing.

But Timothy doesn’t have many close friends.

I let that sentence echo around my head for a moment. My fiancé doesn’t have many close friends. He has two older brothers who are way closer to each other than they are to him. And his best friend, genuinely, hand on heart, the person he’d call in a crisis ... is his dad. Which is lovely, in theory. Healthy, even. His closeness with his parents was one of the first things I fell for, apart from the fact he also cooks the best brunch. But it also meant that asking his dad to be his best man felt ... a little tragic. So instead, we’d agreed to keep it simple. Balanced.

And I get it. I do. I’m the one who suggested it. It seemed fairer that way. But also, I wish he’d said no. I wish he’d told me not to be silly, not to let that stop me from having my girls up here, as my bridesmaids, by my side, because he knows how much they mean to me. That he’d said, ‘Fuck balanced, this is your day too.’ Instead, he just accepted it. And I smiled and told myself it didn’t matter. It does, though, a little, I realise now.

I shake it off. Who cares about traditions these days anyway? It’s way better to break traditions than stick to old-fashioned ones, right? But I can’t help the twinge of sadness as I watch the girls from across the room. Molly

is laughing so hard, her shoulders are shaking, and Rachael is covering her mouth with the back of her hand.

I think of Jake's funeral: his friends, like a pack, arms around each other, loyal to the end.

There he is again, like a parasite in my brain. Can I not have *one* moment without him invading my thoughts?

Breathe out. Turn back to your fiancé.

Timothy passes me a blini with cream cheese and caviar. Just as I'm about to pop it in my mouth, he stops me, waiting for a *Fork Yeah* photographer to jog over and snap me with it. The flash blinds me. A pearl of caviar slides off the cream cheese and down my fingers. I force a smile for the camera, then pop the whole thing in my mouth in one go. As I chew, the tiny pearls of salt popping on my tongue, the camera still flashing, my attention drifts back to the corner of the room. I watch as the girls scoop caviar onto the back of their hands, before licking it off with their tongues. One of them mimes snorting it, as if it were a bump of coke, and everyone laughs. I'm desperate to join them.

There's a lull in the conversation at our table and I look around the room. Is everyone having a good time? Is it just my girls having fun? I try to remember the last time I laughed like that. Properly laughed, tears streaming, stomach cramping, gasping for air. When was the last time I even had *fun*?

I catch my mum's eye next to me and give her a quick smile. Then feel a tap on my shoulder. Timothy's dad, Sam, has appeared behind me.

'Sam! I wanted to say thank you for the speech you gave. It was so lovely.'

'My pleasure, Belle. I wanted to say a little thank you tonight, as I'm sure tomorrow will be too busy – but thank you for making our Timothy so happy. You've been so good for him.'

'He's been good for me, too,' I say automatically.

'He has! That's great.' It's a statement, but why does it feel more like a question? It hangs in the air, just a moment too long.

'We're great together,' I say.

He nods, satisfied, happy. 'That's all a father can ask for.'

But I'm still thinking about the way he said that. *He has?* Like he was surprised? Like he knows something I don't?

‘Hey, did I ever tell you about the summer Timothy realised he wanted to be a chef?’ he continues.

I smile, shaking my head. ‘He said he always knew. That it was never a question.’ I shrug.

He chuckles. ‘That’s the polished version. The truth is, he really was as awful ... as I hinted in my speech. When he was thirteen, he tried, but he was useless. Burned everything. Made such a mess. His nanna ...’ He nods to Maude. ‘She banned him from her kitchen after the spaghetti incident.’

‘The spaghetti incident?’

‘Don’t ask. The ceiling was never the same.’ He smiles into the distance, lost in the memory. I laugh. I can almost picture it. Thirteen-year-old Timothy, tomato sauce dripping from the lampshade, refusing to admit defeat.

‘That’s the great thing about Tim,’ Sam continues. ‘He kept at it. Willpower of steel. Practised every weekend until it was perfect. Ended up applying for culinary school and never looked back. Wouldn’t let anyone see him fail.’

I smile and gaze at Timothy. *Willpower of steel*. That’s a good thing. That’s what I need, someone steady, ambitious. Someone who strives for more. Who doesn’t quit.

So why does *wouldn’t let anyone see him fail* sound like a warning?

I nod to Sam as he stands, squeezing my shoulder as he goes. Timothy hands me another glass of fizz. When I look up, Jules has materialised beside me, having swapped seats with Mum, clearly unwilling to miss anything.

I take a sip, then another. Then I realise I’ve drained the glass without even tasting it.

Jules watches me, an eyebrow raised. ‘Thirsty, are we?’

I smile but it feels wrong on my face. Too tight, too deliberate.

‘The nerves are normal, lovely.’ She rubs my arm. ‘Everyone has them.’ She picks up the bottle of water on our table and pours me a glass. ‘I nearly ran away on the morning of my wedding. Did I ever tell you that?’

My mouth falls open. ‘You did not!’

‘Oh yes ...’ She chuckles. ‘Made it halfway to the train station before your great-aunt caught me. Dragged me back by the tail of my lovely veil.’ She laughs loudly. ‘Not leaving, though ... It was the best decision I ever made.’

I stare at her. ‘You wanted to *run*?’

‘Cold feet, poppet. Everyone gets them.’ She squeezes my hand. ‘I’m saying I didn’t run, though. I had fifty-two wonderful years. The trick is knowing when it’s just nerves and when it’s something else.’

I smile weakly, waiting for her to tell me which one this is. She doesn’t.

Four courses in and I’m running out of small talk. I move a plump scallop around my plate. Six months ago, I would have inhaled these. They’re something I’d never tried before Timothy – before he first dished one up for me in his restaurant, after he’d closed the place just for us, lit a pan just for me. Now the smell turns my stomach. When did that happen? When did the thing I loved become the thing I’m pushing around my plate?

I rest my head on his shoulder and he pecks my forehead.

‘Everything’s running smoothly,’ he says calmly.

I straighten up. ‘Yes, that’s great.’ A flutter of nerves, the suspicious kind, the kind that comes from not having seen my ghost in a while.

‘I forgot to ask ... Did you remember to preorder the wedding thank-you cards?’ he says, scooping a scallop into his mouth.

‘Yes, they’re at home, waiting – stamps and all.’

‘Good, good ...’ He chews and swallows. ‘And the fireworks team arrived to set up for this evening?’

‘Uh, yes, I think.’

‘This location is pretty remote so hopefully they’ve found it okay.’

‘Yes, I’m sure they have. I gave them the number of the reception in my intro email.’

He nods, satisfied. Another item checked off.

I try to remember the last time we talked about something that wasn’t the wedding. The last time he asked how I was feeling, not whether I’d confirmed the florist. The last time we laughed at nothing.

We’re nearing the end of the meal. Everyone is finishing their lemon sorbets – the final course, which we chose because Timothy said it’s a French tradition. Usually, a ‘Trou Normand’, as he assures me it’s called, is served as a shot between courses, but having sorbet means the cold iciness will wake everyone up after lots of food, so we can continue to celebrate.

I watch as he straightens his tie next to me. ‘I know you weren’t expecting this ... but I wanted to make a little speech this evening.’

My eyes widen. ‘Oh, but the timetable!’

‘Don’t worry, I factored in an extra ten minutes.’

Of course he did.

He stands as one of the hotel staff hands him a microphone. Timothy clears his throat. The room goes quiet.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jake

She told me not to go up to her room, so I decided to go up to her room.

I was thinking I could have a snoop around, see if there's anything she's been hiding. Maybe she's got some dirty little secrets I can find, something to prove she's still the same Belle under all the pristine packaging. I left her standing in the corner of that room just as her Prince Charming swooped in. I could tell she wasn't expecting to see him; she looked as if she'd seen a ghost. I make myself laugh at my wit.

Back in her room, everything's as she left it. Makeup sprawled over the dressing table. Wedding dress hanging proud. No bodies or secrets under the bed – just a pair of her knickers kicked off to the side. I smirk. There she is.

Next to the sofa sits a leather holdall. I open it and realise it contains some of Timothy's stuff. There's aftershave, which I resist the urge to sniff, as well as boxers (Calvin Klein, fancy twat) – I definitely don't sniff those. There are matching sets of socks, as well as a packet of paracetamol, in the side pocket. I zip the bag back up carefully and place it to the side.

Belle loves a tradition, I know that. I know she'll want to spend the night apart from Timothy before the big day. I feel a tingle, an impulse to go snoop in his room – maybe there'll be some secrets there. But when picturing his wedding suit hanging, perfectly pressed – neat, ready – I feel a wave of nausea. Something unsettles my stomach, which I'm going to blame on the first sip of booze in ten years, because the alternative is worse.

I've been here longer than I need to be. Gabe is probably cursing at me from his little attic, ringing the bell on his desk, telling me to get a move on. I'm stalling and I know it.

The thing about Gabe's mission is that he was characteristically vague about what I'm actually supposed to get out of it. Something about putting something right, he'd said, like it was a complete manual for the evening. As if I'd know what I was looking for when I found it.

So far, what I've got is this: Belle is not who I thought she was. She's not the girl I knew, but she's also not the version of herself she's been portraying all evening – the one with the straight back and a preference for wine that isn't just whatever's cheapest.

So what am I actually learning here? Peter Cox: boring. Me: don't really wanna think about it. Vik: still ew – definitely not thinking too hard about that. Nat: the only interesting one so far. Not because of what happened – I'm a ghost, not a monk, I know holiday romances happen – but because of how she called it off. I spent four years with her and never saw her do that: truthfully speak what she thinks, without softening it or apologising for it. However, what I'm supposed to learn from any of this, I couldn't tell you.

I belly-flop onto the sofa, cushions sprawling on the floor, and flick on the telly with the remote. I spend a good hour looking for a film I haven't seen yet, but I've seen them all. My hand finds the seating plan in my pocket. I pull it out, unfold it, turn it over. I can't find a pen in the room, just an eyeliner, which I use to scribble something on the back. Then I fold it up and shove it back in my pocket. I check the minibar hidden within the wardrobe, but it's all soft drinks and I need something stronger. I'm tempted to have a rummage through the other guests' rooms. I wonder where Vik's room is. Does he still have that blingy earring he used to wear, hidden away like a guilty secret? But eventually I get bored, with a nice sprinkle of FOMO, as the ground beneath me vibrates with the sound of laughter.

So ... I stroll my way through the castle, down the wooden staircase, through the bar, and to the dining hall, because why not. And while I'm at it, why not treat myself to some more booze, enjoy it while I can. A wedding rehearsal is a cause for celebration, after all. I steal a flute from a silver platter at the entrance and stand, observing the room for a while.

Chatter fills the air, spoons clanking on little bowls. What I'd do for a taste of dessert.

This room is impressive, almost like a movie set. Huge chandeliers, big fuck-off flower arrangements. And Belle sits, glowing, on the top table, Timothy by her side. They look deep in conversation. Probably whispering sweet nothings to each other. I spy Belle's girlfriends in the far corner, the ones from Ibiza, looking much more sophisticated now. Fully clothed, for one. I watch as they take photographs of the happy couple, zooming in on the lovebirds. Then the room falls silent as Timothy clears his throat into a microphone.

I watch Belle laugh, her eyes doing a quick lap of the room before settling back on Timothy.

‘I wanted to surprise Belle with a list of reasons I fell in love with her. Reasons why I cannot wait to make her my wife tomorrow.’ He turns to Belle. ‘I know you hate surprises, so I’m sorry to have sprung this on you, but I wanted the room to hear why you are so special to me, before our big day.’

Timothy then pulls a piece of paper from inside his suit jacket; except it’s not just a piece of paper. It’s a receipt roll which unravels to the floor. The crowd howl and clap. Belle’s mouth is open so wide, I can see her fillings. Timothy raises his free hand, palm out, encouraging everyone to settle down, but his grin gives him away. The corner of my mouth pulls up against my better judgement. Very charming, Mr Posh Boxers.

Anyway, I remember Belle loving surprises. The look on her face that night I picked her up in my car and drove us to the field we first made love in, to watch a forecast meteor shower. The delight on her face when I pulled out the blanket. Her squeal as I summoned her favourite pick ‘n’ mix from my car boot. That must be it – she started hating surprises after me, as no one could pull them off as well as I could.

Timothy continues, ‘Belle, I admire your certainty. How you know what you want. I’m in awe of how you make decisions clearly and never second-guess yourself. It makes me even more proud that you have chosen *me*,’ he points to his chest with his palm, ‘as the man to spend your life with. Your certainty in us as a couple is all a man could ask for.’

I frown. My Belle once spent thirty minutes trying to decide what she wanted from the local Chinese takeaway. Couldn’t choose between crispy beef or chow mein. In the end I was so hungry, I ordered for her.

‘I love your independence. How you don’t need another to feel complete – and how lucky I am that you chose to let *me* in.’

She might not need you, Tim, but she needed me.

‘I love your smile. I love the way your eyebrows have a mind of their own. I love the sound of your giggle and how you sometimes snort when you laugh, even if you do get embarrassed after.’

I shuffle, thinking back to that pig snort that Belle made with me, just moments ago. Not so special now, am I. I bite the inside of my cheek. I’m so stupid to think that that was my moment to claim.

Also, the eyebrow has a name, you should know that, Timothy. It's Browelle. Duh.

'I know they say that true love finds you when you least expect it, and that certainly was the case for both of us. My world stopped still when I first saw you.'

How did they meet, anyway? I'm glad he doesn't dive deeper – I'll get to experience it soon, which I'm dreading, to be fair. I look at Belle, turn to focus on her instead of the growing heaviness in my chest.

I've missed so much. I don't know where she lived when they met, what she does for work now, if she still takes her tea with two sugars. I haven't asked and I'm only realising that now. I knew every bit of her up until twenty-five and then nothing – a decade of her without me. These people in this room got to be there for all of it in ways I didn't.

But she was always going to become someone I'd have to learn again. With or without the crash. I just didn't get a chance to.

'I feel like the luckiest man in the world being the one to wake up and fall asleep with you every day.'

I don't get mornings anymore. Or nights.

'I promise to love you forever ...'

I'm stuck in forever.

'Please, everyone, raise your glass to my sweet Belle.'

Timothy raises a glass and his face reminds me of that iconic scene in Baz Luhrmann's film adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*. The way he dips his head, forehead creased, dimples proud. The room follows.

I fix my gaze on Belle, who is glowing – not for me and not because of me. Just glowing, because that's what she does – and something in my chest unclenches, just for a moment, because she looks happy. Genuinely happy. I raise my glass, gripping the stem tight. My stomach lurches then as, to my surprise, she looks right at me, a smile on her face.

I don't look away. I raise my glass slightly higher. It feels stupid, no one can see me do it. But she can. So, I hold it steady, plant my feet, keep my gaze holding hers and stay right where I am.

'One final thing,' Timothy says again into the mic. The room turns back to him. I watch Belle's eyes leave mine.

'Once we're done with dessert, there will be fireworks on the lawn, overlooking the sea, followed by drinks and a DJ – so do enjoy. We'd just

ask that you're mindful that we have a big day tomorrow, so perhaps pace yourselves accordingly ... We'd hate for anyone to be suffering tomorrow!'

Talk erupts throughout the room at the mention of fireworks and a DJ, glasses clinking and someone wolf-whistling from the back. The responsible drinking note gets a laugh too, which means absolutely nothing good for Timothy's plans.

Belle is standing now, pulling Timothy into a hug. I swallow. Chairs scrape back as the guests grab their bags and phones from the tables, patting each other's backs, downing the rest of their drinks. I'm about to duck out and start to walk back towards the bedrooms, but I turn and Belle is next to me, in front of the fireplace, pretending to warm her hands on the crackling logs. She seems energetic, jittery. I feel flat next to her.

Don't act like a lovesick puppy now, Jake.

'How many more now?' I ask, knowing full well the answer.

'Five more' she says through closed lips, careful not to look like she's talking into thin air. 'We're halfway. We started at 4 p.m. and now it's almost eight, so we're on track. Let's go, the next one's a good 'un.' She turns her head, winks at me, and holds out her hands.

Is she enjoying this?

Emma Cuthbert

No one has ever looked at Belle like this. Not with hunger – she’s had that – but with patience. Like Emma has already decided what she’s going to do and is in absolutely no rush to do it.

They stare at each other, from opposite ends of the sofa. Red wine in hand; Vapour Soul playing on the record player. They know what’s coming. Belle rearranges herself, the pulsing between her legs getting harder to ignore.

Emma breaks the spell and looks away. She uncurls her legs as she stretches over to place her wine glass on a book. Belle watches, eyes skimming the soft skin of Emma’s arms, working her way up from her hand, adorned with gold rings, to her décolletage. Her hair is shorter than Belle remembers, swept back from her face, and Belle can’t look away from those cheekbones, her clear skin, the way her lip curls just to one side. Emma is wearing jeans and a ribbed white tank top that fits tight against her chest – no bra in sight. Belle bites her lip. Tries not to stare again and fails.

‘I’ve been imagining you here, on this sofa, since we first met.’ Emma’s voice is deep, a London accent with a Scottish twang. Belle feels her cheeks turn hot. She too had been imagining this for weeks. Lying awake, phone hot in her hand after another late-night call, imagining the feel of Emma’s hand reaching between her thighs. And now it was really happening and she couldn’t remember how to breathe.

‘Come here,’ Emma says. Belle puts down her glass without looking where it lands. She crawls over, the sofa soft and unsteady beneath her, and wobbles slightly – nervous, vulnerable, made worse by the way Emma’s expression deepens as she watches.

She kneels next to Emma, who takes her face in her hands, leans forward and kisses her. Emma’s skin is soft and smooth against hers. The absence of stubble is a joy. Belle closes her eyes and lets herself fall into it. Emma’s kisses are more tender than she’d imagined, and she’d imagined this a lot. She tastes like cherries, wine. She inhales the scent of Emma now: a radiating warmth, of faded perfume and saltiness.

‘Do you want this?’ Emma whispers between kisses.

‘Desperately.’ Belle feels a thrum in her chest, her hands shaking as Emma leans back and gently removes her own top. Belle takes a sharp intake of breath at the beauty in front of her. She notices a tiny freckle under the left breast and wants to touch it, trace it, memorise it. Wants to run her tongue across Emma’s collarbone, down to where her nipples stand, hard and waiting.

Emma reaches forward now and removes Belle’s top, while her eyes continue to devour her.

‘Get undressed,’ she whispers.

Belle’s breath stops. A command. Emma has given her a command and Belle’s whole body wants to obey. Her hands go to her skirt before she’s decided to move them. She shimmies it down slowly, not breaking eye contact, half-terrified Emma will look away. She doesn’t.

She watches as Emma arches her hips, sliding her jeans off. Then her pants. Black. She is perfect. Belle could sit here forever, tracing the paleness of her skin, the soft dip of her waist. Except she was getting wetter, and Emma hadn’t even touched her yet.

Emma motions for Belle to come closer and, once within reach, pulls her by hips and guides her to her lap. Belle wants to press against her, wants to feel her chest against hers, but is scared to move, in case it shatters the moment.

Emma leans in and kisses Belle’s breasts, prickled with goosebumps, almost vibrating with anticipation. Belle’s hands reach for her own hair, shaking it free from her ponytail, and she can’t help it anymore, as she rolls her hips against Emma.

Emma turns Belle around on her lap. She stares out into the open room and is met with her own gaze in the mirror leaning against the bookshelf opposite.

Belle watches, mouth open, as Emma uses her leg to push Belle’s thighs apart. She watches as Emma kisses her neck. She watches as Emma reaches around to pinch Belle’s nipple. She watches as Emma reaches her other hand between Belle’s legs. Watches as she draws small circles on Belle’s clit, which is wet and ready.

Belle is practically shaking.

She stops thinking now and just feels. She melts into Emma’s warm chest behind her, reaching her own hands back to Emma’s thighs, desperately pulling her body closer. Emma gets the hint.

Belle grinds into her hand and Emma's rubbing gets harder, more urgent. She can't help the moan that escapes her mouth as Emma inserts a finger. Belle's body judders, unable to keep still. She feels the pressure building as Emma kisses her neck, nibbles it, breath hot and rippling against her skin.

Belle can't think of anything apart from the feel of Emma's fingers moving inside her. She claws her nails into Emma's thigh. Emma's other hand now reaches around to touch herself alongside Belle.

Emma's fingers match Belle's breathing, speeding up when Belle's hips stutter, slowing when she gets close. She teases. She draws it out. Her breath is ragged against Belle's neck, both of them moving together, and Belle feels the wave building, unstoppable. Emma's fingers curl just right and when Belle comes, Emma's name in her mouth, she feels herself let go completely. Emma shudders behind her a moment later, breath catching, and they stay there – tangled, panting, real. No performance. No worry. Just this.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Belle

I feel my cheeks burn whenever I think back to this night. I take a deep inhale, excited to relive it. I shuffle on the wooden floorboards, wondering what Jake will think. I smirk.

The room is ever so slightly smoky, filled with the scent of incense, a musky sandalwood aroma wafting from a low bookshelf to our left. God, I loved this apartment. A woven rug, red, black and cream, lies in the centre of the room underneath a coffee table which is all glass, except for its bronzed legs made from metal piping.

Next to that, a cream velvet sofa backs on to a window overlooking a residential street of brick tenement houses. A fur throw is folded delicately on one arm. A taller bookshelf on the far wall holds a record player, something slow and warm drifting from it and the shelves are stuffed with books, trinkets, records. A mirror is leaned up against the bookshelf, making the room appear bigger and, next to it, a tall lamp casts a warm ambient glow.

The monstera in the corner was her pride. ‘Eleven years old,’ she’d told me once, touching a leaf like it was a pet. ‘Most people overwater them. You have to learn to leave some things alone.’ I remember wondering if that was advice about plants or about me.

The day we’d met, I was not expecting to meet a new love interest. My mind was all work – I had a presentation the following week but had also promised Jules a visit for her birthday, so my stress levels were at an eight out of ten on that train from London to Edinburgh.

I was tapping away on my laptop, oblivious to my surroundings, when I stretched out, looking out at the barren land through the window. My leg was tapping frustratedly against a table leg, or so I thought, because then said table leg moved.

‘Oh my God, I’m so sorry,’ I said, ducking to look under the table and confirming it was, in fact, a human leg. I peered over the tabletop and

noticed a woman sitting opposite, a mischievous and amused grin playing on her lips. She had chin-length brown hair, swept haphazardly to a side part. She wore a blue check shirt buttoned to the top and was holding a book open on the table; a red leather bookmark was placed neatly in the fold. She looked like an actress I admired. The kind of woman I'd pause on while scrolling, telling myself it was just appreciation. She looked, I realised with a small internal lurch, like the women I'd always noticed but never let myself think about too hard.

'I really am so sorry!' I grimaced.

'Playing footsie, are we?' She smirked, playfully, and I felt my face go immediately, completely, red. I closed my laptop. We flirted the entire way to Edinburgh. She made me laugh and talking to her, flirting with her, felt so easy, effortless. Like I didn't have to try or put on an act – I could just be myself. She asked for my number when we got off the train and I gave it to her without having to think about whether I wanted to.

That weekend in Scotland, I was barely there. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw hers: that steady blue, fixed on me like she'd already decided something.

I had agreed to a drink in a pub with her, before my train back home that Sunday, and the tension was palpable. She had placed her hand on my leg in the corner booth when we chatted about our lives, our jobs, our friends, and I'd felt like a giddy schoolgirl; I could hardly concentrate on anything but the warmth of her palm on my thigh. I chewed my straw as she talked; the Roman nose of her side profile as she looked out towards that bar felt like the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. The distance was going to be an issue, but she'd promised me that she'd text me every day. And she had stuck to her word.

Texting for weeks became sexting, became phone calls, became Zoom dates, became plans for me to visit her flat in Edinburgh. I was addicted to how she made me feel – sexy, impulsive, hot.

I'd never done long distance, and my only sexual experiences since Jake had been my ex-boyfriend's best friend and an Ibiza one-night stand. But I was two years off turning thirty and ready for romance. In my head, my next serious relationship would be the forever one, and so for the first time, I was honest with myself about what I actually wanted. When Emma came along, I wasn't sure if she was going to be the one for me, or whether she was going to be the sexiest fling I'd ever had. Either way, meeting her on

the train, looking at me like I was interesting, unlocked a part of me that had been quiet for a *very* long time.

There were no expectations with Emma: she felt as happy to explore me and my body as I was to explore her.

This particular evening, she had picked me up from the station with a book she thought I'd enjoy – Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*, dog-eared and annotated in her handwriting. We went straight to her favourite wine bar, where she ordered for us both without looking at the menu. A natural, orange wine from somewhere I'd never heard of. A cheese board with names I couldn't pronounce.

'This one's Neufchâtel,' she'd said, cutting me a sliver from the heart-shaped round. 'French farm girls used to make them for the English soldiers they'd fallen for. A little act of treason.' She'd held my gaze as I ate it. I nodded like I had opinions about cheese. I was too nervous to taste anything properly. Too aware of her watching me chew.

I'm standing in the archway to the kitchen and watch now as we sit on opposite ends of the sofa, flirting, tension radiating from our bodies. Jake comes in behind me and stops, abruptly, noticing Emma. I watch him blinking.

'Hmm ...' He smirks.

'Got a problem with something?' I put my hands on my hips.

'Nope. No problem.' He looks at Emma, then back at me, nods with brows raised. 'She's fucking fit.'

'You basically said the same about Nat ...'

'You've got great taste.' He pauses. 'Vik aside, obviously.'

I sigh, turning back to Emma.

Jake scans the room, tapping a finger to his lips as he nods. 'Let me guess ... Artist?'

I roll my eyes. 'Wrong.'

'A poet?'

'Wrong again.' As Jake totters around me, I keep getting drawn to Emma. That husky laugh, low and a little rough. I find myself waiting for it, trying to tune in without meaning to.

Jake huffs next to me. 'Give me a clue ...'

'She was an interior designer.'

Jake lets out a laugh, short, snappy. 'That explains it. This room is annoyingly well put together.' He gestures to the décor, before adding, 'Although ...' He trails off, his eyes narrowing as he studies the space.

'Spit it out,' I say, folding my arms, bracing myself.

He glances at me, then back around. 'This whole setup – the vinyl, the incense, the strategically placed fur throw ... This is just work for her.'

'Your point is?' I scrunch up my face, tilting my head.

'Belle. She literally designed a shag pad. You fell for a mood board.'

'Don't be a dick.'

I glance at Emma, in her ribbed tank top and baggy jeans. I'd forgotten the way she leaned in when she listened. Really listened. How she never rushed to fill silences, how she'd be comfortable just letting things sit.

How she held eye contact just a beat longer than expected.

How when we were together, I felt like the most important person in the room. But it wasn't just how she made me feel. It was who she was. She had a life I admired and envied – a flat she'd designed and really put her stamp on; friends she'd had for decades; opinions about wine and art and politics that she delivered without hesitation. She never second-guessed herself. Never apologised for taking up space. I wanted to absorb her certainty through proximity, like it might rub off on me.

I think back to this relationship with a fondness I can't shake. Those weekends we spent in bed, talking, laughing, drifting in and out of each other. Time stretched in a way it doesn't anymore.

'This was the first time I'd opened up to someone. And even though it was long distance, I started to let myself imagine a future. For the first time since ... you know.' I swallow and watch as Jake bites his lip. He looks at me consideringly and just for a beat there's something there between us again. I break eye contact and we both turn.

We watch as I crawl over to Emma, on all fours, and we kiss. I feel Jake go very still beside me. I wait for him to crack a joke, some sort of smutty remark, but he doesn't. I look over to him, but his face is contemplative in a way I can't read.

Is he uncomfortable? Jealous? Turned on? He must be feeling something after discovering I found something soft and easy that wasn't with him. I notice the slight stubble on his jaw, the smooth skin around his eyes, how he looks exactly as he did the last time I saw him alive. I haven't let myself look at him properly until now.

On the sofa, Emma pulls my top off. Young me looks nervous, giddy, and horny, somehow all rolled into one – all bitten lip, mouth open, eyes wide, nipples hard.

Beside me, Jake glances away, suddenly very interested in the bookshelf. Still, I reach out instinctively and try to cover his eyes. ‘Don’t you dare look.’

‘I’m not looking!’ He bats my hand away, laughing. ‘Chill out. Nothing I haven’t seen before anyway.’

‘Just making sure.’ I hold my hands outstretched. ‘Come on, take these. We’re going.’

He rolls his eyes but takes them in his, and I let Emma’s flat fold away around us – the incense, the record, that husky laugh, all of it going soft at the edges, then gone.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Jake

‘Ahhh ... I LOVED this place,’ Belle squeals next to me, jazz hands wagging by her face.

I have zero idea where we are but it’s a small box room and it’s pink. Overwhelmingly pink. I twitch my nose as a strong scent wafts over – spiced apple? Cinnamon? It smells like a bakery. Except there’s a bed tucked into the corner, covered in throws, and patches of black mould speckle the ceiling above it.

Someone’s hammered a nail into the wall and hung a trailing ivy plant from it. The rumbling sound of a double-decker bus flies past outside and the room shakes, and I’m concerned as the nail seems to wobble at the movement.

I do a slow turn. Flat-pack-style desk under the window. Laptop, notebook, a pen pot that’s mostly biros with their lids missing and a rogue, dirty makeup brush. I pick a pen up, test it on my palm. Dead. Try another. Also dead. A red one works, just about. I pocket it. And beside it, a framed photograph. I lean in. Belle’s and Jules’s faces squashed side by side, both laughing at something off camera. Juliet is wearing what appears to be a Christmas jumper lit up with actual fairy lights. Classic.

I straighten up. It’s a small thing, the photo, but it gnaws at me. I sometimes thought of Juliet as my own grandma ... Sunday lunches, her insistence on bringing me shortbreads on every visit because I once said I liked them. Her telling me I was handsome and ... if ‘she were my age’, in a way that sounded vaguely threatening. I look around again, focus in on the mould, the ivy, the peeling walls. Belle built a whole life in this room, and this is the first I get to see of it.

I look down to Belle as another bus rattles past, sending the nail swaying.

‘Your bedroom in Bethnal Green?’

‘Ugh ... I have such great memories here with my girls – Daniela and Molly. Rachael was living with her boyfriend at the time but was practically

our third housemate, as we were all inseparable. We lived here for two years but in 2019 the landlord priced us out and we had to leave, dragging our feet.'

She continues, getting increasingly more animated, almost bouncing on the spot. 'Oh my God, I just remembered our first night in this apartment! Daniela slapped a neon pink dildo – you know, with a suction cup at its base—'

'No, I don't know!' I say, more prudishly than I would have liked.

Belle has her hand to her chest now, cackling as she finishes telling the story. '... But I couldn't hear anything over my laughing.'

I smile at her as she waffles on. A hint of the woman I fell in love with. Rambling on, a zest for life, not overly serious about anything. I'd forgotten the way she sometimes did this. How she was able to build a whole world out of a single memory, dragging you through every detail until you felt you were right there with her. Towards the end of our relationship, I'd found it exhausting, but right now, it feels harder to name.

This is the girl I knew – the one next to me now, who laughs at her own story while she's still trying to tell it, hands massaging her cheeks to stop them cramping. Not the Whitby version I've met this evening, with her fancy drinks, who irons her feelings as well as her clothes.

As she talks about her friends with the sort of warmth reserved only for the people who helped shape you, I try to do the maths in my head. If she was here for two years, we must be at some point in 2019. I've been dead for three years. She'd moved to London, built a career, explored her sexuality, and filled a flat with women who knew each other so well, they spoke openly about sex toys. She'd been fine. Better than fine. And I'd missed it all.

She's telling me now about the note they'd left for the next tenants. How they'd written their recommendations for the neighbourhood – the best date spots, the best kebab in the area after a night out, and I catch something under the nostalgia: her voice slightly catches when she curses the landlord again, betraying she's still annoyed about it, even now. She loved this flat, this tiny box room with its mould.

I don't entirely understand the whole London thing. How people are so loyal and protective of their neighbourhoods, how being priced out sits like a real loss. Back home, no one grieved a postcode.

‘I had some of the best years of my life living here. London on our doorstep, arm in arm with the friends I’d been craving my entire life.’

‘Sounds fun.’ I smile, not able to match her energy. I’m still about three anecdotes behind her, which she doesn’t notice because she’s already moved on and I can’t keep up, and I know why. I keep snagging on the same thing: all of this, everything she’s been describing, it all happened for her because she left. She’d wanted this when we were together. I knew she did. And I’d tried to talk her out of it.

‘You’d have loved Daniela – she’s the life and soul of the party ... The banter you two would have had. She would have drunk you under the—’ She stops, abruptly.

I go still and there’s a moment I think she’s clocked it. She’s realised that she’s put me in a sentence with someone I’ll never get to properly meet. Me and Daniela, swapping banter over a table somewhere, and Belle watching us go; she’s speaking like I would have just slotted into her life if someone had moved a few things around. Like I was just running late.

She pauses and looks up at me, her mouth smiling though her eyes aren’t. I watch her realise it in real time. It’s a small calibration – first the smile holds, then something underneath it shifts, not dramatically or in a way anyone would catch apart from me, but just a fraction, the way a room changes when a cloud moves over the sun. She glances down for a second, and I can’t tell whether it’s at the floor or her hands, then back up at me. I don’t say anything, although it’s on the tip of my tongue that I should, but then it’s gone. She’s already dealt with it and that’s that.

I clear my throat as the door opens and a young Belle walks in.

There she is.

She’s on the phone, wearing an oversized denim jacket, her natural dark blonde hair in a centre part, tied in a neat ponytail at the nape of her neck. She throws herself on the bed, staring at the ceiling, phone clutched to her ear.

‘I’m just not sure if it’s right for me to come,’ she’s saying, eyes scanning the room, landing on the spot of damp on the wall opposite. I hear who I’m guessing is Emma on the other end.

Belle sighs, twiddling her ponytail with her fingers. ‘I don’t know. Should I even be meeting your family? What is this?’ She sits up and puts Emma on speakerphone as she takes her jacket off and folds it neatly, placing it at the end of her bed.

Emma's voice fills the room, her tone slow and considered. 'I just know they'd love you, Belle. And, truthfully, I was excited to share you with them.'

Belle nods, then places her head in her hands. She speaks through her fingers now. 'I know. I know. It's just, if I meet them and we don't work out – like could we even do this, long distance?'

'I get it. It's far.'

'It's so far.' Belle sighs, falling back onto the bed. 'I don't want to have to travel five hours to see you. I just want you to be near. To be someone I could theoretically turn up on the doorstep of when I need a hug,' she says, rubbing her forehead.

'And you haven't changed your mind about moving here?'

Belle shakes her head, her voice sad but confident. 'I'm just not ready to leave London yet. Did you have a think too?'

'I've been thinking about it a lot. I don't think it's possible with my work here, the business.'

Belle pauses and lets out a sigh. Silence fills the room as she starts picking the skin around her nails, then she catches herself, stops, sits on her hands instead. Finally, she says, 'Part of me feels that if we really wanted us to work, we'd make it work, you know?'

Silence again. 'This is shit,' Emma says.

'So shit.' Belle sits up now, crossing her legs underneath her, holding the phone in the palm of her hands. A car horn beeps outside.

'I'm not ready to completely let go of you yet, though, Belle.'

Belle's face looks pained; her frown is deep, her mouth downturned. Her eyes skim the phone, her hands, the bedsheets. I can't tell if this is what she wants or if she's been pushed to this.

'I think, for now ...' She pauses. 'We need to end this, what we're doing.'

Something hits me in my chest – not the ending ... I'd clocked that was coming, since Emma will not be the one at the altar tomorrow. It's the bit before it, the way Belle put herself first, without collapsing inward or making it easier for everyone else.

I think about how many times I'd watched her do the opposite with me. Swallowing the thing she actually wanted to say and handing me the version I could handle instead. I thought that was just how it was, but it turns out that was just who she was with *me*.

Hearing how she was so excited about this time in her life, I'm proud of her for not throwing it away for someone else.

'I guess so,' Emma replies.

I stick out my bottom lip and turn to Belle beside me. 'Very mature.'

She nods, excitedly. 'It was the right choice. Doesn't mean I don't still think about her, though.'

She smiles but then looks away, finding a spot on the wall just past my shoulder.

'Hey, you okay?' I reach out and my fingers find her arm.

'They're not all like this, you know,' she says softly, that confidence now gone. She knows what's coming and she's trying to warn me ... or herself, I can't tell which.

'I don't know, but I'll find out.' She tries to smile. 'I'll be by your side, Belle.'

'Well, the next one's nice, anyway. But after that ... Fuck.' She laughs, a deep exhale. 'We might need a big drink before that one ... and the one after that ...'

I squeeze her shoulder before letting go. 'Shall we have a quickie now?'

One side of her mouth curves up. 'Let's do it.' Her eyes twinkle as she takes my hand.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Belle

I'm back at my wedding rehearsal, next to a roaring fireplace. Jake is ... somewhere, and there is no way in hell I'm missing the fireworks I've been looking forward to for the past year. I briefed the company, Vampyre Sky Pyrotechnics, to use colours that fit in with our florals in the chapel tomorrow *and* to have them go off in sync to a track that played in the wine bar where Timothy took me on our first official date.

We both agreed the actual first date didn't count, although for slightly different reasons. Mine being, there's no way in hell we are mentioning Tinder in our wedding speeches, and Timothy's reasoning being that it was the wrong setting: too casual, no champagne. No one needs to know we rewrote our origin story before it even properly began.

I've been picturing this moment for months. Seeing everyone together, huddled under blankets, faces lit up with sparks, and Timothy by my side, our last evening together before becoming husband and wife.

First, though, my notes. After a shimmy in my bra, I add:

Things I have learned, visit 5:

1. I knew when to let go ... First time for everything.
2. Orange wine is not as nice as it sounds.
3. I put myself first and it worked out. Why didn't I do that more?
4. I miss her, actually.

Note: still have that book she gave me. Going to read it this time. Actually gonna.

I peel the paper off my palm, which has turned oddly clammy. Must be the fireplace. Not what's still to come. That's not something I want to think about just yet ... I tuck the paper and pencil back into my bra and start to rub my palms on my dress. Stop. This dress costs an entire month's rent of that Bethnal Green flat. Plus, I'm a woman now. Women don't rub sweaty palms on satin. The old me did that and she's not invited this weekend.

Right. Where's my husband-to-be?

I find him waiting for me, elbow outstretched, and I grin at him, take his arm and we walk onto the grounds.

The fireworks are magic. So why does my stomach keep dropping? I shiver. It's really damn cold. My right heel keeps sinking into the grass. One of Timothy's aunts looks a little too drunk and she stumbles to my left. Is this feeling just nerves, or excitement? Or is it that my dead ex has been dragging me around on a time-travelling road trip of my past failed relationships?

Timothy pulls me closer. He's standing behind me, arms around my chest, chin resting on the top of my head. I know what this looks like from the outside: the perfect candid couple shot. The one the photographer has been angling for all evening. I can feel the lens pointing at me from somewhere to my left. Instead of feeling safe, I feel claustrophobic. I stay very still, fighting the urge to step forward and shake Timothy off, as smiling guests are watching us now too.

Timothy's sharp stubble scrapes along my cheek as he leans down. 'Thank you for everything you've done for us this weekend. Everything so far has been perfect.' I tilt my head to give him a peck on the cheek.

Should I be annoyed that he said 'so far'? And damn right it's perfect. I feel like I've been working two jobs for the past year. I had to turn down a weekend away with my cousins, which got silently downgraded to 'maybe next year', because I had a weekend of Zoom calls with venue options. I had to give up my monthly book club because all the reading I could manage were brochures and contracts. I even missed Aunt Susan's retirement party because I was knee-deep in spreadsheets and logistics. Every time I had to say no, I told myself it was an investment. That this moment would be worth it.

'I'm constantly amazed by you, Belle. I love you.' I watch Timothy's face go orange and then red as the fireworks illuminate him. For a moment that urge I was feeling lightens. I find myself pressing closer without meaning to.

He means it. That's the thing about Timothy, he always means it. My natural instinct is to hold it at arm's length, inspect it, look for the catch, but there isn't one with him. I've never felt so certain of being loved. Never felt so steady inside a relationship. Compared to what came before him – and I'm dreading reliving those memories – Timothy is a gem. A rare jewel. A thing hard to find in modern dating.

These jitters must just be nerves. Cold feet, like Jules said. Everything is going smoothly. I have nothing to worry about.

I don't.

The crowd goes silent – a collective held breath – and then my favourite kind go off. The twizzly ones: silent at first, but then the sky comes apart in an explosion of glitter. I get chills across my shoulders, and for a moment I'm not thinking about anything other than this. Just the sky.

A gust of wind pushes a cloud of smoke over the crowd and I spot him then. Jake. He's standing next to Vik, hands in his pockets, eyes to the sky. I watch as he takes a deep inhale. The same one he'd do when he was trying to take things in, be more present. He tilts his chin up and closes his eyes for a second. For a moment he looks just like the old Jake.

He doesn't know I'm watching and I note something on his face I can't describe. Not sadness, but something similar. Like he's trying to memorise this moment ...

Then the smell hits me. I close my eyes, inhaling that dry, gunpowder smell, almost metallic in my mouth. It takes me back to one bonfire night we had together. How we had set off fireworks in the field behind his house. How we'd run, mock screaming, back to our blankets after lighting the fuse. Cheesy music was playing from his battered, portable speaker, getting overshadowed by the loud bangs. How we crawled over each other. How he had the ability to make the world stand still when he smiled at me. How he always knew the spot. How I clawed his skin in ecstasy. The smell of smoke in my hair for days after, not wanting to wash the memory out.

What would life have been like if he had lived? Is there a world where there could have been a way back for us? A world where we'd have gone our separate ways and grown up. Could we have come back together? I imagine watching us, an outsider looking in, playfully fighting the crowds down Columbia Road. We'd argue about the price of the hydrangea stems, his hand holding two coffee cups in a cardboard holder and a bouquet of roses clutched in the crack of his elbow.

The fireworks pull me back. I swallow and push myself a little harder into the body behind me. He squeezes his arms around me tighter – *Timothy* squeezes his arms around me tighter.

It's a strange thing, watching your entire romantic history play out before you in one evening. Like a boxset of trauma nobody asked for. And this feels like the first moment I can really take a step back. Try to take stock,

learn something so that I don't get damned for eternity. What have I actually learned so far, though, from the lists I've been making, kept neat and tidy in my bra?

Let's start with Vik. God, I try not to think about what happened with us, and it's obvious why. There's no lesson from that evening that I can wrap up neatly; instead, I just have the memory of doing something that, in the moment, I realised was wrong, but still did it anyway, because the alternative was going home to an empty bed and feeling feelings.

But I think that what Vik taught me, if that's even the right word, is that I could make a mess of something and still be standing afterwards. Which is more useful than it sounds. Also, that car sex is genuinely terrible and if anyone tells you it isn't, they're lying. Need to add that to my list.

Nat, I think about more fondly. Not because he did anything particularly significant, apart from being generally gorgeous and uncomplicated. But dancing at the bar that night – no bag, no phone, no idea of the time – was the first time since Jake died that I properly felt like myself again. Like Belle was still in there, and I hadn't lost her entirely. Nat didn't give me that, but he was there when I found her.

I think about Emma with warmth. She taught me what it feels like to be truly seen. Not as an asset, not to be won over, but just recognised and accepted for all of my strengths and flaws. Also, that it is possible to put yourself first and come out the other side, not just intact, but clearer. I walked away from her because I wasn't ready to stop living the life I was building and she let me go without making me feel guilty for it. I've never forgotten that.

Also, that multiple orgasms are achievable. Thank you, Emma.

Jake taught me ... Well, that relationship taught me I had ambition, for one. That I was capable of more than just my hometown and a sensible plan. As for anything else ... I slump, pick the skin around my fingers. I don't have words for it yet. Maybe I won't tonight.

And then there's Timothy. Who never once made me feel like I was too much or not enough. He has never put me in a situation to test me, or make me jealous, or feel the need to compete. I think about that one female diner at his restaurant ... I'm sure there have been plenty, but I actually caught this one – she had leaned across the bar, laughing too hard, her hand on his arm. But he'd looked up, seen me, smiled, and walked straight back. We didn't even need to mention it. It wasn't even worth an explanation.

Maybe that's what tonight has been. Not a haunting, or a test. Just a chance to set things down properly before tomorrow. A reminder that I'm right where I need to be.

And I'm not even finished yet ... I take a deep breath and focus again on the fireworks in front of us.

Jules is to our right now, dancing with my dad under the stars. He twirls her around while my mum takes photographs. After a couple of spins, she raises her arms in the air and she twirls more, eyes shut, completely in her own world, while my dad tries to copy, although two beats behind. I watch her longer than I mean to; she reminds me of me, that night in Ibiza.

Just behind them I spot Kelly cheers-ing with Barnaby – Timothy's youngest cousin. I roll my eyes. By the looks of it, she's going to be successful in her quest for a shag tonight.

The fireworks show comes to an end, and Timothy turns to me, looking deep in my eyes before pulling my chin close and kissing me deeply. It feels natural, normal.

But there are no fireworks. My stomach doesn't flutter, and I don't feel the urge to sink into him more, legs weak from his kiss. Instead, I pull away and turn back to the crowd.

I'd planned this especially, the night before the wedding, to give us a moment I'd always dreamed of when I thought of pure love: fireworks overhead, his arms around me – something straight out of a film. And now I'm standing here, leftover smoke from the show billowing over the sea, feeling nothing but the cold bite my skin and my feet hurting.

Of all the places, of all the nights to feel nothing when his lips touch mine. I'd have swapped the fireworks in an instant, just to feel some metaphorical ones tonight.

'What's next?' Hot breath tickles my neck and I jump, hairs raised. That's not Timothy's voice. It's Jake's.

'You okay?' says Timothy, feeling me tense. I try not to look at Jake, who is standing directly beside him, grinning.

'All good!' I sing.

All three of us turn as a voice from the hall shouts to come in for the party.

Great, this is my chance, I have the perfect excuse – I don't even have to lie for this one.

‘Time for my outfit change!’ I squeal, as Timothy shakes his head, surprised.

I rush off back upstairs, Jake behind me.

‘Four more,’ I whisper to him in the long corridor. ‘Let’s do this one quickly, get ready, have a big drink – maybe a shot – and then brace ourselves for what’s coming.’

We open the door to my suite, and as soon as it closes, Jake takes my hands in his.

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Arthur Adler

He had been teasing her all day – for hours – leading her to the edge of climax. And just as she's about to explode, he stops. Pulls back. A mischievous glint in his eyes. She moans, cries, begs for him not to stop. To enter her. To ravish her. Please. His light eyes, dimpled cheeks, and tanned chest drive her crazy. He starts again: rubs his hands over her thighs, licks between her legs, circles her clit, inserts his fingers ... and then, just as her legs start shaking again, he stops. She grabs the bedsheets with her hands, gasps for air, begs him to release her.

Then she feels a drip of sweat hit her chest. Belle opens her eyes as Arthur grunts. He's atop of her, thrusting.

The fantasy has gone and instead is replaced with the familiar.

She stares into his eyes, dark brown, as he pumps. She knows every inch of him. Can read his pale skin like a map, knows the constellation of his moles. Could blindly trace the Pac-Man tattoo on his ankle. Knows every vein of his cock. She arches her back up slightly and he furrows his brow. She knows he likes that. She can tell he's concentrating on not coming too soon.

Focused, he returns the favour, reaching down to squeeze her nipples. She tilts her head back, reaches her arms above her, and grabs on to the headboard for support as he pounds.

This dance they play is well rehearsed, follows the same act. Initiate – usually an 'early night?' with a wink or just 'bed?' – then they strip their clothes, socks still on, and jump under the sheets, giggling. They cuddle. They warm each other's feet with their thighs, they kiss, they touch. He climbs atop and enters. She relaxes into him, feels utterly safe.

He knows her just as well. He knows that if he leans on his elbows and kisses her neck, there's a spot that gives her goosebumps, that makes her arch into him more. He knows her favourite sex toy (the rose-shaped one with a sucker) and he knows that she loves sixty-nine but only on the three days of the month when she's feeling her most confident and has had time to properly shave.

Belle grips the headboard harder, feels complete as he slides in and out, and she closes her eyes again. Thinks of edging. Thinks of being taken from

behind. Thinks of sex in lavender fields. 'I'm gonna come,' she moans, fingertips white, head thrown back as her body shudders. The orgasm ripples through her body, legs going weak.

She grins, looks up, locks eyes. His mouth falls open. He continues fucking her. 'Oh fuck,' he whispers.

'Hmmmmm ...' she replies, a soft moan back. He pulls out as she bites her lip, looks from his dick to his face, as he comes over her chest. Warm, sticky, and his. He kisses her on the forehead. Climbs off, a grin on his face as he leaves the room. Belle looks down at the mess on her chest as Arthur walks in with a tissue roll and cleans her up. He throws the tissues into the bin and rolls over.

He'll be asleep in four minutes. She doesn't mind.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Jake

The floors are so sticky that my trainers are squelching. There's also that familiar smell of damp mixed with hops mixed with stale beer that I didn't realise I'd missed so much until now. It takes me back ... Crowding around pool tables, beer in hand. That feeling of hitting a bullseye, sight slightly hazy, flashing pearly whites at girls huddled in the corner.

This pub isn't quite as rough as my local back home, though. No pool table in sight. Instead, looking out of the windows, it appears we're practically sat *on* the Thames. It's all wooden beams, pirate maps on the walls, and The Smiths playing on knackered old speakers mounted on a brick wall. I lean forward, spotting what looks like a noose hanging from a pole outside. Only in London would that be considered atmosphere. I shrug. I've seen worse ways to go.

On a specials board above the bar, *burrata with nduja* is written in chalk. I have no idea what nduja is – I assume it's some sort of fancy Spanish ketchup. I'm fairly certain Belle knows, though. A bloke at the bar gets a round in and I catch him wincing at the price as he taps his card to a machine. He then juggles four pints back to a table without spilling a drop. What a skill. Still, at eight quid a pint, I wouldn't want to waste an ounce either.

I scan the crowd. My guess is it's a Sunday afternoon. There's a couple with their jumper-wearing dog lying under the table, a woman reading alone at the bar with the confidence of someone who does this on the reg. An old couple occupy a table next to us – they're eating scampi, chips, and neon green peas. Behind them a young family plays a card game. It seems like the kind of place where you could become a regular, where the staff might remember your order. I wonder if this is Belle's local.

And then I spot her – young Belle. She's wearing an oversized jumper, and there are big silver hoops in her ears; a finger is fidgeting with a loose

wave of her dark blonde hair which is long and curled. I got her a pair of earrings like that for one of her birthdays.

She's sitting, leaning in, eyes locked with another man. Cosied up in a wooden corner booth, the stocky guy sitting in front of her wears thick-rimmed glasses and dons a slightly ginger beard. His arms are covered in black-and-white tattoos. I can make out a PlayStation controller on his bicep and three love hearts in a line on his wrist. The words 'Endure and Survive' on his forearm in a weird script – a proper hipster.

'Who's this guy, then?' I quip, looking him up and down. His black T-shirt has its sleeves rolled up. A grey knit beanie hat sits next to his beer on the table.

'That would be Arthur,' she says, twitching her nose. 'He's been my only other proper boyfriend, aside from you and Timothy.' She says this while looking at him, not me. I guess moving to London will do that for a girl – gentrify her, make her fall for this dude. Anyway, we saw from Matty she had a thing for the alternative types.

I give him a once-over, watch as young Belle picks a cat hair off his shoulder, then flicks it away without thinking. He has puppy-dog eyes, thin lips, brows slightly upturned that make him look permanently introspective. His hand is resting on her knee in a polite way and he's nodding along as she talks.

Belle liked guys wearing jewellery. I note the metal bracelet on his wrist. I used to wear one like that. Same type. Same wrist. I bought mine at a market stall outside a gig, lost it somewhere but never replaced it. This could have been us ... But it's not. Anyway, I'd have much better taste in tattoos than those if I hadn't been so scared of needles.

A howl of laughter erupts from the beer garden outside, and Belle shuffles beside me.

'How'd you end up here with him?' I ask.

'Tinder.'

'Oh. Yeah, before my time, I guess.' I shrug.

Belle laughs. 'Tinder was around when we were together, Jake.'

'Well, I never got the chance to use it—'

'You never got the hang of MySpace. Tinder was beyond your technological capabilities,' she says, rolling her eyes.

'That might be true.' I laugh.

Call me crazy but ... are we starting to get along? I don't seem to be driving her to bouts of anger anymore. She hasn't thrown a vase at me for at least a few hours.

'What did you like about this fella, then? He looks as if Boxpark and Spitalfields Market had a baby. Was he born in a food truck?'

'Hey, now,' Belle protests.

'He looks like he ferments his own kimchi.' I'm on a roll now. Belle's biting the inside of her cheek. 'He looks like a sensitive soul. The type to make you a mixtape. But like, on an actual cassette.'

'Jake!' Belle squeals with a smirk. 'He actually did that,' she says, placing a palm against her forehead.

'What, the kimchi or the mixtape?'

Belle playfully slaps my arm.

'It had "Kiss from a Rose" by Seal on there.' Browelle wobbles up and down.

'Wow. I'm impressed, that's a *right* tune.' I scratch my head. I would have liked to have done that for her – made something for her to listen to, to remind her of me. It never occurred to me that I actually could.

'He was very sweet. At this stage we'd been dating around three months. I liked him. I liked his humour. I liked that he cared deeply and I liked his sensitivity, but I wasn't crazy about him ... you know?'

'Hmm.'

'This was the night he told me about losing his mum. And I told him about losing you. It bonded us, I guess.'

I feel something in me jolt. Like an elastic band flicked hard to my chest. The classic 'Dead Ex Sympathy Play'. Bound to connect. She used my death – not cruelly ... She just carried it somewhere and it helped her to get closer to someone else. What do I do with that?

I look away, focus on the old couple and their scampi instead. The fish is almost demolished, leaving a wash of grease on the bottom of the plate, their empty ketchup sachets abandoned on the table. I change the subject.

'So when *did* you get crazy about him?' I say, nodding towards Arthur. 'Did the kimchi do it for you in the end, or ...?'

She doesn't laugh. Tilts her head to the side and looks to the noose swinging in the breeze outside. Slowly, she says, 'I don't know if I ever really was. I was never *really* mad about him.'

My eyes wander back to Arthur, his bracelet. 'No fireworks?' I question.

‘No fireworks. Not like with us ...’ She looks away. A flush starts at her neck and works its way up, slow and involuntary.

She continues, ‘But it was love ... A safe love. A vanilla love. A deep connection. But I was never mad about him. I think I was still scared of being crazed. I moved in with him shortly after this, when I got kicked out of my last flat. That was about as crazy as we got. Just as well, too, with Covid. It made sense, really.’

I watch young Belle talk to this guy. They’re leaning towards each other, one elbow up on the table, heads resting in their palms, staring into each other’s eyes. They’re mirroring each other and they look very in love, despite her downplaying it. She tips her head back as he makes her laugh. I used to love getting that reaction from her.

Why is this getting to me? I run through the options – nostalgia, FOMO, some general existential sadness about being dead – until I land, reluctantly, where I always do. It’s jealousy. Obviously, it’s jealousy, and also something else underneath that I don’t want to name but that keeps bubbling to the surface. Regret.

Why couldn’t we have had fireworks without setting ourselves on fire? I used to think that was what passion looked like. That real love involved getting burned in some way. That arguing was proof of something real. But what if that tension we had – the arguments, the fire – wasn’t inevitable? What if it was because we were young and stupid? Neither of us knew how to love someone without making it a war.

Would it have been possible to keep the fireworks in the bedroom and find something steadier everywhere else? Is that even something that exists?

I look up to the ceiling. Tempted to swig some flat shandy from the table next to me.

Can’t change it now, which is a convenient thing to tell yourself when you’re dead – I’m ten years too late and she’s marrying the ‘love of her life’ tomorrow.

‘Do you have both with Timothy?’ I ask quietly. ‘The fireworks and the love?’

She meets my gaze and smiles. She blinks slowly and I watch as her eyes flicker just for a second to my lips. I resist the urge to reach down and cup her chin.

‘I do,’ she says.

For a moment we hold that look. It's like everything around us has stopped. Two words to change a life, to bind someone to you. Two words meant for someone else, not for me.

'Ignore the pun.' She smiles.

She's happy now. She's got the best of both and I'm happy for her. I shuffle, loosening the collar of my T-shirt with a finger, while simultaneously rolling my neck.

'I'm glad.' It takes all my strength to resist the temptation to pull her closer towards me. I want to feel the warmth of her skin. Have her warm me up. Make me feel something other than grey.

Almost as if she's read my mind, she leans in and rests her head on my arm. We stand there, surrounded by people walking past us, in the middle of this pub, but I can't focus on anything else. Only the sound of her breathing next to me, the rise and fall of her shoulder against my arm.

Next to us, the scampi couple get up to leave. I curse them under my breath as Belle straightens.

'To the end?' she asks.

'Let's do it,' I reply, opening my palm.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

Belle

‘God, you’re so good at this,’ Jake says next to me.

We watch as younger Belle is holding hands with a teary Arthur on the sagging sofa of the home we shared. She’s wearing a trench coat, part buttoned, ready to make her exit. Her eyes are empathetic but her tone is confident. It’s not doing that wobbly, quiet thing that it used to do when I got emotional.

I didn’t realise how much of a professional I’d become at amicable break-ups. I always thought they were by definition messy, awkward, full of tension. I mean, that was until I saw my entire relationship history play out before my eyes. Watching this now, I can see the whole choreography: my gentle hands, my eye contact not faltering, the careful pacing of the bad news. When did I get so good at leaving people? And why the hell am I watching myself break up with Arthur Adler, with Jake Marleigh by my side, the day before my wedding to Timothy Small? I get that tingling urge to check the time, keep on track, but find myself distracted, as younger me consoles the sobbing man next to her.

Young Belle nods, voice soft, letting him down gently, ‘I love you so much, Arthur. But we want different things.’ She looks around the room, eyes landing on the scratching posts littering the floor. ‘I’m starting to feel like the stay-at-home mother of your cats.’

Jake looks between me and younger me, comically.

‘But they love you so much, Belle,’ Arthur says, pulling her hands closer.

Jake next to me points, mouth open. ‘Is he for real?’

I ignore him.

‘I love them too, I really do.’ She nods, Browelle dancing across her forehead. ‘You know I love Dutch, Lenny, Sadie ...’ She pauses, sighs, continues, ‘And especially Gavin.’

Jake next to me howls. ‘This is the best romcom I’ve watched in years! Gavin! The cat’s name is Gavin! This man is crying and you’re more

worried about a cat named Gavin than him! I've been dead for ten years and I never once got that reaction.'

'I still miss Gavin.' I shrug, watching the black-and-white cat circle my feet. That cat really felt like my little bestie at times. One of the highlights of lockdown had been spending time with them. They kept me focused, comforted.

Younger me continues, 'But they want and need me to be in *here*, and I want to be out *there*.' She motions to the door. 'I'm starting to feel guilty about going out and leaving them alone while I live my life and that's ... not healthy.'

Arthur coughs into the back of his hand, nods.

'Maybe there could be a point when we could come back together,' she offers, 'when the time is right?'

He whimpers then, his shoulders shrinking, like a turtle retreating into its shell.

'This really hurts, Belle, but I know you're right.'

Gavin jumps onto Belle's lap, like he knows what's happening. His skinny black tail stands straight like a pole and cat hairs glitter the air.

Belle lets go of Arthur's hand and strokes Gavin, lips pursed together as Arthur cries.

'I'm so grateful for everything you've done for me,' he snivels. 'It's been a real honour calling you my girl.' He snorts and swallows. Loudly.

'We've had some great times.' Young Belle nods, as Gavin makes biscuits on her thighs. 'But fresh starts can be good.'

I wince at this. It's not untrue, it's just awkward. Something a mum might say to console her kid after a breakup. I really did feel like his mother at times. Washing his boxers while he sat there, gaming.

Arthur smiles, wiping his nose on his sleeve now. 'I might be better suited to someone who loves gaming as much as I do anyway,' he says, nodding.

'I really tried to get into them, but let's be honest, I wasn't great, huh?'

Arthur laughs, cheeks wet, nose red. 'I'll never forget the time you tried to play Baldur's Gate ... and ended up having sex with a mindflayer.'

Young Belle's eyes go square, and she forces a laugh, looking to the door.

What can I say? The 'mindflayer', with squid tentacles on its face, looked kinda hot at the time. I was deep in my fantasy era. Locked indoors

for weeks on end, same type of sex on repeat, no excitement, I was willing to try anything to find some spice ... including tentacle porn.

Jake bounces beside me. 'A what?'

'A mindflayer. It's a creature. From a game ...' I tilt my head to the side, replaying the scene in my mind.

'Right. And you—?'

'It had tentacles.'

His eyes widen. 'For a penis?'

'No. On its face.'

'And that was—?'

'I was going through something, Jake.'

He pauses, eyebrow raised. 'I wanna play that.'

I glare at him.

'Seriously, though – again, I'm impressed.' He nods. 'It's not easy to say, "You're boring," without saying, "You're boring."' He grins at me.

'He might have been boring, but you know what he never did?' I say, watching Arthur pat Gavin on the sofa, cheeks red. 'He never once laughed at my insecurities. Never made me feel like a joke.'

Jake's grin fades, just slightly. A tiny reaction. I'll take it.

'I'm just saying, being boring has its perks.'

He's quiet for a moment and I watch as he properly looks at Arthur, then at me, then back at Arthur, who is now blowing his nose into an already wet tissue while Gavin headbutts his chin. The expression on Jake's face is one I can't decipher. Like something's turning behind his eyes. He shoves his hands into his pockets and turns back to me.

'So, learning much about yourself?' he says, quieter than before.

'I think so? I've been trying to look for the meaning ...' I shrug, words trailing off. 'Do you think that's the point? Is that what your psychopomp wants?'

Jake pauses, runs his hands through his thick, dark hair. 'His name is Gabriel. Well, Gabe. And honestly, I don't really know what he wants.'

So neither of us knows why I'm having to go through this? I roll my shoulders back and look to younger me. She's hugging Arthur now, patting his back, peeking at the watch on her wrist. He doesn't catch it.

'Why me, do you think? Why would I be at risk of soul destruction, out of everyone in your life?'

'Uh, maybe because you fucked Vik?'

‘Then why not visit Vik? He fucked me back!’

‘Fair point.’ He nods. ‘I don’t really know. I just do what he says.’

I stare at him. He’s been dead ten years and that’s the best he’s got?

‘Right, so you’ve upended my entire life the night before my wedding on the instructions of someone you can’t explain and for reasons you don’t know.’ Jake remains silent and shrugs, again.

‘Great. Really reassuring. Well, what’s he like? This Gabe?’ I ask. I imagine a hooded, cloaked figure. Or maybe just a presence? Or maybe he has horns – half-man, half-bull, like a Minotaur?

Jake sticks his chin out, scratches his stubble. ‘He’s stubborn. Grumpy. Sarcastic.’

‘Hm ... He sounds like you.’

‘Ha. I know, right.’

Okay, so a Minotaur with Jake’s face. Permanently growling. I try to picture this ‘in-between’. Try to imagine Jake and Gabe together, and I can’t. My imagination keeps defaulting to a white waiting room full of plastic chairs and old magazines about caravan parks. A water cooler that bubbles occasionally.

Is it too warm or too cold? How many other people are around? Is he lonely there?

‘Are you okay, where you’ve been? The in-between?’ My mind now switches to the waiting room in *Beetlejuice*. That was always one of Jake’s favourite films. Now I visualise a shrunken head alongside Gabe the Minotaur, cobwebs hanging from the ceiling, neon lights.

‘Do you want the truth?’ Jake says.

That’s a stupid question. ‘Why would I want a lie?’

‘Okay, truthfully ... No, it’s not great. Nothing’s bad but also, nothing’s good.’

‘Are there shrunken heads?’ I ask. Jake looks at me like I’ve just tried to order an oat milk matcha in a greasy spoon.

‘No shrunken heads,’ he says, finally. ‘It’s sort of just ... meh.’

‘Right.’ I nod. I look around this room: its peeling wallpaper, furniture clawed with cat scratches. It felt like home at the time but also ... it too is pretty meh.

‘I know that feeling,’ I say, looking over to Arthur.

Jake turns towards him too. ‘Bless him,’ he says.

‘I wonder where he is now. Any chance we can find out?’

‘I don’t think so. This is all to do with present-day you, I’m afraid. Why do you think no one else can see me.’

We’re still for a moment. ‘If it’s any consolation,’ I say to Jake, ‘I think the cats can see you.’

All four of them roam around our feet now. One of them, Dutch, is staring up at Jake. It used to freak me out when they did that, just stare at a wall or the ceiling, almost like they could sense something we couldn’t. I reach down to pet Lenny, who flops onto his back, rolling, stomach in the air. I do miss these cats. Is it bad to admit I miss them more than Arthur?

My chest tightens. It’s so weird how you fall in love with people and then they become strangers. Like you know everything about them and then you break up and that’s it? We lived in each other’s pockets, Arthur and I. I’d take a bath, cats perched on the edge, while Arthur took a piss on the loo next to me. We set up assault courses in the flat stairwell to get our exercise, and wiped sweat from each other’s brows afterwards. He knew my routines, how I took my tea, but he never really knew what I was actually thinking. What kept me up at night. I’m not sure I ever let him.

‘Funny how the ones that don’t break your heart still manage to bruise it a bit.’ I draw my hand away from Lenny and stand up. ‘I thought I was past all this.’ I rub the back of my head. ‘And it’s about to get worse.’

Jake moves closer to me, pulls me in for a side hug, rubs my arm. I ease into him before I’ve decided to. Like muscle memory.

‘I think we can handle it, Belle. Want a drink first?’

Yes. ‘Drink, then let’s get the bad ones ticked off.’

We turn to face each other, cats circling our toes like hungry sharks, and hold hands.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Jake

Bride Belle is back. I feel it in the way her grip loosens in my palm, as she slips her hand out of mine. I flex my fingers and massage them with my other hand, a totally normal thing to do which has nothing to do with me trying to replace the warmth of hers.

A sliver of cold air slices past me as she rushes towards the dresser. She pulls that same piece of paper out from ... who knows where and proceeds to scribble on it.

‘What are you writing?’

‘Nothing.’

‘You’ve been writing “nothing” since Peter Cox.’ She doesn’t look up.

‘It’s a system,’ she says, furiously jotting.

‘You what?’

‘A system. For the soul. You said it’s at risk, so I’m being thorough.’ She folds the paper neatly along the same creases and places it ... Oh, in her bra. Along with the pencil? Standard.

‘Thorough,’ I say as I collapse onto the bed, fingers rummaging into my pockets. I stare up at the ceiling of the four-poster, lined with a swirly fabric. I make out little gargoyle faces staring out at me from the carved posts of the bed. Petrifying. Creepy old bed. Why would someone choose this for their wedding night?

I hear the click of a light switch and an extractor fan whirrs up.

‘Won’t be a second!’ she calls out as she walks into the bathroom, and there it is again, that tone.

‘Why do you talk like that when we’re here?’ I frown in the direction of the gargoyles.

‘Like what?’ she calls back in that same tone.

‘I don’t know ... All chirrupy chirpy.’ I hold my hands out in front of me, inspect the skin on the back and then plop them down on the duvet. ‘It sounds fake.’ I pause. ‘It’s not you. You’re all uptight.’

She pokes her head around the door – just her head, body hidden. I can tell she's partly nude.

'How do you know what's me? You've been dead for ten years,' she says flippantly, a little sterner now. 'Anyway, we still have two exes to go.'

I shoot her a look. 'Come on, Belles. I know you.'

I know her voice ... I could almost hear her narrating in my head when I first reached the in-between. I'd see things and hear what she'd think of them: 'Jake, you idiot,' she'd say monotonously after I spent an afternoon testing which wall thickness I could walk through. 'Shit, huh,' she'd say bluntly, when I looked out at a sunset and it was all grey. Then all high-pitched and squealing excitedly, when I realised I could literally go anywhere and do anything, for *free*. This voice now, though, it's too considered. All formal, polite. Like a bad actor playing a receptionist in a C-grade movie.

She's shooting daggers at me now, her brows furrowed. 'You knew the *old* me, Jake.' Her hand clutches the doorframe.

'Yeah, Belles, the real you. The one who isn't totally covered up. The one who acts like a human and not a robot.'

She slips back into the bathroom. 'Says the literal ghost.'

I sit up now, talking to an empty doorframe. 'Are you denying there's a difference between the person you are while we're in this manor, and the person you are when we're away from here?'

'No,' she shouts back.

'Okay, good. So why won't you take my observation on board?'

'Because it's unhelpful! There's a lot to organise.' She sounds breathy, like she's flapping around. 'Sometimes I have to put a face on when there's a lot going on, that's all. I'm not always like this.'

When stressed, the Belle I knew would get even more swears. Her voice would crack, and she'd pause, she'd get a little emotional, ask for a hug. Not fall into the tone of a robotic sales assistant. Does Timothy also get the sales assistant, or is that just for me?

'Is Timothy always the way he is?'

'No,' she snaps bluntly, quickly.

'Then is the wedding fake?'

I hear rustling, then heels clicking on tiles, and her head pokes around the door again.

Oh, she's mad.

‘What? You don’t know what you’re talking about. Shut up, Jake, I need to get ready ...’ Her voice trails off and the bathroom door closes so loudly, it makes me jump.

I think I touched a nerve there. I’ve just been getting weird vibes. Seeing her in this hotel, it seems like an act, like she’s trying too hard. Smiling a little too forcefully for photos. Posing just a little too much. And even if time does change you, your wedding weekend should be when you feel your most at ease. You’re surrounded by people who know the real you – who have picked you to be in their life because you’ve made a connection – and marrying the person who knows you inside out, knows your flaws, your quirks, knows when you’re not being yourself. Has Timothy even seen the real Belle? Has he even noticed that she might be a little thrown tonight? That she’s been distracted? I look at my hands again, push back the cuticles of my bitten nails.

The bathroom door opens and out she walks, hands in her hair, as a strap slips from her shoulder. She’s wearing a dress that stops me in my tracks. If I weren’t dead, my heart would have skipped a beat. I almost feel the thumping of blood through my veins.

The dress is a pale pink, a blush, like the start of a sunset, but after ten years of grey it might as well be neon. I’d forgotten that colour could do this. So vivid, so full of life. Then my eyes skim her curves, her bust, her face, cheeks slightly flushed.

She looks drop-dead gorgeous.

‘Help me zip this up, will you?’ She walks in front of the bed. I swallow and stand, towering over her. She turns her back to me, hands still holding up her hair. My fingers graze against her soft skin as I push some strands of her red hair from the base of her neck.

I breathe in her perfume. If I leaned down, just slightly, I could kiss her neck, could feel the warmth of her skin under my lips. I pause, taking the zip in my fingers at the base of her spine, one hand to her waist to hold the dress taut. I zip it up, slowly. I try to staple this moment to my memory – the curve of her hips under my palm, the freckles on her back, the silvery downy hairs on her neck. She’s so beautiful I have to remind myself to keep moving and not just stand here with my hand on her waist like an idiot, as my hairs stand up across my arms.

All I can think is: *Timothy, that fucking guy* – does he even have any idea how lucky he is?

‘Thank you.’ She smooths down her dress and walks over to the mirror, reapplying some lipstick and patting it in with her fingers, and I realise I haven’t moved an inch. I watch her catch sight of my reflection behind her before she looks away again, going straight back to the lipstick. Did my hand on her waist do anything for her or was that just me?

She nods, ready. ‘Let’s go down. You’ll see I’m not that uptight,’ she says, fiddling with her earrings, marching to the door.

I follow her out and down the long staircase, watching her hips sway as she walks. What’s a guy to do? Ignore the beauty in front of him? If this is my last night on earth before whatever the next step is – heaven or hell or just nothingness – I might as well take the memory of a beautiful woman along with me.

Two more after this, then Timothy. Then Gabe takes me and she walks down the aisle and I ... I press my hands deeper into my pockets.

As we re-enter the hall, everyone cheers. For Belle, not for me, obviously. I wonder if I’m being picked up as an orb in any of the hundreds of pictures being taken of Belle right now. I leave her twirling in her dress, Timothy and her family applauding, and scope out the room. Someone has somehow managed to turn this Grade II listed manor house into Fabric. Impressive. The ancestral portraits hung on the far walls are now vibrating with bass and sass.

There’s a DJ set up in the corner, blasting music – everything from Nineties R&B to the indie that Belle and I used to love. I spot Harry leaning over the speakers, holding a beer and attempting to make eye contact with the DJ. I walk to the bar, which has upgraded since dinner – spirits lined up, beer taps flowing. I lean on it, grabbing a pre-poured wine, and watch as Belle joins her girls. They crowd around her, squealing. They bring her drinks, which she downs, impressively. She whips her hair around, hands caressing her body, hips rocking to the beat. Timothy stands next to his dad, both of them watching Belle. They laugh and cheer, wine in one hand, the other sat neatly in their tux pockets.

More shots.

Drunk by both me and Belle.

Me to drown out the Coldplay song currently blasting out (who plays Coldplay at a wedding rehearsal?). And Belle ... I don’t know. To enjoy her last night as a single woman? To prove to me she’s not stuck-up, that she’s

still the same Belle? Or just to live it up with everyone she loves in one room?

The one she loves most, though – Timothy – isn't looking too impressed now. I move to stand next to him, size him up. He's not as tall as me, but he smells damn good. I note the mole on his cheek, the twitching of his mouth, the growing stubble on his chin – a reminder that he's very much alive.

Timothy and I watch as Belle runs towards the bar, her sunset of a dress clutched in one hand, and instructs the barman to line up another shot. Timothy's head is shaking slowly beside me. I almost hear a tut. He glances to his cousins, his brothers, who stand in a line on the other side of the room, gaping, as Belle is handed the drink. She downs it, then throws her hands in the air. The woo she lets out is practically testing for an echo.

Her girls are that echo. They cheer her on. As she slut drops. As she spins in circles. As her dress fans out around her. As she climbs onto the bar. As she dances to the crowd of girls below her, bar staff laughing nervously.

And I'm there too, cheering her on. I leave Timothy, the bore, tutting, while I bop to the beat, shuffling my feet, badly but committed. It feels good – the vibrations of the bass pounding through me.

At last Belle grabs me away from the DJ booth – I was seeing how close I could stand to the speakers for the biggest vibrations – and drags me to the bar. Without caring who sees now, she grabs two shots and hands one to me, a glint in her eye, her cheeks plump with laughter, forehead glistening with sweat. I take note of the barman clocking the shot glass floating in the air, doing a double take, and then dropping clean behind the bar as Belle shouts, 'Cheers.'

'Cheers.'

We clink glasses. We drink. She winces, wipes her lips with the back of her hand, and takes my palms in hers.

'Ready?' she asks.

Sebastian Priest

A voice drifts out of a small portable speaker on the bedside table. A woman's voice, breathy and soft, which sits close and feels intimate, the lyrics half-whispered but dreaming of love. Belle latches on to the voice. She spent an hour the previous evening making this playlist especially for tonight. A soundtrack full of love songs, to sing to. To shag to. She had hoped it would impress him.

She'd been more nervous than usual. Had spent two hours this afternoon bathing, shaving, tidying her flat. She'd plucked out her nipple hairs, taken time to curl her highlighted blonde hair, fresh from the salon that week, and stuffed her dirty washing to the bottom of her wardrobe. She had even put on a matching lace set. She smiled when she thought of him.

She's below him now and she's not thinking of how well the playlist is working. Instead, she can't shake the creeping claustrophobia.

His hand *was* on her thigh, then her waist, then her breast. Then it wasn't. She feels fingers at the side of her neck, a thumb pressed below her jaw. Words dissolve before they reach her mouth. She can't feel her hands. They're above her head, clasped in his other palm. The weight of him feels heavy.

She sinks into the mattress.

He pants.

Her mouth opens, then closes.

It's difficult to swallow. She said yes to this, she reminds herself of that. It's fine.

His eyes are shut, and she can't look at him, can't catch his eye, so she turns her head and focuses on the window. The flicker of the light through the trees outside casts everything in an amber hue. The streetlamp is amber. She hadn't noticed that before. How long had it been that colour? She counts the shapes on the curtains.

One. Two. Three.

She tries to remember the words to the song but can't. On the windowsill, her little cactus droops to one side. She'd been meaning to water it.

The song fades into the next. A husky, rough male voice.

She squeezes her eyes shut. Everything has gone still. Very still, except him.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Belle

We land and Jake has immediately located the cheeseboard, despite technically being dead. He raises an eyebrow at me – cheeks full, clearly delighted with himself.

We're wedged next to a fold-out dining table, balloons bobbing overhead in celebration of Racheal and Luke – the first of us to get engaged, which felt very grown-up and slightly alarming, especially after a couple of drinks.

In the centre of the room, Luke has his arm draped around Rachael's shoulder, the pair of them glowing in that specific way newly engaged people glow. Like they're lit from the inside by smugness ... and love. Rachael's laughing at something, a plastic wine glass tipped towards herself.

I remember being jealous that evening. Not of Rachael, specifically, but of the milestone ticked, the path visible ahead of her in a way it wasn't ahead of me. I thought that by thirty I'd have been happily married or, at the very least, engaged. Instead, I'd broken up with my gamer boyfriend and when my thirtieth arrived, it hadn't felt significant or special – it was just like any other Tuesday, except with better wine.

The plans for my year had been less hurty, nerdy, and surviving, and more thirty, flirty, and thriving.

Next to the happy couple, a girl sways along to the music, empty glass in hand. She's wearing a dress more suited to cocktail hour at the Ritz than a house party in Harringay, which the guy next to her doesn't seem to notice because he's too busy asking her if she's back in the office yet or still working from home.

Next to Jake and me, a guy in a checked blue shirt and grey gilet is trying his absolute best to impress Rachael's sister.

'So, er, I'm quite into crypto. I've been exploring some DeFi stuff, but I might just ape into Solana while it's hot. Or just stick it in Bitcoin and be boring ...'

‘Oh wow,’ she says, tapping her foot, eyes doing a slow lap of the room in search of ... literally anyone else.

‘Love a bit of networking.’ Jake nods next to me, a crumb of cheddar on his lip.

‘How do *you* know what networking is?’ Jake worked in a garage after finishing A-levels and never networked a day in his life, unless you count charming people into not noticing he slightly overcharged them for an MOT.

‘Films,’ Jake says, flicking another cube of crumbly cheese into his mouth.

The cheeseboard is one very typical for a house party of this type: a slightly sad, sweaty-looking brie, a jar of chutney that no one has opened, and a tub of hummus that’s almost finished, with a shard of a crisp poking out like a shark’s fin.

‘Right ...’ I smile.

From where we’re wedged, we have a prime view straight into the kitchen. Someone is attempting to pour wine next to the counter, despite having approximately four inches of space. There’s a bin bag hanging from the drawer handle, already full; squashed beer cans that didn’t make it in are stacked next to it. I can also see that the bedroom door is ajar and spot a pile of coats laid on the bed. I wonder if that’s where my favourite denim jacket went.

I didn’t think it was possible to squeeze *this* many people into such a small room. It’s like the Central line during rush hour, sardine-style, except with booze and friends instead of sweaty armpits and morning breath. This was the year that lockdown lifted and you can feel it. Everyone’s slightly too loud, drunk earlier than they should be, and hugs are lasting just a beat too long. Someone in the corner howls with laughter like they’ve forgotten how to socialise at a normal volume.

I reach for a cube of cheese the way Jake did, but then put it back. My throat feels dry and I look around for a drink. Jake moves closer, our arms pressed together now. He’s stopped eating and is watching me avoid the room.

‘You don’t want to do this, do you? Find younger you,’ he says. Not a question.

I already have.

She's perched on a windowsill, deep in conversation with Anna – Luke's friend. I'd come straight from work, so I was dressed in all black, with my heels on. Sure, I wasn't successful in the relationship department, but everything else was going well. I had a new job, a new flat – the first one I'd been able to rent entirely on my own. And after a year of lockdown and someone else's constant presence, going home to silence felt like a gift. Having my very own bathroom made me feel like royalty. I was back on the apps but not seriously. And I didn't need to be. Because I was fine.

I'd forgotten that. That I was fine.

She's animated. She gestures with her hands, and her face is expressive as she talks to Anna. She's confident, I can tell by the way her shoulders are back, how her head is raised, how she isn't scoping out the room, comparing herself to others. She looks well.

'No,' I say. 'I don't.'

I know what's about to happen and who is about to snake their way into her life, but now I can't look away. Not because of him, but because of her. She has four minutes left of just being a girl having a good time at a party, before her life re-arranges itself around one man, which she won't even clock is happening. I'd like to keep her here for a little bit longer.

'Well, that lipstick looks good on you,' Jake says, his arm still pressed against mine.

I allow myself to look at her face properly. That colour. I'd forgotten I used to wear red. A proper bright orange-red. I mixed it myself: two lipsticks layered together until I created the exact shade I wanted. I used to do things like that: small deliberate acts of indulgence, just because I could. Because it felt like one step closer to my truer self. The lipstick made a statement. It made me feel bigger. Seen. I stopped wearing it shortly after.

My stomach lurches when I spot him.

Sebastian. Prowling the room. Working it like he owns it, which he absolutely does not. It's Rachael and Luke's rented two-bed in Haringay. There is a single overhead bulb and someone's optimistically lit a Yankee candle.

He's not unattractive, that's the thing. All Morrissey-wannabe, big quiffy hair. Harsh angles – sharp jaw, sharp nose. The kind of face that charms well, but photographs badly. I can see it now, though, if I look hard enough. How there's something slightly off in the set of his jaw. How it's tense. The way his eyes move around the room before the rest of his face does. I

couldn't see it then. I've spent a long time wondering why I couldn't see it then.

He's already at the kitchen doorway, leaning into the frame with an arm raised, blocking the exit of one of Rachael's school friends without it seeming like that's what he's doing. I understand now that he probably did mean to. She's laughing in that way women laugh when they're deciding whether to be rude or not. She decides. Makes her excuses. He watches her go without embarrassment. Like he's already moved on before she has.

He refills his cup from a bottle on the table – not his bottle – and downs half of it standing up. His eyes are doing a sweep of the room. Patient. Methodical. He should have come with a red flag the size of a bedsheet waving behind him.

Rachael's cousin is next. The girl who'd only just managed to escape the gilet-wearing city banker. He leans down to say something in her ear and she entertains it. For a bit. Before making her excuses to go to the bathroom. He starts to follow her ... but then he stops.

Across the room, a younger me tips her head back, laughing at something Anna said. The orange-red lips. The heels. Taking up space without meaning to. He changes direction.

Anna sees him before I do. We exchange a look – quizzical is generous, it's more 'oh, who's this, then' – and then he's there, elbow on the wall above my shoulder. Biceps flashing, flexing. Same move he's used twice already tonight. I didn't know that then.

I watch younger me straighten slightly. Not nervous but ... interested. She fiddles with her perfectly curled hair, lifting it from the base of her neck. Holds eye contact even when she drinks.

Jake shifts forward slightly – not much, just enough that his shoulder comes between me and the room. The cheese is gone from his hands.

'You fell for him straight away?' he asks.

'I think I was in the mood to fall for someone.'

I watch Sebastian reach a hand to younger Belle's chin, tipping it up. Younger me doesn't pull away. Anna leaves us to ourselves.

'He'd have done this to anyone who would've had him. I just happened to be the one who did.'

I look away before he leans in. A sour taste in my throat. Jake and I stand in silence for a moment. Across the room someone pops open a bottle of

prosecco. Luke wolf-whistles. The Bitcoin man is waffling on to someone else now, something about pivoting careers, LinkedIn, Zoom fatigue.

‘What happened?’ Jake asks eventually.

I keep my eyes on the carpet. There’s a patch the shape of an iron, hard and crusty, burned into it.

‘He ... He wasn’t very nice.’

‘In the usual ways?’

‘No.’ A long pause. ‘More than that.’

Jake waits. I’m grateful for his new patience.

‘I didn’t recognise it at the time. That’s the bit I can’t ...’ I stop. ‘He made me feel like I was the problem. Told me I was overreacting, too sensitive, that what he did wasn’t that bad. And I believed him. I guess it wasn’t the first time I’d heard it.’

I pull one of my sleeves back up over my shoulder, holding it there for a moment, like if I let go the whole dress might slip. ‘I see now it was borderline emotional abuse. A bit of physical ... I didn’t like a lot of things he did to me in bed.’ I swallow, try to force down the ball rising in my throat. ‘But he insisted.’ I take a deep breath. ‘I don’t know where I went or how it got—’ I can’t finish the sentence. I don’t need to ... I turn away so Jake can’t see my face, my eyes prickling.

He turns and his arms wrap around me, big and certain, pulling me back against him so I’m facing away from the room, away from Sebastian, away from all of it, and something in my chest gives in.

The tears come silently.

‘It was bad,’ I say. ‘I wish I could rip her away from here. Pull her from that windowsill and out of the door.’

His arms tighten. ‘How long were you together?’

‘About a year.’ My head droops. ‘Way too long. He basically forced himself into the flat I worked so hard to secure. It was so hard to get him gone.’

Jake goes very still. Something moves in his chest. Then his arms. I can feel his neck straining, how he’s fighting the urge to cross the room.

‘Don’t,’ I say quietly, turning to face him.

He stops. Jaw tight, nostrils flaring, and still not looking at me. I reach for his hands and lace my fingers through his, properly.

‘Let’s just get it over with,’ I say. ‘To the end?’

Eyes dark, he takes one last look towards Sebastian across the room.
Then he turns to face me.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Jake

It's freeze-your-tits-off cold in here. And dark, with only a sliver of light from a lamppost outside cutting through the crack in the curtains, just enough to make out shapes in the room. This place seems absent of smell ... and absent of character, which is very unlike Belle. I squint to try to take in more surroundings. We're standing in front of a built-in kitchenette. The sink is overflowing with dirty dishes. A leather sofa sits next to a wall, deep white cracks marbling its covers. A fly buzzes through the room. I swat it away. I would normally make a joke here. I don't have one.

Before I get a chance to check Belle is okay, a door on the far side of the room slowly opens.

A girl scurries into the room, a bag under her arm, moving from surface to surface and stuffing things in: a notebook, a jumper from the back of the sofa. Same hair, roughly, but this can't be Belle. Even I can see the difference between glossy and this – her dark roots have grown out, and the rest of it is dull and flat, like she's just stopped caring.

And her posture. Even in the dark, I can see her form, how her shoulders are curved forward, head tilted down, the vertebrae at the base of her neck pushing against the skin. She reminds me of those fossils at the Natural History Museum.

She drops her bag on the sofa and moves into a side room without turning on the light and comes back arms full – toiletry bag, a toothbrush, wipes, a brush. She stuffs them into her bag.

The Belle I know fills a room with light without trying. This girl is a shadow and doesn't want to be seen. I watch her work the room in silence and think we must be in the wrong flashback. Gabe has cocked this one up. We're meant to be somewhere else, and this is someone else entirely.

And then she steps into the light of the streetlamp that is still forcing its way through the curtains, and reaches to unplug a charger from an extension cord – and I realise.

It is Belle.

This can't be right. I know this woman, have loved this woman ... and yet I'm standing in this room looking straight at her and I don't know who she is.

She's tiny – really fucking frail. It's like she's been stripped of her glow. That warmth that followed her around for years has been hollowed out, like someone reached in and took the light. As she winds the cable up, I catch a glimpse of her arm, then her neck. Deep blue splotches which seem dark at the centre and then yellowing at the edges. Old ones and new ones.

I stare. I keep staring, keep waiting for my brain to offer me something ... an explanation ... anything, but nothing comes and there is nothing I can do. I can't cross the room, can't even turn the light on to see her properly.

Gone are the plump cheeks, the smooth skin, the bright eyes. Instead, her eyes are framed with dark circles, her skin blotchy, cheeks gaunt.

I'm angry now, so fucking mad, which feels useless because ... What can I do?

'What the fuck, Belles?' I look at her beside me. She's very still, eyes to the floor. A part of me shatters. I thought nothing could compare to the rage I felt seeing her post-fuck with Vik, but this ... This is awful.

Like a mouse, timid and nervous, young Belle scuttles back to the sofa. She pulls on a hoodie, before stuffing a laptop and charger into her bag and zipping it up.

'You're leaving?' I ask.

'Running away from my own home, in the middle of the night,' she whispers and then laughs, once, a short sharp sound with nothing funny in it.

'He doesn't know?' I look to the bedroom door and then back to her. I'm standing here with all this rage and nowhere to put it, and it's just sitting in my chest, getting heavier.

'No. I'd been planning for a while. I'd found somewhere else to live but kept it a secret, didn't want him to know where I was going. Or try to stop me.' She has her arms wrapped around herself, nails digging into her skin. 'The tenancy was up in two months anyway. I just didn't renew it, and he never checked that stuff.' She pauses. 'He never even helped pay for it.'

'Oh, Belle.' I clear my throat, feeling it catch. 'How did it get to this?'

Belle beside me cries. 'I know. I don't— How? How could I let things get that bad?' Her cheeks are damp. 'How could I let that happen to

myself?’

I don’t think about it. I just put my arm around her and she doesn’t pull away. We stand there, watching as young Belle scans the room and nods, just once. She walks towards the door, grabs a full bin bag of possessions next to it, and pulls the rucksack over her shoulder.

‘How good was I at leaving things?’ she whispers.

‘It wasn’t you, Belle.’ I squeeze my arm around her as young Belle sneaks out of the front door, closing it slowly. ‘It can happen to anyone. Clearly.’

This wasn’t her fault, I want her to know that. If this could happen to her, of all people, it could happen to anyone. I know she’d always had a tendency to put other people first, but that’s not the same as inviting this in, and I hate that I even have to think this through.

Through the front window, we hear the sound of a car starting up. I peer out, and Belle is sitting there, hands on the steering wheel. Face determined. Strong. She doesn’t look back as the car lurches off.

My mind races as the headlights sweep the room. I’m flitting between harsh anger – wanting to storm through that bedroom door and beat the living shit out of that waste of space – and wanting to cradle Belle, soothe her, protect her. How could someone do this? To someone so kind, genuine. To someone who wouldn’t hurt a fly.

Of course she’s the way she is now. Of course she’s more guarded. The one back at the rehearsal, the girl with her hair done, her back straight – this is the same girl. She built all of that, on top of this. And I’ve been giving her grief for putting on an act ...

I took the piss out of the people she dated. Mocked every safe choice she made, without asking why she wanted safe.

I belittled her for being too chirpy. Then too uptight.

I decided what was real in her and what wasn’t, like I had any right. I’ve spent the whole evening wanting the old Belle back, the messy one, the fun one – without once considering that maybe she’d had to leave that girl behind for a reason. And I did all of it on the night before her wedding.

And worst of all, I called her a fucking robot just moments ago. I said this to her face – told her she wasn’t acting human. I thought she was simply hollow now, rather than considering, even once, that maybe something might have made her that way.

I feel sick.

I decided what was real in her and what wasn't, like I had any right. I know it's not the same as what he did in that bedroom. But it's not nothing either.

Timothy, though ... Timothy, who is alive. The guy who will be there tomorrow and the day after that, and the day after that. I mean it when I think it: I'm glad she's got him. That's the truest thing I've felt since I died.

We have two more after this ... So does this mean there's another bad one to come?

'Please tell me the next one isn't as bad as this?' I ask, my fingers crossed behind her back, her head against my chest.

'It's not great. Can we have another break?'

I reach down, my hands grazing her arm before finding her hands. 'Of course,' I say.

The fly buzzes back past.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Belle

I surface at the bar, and the music finds me before anything else does. I rub my eyes weakly as the bass vibrates in my chest. The lights are all wrong – they bounce around and strobe off someone’s sequins. They’re much too bright, or rather, I’ve just come from somewhere very dark.

The barman slides me a glass of water without me asking, and I take it, thanking him, so grateful I could cry. I take a long sip while I look around. Jake is gone, which means we’re done for now.

The rehearsal party is in full swing. It doesn’t need me to keep it going, which is both a relief and a small grief. When I lower the glass, I catch Timothy’s eye. Or rather, I catch him looking away. Quickly and deliberately.

He’s by the fireplace with his dad, the pair of them standing with that particular posture they share: shoulders slightly hunched, chins lifted, hands behind their backs – like they’re surveying a battlefield rather than a ballroom. He won’t look at me. So I wait. I stand at the bar and wait, and eventually, because I know him and I know he will, he looks back. And I didn’t get it wrong. Instead of smiling, he shakes his head. It’s a slight movement, barely noticeable. But I notice it. The way his mouth pulls to one side, slow and almost considerate, as if in thought. I know this face. I’ve seen it multiple times. It’s his face when he’s frustrated with me – for misplacing my keys for the twentieth time that week, for taking too long to get ready so we’re late to our dinner reservation. He had that look when I turned up to his colleague’s Christmas drinks last year in a dress he didn’t think was quite right. It’s disappointment written across his face, here, in this room.

I feel a heat rising through me, starting at my forehead and boiling its way down somewhere in my chest. Have I embarrassed him? I put the glass down. I need to get out of here ... I need the bathroom.

The bathroom is empty. I lock the cubicle door, drop the lid, and sit down. I pull the paper from my bra. It's soft at the folds now and slightly greying at the edges. I smooth it against my knee and look at what I've written so far.

We've had six visits so far and I've written six tidy little lessons. I put pencil the paper for visit seven.

Things I have learned, visit 7:

1. ~~Some people will~~

I stare at the line for a long time. Then fold the paper back up. Tuck it away, wash my hands, and look at myself in the mirror. Bride Belle looks back at me and I'm not sure which one of us blinks first.

My hair is knotted at my shoulders, and my cheeks are the colour of the red wine I definitely wasn't supposed to be drinking. We'd made a pact – had promised each other: fizz and wine over dinner, then sparkling water. Just sparkling water. In order to *stay clearheaded and ready for the best day of our lives*, he'd said, and I'd agreed, because it had seemed reasonable back in London, back when the wedding felt like a thing that was happening to a future, calmer version of me.

I ball up a tissue and blot my forehead.

This is not what I'd planned for this evening. Which is so obvious, it's almost funny, except I'm too tired to laugh. It's the night before my wedding. My husband-to-be is ignoring me in a room full of our nearest and dearest, and the person I currently feel the closest to in the world is a ghost. The ghost of Jake Marleigh, specifically. I'm also sweating in a bathroom, by myself. I need a minute to process all of this.

I breathe in through my nose. Hold it. Then out. Like I learned on Instagram.

Here's the thing. Reliving what Seb did to me ... I know that's why I needed the wine, the noise, and why I wanted to let my hair down. I'm not unravelling – I am, instead, just releasing some pressure. There's a difference.

And maybe, if I'm being honest, in the privacy of my own head at least ... Maybe Jake's voice is in there too. I don't want to admit that he knows me more than I want him to. That after ten years, after everything, he can still land something without even trying.

The way he's able to make such casual observations, without realising how I take them to heart. *You've changed ... More uptight*. How he said it

so matter-of-factly, like it wasn't hurtful, like he was just stating the obvious.

I just ... I don't want to be the woman who nurses a sparkling water at my wedding rehearsal dinner because I'm worried about what people will think. I don't want to have to change myself for others. I vowed not to let that happen again – and I meant it.

And Timothy knows what I've been through in my past, and what I never want to go back to, which includes letting someone's disapproval dictate how I hold myself in a room.

If he loves me as he says he does, he will understand that.

I've just talked myself into more wine, using feminism and trauma. That's new.

I lift my head, blow out a breath, and go back out there.

It's not a protest. It's just a party – my party – and I intend to enjoy it.

As I walk through the hall, I try my hardest not to glance at Timothy, although I feel his eyes following me. I grab a glass of wine from a staff member holding out drinks on a silver tray, thank them with a small courtesy and continue towards the back doors.

The cold outside is physical – it hits me before the door is fully open. A gust of ice-cold winter air almost takes my breath away. It's like walking into the Arctic. The frosty grass crunches under my heels. I look to the sky – no snow yet.

Above the treeline, Whitby Abbey is lit by a full moon, like a spotlight; it looks like the main character on a theatre stage. It looks like a painting of a ruin, rather than an actual one. Like something that chose to fall apart for beautiful effect. I spot a group of smokers mingling under an oak tree and decide to join them. I haven't smoked for years but, man, do I crave one now.

It's some of Timothy's restaurant people, as well as Vik and his wife. Vik clocks me coming and lifts his chin. I can do this small performance of sociability.

'Smoke?' a guy asks, offering a pack. I vaguely remember him – Augie, I think his name is. A finance guy at one of Timothy's restaurants.

'Ugh, thought you'd never ask.' I put one in my mouth and he lights it. The first drag does what I needed it to do. I tip my head back and exhale, let the sound of the sea nearby find me. Waves against rocks, relentless and soothing.

For so long, I couldn't wait for my own wedding day – to experience that specific sort of attention: the feeling of the whole room being there for you and the person you've chosen. I used to think that sounded incredibly romantic, only to be gained when you found *the one*.

Now that it's here, I can't locate that feeling. Everyone watching Timothy and me, cataloguing us, deciding privately whether we'll last ... Or won't we? I can feel it all happening in real time and it's too much.

I've been in a room full of people watching me all evening. Out here in the dark, this smoke in my hand, chit-chat around me, I can be nobody for a moment. Eyes shut, head up to the moon, surrounded by small talk.

I feel him before I see him.

A change in the atmosphere, the group adjusting slightly, attention shifting. I've been with Timothy for three years – I know the effect he has on people. The way they gravitate towards him, the way rooms reorganise themselves when he enters.

I turn to face the manor and see him approaching. He's smiling, but it's pained. I know that look and I know he, too, is acting now. That's his 'I'm stressed because I'm not in control right now but don't want people to see I'm freaking out' look.

'There you are,' he says, coming to stand beside me. Hand at the small of my back. His voice is warm, easy, totally unaffected. He's very good at this. 'I was looking for you.'

'Oh, were you?' I smile up at him. I know you watched me walk out here.

'Let's leave you lovebirds to it!' Vik grins, already stubbing out his cigarette, steering his wife and the others back towards the party.

When they're gone, he doesn't say anything immediately. He just looks at the cigarette between my fingers.

'It's one cigarette,' I say. 'It's not heroin.'

'I didn't say anything.'

'You were about to.'

He pauses and exhales, slowly, through his nose. 'I've spent the last hour and a bit ... I've just been—' He stops. And starts again, but quieter now.

'What's going on? This isn't like you.'

'Which part?'

'The shots. The dancing on the ...' He glances towards the manor. 'All of it.'

'It's a party, Timothy.'

‘It’s our rehearsal dinner.’

‘Which is also a party.’

‘Belle.’

Here we go.

‘Everyone is here. My family, people from work. Luckily, the *Fork Yeah* team left before the party kicked off but ... You have to understand how this looks.’

‘How does it look?’ I want him to say whatever he’s thinking out loud.

He considers it carefully. Looks around, then back at me. ‘It looks like maybe you’re not all right.’

‘I am completely all right.’ The words come out steady, which surprises me, because I feel anything but.

The problem is that I’ve spent the past few hours watching every version of myself that I’ve tried to leave behind, and some of it is still stuck to me and I’m hoping to God that he can’t sense that. And if only he knew about my antics today – the ghost, the flashbacks, Seb’s face at that party – then he might not use the word ‘all right’ anywhere near me.

He might use ‘unwell’. He might think ‘not fit to get married tomorrow’.

He nods and then takes a step closer to me, whispering almost. ‘Are you getting cold feet?’

Cold feet? He thinks I’m unsure about *us*?

I tap the cigarette with my index finger, away from my dress. ‘Timothy, yes, my feet are cold. I’m wearing stilettos outside in mid-December. But I’m not getting cold feet for our wedding.’ Another lie.

He looks nervous, slightly panicked. ‘You’re sure?’

‘I’m excited. About tomorrow. You should want me to be excited! What would you prefer, that I sit quietly in the corner with your nanna Maude and her dodgy knee?’

I watch as his forehead creases. ‘I’d prefer—’ He stops again. He does that twitchy jaw thing. ‘I just want to know you’re okay. That’s all.’

‘I’m okay.’

‘Right.’ He nods, before leaning down and kissing me. It’s a flicker of a kiss. Our lips barely touch. It’s so polite, so managed, that I have to actively resist pulling back.

‘I’ll see you inside,’ he says and leaves. It’s only when he’s gone that I realise I wanted him to stay.

One final drag of the cigarette and I watch the tip glow. The waves carry on below. White noise, which feels soothing. One last look at the abbey, broken and all lit up. A magnificent wreckage on display against the black sky. It's beautiful in the way that lonely things often are. I wonder if that's why Timothy is attracted to me. And I wonder if that's why Jake *was* attracted to me. I turn and go back inside.

I push the door open and Jake's on the sofa, telly on, legs up. He's got a pen between his teeth, tapping it against his bottom lip, staring at the ceiling.

I close the door behind me and lean back against the cool wood. Jake spots me, the pen disappearing as he straightens up.

'There she is.' He grins cheekily. I see he's been working his way through a bottle of whisky he's acquired from ... somewhere. Impressively, he's already made a bit of a dent. Recognising the look on my face, he stills. Raises the bottle.

'Give me that,' I say, collapsing into the cushion next to him, kicking off my heels. 'We're going to need that, I think.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Jake

I mute the TV as Belle slumps next to me. She kicks off her heels, curls her feet up under her like one of Arthur's cats and pulls a cushion onto her lap. With her head resting back against the sofa, she holds out her hand. I pass her the whisky and look to the TV instead. I watch images of a movie I've already seen.

When I got up here, I spent ten minutes staring at her dress hung on the door of the wardrobe, without meaning to. Then I paced around until I noticed a half-drunk glass of water on the bedside table. Her side. The same side she slept on when we were together.

I also turned on all the lamps. I'm one of those lamp people. Aggressive in my confidence that they make a room cosier, more atmospheric. Romantic even. I look to the ceiling. What the hell am I doing? A ghost, trying to create a passionate vibe with my very much alive ex? Do I really think I'm gonna be the one to comfort her about her abusive exes? Pull it together, Jake.

Anyway, she seems off. Quieter. She doesn't appear to be her new bouncy self. She's flatter now. She takes a second swig as I push my heels into the carpet. It's thick and scratchy beneath my feet. I pick up the remote, change the channel. Yet another film. One of my faves.

'Don't suppose you've got strong opinions on whether *Die Hard* is a Christmas movie or not?' I ask, grinning as I nod to the TV. She smiles without looking at me and hands me back the bottle. I look into it, sitting awkwardly in the silence.

Then, to do something, I take a swig.

This film always reminded me of our first Christmas holidays together. We hadn't spent the actual day together, to my dismay – she'd wanted to make the most of Grandma Juliet being down for Christmas – but we had spent all of New Year's Eve at my house, watching Christmas films in between fumbling around under each other's clothes. We'd pulled my

bedroom mattress onto the floor and set up a fort with bedsheets hanging over an ironing board. I'd spent forty minutes trying to get the sheets to hang right, weighing them down with a stack of books, including a dictionary I'd never actually used.

Belle had watched, sitting cross-legged on the mattress, directing me while eating cereal straight from the box. We'd drunk cheap Asti from the bottle, fizz running down our chin as we laughed. I'd joked about whether or not I could make her orgasm as the clock struck midnight. Her reaction was one of pure shock, then a mischievous grin, then a squeeze of my leg as she bet yes. I remember waking up still inside the fort, Belle asleep on my chest. The sheets had half-collapsed in the night and neither of us had noticed.

She brought out a playful side in me. A side of me so different to my usual grumpy self – the kind of guy who built forts. I don't know what happened to that guy. He died in more ways than one after we broke up.

I turn back to the TV. Then to her. Her makeup is slightly smudged, lipstick gone, freckles on full show. I know her well enough to know that that's significant. The woman in front of me looks nothing like the one downstairs. Her eyes are so sad. I notice my foot thumping the floor, jittery, restless. I'm craving the sound of her laugh. How can I make her laugh?

I look at the whisky in my hand. Not quite as cheap and cheerful as the Asti we used to neck from the bottle on my bedroom floor. I don't say that.

She sits next to me, still and silent. I must have really upset her earlier. I've ruined this weekend for her. And she'll never forgive me for it. Even after I'm long gone, this is the memory she'll have of me. Dead ex ruining her magical wedding, calling her uptight and robotic.

I was just desperate to have the old Belle back. Prove to her in some twisted way that she was settling for boring.

'Look, Belle ...' I say into my lap. She shuffles closer and turns to face me, head resting on the cushions.

'Earlier, what I said—'

'Stop!' She closes her eyes.

I turn to her now, moving my whole body around to face her. I watch as her chest rises and falls, and study her lips, which are trying to form words. 'You were right,' she says softly, eyes shut.

I scan her face – the curl of her Cupid's bow, how there's a bit of hair caught in one of her lashes – and it catches me off guard. She's saying I'm

right. So why do I feel crushed? Why did I push it?

‘No, Belle—’ I try to find the words to apologise but she cuts me off again.

‘Jake. You were right,’ she says, looking at me now.

I look away, catch myself focusing on the patterns in the table in front of us, the swirls from the bark of the tree, now glossy and polished into something that no longer resembles what it came from.

Belle continues, ‘This ... This isn’t me. It’s just annoying how you, of all people, have been the one to spot that.’ She huffs out a laugh, rolling her eyes. I feel myself sinking a little, into the sofa, into a void.

She continues, ‘I’ve been performing a version of me for so long that I don’t know who I really am anymore. I don’t know what the original me looks like.’ She pauses, rubs a temple with her fingers, sighs.

I rack my brain for something to say, try to arrange a sentence to change the subject, but my brain can’t focus.

‘I pretend that I’m together because I have to. For my job, for my relationships. So that people think I’m okay. More than okay. Perfect.’

‘That’s not ...’ I stop. Then start again, ‘Belle, you’re perfect without even trying.’

‘You’re so wrong, Jake.’

I sink lower. The fact I’ve been lying to her is starting to eat away at me. This whole thing – the tour, the exes, the time travel – it was never about saving her soul. It’s mine that needs saving. And I’m putting her through this the night before her wedding.

Right now she’s wrung out and she’d probably forgive me, and the worst thing is that I’m aware of that. Which means I’m still doing it – manipulating her.

I want to do what’s best for her, which at this moment is keeping quiet. The last thing she needs is me making this about my soul, my deadline, my mess. That’s what I tell myself, anyway.

Belle leans her head back, closes her eyes again. I watch her hands hold on tight to her arms, hugging herself.

‘When Timothy listed the reasons he loves me in that speech, I felt proud. But then, I don’t know ... Something in me felt off. It felt like he was talking about someone else. It felt like he was describing someone I’d worked very hard to become, rather than someone I actually am.’

All I can think is that she wouldn't be saying this if she knew why I was really here. I can't tell her. I can't have her hate me. Because even with her imperfections, to me, that's what makes her so perfect. And after all this, I'm going to have to leave her again – and I'm not ready for that.

I look at my hands – there are two things I could say right now, and I fight against the urge to say the first.

'He loves you, Belle. The real you.' I feel something shift in my chest as I say it. It feels like putting down a heavy backpack that you've been carrying for too long and immediately wishing you hadn't, because you won't be able to pick it back up again.

He's a better man than I am. That's not a hard conclusion to reach, and I was never competing for the title. But sitting here now, I think about Timothy making that speech and meaning every word of it. All that certainty. I had that feeling with Belle, but never the steadiness. I always felt like I was one step from losing her. When you're frightened of something walking out of the door, you start slowly making the door smaller. And calling it love. I got good at that. And she noticed before I did.

When I look up, Belle is looking at me, her eyes hazy. She reaches out for my arm and strokes it now. The feel of her skin on mine almost makes me feel alive again. Ten years of nothing and then this – her thumb moving across my forearm. It's barely anything but it feels like everything so I don't move, in case she stops.

'Thanks for being here with me through this.'

I give her a small, curt nod.

'Fuck ... Revisiting Sebastian was a trip. It was worse than I remembered.' She pulls away, rubbing her forehead.

I feel my jaw clench harder. I look out the window. There's nothing useful out there, just darkness and the faint sound of the sea. I want to say something that fixes it, but there's nothing.

'He was a ... I can't believe ...' I stumble over my words. Then I try saying the only true thing I've got. 'I'm proud of you for leaving, Belle. You're stronger than you think.'

She's quiet, looking into her lap, tracing the lines of her palm with her finger. Her engagement ring catches the light.

'You know, the next one ... It won't be easy. You might need to pick me up like a sack of potatoes from the floor afterwards.' She looks at me, smiles.

‘I’ll be right next to you.’

We look at each other for a long while. Neither of us moves. Sitting side by side on the sofa, silence surrounding us, I stretch my leg out slightly, so it hits her thigh. She doesn’t pull away.

‘Do you fancy a cuppa, before the next one? Two sugars?’ I ask.

‘I don’t take sugar anymore.’ She reaches for the whisky instead.

I nod and look at the TV, which is still on. A building is detonating. Erupting in flames and crumbling to the ground, as people run in the distance.

Her breathing is steady. My leg against hers. I give it one more second, then I reach out, desperate to feel her hands in mine. She shuffles to the edge of the sofa, smiles a sad smile with sad eyes, just for me.

‘We’ve got this, Belle,’ I say as she puts the bottle down, placing her palms in mine. I curl my fingers around her hands and force myself to look away to avoid noticing how perfectly they fit. I watch her face. Count her freckles. And she shuts her eyes.

Joe Silver

Belle's grey scarf sits neatly atop her folded clothes on a leather chair in the corner of the room. She had known him for a fortnight, give or take. She knew his coffee order but not much else.

She lies on the bed, naked, as Joe walks around the room, his eyes glued to her. He's topless, grey suit pants still belted around his waist, his arms crossed as he inspects her. Her nipples are hard but not from arousal. She's freezing but holds back the shiver.

She said yes to this earlier. Was turned on by the idea. Liked the thought of being submissive, being controlled. But as she watches him now, circling, the wetness between her legs has dried up.

She looks at him, hates the way his eyes crawl over her skin. How they settle between her legs. She wants to cross her thighs, but she physically can't. She wants to sit up or crawl into a ball, but he won't like that either. He'd told her. He wants her wide and spread. Wants her to feel small and wants her begging. And she'd said yes.

Belle looks to the ceiling and her eyes catch on a squashed moth next to the lampshade. She wonders how long it's been there, why he hasn't wiped it away already.

Finally, he walks over to the chair. He picks up her scarf and sifts it through his fingers, back and forth, before bringing it close to his nose. She watches his hands work the fabric – the scarf she wears in winter, which keeps out the wind – and it looks almost alien in his grip.

He takes his time. Like he has all the time in the world. Like he knows she will wait.

She feels something in her settle, feels her legs open a little. Then comes the crushing recognition: she's finding comfort in the way his eyes are devouring her, the way he's in charge, not her.

Before she can sit with that, he leans over her, ties the scarf around her wrists and secures it to the headboard. She smells the perfume that she'd applied that morning, floral and sweet. A happy fragrance. She closes her eyes and breathes it in.

The jangling of his belt forces her eyes back open. It drops to the floor, still held within the belt loops of his trousers. He climbs onto the end of the

bed, his skin meeting hers from her toes upward. He lowers his head to her inner thigh and hovers. She expects a lick, a warmth, a comforting feeling, but gets only his breath. Then he inhales. Slow, contained, deep. It happens again and again. She realises he is sniffing her. Working his way up, using his nose to sniff her out.

Why did she say yes, again? Did she really want this? Or did she just feel so numb that she wanted to try something new? She had wanted to feel something. Or is it deeper? Because this is her new normal, what her intimacy has recalibrated to? She doesn't want it, but she recognises it.

And so as he enters her, her body softens, relaxes. She can't feel her fingers – they're tingly from being raised above her – but her eyes still work. They find the moth.

A dark smudge on the white ceiling.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Belle

I watch as thirty-one-year-old Belle cradles a glass of red wine. Her thumb traces the stem up and down as she peers at her reflection in its deep burgundy liquid, her phone face down next to her on the table. She's dressed well, sitting straight, mousy hair plaited behind her back, but it's all a performance.

It's like catching myself in the mirror at a bad angle.

The bar this evening is heaving – mainly Christmas parties, people donning festive grins and kissing under the mistletoe – but she hadn't noticed any of it. I was too in my own head. I'd got there hours earlier, because there was nothing else to do, and I was lucky to get a table only because of that. Watching her is jarring. It's like everyone around her is moving at double speed while she sits there in slow motion. The music gets cranked a smidge louder. Someone in a Santa suit yells, 'Ho ho ho.'

Now, looking out of the frosted glass of the windows, I make out the shadows of smokers outside, pint glasses in hand. It smells like a mix of mulled wine, dry tinsel, and wet dog – and even standing here, among a crowd, I feel the loneliness radiating off her – because I remember exactly how it felt.

At the table to my right, someone's abandoned a Secret Santa gift. It's a frying pan in the shape of a penis so you could make rude fried eggs, half in its bag, gift tag swinging. The evening, like its owner, moved on without it.

Behind me I feel a presence. A warmth, as Jake step closer, his shoulder against mine. It helps, for a moment, but with it, there's also something else. A pull in my chest that makes me fidget. I shuffle on the spot, lean my weight onto the other leg, and scan the room again. His being by my side throughout all of this is comforting but it's also becoming increasingly frustrating. We never had closure on our relationship. We broke up and then he died. And I've carried that guilt with me for years.

He doesn't say anything, but neither do I. That's always been the problem with Jake and me. Too much unsaid, and then there was suddenly no time left to say any of it. I shake the thought off. Now isn't the time.

Young Belle sits consumed by and consuming her drink. She isn't constantly looking at her phone. She's not scanning the crowd, looking for people she recognises, or looking to the door, ready to wave every time it opens. I'd taken to visiting pubs and bars by myself, purely as a way to get out of my tiny flat. I hadn't seen my friends in months. It's not that they'd given up on me, but rather they just assumed I wouldn't come, so they stopped asking, and I felt like too much time had passed to get in touch again. Oh, hey, remember me? Your friend, Belle. Sorry about disappearing off the face of the earth. I was just being emotionally gaslit, and now I'm too fucked up to act normal ...

I didn't want to beg for their forgiveness. Apologise for being a bad friend, for missing birthdays, for turning down every invite for fear of them seeing my bruises. Plus, Sebastian wouldn't let me go. And how could I explain that? That the once bright, friendly Belle was under his control and had willingly let it happen. I didn't want to see the disappointment on their faces. Didn't want to make excuses for the behaviour of a man I thought I loved, so I just stopped responding to their messages at all.

The first time I'd arranged to see the girls, I'd worked myself up so much that I was shaking by the time I got to the pub. Our old local. I walked around outside for fifteen minutes before building up the courage to go in. I lasted ten minutes. Made an excuse about a bad stomach – which was partly true, due to my general anxiety – and left.

Afterwards, I wasn't able to pick myself up like I'd expected. I beat myself up about that on top of everything else. Which in turn made it harder to get myself back on track. All this made the old Belle feel like a dream. I felt like an empty shell. I couldn't remember what had made me happy, what I'd enjoyed doing with my spare time, or what my favourite food had been. I was changed.

But I was good at my job. Proof of survival.

A figure approaches young Belle's table. Hovers for a moment, not in hesitation, but rather observation. Joe appeared fine. That was my word to describe him – just fine. Nothing particularly wrong, but nothing really right. He dressed well. He wore a good coat. He also seemed like the type who wouldn't crumble under pressure at being given the wine list by a

presumptuous sommelier, but under normal circumstances, I wouldn't have given him a second glance.

Young Belle takes a sip of wine as Joe pulls up a seat. I'm thankful I can't see his face from where I'm standing; his back is to me. But I can see my reaction to him joining. Belle swallows her mouthful, moves her phone slightly closer to her, then places her glass back on the table. She doesn't smile, but instead just raises a brow, leans back in her chair, and tilts her head to one side, quizzically. It strikes me now how she's prioritising safety for her phone over herself.

'Couldn't help but notice you've been sitting here for a while, and no one has joined you. I was hoping I would get the honour,' he says, with a West London accent, confident and measured.

He always took his time with sentences, drew them out, and paused disconcertingly before answering a question. A few times I almost repeated myself, thinking he hadn't heard or was ignoring me, but he was just mulling it over, untroubled by how long he left you waiting.

'Knock yourself out,' young me replies. I notice how my shoulders drop slightly, how I immediately loosen in his presence.

'I'm Joe. And if I'm not being too forward, I wanted to say that you look very beautiful tonight.'

Jake, next to me, shuffles. I watch as young Belle swirls her wine around in the glass. She smirks but there's no brightness in her eyes.

'How do you know that's not every night, Joe?'

'Fair. And your name?'

'Belle,' said matter-of-factly. Almost resigned to the fact that this is happening now.

'Beautiful Belle,' he says, leaning forward, head in his palm. Belle mirrors him, leans closer. It didn't take much for me to let him in. How quickly I relaxed into his company, without making him earn it.

'I know how it looks,' I say now to Jake.

I can tell he's struggling with this, both in the way he's looking everywhere but at Joe, and he's no longer by my side – he's a step behind me. Is it me he's avoiding? Seeing me like this – desperate, pathetic. Drinking alone on a Friday night, so close to Christmas. I wouldn't judge him if he was. I think the same.

'Work was the only place I excelled. Outside of that, I'd moved to a new part of London, didn't know anyone, and felt really isolated.'

‘I can see that,’ Jake says slowly, as Joe rises from the chair and Belle swigs back the last of her wine. He moves, almost glides, behind her chair and lifts up her coat. The gentleman. She smiles her thanks, but doesn’t put it on, just folds it over her arm as they leave together.

‘Eight million people in this city and I’d never felt lonelier.’

Jake says nothing. The irony isn’t lost on me, telling him I was lonely while we’re watching past me go home with a man I barely knew. It’s the most depressing version of problem solving, but there’s a particular kind of loneliness that makes you do stuff like that. Crave any sort of attention, no matter how dark, just to fill a void. A void, I now know, that no man was ever going to fill.

‘Belle, come here.’ I turn to my right, and Jake’s there, so close I can smell him. How is it possible that he smells exactly the same? The same detergent on his clothes, the same hint of lavender on his skin.

Next to us a barman collects empty glasses, stacking them in the crook of his elbow as the lights on the Christmas tree in the corner start flashing aggressively.

He pulls me in tight, so close that my head rests in his neck. We sway together like we used to.

There was a time I thought I’d marry him. I imagined us taking classes for our first dance, learning some romantic routine we’d practise in the kitchen. I won’t be having a first dance with Timothy tomorrow. Another tradition we’re breaking. We pretend it’s because we’re trendy, but really it’s because Timothy has two left feet and has to be *perfect at everything*. He didn’t care that I did care. I cried myself to sleep the night he admitted that he didn’t want to. A tug in my chest. That feels like a pretty big thing to have admitted, even to myself, in a bar at Christmas time, swaying with a dead man.

We rock together, Jake slightly offbeat to the music. Not badly, just to his own rhythm, which I’d forgotten was something he did. He wouldn’t have minded looking like a fool. Would have just wanted to see me smile.

Next to us there is a flash of a camera pointed at a group of girls, and a staggering rush of cold air from the door opening, but to me, it feels like the room has slowed once more. Like no one is here but us.

I feel Jake breathing in my hair, and it doesn’t put me on edge like it did with Joe. It feels like he’s trying to take in this moment. Store it for forever,

rather than dominate. I feel his thumb move, just slightly, against my waist. If he's realised he's doing it, he's decided not to stop.

I close my eyes, warmth spreading through my body. Still swaying, he pulls me closer, and I let him. I feel his other palm move to the small of my back, and I don't resist. There's about an inch between my face and his jaw and it's all I can think about.

As the music fades into the next song, I hear him exhale, unsettled, like he's resisting something. Is he not enjoying this closeness as much as I am? I pull up to search his face.

His eyes are soft, gentle in a way I wasn't prepared for. I watch his chest rise, catch his mouth opening ever so slightly, the words not quite ready.

The way he's resisting ... His eyes are tracing my face – my mouth, my eyes, my chin, like he's gearing up for something.

He has something to say. I know he does. I realise I've gone very still waiting for it, aware of my own breathing, aware of his, aware of the silence, aware of how quiet the air has gone between us.

'Are you okay?' I ask, softly. I reach my hand up and rest it on his cheek.

He shakes his head. 'Shall we go to the end of this one?'

He's changed the subject, but all I can think about is this: was he about to tell me he still loves me? And why do I feel crushed he didn't? And what does it say about me that I wanted him to? I need to get a grip. We're almost through with all this now. Nearly finished with not only this time travelling, but the end of the evening. I should be happy to get back to the weekend, as planned. So why do I feel sad?

Somewhere behind us, Mariah starts up again. A crowd erupts in drunk harmonies. The penis frying pan is still there. Someone's not getting their comedy breakfast tomorrow.

'To the end,' I mutter.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Jake

I dig my hands into my pockets and look around nervously. I'm expecting the worst, obviously. This time, we're standing outside a row of houses, and everything is grey. I can't tell if that's because I'm losing my colour again, or because London this time of year is really *that* miserable. I can feel the cold in the way I can feel most things now, and I can tell it's freezing. And if I weren't a ghost, my hot breath would cloud against the chill. But I can't. I try. Still can't.

There's a very dead Christmas tree on the pavement, a trail of pine needles leading back to a house a few doors down, like blood leading you to a crime scene. I always thought forensics would be a great job to get into. Shame I never got the chance.

The house we're outside of is ... quite nice, actually. A terraced house on a quiet street. Brown brick, black door, cement paving. A dead plant in a pot. The neighbour next door has Christmas lights still up and canned snow sprayed on the window, smudged with grubby fingerprints.

Turning towards Belle is like looking at the sun on a winter's day. She is glowing. The pale pink dress clings to her curves, hair dancing in the breeze. She, too, is looking at the pine needles on the ground, tracing them back like I just did. I know she's thinking the same *CSI* thoughts.

That moment we had just then in that bar. Was I imagining the tension? The heat between us? I can still feel the softness of her dress under my hands. The smell of her hair – fresh apples, always, and even now. I pinch my skin but can't feel it, because I'm still a ghost. With a crush ... more than that.

'Where are we?' I ask to break the ice.

'Outside Joe's,' she says.

Right. That creepy guy with the posh voice and tailored clothes. The shaved head, presumably an attempt to hide the fact he was balding at a young age. You know when you look at someone and you just get bad

vibes? Well, I definitely felt that with Sebastian. But this guy, Joe? I didn't even really see his face and I still got bad vibes, just from the back of his head. Never trust a guy who looks like the back of Jason Statham, that's what I say.

'Things get better now,' Belle says, before chewing the inside of her lip.

The door to the house opens. And young Belle exits, makeup free, a ringing phone in her hand, twirling a set of keys on her fingers. She's wearing an oversized cable-knit jumper, pulled up to her neck. I can tell she's still frail underneath. She shuts the door behind her, walks out of the front garden, and perches on the front brick wall.

'Belle speaking,' she answers the phone. Her voice is confident, but her body tells another story – arms wrapped around her chest, phone pressed to her ear.

She nods. Straightens. Smiles. Twizzles the keyring a few times more. There's just one key on it and a metal fob from an estate agent I've never heard of. She looks back towards the house, then down at her feet. 'Wow, this is fantastic news. I'm so thrilled to join you and your team!'

Belle, next to me, smiles softly. 'I was headhunted and found out I got the job. Head of PR for an up-and-coming alcohol brand. It felt like everything was falling into place.'

'So that's what you do for work.' I smile. Head of a division, of course – I wouldn't expect anything else. She was always destined for greatness. I swallow, knowing that I tried to hold her back from that.

'This moment: the fresh air, the good news, the start of a new year. It felt like a lightning bolt. My first hit of clarity. An opportunity for a fresh start. It made clear that I was still holding myself back in my dating life. Still punishing myself. Things needed to change. This new role gave me the confidence.'

Belle finishes her call and hangs up. She laughs, shimmies her shoulders, and places her head in her palms, elbows resting on her knees. After a few moments, she stands, takes a deep breath, and turns back towards the house.

We follow her as she walks up the front garden, turns the key in the lock, and enters, through the narrow hallway, lined with smart men's shoes. A shoehorn hangs on a hook. A waft of bitter coffee hits me as we follow Belle into the kitchen. It's a big room – there's been a renovation, a wall knocked down – but apart from that, there's absolutely no character.

No frames up, no personality, just white walls. A grey kitchen. Asylum vibes. Very much like the in-between I've been living in – a huge lump of 'meh'.

Except, this guy seems to have purposefully built this for himself. It's a huge contrast to Belle. Sure, her little trinkets looked like clutter, but they were proof of a life built, of her, showing care for a room lived in.

Joe is wearing a dressing gown and sitting at the kitchen island, empty apart from a sink, tapping away on a laptop. He doesn't look up when Belle enters the room, and now I'm here, I make out his face clearly.

I was right. Bad vibes. A plain man, but smarmy, like a lizard ... or a snake. His bald head is glistening. Skin so glassy, it looks like a snake right before it sheds its snake-y skin.

Belle packs up her laptop from the dining table behind the kitchen island and puts it in a tote bag. I don't recognise the brand name printed in a bold font on the front, but I pay close attention – if this is her job, and therefore a part of her new life, there's a part of me that wants to remember it.

It's only as Belle pulls a scarf – a grey, long, woolly thing – from the back of a chair, that Joe actually looks up from his computer and to her.

'What are you doing?' he asks – no warmth, just questioning.

Her tone is similar to his. Blunt, direct, monotone. 'I'm getting out of here. I won't be coming back.'

He laughs, a snooty, awful sound. 'You're joking, right?'

'I'm serious,' she says, not looking at him, but at the scarf in her hand. 'I don't want to see you again.' I notice that the top of her lip is curled up slightly in disgust.

'Fine. Go then,' he says, nasally.

Belle doesn't respond; it's like she's in a trance. Like the scarf isn't a scarf but a looking glass instead.

'Doesn't matter to me. Fuck off back to Clapham, love.' He turns back to his laptop, muttering to himself. Nonsense I can't hear and don't want to.

Young Belle huffs out a small laugh, shakes her head. She blinks a few times, still focused on the scarf, then places it back on the chair. She pulls the tote bag on her arm, lands the handles in the crook of her shoulder and walks back out to the hallway. Belle and I follow her as she grabs her coat from the banister. Behind us, Joe's stool squeaks as he pushes it back on the floor.

'Think you're better than me? You slag. You were a shit shag anyway.'

The words hit me before the moment does. Shit shag. I've said that too. I've said those exact words. I look at Belle beside me, and I can tell from her face she knows it too.

Something happens in that moment, something I haven't felt since ... who knows. I look back to the kitchen, see Joe standing there – his robe falling open at his chest, weedy legs, barefoot on the grey vinyl floor, gesturing in the air – and all of a sudden the colour drains out of everything. The bleak walls somehow go whiter, the grey kitchen goes greyer, and it all narrows down to this man.

My knuckles go white as I squeeze my fists, nails digging into my palms, and my heart races. The urge to walk back towards this guy has a specific tang to it. I can almost taste the satisfaction of a dressing gown collar grabbed from behind, taut in my hand. The feel of jaw, nose, against knuckle.

But I know I can't make him pay. I'm a useless ghost.

So instead, I stand in the hallway and vibrate.

I know that the best that'll happen, if I try, is that I'll walk through him. What kind of torture is this, where I can't stand up for someone, where the best I can do is make a man shiver. The full extent of what I'm able to offer is a mild drop in temperature, like I'm a draught under the door.

Young Belle is already pulling on her coat. She's done. I force myself to watch her instead of him. I focus on the line of the shoulders under the padding of her waterproof. Head high. The Belle that has found the courage to stand up for herself. She doesn't even shake until she's outside, her fingers trembling as she pulls the door closed.

It slams. A dog starts barking somewhere down the road.

We follow her through the gate, which she leaves open, but she's fast. We slow to a halt and watch her go. She's not running, but something's different. Like a gear shifting. She pulls her coat tighter around the neck and doesn't look back. We stand there for a moment after she's gone around the corner.

I look down and kick a bit of gravel off the kerb. I'd called her a robot – said it like it was a fact – and made her feel bad for acting so forced.

But she didn't even flinch. When he was yelling at her, she didn't even move. That's the bit I can't stop thinking about. She either just absorbed it, the way she's clearly learned to, or she built a shell around herself.

I think it's the latter. She's not a robot, she's just hardened. It's not that she's emotionless or lost herself – she's protecting herself. And I'd said that to her because it was easier than directly asking what happened. It was easier than admitting that I didn't recognise her anymore, and that scared me. She didn't go cold and heartless. She just stopped leaving the door open for strangers to get in.

'Fuck, Belles. I shouldn't have said that. The robot thing.'

And not just that. I can still hear it – *shit shag* – coming out of his mouth like it came out of mine. But one thing at a time.

She goes quiet for a moment. 'You weren't wrong.' She's squeezing her lips together so they go white around the edges.

'I'm so—'

'Jake—'

'I didn't get it. But I do now. I'm sorry, really.'

She looks at me, her head tilted to the side. Not forgiving, but understanding. 'I don't want to be like that anymore,' she says quietly. 'I'm so tired of holding everyone, everything, at arm's length.'

I know that feeling, though I'm not going to say so.

She breathes out, pushes her hair back off her face with both hands and holds them to her temples for just a moment, looking up at the sky. She used to do that when we were together. When she was thinking or trying to make a decision. I haven't seen her do it since I've come back. Without thinking, I reach out and tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. She doesn't flinch.

My mouth opens as if to say something. What comes out is: 'You know I'm rubbish at this.'

'I know.'

I've never been great at words, like, ever, but one thing I am adept at is gestures and big romantic actions. We can't have it all.

'You're ...' I stop, shake my head. 'I'm glad I got to see this bit, Belle.'

A grin, just there. She knows what I'm trying to say, or rather, I hope she knows, because what I'm really thinking is that she is brave. I've been watching her all evening, trying to find the girl I knew in this woman, and that hasn't been fair on either of us. She was here the whole time – she just stopped leaving the door open. Also, she's still the most beautiful woman I've ever seen and, somehow, there's a Belle-shaped hole embedded in my

chest and there always will be. I've been trying to find the right moment for ages and now I'm running out of road.

'Belle, I need to tell you something.'

Her eyes widen a little, and my reflection in her pupils looks lame.

'I should have said this earlier, not left it so late ...' I say, running my hands through my hair.

Her hand moves towards me, palm outstretched. It hovers in the air between us, then she shakes it a little, like washing grime off a window.

'The thing is—'

'No, Jake.' She nods, takes a step towards me, and puts both hands on my chest. I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

'Not yet. Not now,' she says.

I look down and meet her eyes. 'Can we chat back at the hotel?' she pleads. 'I want to be done with this chapter of my life now. I'm ready to move on.'

She drags her hands down my chest and finds my palms with hers. We interlock fingers, and she closes her eyes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Belle

I wait a second longer, my hands in his, my eyes closed, before I open them. I allow him to think I'm not fully back yet, savouring the touch of his palms, how his fingers are curled around mine. When I crack my eyes open, his are still shut. I don't move. I stay as still as possible, letting myself feel the weight of him on the cushion next to me and how our breathing has found the same rhythm. The paper is still there, tucked against my ribs. I don't take it out.

Outside, a bare tree creaks in the wind. Apart from the rise and fall of our breaths, everything else is quiet. I look to the bed and expect to see a Jake-shaped dent in the centre of it, but there isn't one. Just layers of cushions that only exist to be removed at bedtime. Behind him, on the wardrobe door, hangs my wedding dress. The edge of it catches the light from a lamp, and for a second it looks like something living.

I look to my lap. Even in death, Jake is still a lamp guy.

He opens one eye, checks mine are open, then opens the other one. We sit smiling at one another, awkwardly, still holding hands. I feel a flutter of butterflies that feels both incredible and devastating at the same time. The same ones I had before my first kiss: the particular apprehension of not knowing what comes next. Nothing like the ones I wanted but didn't feel with Timothy under the fireworks this evening.

'I just have one question,' Jake says, hands still in mine. A knot ties itself in my stomach. I brace myself for it.

'I couldn't tell, just wanted you to clarify ...' He looks deep into my eyes, very serious. 'When you dumped Joe ... Was he wearing a silk robe, or a towelling one? I feel like that changes things.'

I blink at him. It takes a second to land.

'Towelling,' I say. 'With a hood.'

He nods slowly, as if this is significant, critical information.

He exhales through his nose. 'Okay.' A pause. 'Okay.'

Something releases in my chest that I didn't realise I'd been holding. I start laughing, properly laughing – the type that bubbles up seemingly out of nowhere – and then he starts too. For a moment, we're just two people in a hotel room laughing late one evening at nothing and everything, wiping tears from our eyes, slapping our knees, and clutching our chests.

My body seems to buzz.

We did it. I did it. I got through reliving the bad ones.

'Thank God that's over,' I say. We both slump back onto the sofa in sync.

'Hmm, you're not getting off that easy, darling,' he says, eyes to the ceiling, 'We still have to see the start of your and Timothy's journey.'

I nod slowly, then shuffle and stretch my legs out from under me. Almost without thinking, as if acting on reflex or muscle memory, Jake picks up my legs and places them across his lap. His thumb strokes my thigh. My stomach flutters.

A soft curl of his dark hair falls to his brows and, all of a sudden, it feels like we're in our early twenties again and I'm here getting lost in the way his blue eyes are skimming my legs, still jealous at the unfair length of his lashes. I'd spent ten years avoiding pictures of him, knowing that looking at his face properly – those eyes, that jaw, the dimples embedded in his cheeks – would, simply, break me. Knowing that those lips, soft and pink and always on the verge of a joke or a kiss, would never skim confidently across my skin again. I cross my legs to stop myself throbbing.

Except, I'm not twenty now. And I know better. I shuffle forward to sink deeper into the sofa, my head resting on a tassel-covered cushion propped up on the armrest, and make a conscious decision to look at the ceiling instead of him.

It's very plain up there. Painted a shade of wispy white probably called something like Chantilly Cloud. The lampshade looks like it's made from antler horns, which is the ceiling's single contribution to the room's otherwise fussy enthusiasm. It's like the ceiling was an afterthought. Like whoever decorated this room ran out of ideas the moment they looked up.

Jake pulls my dress down over my thigh. I hadn't realised it had ridden up. He does it without comment, without being asked; he just smooths it down and fixes it the way he used to. I'd forgotten he used to do things like that, I missed it more than I realised.

I bring a hand to my forehead and scan the room. Maybe it's time to tell him the truth. What I've been holding back all evening for fear that he'll

judge me, that he'll look at me differently. This evening has taught me that in some strange, impossible way, I can still trust him. He's still here, by my side, taking care of me after everything he's seen today. And despite seeing me throw myself at his best friend ... at his own funeral.

I rub my eyes. 'Honestly, it's not the fairy-tale romance you're probably imagining.'

Jake looks from my thigh to me.

'You're telling me Timothy didn't pull up with a horse and carriage for your first date?'

I give him evils, chin to my chest.

'That he doesn't have a parade of tiny mice and birds following him around, smoothing his hair down, ironing his shirts?'

'You and your Disney films.'

'You're telling me he doesn't have a little rat under that chef's hat of his.'

A snort escapes my nose, but I don't attempt to cover it this time. It makes me laugh harder. Jake hits my leg as he throws his head back. I wipe a tear from my eye, unable to breathe. Our laughter dies down, and we smile, gazing at the window, Whitby Abbey in the distance. Jake massages his cheeks, the way he used to after one of our old laughing fits.

'In all honesty, I don't really know how we ended up here. Or, rather, I do, but it's hard to admit.'

'That sounds really cryptic,' he says, frowning.

'I think we're both ... Timothy and I are just practical people.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, we're in our thirties.' I shuffle up on the sofa, so his hands are on my shins now. He doesn't stop stroking. 'We both want kids and see a family in our future. Also, there's respect there.' I sigh, very aware that these are pathetic reasons to be with someone. 'We both respect each other ... and each other's space. And it's nice to have someone to share your life with, you know?'

'Hm.'

I stop. Am I listing all the reasons we're right for each other in an attempt to tell myself that we are? Also, a part of me worries that I've offended Jake with this. He's dead and will probably be lonely forever, while I'm here moaning about settling.

'It's nice to have someone to take care of you, if you need them.'

Jake nods, slowly. We're silent for a moment.

‘I feel like there’s a “but” coming,’ he says.

The engagement ring on my finger sparkles. My dream one – a vintage, one-carat diamond trilogy ring, chosen together on a Sunday stroll through Hatton Garden. He’d done his research, of course. Three jewellers shortlisted, budget agreed in advance. So I knew it was coming but hadn’t known exactly when. And the proposal, of course, was beautiful – incredible, in fact: candles, a speech, roses under a blue whale. But the one thing he couldn’t plan for was missing. My heart had been full. My stomach hadn’t done a thing.

‘But ...’ I pause. A drop in my chest as the words form on my lips. My eyes prickle now, but not from laughter. ‘I’m just not sure the feelings are there.’ I clear my throat, feeling my voice wobble.

Jake pulls my legs closer to his chest. ‘The spark?’ he asks.

‘The spark.’ One nod. It used to be there ... Didn’t it? Where did it go? And how did it go so quickly?

The windows rattle and howl as a gust of wind pushes against the glass.

‘Sounds a bit like Arthur 2.0.’ Jake taps his finger on my leg.

‘Ah, but no. Because Timothy doesn’t game. And Timothy has money.’

‘Gotcha ...’ he says. ‘Also, Timothy doesn’t have a cat called Gavin,’ he adds, squeezing my thigh.

‘Oh, Gavin.’ I feel his chest bounce with laughter and wish I could bottle that feeling.

We’re still a moment more. I lean into it, the quiet. With Timothy I always rush to fill the silences. I’d forgotten how different it was with Jake. How we were comfortable, so similar that we could sit still together, not saying a thing yet already knowing what the other was thinking.

Below us, the music has stopped. I hadn’t noticed until now. The party is over. The night is ending.

Jake shifts beside me; his thumb stops moving on my leg. He looks outside the window, scrutinising the dark nothing beyond it, and he’s doing the same maths I am, I know. How many hours till morning, before tonight starts being tomorrow. He has something to say, I’ve sensed it for a while now. Something more serious than his usual jokes. His eyes are searching the room, he’s biting the inside of his cheek; he’s looking for words, trying to find the ones that matter.

‘Belle, I’m ...’ He stops and rubs his face before trying again. ‘I just want you to know that I ...’ He stops again, his breathing heavy. ‘I’m glad you

showed me, all of it. I needed to see it.'

I nod at what he's said, or tried to say. It's not an apology, but I can feel one behind the stumbling. I don't push it. I just focus on this moment instead. His eyes are on mine but they keep dropping to my lips, and I shy away, look at his hands instead. How strange it is that someone who has been gone for ten years can still make me feel like a nervous teenager.

And now he's here again, sitting in front of me like no time has passed. And I miss us.

'I was so young, when you died. I can't help but wonder what would have happened if you hadn't.'

Chances are, we wouldn't have worked. I'm not naive to that. How many first loves actually make it?

I know that even if he hadn't died, our relationship would have run its course. We would have not spoken for a few weeks, then met up at a pub, then had great breakup sex, then got back together just to break up again. Then I would have moved to London, and he would have blocked me on his phone, but we would have continued to have an annual fling every December when I'd visit my parents back home over Christmas ... Until the day he met a girl he loved and who didn't want to leave, someone who gave him everything he wanted.

And that would have been that ...

We were not perfect.

But the hope was there.

I had hoped that we could have made it. That we would have worked out. That in some alternate world, in a *Sliding Doors* kind of way, he would have moved to London with me, got a job he loved, felt fulfilled, and it would be *our* wedding day tomorrow. Okay, maybe not here, in Whitby, the birthplace of Dracula. But in Hackney Town Hall. Disposable cameras. No flashy fireworks. No scallops or caviar. Just pure love.

Jake clears his throat, bringing me back to the room.

'Spanner in the works, isn't it?' he says, tenderly. A softness to it.

'It really is.'

'So, was I your favourite?' he says. This is the Jake I know, who comes across all macho but still needs reassurance.

'I think so,' I say. He raises his brows, wanting more.

'Okay, yes, yes. Of course you were.' I laugh. 'I sort of wish we could have gone back to when we were both working in Maidstone that second

summer we had together. In some ways, it was the best time of my life.'

'You're saying the nights we spent drinking pints and playing Boggle at The Red Lion, with its smelly carpets, were the best times of your life?'

'You're saying getting hit on by Suzie behind the bar *wasn't* the best time of your life?' I tease.

'Her name was Sharon.'

'And the ringworm you got from the lake?'

'It wasn't ringworm.'

'Jake!'

'I had sensitive skin.'

A rap at the door sends a jolt through my body.

I sit bolt upright, and Jake next to me goes very still, eyes wide.

'Who is it?' I shout as the door opens and Timothy walks in.

'Just me. Who were you talking to?'

Fuck.

'Myself,' I reply, maybe a little too quickly, eyes flicking to Jake, who is still sitting, frozen, like one of those gargoyles from the fireplace behind him.

Timothy hovers in the centre of the room. He looks around suspiciously, then walks over to the sofa, picks up the remote, and turns off the TV. The room darkens.

'Are you sure you're okay?'

'Yes. I'm all good. You?'

He ignores my question. 'You know ...' He's not looking at me, but at the remote in his hand. He places it on the table and then drags his fingers back through his hair, shaking his head.

'Timoth—'

'Belle, if you're having second thoughts ...' He takes a step forward. 'If you want to call this off ... Is that what you want?'

Jake doesn't need me to look at him to know he should get up. Slowly, he stands and sidesteps back to the wall. He's standing behind Timothy now, next to my wedding dress. Two ghosts in a line. He slow blinks at me, then puts his fingers in his ears and tiptoes to the bathroom. Timothy doesn't see the door close behind him.

I open my mouth but Timothy cuts me off again.

'I'd rather know, Belle. We can sort it if that's the case, but I need to know.'

This is my chance. If I have second thoughts or doubts, now is my time to tell him.

I look at my hands. A decent man is standing before me, asking me politely if I still want to marry him. He's not guilt-tripping me, calling me a shit shag, or trying to control me. He's offering me the door.

And the answer in the pit of me that shows no hesitation now is one that I don't expect.

If I could be with Jake, I would.

The realisation arrives fully formed, like it's been there deep inside me all evening, just waiting for me to be still enough to reach it. I know what kind of person this makes me: the kind of person who walks away from someone this good for a ghost. But he's a ghost who hasn't seen me for ten years and still knows me better than I know myself. Who loves me despite my fuck-ups. Who was my first love.

But I can't be with Jake. Jake is dead. And Timothy is here, now crouched before me, hands in mine, offering me a life most people would be grateful for. So I tell him yes.

'I want to get married tomorrow.'

The warmth of Timothy's breath hits me as he exhales. He reaches forward and kisses my forehead. 'I love you, Belle. Get some rest. Big day tomorrow.'

I sit still as he squeezes my hand before walking out. He looks back just once then closes the door gently behind him, as I sink deeper into the sofa.

The room is quiet. Too quiet, without Jake.

I stand to walk towards the bathroom, ready for our last trip of the evening, and as I do so, my eyes land on my wedding dress once more. My veil is almost trailing the floor. And then it hits me – I didn't say his name. I replay it in my head: *I want to get married tomorrow*.

I didn't say, 'I want to marry you tomorrow, Timothy.'

I hear the bathroom door creaking open, the fan whizzing, and I turn to watch as Jake steps into the room again, his hands outstretched. A blank look on his face.

'Are you ready? Our last one.'

This is good. I need this. I need to remember why I fell in love with Timothy in the first place.

'I'm ready.' I nod, reaching towards him.

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Timothy Small

He's given her the full tour of his place – the restaurant. The pantry.

The foreplay had started at the bar, where he'd lifted her onto the counter, pushed her legs wide as he slid in between, and kissed her. Her hands in his hair, his hands around her waist. She had leaned back and gripped the edge of the counter as he nibbled her neck.

They'd had to stop before they got carried away. *Not here, not yet.*

Then to the back of the restaurant, to show off the wine cellar. It was a small, dark room with a glass window and door. He'd pointed out the vintage, the Château Margaux, described its silky, refinement, its blackcurrant finish. He'd been steady all evening, his hands sure and his voice unhurried. But in the cellar, when she'd reached past him to touch the label of the bottle, his exhale had been just slightly too slow and deep. It was a tight space, but room enough for him to push her back to the wall and kiss her passionately, wine bottles rattling, whispered words echoing in the dark.

But not here, not yet.

He wanted to take his time and show her his everything; he needed more space.

And then through to the kitchen, where he'd pointed out the state-of-the-art equipment, the water baths, the Japanese chef knives. Belle wasn't focusing on any of that. His hands entranced her, the way his fingers lingered across stainless steel surfaces. How she couldn't tell whether the heat was residual from the end of service or radiating from her. She'd watched, silent, as he pushed aside a crate of vegetables, making space for her in a place that was normally just his. Just to seduce *her*.

He'd placed her with ease on a cold metal table, opened the top buttons of his shirt while she watched on, a fire behind her eyes. He'd reached between her legs and she'd leaned into him, gasping for more in his ear as he teased.

And now she watches the hard bulge in his pants grow as she unbuckles her jeans and shimmies them down to her ankles. He kneels in front of her, slowly sliding her shoes from her feet, then pulls her trousers off, placing

them neatly to the side. He plants small kisses up her legs, to her knees and then inside her thigh, before standing up in front of her.

She takes delight in watching his dick harden underneath his trousers until she can tell it's bursting at his waistband to escape. Small by name, but not by nature, she thinks to herself, biting her lips as she pulls him closer by the hips.

He unbuckles his trousers, and they fall to the floor as he pushes himself into her. Belle looks at him and he looks back. There's a stillness as they hold each other there. She can feel her legs shaking then as he slides in and out, slowly. The whole of him consuming her. She can't take it anymore, him standing there, foreheads pressed against each other, her arms around his neck, the cold steel under her arse. There's an urgency to them now, their breath speeding up as he quickens his pace, Belle leaning back on her elbows, watching as he fucks her.

Afterwards, he kisses her, fingers tangled up in her locks, a bead of sweat running down his forehead. He pulls his trousers up, disappears, and comes back with a tissue, a bottle of wine, and two glasses.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Jake

Blimey. So this is what a fancy restaurant looks like.

The best meal – or, rather, the most memorable meal – I ever had with Belle was a box of chicken nuggets from the local high street at one in the morning. We'd been debating something, I can't remember what, but when we walked past a chicken shop she announced she was starving, like the debate hadn't happened at all.

We ate them standing up outside, the box of nugs balanced on a windowsill. She had dripped barbecue sauce on her top and didn't even care. For some reason, the ultra-processed battered chicken-and-God-knows-what had tasted out of this world. Maybe it was because we were drunk, or maybe because they were piping hot and crunchy and it was cold outside. Or maybe it was just because they were shared with her.

I look at the perfectly set tables, spaced evenly around the room we're standing in. The white tablecloths look like they've been ironed. There's a bar next to us too, laden with fancy-looking bottles, backlit so their contents look like liquid amber. If it wasn't for all of that, I'd have thought we were in a gallery or something, judging by the two huge art pieces hung on the wall, all abstract, monochrome paint splats. Not my cup of tea, that. I prefer something more classic from that guy with one ear instead.

It's cold in here, though, I can sense that with my ghostly sixth sense. No warmth, no character. It's all showy. I can't imagine what the food is like. Talking of food, the fanciest meal I ever had was at my local Toby Carvery when I got the Big Plate with everything.

'Let me guess ... There's *fooey grooey* on the menu?' I say.

She laughs, tossing her hair away from her face. 'It's foie gras, Jake, and no, that's gross. Timothy is boujee, I'll admit, but not into animal torture.'

'Frogs' legs?'

'Nope. But there's a really great monkfish dish topped with ants.'

‘ANTS?’ I shout. The girl who once squealed because an ant crawled up her arm at a picnic now eats them, apparently.

‘What? They add a bit of crunch!’

I shiver comedically, and she laughs into the back of her hand, so I fully commit. The shivers, the gasping face, the whole thing, except she’s already moved on, thumb pressing a petal loose from the rose display on the bar, and I’ve completely forgotten what my face is supposed to be doing.

I hear it then.

Moans ... Coming from the kitchen?

Goosebumps make their way down my arms, and something in me catches. My feet don’t move. I tell them to and they don’t. My body has decided to leave and it physically can’t. I force my eyes away from the double doors and focus on the way someone has folded a napkin into a neat triangle, cutlery placed inside it like a pocket.

I’d recognise her impatient, breathless moans anywhere.

I realise this is a strange thing to know about a person you haven’t touched in ten years. And it is an even stranger thing to feel in your chest. I put my hands in my pockets and immediately pull them out again. Then they impulsively reach towards my ears, as if to cover them, but I’m very aware of Belle standing next to me and how pathetic this must look, so I stuff them in my pockets again.

My mouth feels dry and dusty, so I clear my throat. ‘I thought you said there wasn’t any passion with Timothy?’

She shuffles on the spot, looks up at the light fixture, a twisty, garish metal thing.

‘I said it wasn’t all that, not that there was no passion.’

My mind goes blank. I’m trying to understand this, trying to make it make sense in my brain, and I can’t think of anything. My thoughts just keep landing on that stupid light fitting and what a pain it would have been to install it on that ceiling.

I thought I got it. I thought I knew what he was to her: an easy path to the life she thinks would make her happy. She’d so flatly said that Timothy was practical. Useful. Of an age. Like she was reading from some teen magazine ‘Is he the man for me?’ checklist of a perfect husband. I’d actually felt a tiny bit sorry for him. I thought she didn’t love this man, not really, not in the way she loved me. Not in the way it actually counts. I thought I had her mapped out.

I thought I knew this new Belle.

I don't, at all, I realise, as I swallow the lump forming in my throat. I was so stupid to think I knew her. I've never been so wrong about anything.

Laughter comes from the kitchen now, a clink of glasses. My feet are still stuck to the floor.

Through two double doors at the back, Belle appears, wine glass in hand, followed by Timothy, who is holding the door wide for her. This is the Belle I've grown to know tonight. The tailored blazer, the heels, the gold at her neck. The Belle who prefers heels instead of trainers, who has ditched the eyeliner and bleach somewhere along the way, favouring less is more instead. The Belle who isn't trying anymore, who just is. And the fucking glow ... The way her cheeks are flushed, her reddish hair ever so slightly dishevelled on top.

And Timothy, waltzing in like fucking James Bond, a grin stapled on his face, which I can tell he's trying to stifle. I've done that before, too.

Why is this getting to me so much? I know she's marrying him, for fuck's sake, I know how this story plays out.

But she'd dampened it for me. She'd played down their connection.

It's the way his arm moves from the door to the small of her back. How he guides her to the table for two. How she laughs and doesn't look away from him when she does it. How at ease she looks. She's not pretending here. This is her. She's gesturing with her hands, laughing into her wine, reaching out to wipe a smudge of her lipstick from his lips. Just like that, without even thinking about it. My jaw tightens. That's not something you do with someone you're still figuring out or getting to know. That's something you do when you've stopped performing and start just *being*.

Timothy pulls out a chair for Belle and that thing in my chest tightens, and I'm trying to work out if it's him that I'm jealous of – his success, his money, the fact that he can keep her – or the fact that she's built something *actually real* with someone else.

He sits, head tilted to the side, watching Belle talk with a sure smirk because he feels secure enough in himself to let her be exactly who she is and not feel threatened by it – by her ambition, determination, beauty. He sits there and loves her for it.

When she told me she wanted to leave, I felt threatened – like it was a personal attack – because I was too scared to let her go and trust she'd still

want me at the end of it. So I got drunk and said the worst things I could think of about her to anyone who'd listen.

'I don't know if I can watch this.'

I say this in my head, but it comes out loud; my lips move before I can stop them.

The twisted thing is, I can't take my eyes off them.

She doesn't say anything, but I feel her move closer to me. Feel her hands closing around mine.

We're back in Belle's hotel room. It seems darker here, somehow, than it did before. I loosen the grip of her palm and slide my hand out. Rub my clammy palms on my trousers. My legs carry me forward, pacing ahead, before turning abruptly back again. Belle stands awkwardly in the centre of the room, something soft on her face.

'Hey,' she whispers, moving towards me.

I stop in front of her, so close I can tell what shampoo she uses. Not information I need right now. 'I don't understand.'

'I don't either.' She sighs.

I notice how she isn't crossing her arms. How she isn't looking around sheepishly, scoping out an exit or a way to escape. Every time a conversation got too close to something real tonight, she found a way to redirect it or tidy it. But right now she's just standing here. Looking at me. Head on. Not tidying anything.

Which means there's nothing left to hide behind. For either of us. I've run out of things to look at, jokes to crack, things to say that aren't this. It seems stupid because I've watched every chapter of her life play out and I know how this ends. I know what she's going to say, but I ask it anyway.

'So you're marrying him tomorrow?'

She exhales, long and slow, like she's been holding her breath since we got here.

She's quiet for a moment. 'If I could be with you, I would.' She says it simply, as if it's a fact, and then stops, looks away, seems to shrink. 'But I can't. So yes, I'm marrying Timothy tomorrow.'

I let that sink in.

My throat makes a noise I don't mean to make, somewhere between a cough and a swallow. I look away from her.

It's everything I wanted to hear.

For about five seconds, I let myself have it. I soak it up, that feeling.

It was all worth it for those words. Ten years of grey and numb so-called life, devoid of taste and flavour – it was all worth it to find out that she would still choose me. I could laugh, I could pick her up and spin her around. I almost do.

Then I notice her eyes, how open they are right now. How she's given me something true and doesn't know yet that I haven't done the same. She's standing here, with nothing left to hide, and I'm holding something back from her. The five seconds are up.

Belle pulls back slightly, searches my face. 'So, that's it? We're done? You've seen everything now ...' Her voice trails off. 'Am I saved? What happens now?'

There it is. The question I've been outrunning all evening. One last chance to lie, tell her that her tour's complete. She'd never know. She'd believe me. I look down at the floor, at her feet, which are red from the dancing, at my scruffy trainers, the same ones I've been wearing for a decade.

'Belle, I lied.' My hands grab her palms, holding them tight.

A vertical line appears between her brows. I watch her expression shift into confusion and I have no idea where to start.

My brain is trying out different openers simultaneously, then forgetting them just as quickly. *It's complicated. You're going to hate me but ... It's not what you think.* None of them are right.

I snort out a laugh, just one. 'Right, well, thing is ...' I pause. 'I blame the psychopomp, really ...'

I laugh again and stop. She isn't laughing. She isn't doing anything, just holding my hands and waiting.

'The truth is ... I was sent to visit you ... to save myself, not you. This tour, it wasn't for your benefit. It was for mine.'

She blinks and her patience somehow feels worse than if she'd already started shouting.

'Gabe didn't give me a choice.' I say this and regret it, because that's a lie. Try again.

'I've been stuck in the in-between for ten years. Most people don't get stuck there but I did because there was something I needed to put right. Something bad that I did when I was alive – to someone I loved.' I swallow. 'It was never your soul that needed saving. It was *my* soul, Belle.'

I feel her hands slipping from mine.

‘I should have told you at the start, I know that, but you were upset and angry to see me and it was your wedding day, and I didn’t know how to—’

‘How to what?’ Belle dips her chin.

‘How to tell you without losing you again.’

It sounds romantic in my head. It sounds like the right thing to say, the sort a hero would say at the end of a movie where he’s professing his love, but I watch it land on her face and that isn’t what she’s heard.

She takes a step back and lets go of my hands.

‘I wanted to tell you, I nearly did, about three times but—’

‘You’re saying that all of this ...’ She turns, her voice level and controlled. ‘That I walked through every relationship I’ve had – watched myself with Sebastian, with Joe ... I relived the worst parts of my life, the night before my wedding, because you told me my soul depended on it, but in reality you were just scared of losing me?’

I stand with my mouth open but nothing comes out.

‘Like you hadn’t already?’

I stare at my empty hands like a part of me is missing.

‘I know how it sounds.’

Belle brings her hands to her forehead and turns. ‘I wasn’t yours to lose, Jake.’

I freeze.

My eyes run over her face and she’s not blinking, not moving, but her chest rises and falls quickly, her hands clenched at her sides, her dress slipping from her shoulders.

‘Belle—’

‘Did you work it out, then? The thing that was so bad, you got stuck there – do you even know what you did?’

I know the answer. I’ve known since about halfway through the evening, maybe earlier. Every relationship we visited, every man she chose, every bad decision and emotional turmoil and walls she put up, my fingerprints are all over it. I know exactly what I did that was bad enough.

And now she’s asking me directly, as I’m sure Gabe will do too, and the words are right there in my throat, but I just can’t make myself say it to her face.

‘I know ...’ I gasp.

Then silence. My mouth is dry and my hands feel pathetic at my sides. It's there, the apology, on the tip of my tongue – the video, the smooth whisky bottle in my grip, being scared and drunk, everything I said, the holding her back, the controlling ... I swallow.

I feel it then, before I can stop it. My mouth curling up, the air through my nose, my eyes squinting shut. A laugh.

Belle takes another step back and the distance between us widens from feet to years.

'You laughed at me.' Her voice sounds different, low and cold. 'When I was twenty-five, in my bedroom, I told you I'd seen what you'd said about me and you laughed. Exactly like that.'

The room tilts.

'I'm sorry, Belle ...' But my smile is still wide and her face is crumbling.

'And then you left and then you died and I spent ten years wondering if you ever did feel sorry, and you're standing here telling me you know, but you still can't say it.'

'Belles—'

'Both times I tried to show you who I really am – when I told you I wanted more, let you in on my dreams of a fresh start, and then again tonight – and both times you've made it all about you. And what you were scared of. What you could lose. And then you laugh, because you can't admit it.'

'I can.' My voice comes out weaker than I want it to.

'Then say it.'

'I didn't mean any of it.'

'Then why say it?'

'Because ...' I stutter, then stop.

'Because? Just because? Fucking hell, Jake.'

I can't do anything but stand here, stupid and dumb, and she's turning away now, laughing.

'Do you know what's really worth laughing about?' Her voice is breathless and messy. 'The really funny thing is that I didn't realise until tonight how much that video influenced everything that came after. The good, the bad ... With every person I was with, I was just waiting for the moment they'd turn around and do the same. I chose people who were so easy, because there was no threat, and then chose people who would humiliate me because then at least I knew it was coming. I chose people I

knew I couldn't really love. Because loving someone means giving them the power to do what you did ... So thanks, Jake. Thanks for all my trauma.'

My chest feels like someone is kneeling on it. She's never said this to anyone; I can tell by the way her hands are shaking that this is the first time she's putting it all together out loud.

'So it's all my fault?'

It comes out wrong, falls out of me like the wrong lyrics to a song. And her face doesn't change. She doesn't flinch or recoil. She just looks at me, nodding slowly, lip quivering.

'Well, we're done now, aren't we.' She shakes her head. 'You've saved your soul. Now leave.'

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Belle

The moon outside. The haunted bed. The dresser covered in products. The sofa we were sitting on moments ago. My reflection staring back at me.

My toes against the carpet. My dress under my fingertips, now creased at the hips. My breath, hot and panting. My hair stuck to my cheek.

The wind against the windows. The creak of my weight on the floorboards. The silence so loud, it's deafening.

My faded perfume. The hint of smoke from the fireplace.

Whisky. The strength of it biting the back of my throat.

Five ... Four ... Three ... Two ... One.

The technique my therapist taught me to ground myself in the present, to pull myself out of the past.

I walk to the dresser and reach down, hands still shaking, to pick up my lipstick, which had fallen to the patterned carpet. As I crouch, I look to the mirror, half-expecting to see his reflection behind me, that same smirk, that grin.

I collapse onto the floor, my chest tight, heart thumping.

My lipstick. The fibres of the carpet, the ring on my finger—

He's gone.

My nails perfectly manicured, a string of lint on the floor—

He's gone, again.

I told him to leave and he walked out of the room, and that's twice now this has happened and both times he has left without looking back.

The first time I'd been weeping into Dad's lap as his car pulled away. I'd found comfort in Jules and then told myself I'd call him in the morning. There was no morning, there was just a phone call from Jake's mum at 5 a.m. and a sound that came out of me that I didn't know I could make.

And now he's walked out again. And in the morning, I'll be walking down the aisle to another man and there will be no more mornings for Jake again.

I sit in front of the mirror, palms flat against the carpet, trying hard not to hyperventilate.

I didn't get to say goodbye.

Both times. The first because death took him from me. The second because I was angry and ... death took him from me again. We never had closure. That was taken from us. And now I'm replaying the argument in my head, and I know I was right. I had a reason to be angry. He lied to me and then laughed at me, then made it about himself.

I sit back on the heels of my feet, wipe the hair from my brow, and look at myself in the mirror. My dress has slipped down one shoulder and I don't fix it. For a moment I look nineteen again: sitting on my bedroom floor the next morning, eyeliner all over my face, wondering how someone could just be gone. Same girl. Different room, but the same feeling.

I'm furious at him. Furious at a man who hurt me because he was scared. But I'm scared too. I've watched myself grow, throughout this evening. Watched every good and bad decision I've made throughout my life. I showed him exactly who I am and he still couldn't give me the one thing I needed.

But he's gone and I still don't know if he's sorry, and now I never will.

It's getting late. I need to go to sleep. Maybe I'll wake up in my London bed and it'll be the morning of our rehearsal and this will all have just been a dream, a fever dream, cold feet, whatever you want to call it.

In the reflection behind me, my wedding dress hangs, perfect. I look away.

Is this really what I want? Safe?

I lean on my hands and stand. I go to the fireplace and stand there for a moment. I go to the bathroom, turn the tap on, and forget why. I pour myself some water, place it somewhere. Then to the sofa, where I pick up a cushion that we'd kicked to the floor and I hold it tight to my chest because it feels better than doing nothing.

Then I spot it.

Something small, folded, and wedged between the sofa cushions. His side. It feels light in my fingers as I turn it over in my palms. White paper, neat handwriting on one side, scribbles and chaos on the other, folded into a haphazard square, with crease marks where it's been folded and unfolded at wrong points.

Perched on the edge of the sofa, I open it, smoothing it on my lap.

It's the wedding seating plan that Jules had brought up earlier, the one where Jake had scribbled his name. I trace his handwriting with my finger. The curve of the J, hooked too far to the left.

I turn the page. It's covered in notes, scrawled using different pens, different colours, in his handwriting. Jake's.

Confused, I rub my head. I turn it this way and that, to decipher the scribbles.

I saw myself in him and wanted to be sick.

Crossed out, one word at the bottom of the page:

~~Weird~~

Big capitals, halfway down the page:

Still looking for someone to take control, still my fault.

Tiny words, almost falling off the page:

His speech. Good. They look good together. But she looked right at me after – did she feel that too?

He'd been making a list too.

Scribbled to the side:

~~Holiday fling, doesn't count.~~ *First time she looked free. What I'd do, to have been the one by her side on that holiday.*

In a Sharpie, the kind of thick nib whose ink bleeds through the paper:

She stopped wearing that red lipstick after him. She should never have stopped.

Written in red pen:

Did she choose safe because of me too?

There's a smudge of pink on the page which curls and then vanishes. Did he use my lipstick to try to write?

At the top of the page, a sentence is crossed out:

~~She got with him to hurt me.~~ She chose him because she was already hurting, I get that now.

Written upside down to the left-hand side:

She built all of this without me. Worse – she built it all because I wasn't there to hold her back.

The paper shakes in my hands, as a tear hits the page and blots the sentence:

She has no idea. No fucking idea how perfect she is.

And then in the smallest handwriting on the page, so small it looks almost like a mistake, and tucked into one bottom corner, like he almost didn't want to write it:

T—

Nothing after it.

I read what I can, once, twice. Then sink down to the sofa cushions.

A knock at the door then. My heart drops.

Timothy?

I fold the list in my palm and close my fist around it.

I stand, wipe away the tears with the back of my hand, and shout, 'Hello?'

The door opens slowly.

In he steps.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Jake

The door closes heavily behind me and I walk, then run across the room to her, grabbing her hands as she stands, searching her face. I can feel my cheeks are red, bitten by the cold, but her palms are warm in mine.

‘I’m sorry, Belle. So sorry.’

Her eyes wide, tears glistening on her freckles.

‘For tonight, for the past. For lying, for holding you back, for ruining your day. And for laughing, Belle, I’m so sorry I laughed. Both times. I wasn’t laughing at you. I never once thought any of this was funny. My face does something stupid when I’m scared and I hate it and ...’

I grip her hands tighter.

‘I lied and laughed because I’m a coward. I’ve always been a coward and I’ve been hiding from it for ten years because I couldn’t – genuinely couldn’t – admit to myself that I’d hurt you. That I, the person who loved you more than anyone, anything, had caused you pain, so I just – didn’t. Didn’t look at it. Didn’t do the mission. I did everything else instead for a decade because that was easier than sitting with the fact that ...’

I stop. Start again. ‘I couldn’t let anything in without trying to hold on to it so tightly that it stopped being the thing I loved. I did it with you. Every time you tried to grow, every time you searched for something – London, a career, just more, I heard it as you reaching away from me and I made you feel guilty for wanting it. I couldn’t hear it any other way. Because if I let you go, if I loosened my grip just slightly, I thought you’d realise you didn’t need me. I couldn’t survive that. So I held on tighter, I called it love, but it wasn’t – it was fear dressed up as love, and you knew it before I did and you were right to end things ...’

I’m panting, my breath short, but I can’t stop.

‘I’ve spent ten years in the in-between being miserable, and I told myself it was because I was dead, because of the crash, because of bad luck, because I’d lost the one true love, but it wasn’t any of that – it was me. It’s

always been me. And tonight ...' I stop, look at her. 'Tonight was the first time in as long as I can remember that I let something in. Let you know. And the colour is coming back.'

I swallow, stuff the pain down.

'The worst thing is I'm still hurting you. Even now. Showing up here, lying to you, putting you through all of this on the night before your wedding, still making things about me, still laughing and still unable to let you have what you've chosen without ...'

I stop, gasp for air, and my voice cracks, 'Timothy wouldn't do this. That's the difference. He loves you in ways I couldn't.'

I pause. Voice quieter.

'I'm sorry, Belle. For tonight. For back then. For all of it.'

Belle looks to the floor.

I let her. I don't try to fill the silence or make a joke for once. I just hold her hands and wait for it. More anger. I know her tears are coming and I can't believe I'm going to make her cry again. I brace myself for it, hold my breath.

I deserve it.

Her chest rises and falls, her eyes still on the floor. Her jaw shifts slightly, working through something. Then she looks up and opens her mouth and I close my eyes for half a second, just a moment, because I don't want to be a coward anymore, I don't want to hide from this.

'I know,' she says.

I wait for the rest of it, her rebuke, which would be fair, so fair. I'm still holding her hands, gripping them tighter than I mean to so when I notice I make myself loosen my fingers.

She just looks at me.

I'm suddenly aware of what my face must be doing. For once, I don't care. I don't try to arrange it into something more manageable. I just let it do whatever it's doing and hope that's enough.

She opens her mouth ... Here it comes.

'This whole time ... You were writing this the whole time,' she cries and I notice the paper folded neatly next to her.

I nod, it's all I can do, because my throat is closing up.

'Stay,' she whispers.

She's standing so close now and this is taking its time to sink in, but I don't have time to fully process it as she stands on her toes, slips her hands

out of mine, and pulls me closer, kissing me gently on the lips.

Something in my chest explodes.

It's pain and love, wonder and urgency all rolled into one. It's so startling and bringing with it sensations that I haven't felt for so long, that I wonder for a moment if this is it. Is this me passing through my afterlife? Have I crossed to the other side in this pure ecstasy? But I can still smell her perfume and can still feel the heat of her underneath my hand and still feel the way she's pushing herself into me.

These sensations keep me grounded as I pick her up in my arms and place her gently on the bed.

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Jake Marleigh

They kneel facing each other on the bed like they'd done a hundred times before. For a moment, they stay where they are. No script, no next thing. Just him sitting on his heels, looking at her.

She stares back. Doesn't say anything.

She knew this, had always known this about him, the way he needed to look before he could believe. She lets him, straightening up, letting him take her in whole. She watches his mouth quiver, open slightly, his breathing becoming heavier. Then she looks into his eyes.

She'd been carefully trying to avoid those eyes all evening. It was easier when she was angry, but now she looks properly. He is still, after everything, the most familiar thing she'd ever seen, and he is looking at her the way he always has. She knows she is in trouble then. There is no going back.

Her hands find the hem of his shirt before she's made any conscious decision about it. Old habits. Removing his top over his head, Jake allowing her to do so, slowly, fingers trembling, taking her time, his hands finding her waist as she kneels back down.

They take their time undressing each other. He pulls down the zip of her dress, planting lingering kisses on her neck as the pale pink silk falls around her waist. She undoes the button of his trousers. She has to remind herself to breathe. Then she lies back as he pulls the dress down her thighs.

His thumb finds a scar on her ribs that he doesn't recognise. It's small and neat. He doesn't ask, but his fingers linger there longer than they need to, as if each second that passes could catch up with the years that he's missed.

He touches her like he hasn't forgotten a thing. The same place, the same grip. And he touches her the way he always had. Not carefully or like something fragile. Like someone who knows.

Belle really did love everything about him. Not just his strong hands, his thick hair, or the fire behind his eyes. But also his soul. His ability to make her laugh in the hardest situations. His fierce loyalty. How, after ten years, after seeing her at her worst, his love hasn't wavered. She feels a simple certainty that this is exactly where she is meant to be.

And now her hands are nestled in his hair, legs over his shoulders as he licks between her legs. Small kisses at first, then heavy laps, then panting and thirsty and famished as he flicks his tongue across her clit. One hand is used to hold her legs open and it occasionally reaches up to pinch her nipples – the way that always drives her crazy – and the other working his fingers inside her. Between body shudders and back-arching moans into the air, she watches him, his brow furrowed in concentration, his mouth wet from the taste of her.

She calls his name through breathless gasps, fingers gripping the sheets as she tells him to stop – she's close ... She wants to, needs to, feel him.

She moves into his lap without being asked, facing him. His hands find her hips and guide her onto him. She gasps and for a moment they stay like that – his hands steadying her, their foreheads almost touching, breath shallow and uneven, but neither of them moves. He feels her tighten around him, but his eyes never leave hers.

She watches him try to hold still.

She watches him decide to try to hold it.

She thinks the effort of it is the most intimate thing she's ever seen.

And then he can't take it anymore.

His touch slides down her body, and he thrusts – her head thrown back in total ecstasy, his grip tightening, fingers digging in, and she rides and rides and his mouth hangs open as he watches her breasts jump and he can't stand the beauty of it, of her. They tessellate. They always have.

He pulls her closer to him, her warm body flush against his, and they kiss – breathless, starving – his hands in her hair and hers gripping his shoulders, and nothing between them, nothing neatly managed, nothing held back.

For once, she has nothing left to hold back. So she doesn't.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Belle

If this bed wasn't haunted already, it is now.

We lie still, side by side, the sheets crumpled around our thighs. My head rests on his chest and I wait for a heartbeat that doesn't come. I'd been listening for one without realising. I pull up the duvet and we sink beneath it. Outside, the Whitby wind batters against the windows.

Is it still cheating if it's with a ghost? More importantly, is sleeping with a spirit the night before you wed another man the ultimate form of betrayal? Am I a slutty Scrooge? Am I now pregnant with ghost babies? I press my cold feet against his legs. It doesn't help warm them much.

I don't regret it.

An awful part of me has wanted this. I had missed him so desperately that I'd forced myself to stop thinking about him and now I can't stop. His hands, God, those hands, the way they know exactly where to go, without fumbling. How they moved across me like he was relearning something he'd never actually forgotten. The way he'd cupped my face before kissing my neck and my chest, taking his time in a way that made me want to scream at him not to stop, never stop. And his eyes. The way he'd entered me slowly, watching my face the whole time. The way he'd looked up at me from between my thighs like he had absolutely nowhere else to be. I'd forgotten what it felt like to be looked at like that. I press my thighs together now, lying here, still feeling the echo of him.

I've known for a long time that I wasn't finished. That I'd never be finished with Jake. I just wish that wasn't true.

I should be furious. An hour ago I was telling him to leave and I meant it, but now I'm lying here, drawing circles on his chest with my finger, and I can't really explain what changed ... except a folded piece of paper with his terrible handwriting all over it and the fact he came back and for the first time, maybe ever, said the thing he's spent a decade avoiding.

He came here for himself, but he stayed for me. I hold on to him tighter. It feels like nobody has chosen me freely in a long time.

‘Where did you go?’ I ask, nuzzling into his neck.

‘Huh?’

‘When you left earlier? Where did you go?’

‘No, you’ll laugh.’

‘Go on.’

‘I walked down to Whitby Abbey. Moped around like a sad puppy. Lots of goths hanging about up there. Turns out goths can see ghosts too.’

‘What?’

‘Did you know they hold a goth weekend here in Whitby twice a year?’

‘Stop!’ I laugh into his neck, breathing in that scent of him I missed so much.

Our laughter dies down and it’s just us and the silence and the realisation that the day is nearly over.

This is the closest we’ve been in a decade, but time is running out. My eyes keep closing against my will so I press my fingers into the sockets, forcing them open. I’m not ready for sleep. Sleeping means morning. Morning means no Jake.

He’s gone quiet in a way that I can’t read. One of us has to say something.

‘Ten years and you still steal all the duvet,’ I whisper. The way he smiles back is not quite right.

He kisses my head and we watch the window.

‘Is there a way we can go back?’ I ask softly. ‘Can you take us back to our first memory? Back to our first summer together? We could stay there.’

I look up to him. His nose in my hair, his arm around my back, settled on my waist.

‘I wish ... I wish.’ He pulls me closer towards him.

‘But we could try?’

I feel the slow shake of his head.

‘Here, take my hands, we have to try,’ I say, sitting up, pulling my pillow onto my lap as he uncurls his arm from my waist.

‘No. It won’t work.’

‘Why not?’

‘I had strict instructions. Once my mission is complete, I’ll be delivered to the next life if I pass.’

He can't look at me, so we both stare at his hands instead. He's picking the skin around his thumb nervously.

There has to be something I'm not thinking of ... some other angle. I'm good at angles. I find them for a living. If we can't go back, maybe there's another option.

'If there's an in-between, there must be a way ... some kind of, I don't know, loophole? There's always a loophole.'

'Belle,' he says and there's something in the way he says it – not harshly, but with a kind of finality – that makes my stomach drop.

'I'm serious. I don't want to lose you again.' My hands flop to the pillow. 'I've just got you back.' He's quiet, which makes me feel stupid, like I'm arguing with myself. My cheeks burn hot and I can tell they're probably beetroot red, but I don't care.

He wraps the duvet around his waist and looks at me properly for the first time since we collapsed together. There's something in his face, hard and stern, that I haven't seen before.

'So what's the alternative? Pretend tonight didn't happen? Marry Timothy?'

'Belle,' he says simply, matter-of-factly, with no hesitation. 'I watched it tonight, you and Timothy. I saw how he looks at you. You built something real with him, Belle. Don't ruin it for a ghost.'

I fight the urge to look away from his face but it's there in his eyes. A sadness, a knowing, and I know deep down he's right. And the fact he can see it, that he can even say Timothy's name without flinching – that's new. That's not the Jake who made that video or laughed in my bedroom.

So, Timothy. That's my alternative. A man that will hold my hand at dinner parties and remember which of my colleagues I don't like and say the right thing at the right moment, but who will never make me howl with laughter. Who has never really looked at me as Jake has, like he can't believe that I'm his.

Could I really continue living a half-lie?

I picture the chairs already laid out for the ceremony. The flowers already in water downstairs. Jules's dress, which she bought especially, the tags cut off because she was so certain. Timothy's mother, who I'm sure has never thought I was good enough – the look on her face, like she knew this was coming.

If I did call it off, what then? I'd be alone. I'd start again. I'd meet prospects at industry dinners, have them slide into my LinkedIn DMs. I'd be introduced to friends of friends and spend the rest of my life doing this quiet automation of comparison that I can't really explain to anyone. Holding each one up against something that doesn't have a name. Against this.

'I'd rather have one real thing in my life, than fifty years of just fine,' I say, unsure whether to myself or to Jake.

'Belle.' His jaw is locked. 'You're not thinking rationally.'

'Don't patronise me,' I snap before I have a chance to think. I know he's not wrong, but I can't locate the part of me that cares about that right now. 'I don't understand why you don't want to fight for a chance to keep us together.'

'Because even if it was possible ...' He stops and looks at me as something moves across his face that he doesn't manage to hide in time. 'I wouldn't let you.'

We sit in silence.

I'm waiting for the part of me that would think clearly, weigh this up, talk myself down, remind myself what I'm willing to throw away: a three-year relationship, a new house with a pantry that we're about to put an offer on, a man who has never made me feel small. I wait and she doesn't say anything.

I should get up. Go wash my face. Down some water, make a new list, do something useful. I start making the list in my head and get as far as putting the wedding dress up on eBay, before something stops me. For one night I'd forgotten I was supposed to be managing myself. I hadn't even noticed until now that that's what I'm always doing. Managing. I'd got so good at it – the controlled breathing, the game face, pretending not to fall apart. We used to be chaos, Jake and me. Since he died, I just replaced that with control. Turns out it only takes one night to realise that just isn't me.

'It's shit, Jake.' My voice comes out smaller than I want it to. 'For one night I remembered what it felt like to be myself. And it's because of you. And tomorrow that's gone.'

He takes my hands in his as the tears fall. I hate myself for it. The body shuddering, the snot, my face is so scrunched it gives me a headache, but he holds me through it. He wipes my tears with his thumb and kisses my head.

I'm getting married in – I check the clock – twelve hours, and I'm crying in the arms of a dead man. I can't bear to look at my wedding dress hanging nearby, the matching veil I'd spent half an hour steaming. The shoes I'd spent a month deciding on. How Timothy's speech will be perfect, how it'll make everyone in the room cry, and I will be sat next to him, smiling but thinking of a ghost.

I press the heels of my hands into my eyes.

'I don't know how I'm supposed to be okay with feeling this alive ... and then, somehow, I have to go back to sleepwalking through my life. How will I wake up tomorrow and pretend I'm choosing him when I know I'm really just choosing safe?'

Jake looks caught, stuck for a moment. I can see his jaw twitching. He whispers that it's okay. He pulls me close, wraps his arms around mine and I let him, which is not something I do easily these days, and we both know it. In his stillness I know he's thinking. I know he's weighing up options and so I wait.

He's going to say yes, I think. He's going to find a way. He'll tell me there's something else Gabe told him, some clause or technicality. I let myself melt into his arms, tell myself that this is going to be all right.

He presses his lips to my hair, takes a breath.

'Listen to me ...'

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Jake

She's asleep. Her head on my chest, her hands slack on the sheets, and her legs entwined with mine. I'm scared to move because I don't want to wake her. And if I'm honest, I would be happy just staying in this moment forever.

Maybe having feelings is overrated. I spent ten years moping about, hating the fact I couldn't *feel*, and somehow now I can feel everything, all at once, and it's rough. I mean, apart from the post-orgasm glow – who knew, ghosts could still come – the pain in my chest is vicious, the bubble in my stomach agony, the acid in my throat unbearable. Just knowing this is my last evening, ever, with her.

My last night on earth before whatever comes next.

Why didn't I listen to Gabe and do this sooner, like five years ago? It's a question I keep landing on, because if I had, would that maybe have meant more time with her? I know the answer – I was an idiot.

After Belle had begged me to find a way, I had taken her head in my hands, placed my forehead against hers, and promised her the only thing I could.

'Listen to me ... I promise you I will always be here. I will look over you. I will do everything in my power to protect you if I can. I want you to be happy. I want you to live, for me, and for yourself. I want you to be with someone who protects you and puts you first. I want you to be with a love who holds you tight every morning and night and spoils you. Who cheers you on, who supports your dreams, who will hold your hand till you get there.' She had wept in my arms as I said it, my voice weak. 'But for us, this is it.'

We cried together. That was when I truly felt everything that had been lying dormant in me for ten years. For the first time since the crash, the saturation turned up to a hundred. And every instinct I had was screaming at

me to find another solution, to find a way to keep her with me. But I couldn't. And I also didn't want to.

My last living thought was of her. Overturning in my car, I thought of the smell of her hair and the specific, terrible sound she made when she thought something was funny. I thought about what it would have felt like to have that face as the last thing I saw every night. Whether she'd have laughed at my jokes, even though she'd heard them all before. I thought about the way she'd look at forty, fifty, sixty. I thought about the lavender we'd grow in our garden – there was always going to be lavender – and the way the smell would get into everything. The sheets we'd hang in the garden. My shirts. Her hair. I thought about all of it as the car went over. And then I lost all of it.

I don't know what will happen next. I just know that I couldn't let her follow me. She deserves all of that with someone else, someone who will be there with her.

I want her to live.

I wait for it to feel more complicated than it does. I know that younger me would have wanted to drag her with me, keep her for myself, agree and find a loophole that Gabe hadn't thought of, but it doesn't come. I don't even want her to be devastated by the loss of me.

I want her to live.

I watch her sleep as I stroke her arm. She whimpers gently.

I start to close my eyes, my nose in her hair, ready to doze off, say goodbye to the world, but something shifts. The dark blue of the bedsheets fades first, bleeding out until it's the colour of cement, then the fireplace that I'd lit – the flames are still there but they've stopped moving, frozen mid-flicker, the light coming from them bleak and grey.

The curtain by the window is caught mid-billow and the trees outside are perfectly still, seemingly set in stone. The sea that's been crashing all night is silent. The whole room looks like a photograph that hasn't quite developed yet.

I clutch my chest as it tightens.

Because beneath my fingers, Belle has gone both cold and still. Not asleep or dreaming – still. Something is wrong. My eyes spring wide open in panic. I pull back and draw down the covers. Her chest isn't moving. The blush of her cheeks is now greying, the pink of her lips is gone. Like a sketch of herself. I shake her, say her name, then call it louder than I mean

to and she still doesn't move. She doesn't even flinch, just stays frozen like she's been preserved in glass.

Have I just killed her? Have we swapped places? Has she passed and now I'm the one living?

I stagger off the bed, fumbling past the bedside table and sending her glass of water tumbling over the edge, but I don't hear it land. It's then that I notice the clock next to it. It's stopped. The seconds are frozen. Every hair on my body stands up and I turn slowly.

I'm frozen as I realise that in front of the creepy, old mirror stands Gabe.

'Put your bits away, lad,' Gabe says, his voice as gruff and deep as ever.

'Fucking hell, Gabe!' I say, pulling a cushion from the floor – one of the many decorative ones from the bed – and using it to cover myself. The tassels tickle my thighs.

'Hello to you too, Jake.'

I'd forgotten how huge he was. He takes up far too much space in this room. Both his feet and shins would dangle over the bed if he tried to lie down in it. The grey, the stillness seems to radiate off him, like he's brought the in-between with him, hidden in his waistcoat. The flat nothingness I've been living in for a decade. For a few hours I'd forgotten what it looked like.

I steal a glance at Belle in the bed, still in the same position, curled as if I was under her. Her brow is furrowed. I reach out and pull the duvet over her chest to hide her modesty and keep her warm, which is a stupid thing to do, given that time is frozen.

If he's here, though, this must be the end.

His voice booms, gruff, as if he hasn't properly spoken for a while. 'So, how was it? Fun?'

'You could have warned me.'

'Warned you 'bout what?'

'All of it. The exes ... Mainly the exes, but also the fact I'd have to watch her – next to her – with others, all while my feelings came back ...' I stop.

'You didn't mention that.'

'Would you have gone if I had?'

'Hm,' is all I can muster, because I know he's right.

'So a terrible experience, then?'

'No, no ...' I look to my feet. How do I sum up how this past day has been? A whirlwind? An emotional rollercoaster? She was angry and then

robotic and then sad, helpless, and then the laughter, the touching ...

I sigh, move in front of the bed and perch on the edge. Cushion still to my crotch.

‘Parts of it were great. I could *feel* things ... They were small at first, but then more ... I could see colours. Her dress ...’ I look at the silky gown I’d pulled off over her thighs, crumpled on the floor. ‘Then surprising things. I’d forgotten her laugh and how it made me feel ... alive. At first, I thought it was too late, that she’d changed too much, but—’ The taste of her still on my tongue. ‘She’s still there ...’

Gabe nods, once. ‘Go on ...’ He strokes his beard.

‘I missed so much. But in a weird way things were still the same between us. The tension. The passion. We still fit perfectly, you know?’

‘I know.’

I’m sure I catch a flash of sadness on his face. Or what I think is sadness under those heavy brows of his.

‘You do?’ I do a double take, not expecting that response.

He clicks his neck to the side, the edge of his lip quivering. He looks around, then pulls out the tiny stool from under the dressing table, which is still laden with Belle’s products. The stool legs almost buckle under the weight of him, knees up to his chest. The carpet and floorboards groan.

‘His name was Dorian. I called him Dot.’

Oh. He’s done this himself? Of course he has.

‘What happened?’ I’d always wondered but had never asked.

‘I was like you once,’ Gabe says. ‘Selfish. Controlling.’

‘Thanks for pointing that out, mate.’

He ignores me. ‘I made him feel like he had to choose between himself and me. I didn’t feel good enough to compete with his ambition or his freedom. I treated all of it like a threat. I thought if he grew, he’d grow away from me ...’ He sighs. ‘I wanted him all to myself.’

He turns his rings, or what I think are rings, around his enormous fingers, slowly. This is the most I’ve ever heard Gabe speak. I can tell by the way he is slow with his words that he’s either trying not to give too much away, or he’s trying not to tear up.

‘I didn’t realise that loving someone means letting them become whoever they’re going to be and getting to be there for all of it.’ He pauses. The rings stop turning.

I go quiet thinking back to what happened with Belle. Her bedroom. Younger me, my feet planted on the floor, my eyes narrowed. She was saying her truths but I didn't listen because I'd already decided how the conversation was going to go. I hadn't clocked at the time that I could grow with her, that there was space for me too.

'I think we are more similar than you think, Jake.'

'Yeah,' I say, 'I'm getting that. So what happened?'

'I died. Messier than you, mind. Georgian England wasn't an easy time. But still, I got my own psychopomp – Percy. She told me the same things you were told: put right what you did wrong. And I ... Dot was ... I should have made it right.'

'You didn't?'

'I found him. That wasn't the problem.' Gabe's voice drops. 'I followed him everywhere. You could say haunted him, even. I watched him grieve me, pick himself back up, then build a life without me in it. I was there when he fell in love again. I was there when he slept. I was there on the nights he was alone and thinking about me, because the look on his face ...' Gabe talks to the moon outside the window, then to his hands, then to the floor.

'I was right there, for years. And every single day I told myself, tomorrow. Tomorrow, I'll do it. I'll find a way to show him I'm sorry. But tomorrow came and I'd just watch him instead. Watching was easy, much easier than admitting what I'd done.' He coughs, loud and husky. 'I'd follow him around, telling myself I was looking out for him, protecting him, when really, I was doing the same thing I did when I was alive. I was keeping him close but on my terms. Even in death, I couldn't stop controlling.' He shakes his head, uncrosses his legs. The floor groans.

'So you failed?'

Gabe looks at his hands again and out the window, at the sea suspended mid-wave.

'I didn't get a chance, Jake. He died before my time was up. And he was good, a good man. He lived and loved generously and had nothing to put right. There was no in-between for him. I was standing right there and watched him go and then there was nobody left for me to say sorry to. No door to knock on. I've been here 300 years. Not because I was punished. Because I ran out of time.'

He snuffles – such a weak noise for a man this hard – as his voice cracks. ‘I loved him till death.’

I look at Belle without meaning to. Just a glance behind me to the duvet I’d pulled up to her shoulder. Her brow still furrowed, frozen.

Carrying that guilt for 300 years. There’s nothing for me to say, and the right response is probably silence, but I’ve never been good at silence.

‘Christ. And here I was, thinking I had a rough decade,’ I joke. Gabe tilts his head. ‘I’m sorry, mate. I really am.’

‘S’all in the past now,’ he says, straightening on the stool, rolling his neck.

Just like that, he’s back to Gabe again. Gruff, enormous ... slightly inconvenient. ‘How did you leave it, then, with Belle?’

I rub my face with both hands. He’s been more honest with me in the last five minutes than the entire decade prior, and now it’s my turn.

‘The only way it could be left.’ I reach out with my toes and bury them in the fabric of Belle’s dress on the floor. ‘I saw it all. Everything she’s been through, from her point of view. But I also lied about why I was here, because it felt easier. I was scared to lose her again. And I got jealous and then scared again and we fought. I cried by some goths in the abbey. Then it hit me. Why was I hiding how I felt? Why was it so hard for me to say? So I ran back here as fast as my legs would carry me and I begged her to forgive me. She took my face in her palms ... And later she asked me to find a way for us to be together. I said no. I want her to live.’

‘Right,’ Gabe says, nodding.

I look at him then, my face creased. ‘So now what?’

‘That’s it. Your mission is complete.’

‘And?’ My eyes widen, waiting for more.

‘And?’ he replies grumpily.

‘And ... Did I do okay?’ I lean forward.

Gabe chuckles, shakes his head. ‘You did well.’

‘So what does that mean? Where do I go?’

Gabe rolls his eyes, like I’m a toddler asking, ‘Are we there yet?’ for the hundredth time.

‘That depends.’ Gabe leans back on the stool. ‘I carry souls between worlds, Jake. That’s what I do, what I told you a psychopomp does. Some souls go forward to the afterlife. Some ...’ He pauses, scratches his chin, the noise of it loud in the silence. ‘Some aren’t finished with the living world.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘It means what it means.’

‘A straight answer for once would be greatly appreciated.’

‘It means you’re done, Jake. Get some sleep.’

‘That’s it? No explanation? No heaven or hell pep-talk? Not even a debrief?’

Gabe tuts and leans his hands on his knees, bracing himself to get up. The floor groans under him. ‘That’s it, petal. It’s nearly midnight, I’ll pass you on shortly.’

‘I’ll get my lifejacket ready for the boat trip, I guess.’ A laugh bubbles in my chest but doesn’t quite make it.

My last moments before the afterlife, then. I look at Belle, and something drops away in my stomach, the way it does in dreams when you think you’re falling.

‘If this is it, can you just let me have one more moment with her?’

‘Sure thing, kid,’ Gabe says without looking back, as he turns and takes a step towards the mirror.

‘Hey, Gabe,’ I call out. He stops.

‘You’re genuinely terrible company, you know that?’

‘Humph?’

‘I mean it. Like, the worst ten years of my life.’

Gabe’s mouth moves under his beard. I’ll take that as a smile.

‘Thank you,’ I say then, quietly enough that he could ignore it if he wanted. But he doesn’t. He nods, a small movement, quick.

‘I think I’ll miss you, in some sort of demented way.’

‘Hah!’ The products on the table next to him rattle as he laughs.

‘You were shit to watch movies with, though.’

‘I’ve never liked romcoms.’

And then he’s gone. No fanfare. That’s Gabe. Behind me the glass from the bedside table rolls to the floor and, at the same time, the room heats up a touch – I can feel that. I catch the seconds on the alarm clock start ticking away again. I slowly pick up the glass and walk it to the bathroom to refill it with water before placing it back on the bedside table. Just in case she gets thirsty in the night.

I creep back into bed, and as I spoon my body around Belle, she shifts back towards me.

I don't think about what comes next. I just listen to her breathe, count her freckles for the last time.

That's enough. That was enough.

Outside, small flakes fly past the window. Light at first, then heavier.

Snow.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Belle

I have a lump in my throat, a sore head, and a hole in my heart. I woke to an empty room, cold sheets, and silence.

Did we even say goodbye?

Then it starts, the constant knocking at the door. I pull the bedsheets tight around me as I stumble over cushions littering the floor after being tossed from the bed. I rub my eyes wearily as I open the door, still adjusting to the light of the winter sun filtering through the windows. We'd forgotten to shut the curtains last night.

It's Jules at the door, here to help me get ready.

For my wedding day. With Timothy. Right. Shit.

'Aye, love!' she squeals at the state of me. I bring my hand to my hair and notice I can't pull my fingers through it, it's so knotted.

'Bring me back to life, please, Grandma,' I say, peering behind me to the mirror. I half-expect to see Jake in the reflection, but instead it's just me, my makeup smudged and lips pale. I rub my head and drag myself towards the bathroom, bedsheets trailing behind me as Jules whizzes around the room, a gust of energy and excitement.

'Great party last night, eh, hen?' Jules says, noting the half-drunk bottle of whisky on the coffee table. She marches around, picking up pillows, last night's dress, and knickers from the floor. I cringe.

It's then that I notice. Outside – it's white. Snow.

I rush over, both hands to the window, fumbling to open it as the bedsheets fall open. It's actually settled, the snow. My breath steams up the glass as I scan the surroundings. The whole of Whitby is muffled under it. The rooftops, the pirate ship docked in the bay, the many gravestones on the churchyard clifftop – all of it blurred and softened and still. The abbey in the distance now looks like something from Narnia, instead of *Dracula*. The sky behind it is the particular white of an English winter morning that isn't quite dawn and isn't quite day – just a pale, held breath of light. The cold

whips my face and chest but I don't step back from it. I let it come in. It smells of salt and something mineral, the sea turning itself over anew.

I almost spot him then, standing there in the snow under the oak tree below. Jake, looking up at me from the grounds. But I blink and he's gone.

Just the courtyard and the snow, unmarked.

I laugh weakly, shaking my head.

I finally got it, then, the white wedding I always dreamed of.

'You'll freeze,' Jules says behind me.

I leave the window open for a few more seconds anyway, the cold coming in sharp, and I breathe it in until my eyes water. Then I pull the window shut and turn back to the room.

Timothy will be pleased. He knows how much I wanted this.

After a shower, a scrub, and a lot of tap water downed (note to self: why does water in Yorkshire taste so much better than in London?), I'm sitting on the stool in front of the dressing table. It wobbles underneath me, feeling somehow a little less stable than it did yesterday. Jules stands behind me, curling my hair.

'Do you remember, sweetie, how I used to do your hair before school sometimes?'

'I remember.' I smile up at her reflection.

'You always looked like a wee gremlin who'd been dragged through a hedge ... And now look at you,' she says, welling up.

I feel fourteen again for a moment. Except I watched fourteen-year-old me last night. I've watched every version of me, stumbling around, convinced she knew what she was doing. Now the only thing I know is that I'm doing my best with what I've got.

'He always said you'd have the most beautiful wedding.'

'Who did?' I look up to her reflection in the mirror.

She stays focused on my hair. 'Your grandad, of course. Said it when you were about seven. Every time you put on a fancy dress.' She exhales, not quite a laugh. 'His beautiful Belle, he'd say.' I pinch my arm under my robe, willing myself not to cry.

Neither of us says anything for a moment. I reach up and put my hand over hers, where it rests on my shoulder. She gives my fingers a quick squeeze and that's that. A deep breath, then back to the curling. I'm back to the mirror, blotting my lipstick.

‘He’d have ironed that suit three times this morning. Would have driven everyone absolutely daft.’

I laugh properly. ‘He really would have.’

The curling tong hisses.

‘Are Mum and Dad okay? Are they down there already?’

‘Your mother has been ready since half past six,’ Jules says, wrapping a strand of hair around the barrel of the tongs. ‘She’s on her third coffee and has already cried twice.’

I can picture it now: Mum unable to sit still, flapping around, offering everyone tissues when in fact it’s her who needs them most. She did offer to help me get ready but I convinced her to focus on herself, insisting that I needed a calm presence in the shape of Scottish Grandma to help me this morning.

‘And Dad?’

‘Ha!’ she bellows. ‘Well, I pretended not to see the hip flask of whisky he’d hidden in his suit pocket.’

‘Right.’ I roll my eyes, which then drift to the whisky bottle on the coffee table. I look away.

Did yesterday really happen? Was it all a dream? Am I having a breakdown?

Pull yourself together, Belle. Before yesterday, this was everything I ever wanted. Safety, security. Someone who cherishes me.

I open my travel jewellery box on the dressing table. The earrings from Timothy are on the top – the ones he got me last Christmas – still in their pouch. Elegant pearl drops, exactly right for today. I put one in as Jules mists my hair with hairspray. I look at myself in the mirror and take the earring back out.

At the bottom of the small box, tangled in a chain, are the gold hoops I’ve had since I was twenty-two. I put those on instead and don’t look at them twice. Jules coughs as the mist surrounds us.

Timothy might not know that sometimes I stay up till midnight, researching cult leaders, or that for some reason, being in a library or bookshop brings on sudden bowel movements. But he does know that I need chocolate when I’m on my period and he always goes out of his way to get me some when I need it. He knows that I secretly love a dollop of mayo with every meal – even spaghetti, much to his dismay. He’s the guy

who irons his shirt on a Sunday evening and will also do mine at the same time, without even mentioning it.

I nod to myself as I peel the backing off a sticky chicken fillet and press it to my left breast. He's a good man. Things could be considerably worse.

I'm not thinking about last night ... I'm not. I force the thought down. Then another thought appears: a memory of dancing in the snow with Jake. How my puffer jacket squeaked as he twirled me around, how passers-by tutted. My trainers had soaked through within ten minutes. He didn't say anything, just crouched down in front of me on the pavement and waited for me to climb on. He'd walked me all the way home like that, me singing, 'Piggybacking home for Christmas ...' and him beatboxing along.

I meet my dad at the doors to the church. He wipes a tear from his eye as he sees me and my heart clenches.

'Don't be nervous, it'll be perfect,' he says, beaming. I nod.

From behind the doors, I can hear the murmur of guests over the beat of the music. Plucky strings, a live harp. We both notice at the same time that my hands are shaking. He scoops them in his and nods.

'Are you ready?'

'Yes.'

Am I?

Dad pulls my veil over my face and straightens it as a wedding coordinator I don't remember ever meeting hands me my bouquet. It's still dripping slightly at the stems. I hold it away from my dress.

The wedding march starts. Classic, typical, a formal tradition we'd kept.

Then the coordinator nods to us and puts their hand on the doors.

My dad's hand in mine, knuckles white around the bouquet, my vision hazy behind the white tulle. I can't remember the last thing I said to Jake. I fell asleep when—

The doors open.

My bouquet drips on my dress. Beneath my veil, I watch the water darken the white silk and it's then I realise I can't do this.

I cannot say yes to Timothy.

But I can't leave him up there alone. I need to tell him to his face.

My dad ushers me onwards and, in a daze, I take a step, hand in hand. The first thing I make out is the chapel's domed ceiling. The sun beaming

in, casting glints of gold on the red stone of the aisle. I take a deep breath – saltiness from the sea air, old wood from the pews.

One real thing. Even for a short time.

My legs don't stop moving.

We pass a display of white flowers – they're all different, wrong ... I push it away. My dad grips my hand tighter, and I realise I'm walking quicker than him now. I squeeze his hand in silent reply.

Don't look at me like that, Dad.

A flash of purple catches my eye. A hat – big, garish – blocks the view of the people behind it. I don't see their faces. Maybe Aunt Susan?

The way the light is hitting the room, it's too bright, I can't ...

Then the altar.

The candles flickering. The priest smiling, book open and cradled in his arms. Someone coughs.

Then the shape of him. Wrong, all wrong. Timothy isn't that tall.

I squeeze my eyes shut, grip my bouquet tighter, take smaller steps to stop my shoes rubbing so viciously at my heel.

Then he turns.

I stop walking.

'Belle,' my dad whispers, giving a slight tug on my hand. But I'm frozen. I take in the broad shoulders in front of me, the deep brown, tweedy suit. The silver bracelet on his wrist, the twig of lavender on his lapel. Then he opens his mouth.

'There she is,' he says, grinning.

There he is, at the end of the aisle.

Jake Marleigh.

He's older now – there are lines at the corners of his eyes that weren't there before. Specks of silver at his temples and in his stubble. As if he's lived a life. But his grin is the same.

I step forward. Dad shakes his hand firmly then turns to me. He lifts my veil, presses a kiss to my cheek and then I'm passed over.

I look at his hands first. How his fingers weave their way into mine. Less calloused than they used to be. Not as bitten down.

I look up. Jake slow blinks at me, reassuringly.

Every wrong turn. Every person I'd loved. They all brought me here.

'To the end?' he says, squeezing my palm.

'To the end.'

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EPILOGUE

Some gardens hold the dead.

This one holds a climbing clematis that has twisted itself around a fence and a buddleia that was cut back three times and came back each time, but bigger.

There's a terracotta pot tipped to one side, which nobody has got around to straightening yet, and an old, tall chimney pot covered with a grill, blackened at the edges, that has served as a barbecue for longer than anyone intended.

A cobbled path leads to a stone cottage, lined either side with flower beds, which are wild in parts. There are weeds, partly budding flowers, and twigs that somehow didn't survive the winter.

A robin sits on the edge of a mossy stone birdbath, fluffing up its feathers, red belly proud. At the far end there's a pergola. Woody wisteria, barely budding, winds its way to the top in long, reaching stems. Two mugs sit on a small table under the pergola, surrounded by mismatched garden chairs – three originals, one replacement, and one that arrived from somewhere nobody can remember.

Today there's a pair of small Wellington boots sitting outside the cottage – mud-splattered, decorated with rainbow stripes – and, next to them, a broom leans up against the stone.

Inside, in the kitchen, Belle wipes her brow with the back of her hand. She hums quietly – some song without a name, more of a habit than a tune – as she stirs a teapot which is loaded with four bags of Yorkshire Tea, plucked from the sun-bleached jar on the windowsill.

She places the teapot on a tray, alongside a jar of milk and a pot of sugar, and walks out into the garden, still humming, but her pace has slowed down after having left the London tempo behind with her fifties.

'The lavender survived the winter,' Jake calls out, crouching to a planter, garden gloves on his hands as she places the tray next to the mugs under the shade of the pergola.

Belle joins him, bends forward, and brings her nose to the lavender. Eyes closed, she breathes in before audibly exhaling.

‘How is it that that still manages to take me straight back?’ she asks, cheeks plump.

Jake stands beside her, wraps his arm around her waist and she settles to his side, both staring at the purple stems. She’d had it in her hair once, at the very beginning of things, and he’d spent ten minutes picking it out, strand by strand, in a field, while she complained and he pretended not to enjoy it.

A scream from inside and then sticky hands pressed against the glass. Belle and Jake chuckle at the tiny face, toothy and wide-grinned.

‘Help me, Grandpa! Mum is tickling me,’ the young girl squeals.

Belle watches as Jake pulls his gloves off, one finger at a time. She gazes longingly at those hands, which are still her favourites. She’d held these hands on a snowy day outside a church in Whitby. She’d held them in the dark, in the back of a car, contractions shooting through her body, and on a different Tuesday morning, when the news was bad, and the tea was getting cold.

They are the hands that shook slightly while teaching their daughter to parallel park on a Sunday morning in an empty Sainsbury’s car park, both of them certain she was about to write the car off. And they are the hands that had helped to build their dream home in the countryside when they left London twenty years ago. They look mostly the same, just a little more withered and dusted with sunspots.

‘Juliet, Grandpa’s coming to get you!’ Jake sings, before he kisses Belle on the forehead. He walks to the back door, tiny footprints landing as heavy as a stampede of elephants.

Belle shivers, goes to the table, the breeze leaving a stamp of goosebumps on her arms.

His garden jacket, now cold to the touch, hangs on the back of a garden chair. She pulls it on and pushes her hands into the pockets to warm up. Left pocket: a receipt, a biro with no lid on, and the rooting powder she’d been looking for for the past year. The right pocket is deeper and her fingers close around a fold of paper, which she pulls out before she knows what it is.

She almost doesn’t look, almost puts it back, thinking it’s another receipt, but it’s on thicker paper, denser, so she inspects it, turning it over in her palms.

It's soft at the folds, the creases worn slightly white, as though it has been opened and closed more times than paper is meant to withstand.

She notices then, a crayon drawing. A squiggle, a smudge, an assortment of colours. Their daughter's first drawing, her first circle. It'd been stuck to their fridge for years until one day it wasn't, and she'd just assumed the magnet had broken.

Then scribbles, dark ink bleeding through from the other side.

She turns it over.

She recognises his handwriting from the slant of the first letter, the same slant it always had, just a little shakier now and covering every inch of space.

She pauses for a moment, then sits on the garden chair as she pulls her reading glasses from the chain around her neck to the tip of her nose.

Different colours, different pens, a couple faded and old, others freshly written.

Her smile lines. She hates them. I love them.

Her hands still slot in mine like they were made to fit.

She still loves hedgehog mash, but also cooks a mean artichoke.

Caught her telling our granddaughter that ghosts are nothing to be scared of.

Still eats cereal over the sink and now I've started doing it with her.

She danced on a bar in Ibiza on our honeymoon. Those pictures are my favourites.

I hope we live forever, to the very end.

She looks after me while I'm losing my memory.

She sniffs, removes her hand which has risen to her chest without her realising. She takes a deep breath, shakes her head, laughing, and places the list back into his pocket, carefully folding it neatly at the seams.

She stands for a moment. The robin is still on the birdbath; the lavender sways gently in the wind. She picks up the teapot and, with it warming her hands, she looks up at the sky. Just for a moment, she swears she sees someone watching. A huge, mighty man with kind eyes, a big beard, and a familiar sadness. She blinks and, as quickly as he appeared, he's gone.

'What is it?' Jake asks, arriving behind her.

He takes the teapot from her hands without a word and pours two mugs. Hers first, no sugar.

'Nothing,' she says. 'Just saying thank you.'

He doesn't ask again. She just finds his hand, fingers threading through his, the way she always has. The way she suspects she always will.

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I'm sat here writing these acknowledgements on a desk that's buckling – just like Belle's – under old mugs, half-finished notebooks, and too many products to name, and I still can't believe this dream of mine is coming true! I started writing my first book in 2019 and poured my all into finishing it deep in lockdown. When it didn't get published, I nearly gave up. And while I thought of myself and that book as a failure at the time, I realise now that it was necessary. Without that experience, I wouldn't have known what it takes to write another. So, I guess, thanks to me (!) for not giving up.

My first real thanks have to go to the people who have followed my journey online over the past fifteen years. Some of you have followed me since my early, awkward beauty tutorial days and have stuck with me through heartbreaks, falling in love again, and my knitting and fence-sitting content now. I owe you everything. Without you, I doubt I would be here writing this. Those of you who still remember my hamster Echo, my old flat in Bethnal Green, and that one year where I was making both true crime and sex toy review videos – I feel so lucky to have shared it all with the most supportive audience! I've tried to add some easter eggs into this book, I hope you enjoy them.

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Goose, goose, goose.

To my parents, sister, and family for believing in me when I didn't believe in myself, for taking the time to listen to me cry, and for supporting me in all my dreams and ventures (even that one year I tried to photograph a ghost). I feel like the luckiest woman to have grown up in such a supportive environment.

P.S. – Dad, maybe skip past those saucy mini chapters.

To my in-laws who first introduced me to Whitby and took me to experience the annual goth weekend – twice!

To my cat, Maurice. I know you can't read this, but I'll be sure to read it out to you. Thank you for lying by my side while I wrote the majority of this book. For giving me reluctant but soothing purr-y cuddles when I felt stuck. For being the best little shadow and companion around the house, always.

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THE GHOST OF EXES PAST

Playlist

In no particular order, here are some of the songs I listened to on repeat while writing this book. I can't express how helpful these songs were in helping me dig deep and get into the zone, particularly for the harder-to-write chapters. You can listen as you read or just savour after!

'Pretty Thing' – Dizzy

'Polar' – Vok

'Cold Blooded' – Khalid

'Burn, Baby, Burn' – Sea Power

'Like a Dream' – Chelou

'The Simplest' – Hannah Cohen

'Neon Woods' – Tara Nome Doyle

'She' – ISLAND

'Give Me Love' – Jessie Reid

'Melt' – Josef Salvat

'Closing Credits: Bolero' – Steve Sharples

'Cruel World' – Phantogram

'Pray To Be Free' – James Levy and The Blood Red Rose

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katie Snooks is a London-based content creator and the author of *The Ghost of Exes Past*. After studying photography at University of the Arts London where she spent a year trying to photograph ghosts, Katie built a career in social media, becoming a full-time creator in 2015. Known for her honest, relatable approach to topics from acne, dating and the baby decision, she has worked with brands including Johnnie Walker, Pepsi and IKEA, and presented a BBC documentary about her experience with acne. When not writing, Katie can be found swinging from a static trapeze bar, designing and knitting her own clothes, or mudlarking along the Thames.

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Chapter 1

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