

BECCALEE



**A**  
*Perfect Moment*

PERFECT SERIES BOOK ONE



A PERFECT MOMENT

Copyright © 2014 by BECCA LEE

All rights reserved

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of Becca Lee, except for the use of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Cover design by Louisa Maggio @ LM Creations

Cover Image by BlueSkyImage

Interior Design by Angel's Indie Formatting

Edited by Lauren McKellar

Proofread by Hot Tree Editing

# Table of Contents

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Prologue – five years earlier | Ella](#)

[Chapter One | Ella](#)

[Chapter Two | Preston](#)

[Chapter Three | Ella](#)

[Chapter Four | Preston](#)

[Chapter Five | Ella](#)

[Chapter Six | Preston](#)

[Chapter Seven | Ella](#)

[Chapter Eight | Preston](#)

[Chapter Nine | Ella](#)

[Chapter Ten | Preston](#)

[Chapter Eleven | Ella](#)

[Chapter Twelve | Preston](#)

[Chapter Thirteen | Ella](#)

[Chapter Fourteen | Preston](#)

[Chapter Fifteen | Ella](#)

[Chapter Sixteen | Preston](#)

[Chapter Seventeen | Ella](#)

[Chapter Eighteen | Preston](#)

[Chapter Nineteen | Ella](#)

[Chapter Twenty | Preston](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One | Ella](#)

[Epilogue | Jo](#)

# Dedication

“When the world seems to shine like you've had too much wine, that's  
amore.” – Dean Martin, *That's Amore*

To my boys, you make my world a brighter and better place.

# Acknowledgements

After ten years of attempting to write a story, I constantly found myself hitting a road block, so I gave up. This past Christmas, I was inspired. I was inspired by the many authors, who I adore, by the own love of my life and by the beauty I see in the world around me. I half expected my hubby to laugh when I told him I'd actually written the first 6,000 words to a book. Instead, he smiled, kissed me and told me, "I was amazing." Me! Without his support, I wouldn't have had the time to achieve one of my dreams, to publish. Thank you, baby.

As you know, a book doesn't become possible without the amazing love, support and care of so many people. My best friend, Charl, was the first to tentatively read my first few chapters. Her enthusiasm drove me. As my dearest and oldest friend, I thank you, beautiful. I will always be your Junior Burger. And a mention to my wonderful parents, who always shower me with their support and love. Thank you for always believing in me.

Breaking into the community was so damn hard, and I have one woman who was the first to offer kindness and support. An author who showed consideration to a newbie. I'm so grateful to Kristine Raymond for the kindness she showed me. Thank you, lovely. Your heart is beautiful and your writing is amazing.

Justine of Hot Tree Editing, you are a fabulous beta. You told me when to wind it back. You reassured me and offered me great pointers. Thank you so bloody much. You rock, woman!

My editor, Lauren McKellar, has been so patient with me. I'm that painful author who constantly prods. Thank you, Lauren, for making my book shine. A big thanks to Hot Tree Editing, who swept their loving gazes over APM too.

Angel, 'who needs a capitalized The in front of her name', thank you for your fresh eyes and for your wonderful formatting. You've been so supportive and generous.

My beautiful, talented and pervey book babes, you sure know how to pimp my arse. I've loved every moment of it. Josie, Ang, Angie, Ellen, Lila, Rebecca, Justine, Alisha, Becky, Kayleigh and Cynthia, you're all so bloody special and awesome. Thanks for taking a chance on me and supporting me with such ease. Also a special mention to Mandy, your kindness means a lot.

Heather and Shannon, from Sexyways of Reading, you made my release tour rock. Thank you. I was blown away by the interest and support from every single blogger and reader who kindly took a chance on me, sharing my book and supporting my release. You've all help me achieve my dream. Thank you!

Finally, a mega shoutout to my girl, Josie, my super sassy and über gorgeous PA. You organise my arse to perfection, are the loudest cheerleader and have helped me so much. Thank you for the 4am brainstorming, the threats to take people down who are mean, and for your unwavering support. You've been my constant through this. I'll be sure you never go without a Crunchie again.

## Prologue – five years earlier

### Ella

*When you reached out for that perfect moment, it is only natural to want it to last forever. Sometimes, however, life has other ideas. Life simply throws shit in your face and then throws its head back, laughing its goddamned arse off. Seriously! When the phrase, it's only natural comes into play, surely that means it's natural, right? Uncomplicated, right? Meant to be.*

Who the hell was I kidding? Apparently, wanting a perfect moment to last was too much to ask for. Sitting on my backside in the middle of the church grounds, watching my shithead of a fiancé shove his tongue down a bitch's throat, was not exactly my perfect moment. For once, my belief in 'the moment', in a happily ever after, flew out the fucking door, laughing in glee as Fuckwit—yes, *that's now the name I'll be referring to him as*—groaned deeply into Bitch's mouth. Bitch being his skank of an ex.

*Not so much of an ex now, after all, it seems.*

My best friend, Jo, chose that moment to come barrelling around the corner, almost tripping over my frozen body when she took in the sight. I tilted my head up from my position on the ground to look at her. She did this crazy cartoon-like double take as she took in my meringue-covered arse sitting on the damp grass, and then back up to cheating Fuckwit.

Never one to hold back, Jo clenched her fists, stepped over my legs and the mountain of silk I had spread all over the ground, and proceeded forward. Everything seemed to slow down. I expected her to turn into some sort of kick-ass superhero, or maybe even a villain, from the tension in her back. I could almost see the rage pulsating off her. Instead, what happened next left me snort-gasping, followed by snotty crying mixed with a hint of pride.

Jo grabbed on to Bitch's hair, taking both Fuckwit and her completely by surprise. *Having your tongue down someone else's fiancé's throat will do that to you.* She proceeded to shriek like a banshee, pushing Bitch to the ground, before raising her right fist and punching Fuckwit square in the nose. From just a few metres away, I heard the crunch. Fuckwit immediately wailed and hit the ground. At this point, Bitch stood up and foolishly began to wave her finger in Jo's face, when Jo captured her waving finger and twisted, which forced a cry and a drop to the knees. It was then that Jo looked around for what I assumed was inspiration.

Horseshit.

Literally, horseshit. In preparation for my perfect moment, we had organised two magnificent horses and a beautiful fairy-tale carriage. On the ground, just a few metres away from her on the road, Jo spotted the fresh horseshit, her face lighting up with glee. Never one to cower or be afraid of a little bit of shit under her nails, Jo pushed Bitch forcibly in Fuckwit's direction and strode toward the steaming shit. She proceeded to pull off her puffy underskirt from her bridesmaid's dress—ever resourceful—and used it as a scoop to capture what I assumed to be her ammunition.

Both Fuckwit and Bitch were completely unaware of their impending face packs—the fiancé-stealing ex was crying over her finger and Fuckwit's broken nose. The horseshit landed directly on their heads, and then a wild Jo carried out a rub in the face for good measure, finishing off the job perfectly. Jo, clearly feeling satisfied with her handiwork, pulled her phone out of her bra and took a picture of the shitty pair. She turned, looked at me, smiled and headed back to my laughing-crying self.

“Come on. Let's get the hell out of this shithole.” She laughed at her own joke. Pulling me up to my feet, she looped her arm around my waist and gave me a tight squeeze, causing an involuntary sob to escape. “As soon as I get this shit from under my nails, I'll grab us two of those cooling bottles of champers I saw, and you and I are going to have ourselves a party.”

I nodded my head in agreement, trying to steady my tears and ignore my aching heart.



# Chapter One

## Ella

“Take it easy,” I carefully suggested to a pale Jo. She was chugging a glass of Champagne so quickly I half expected the bubble to shoot right down to her arse and release tiny Champagne sparkle farts.

“Nope.” She proceeded to refresh her glass.

At any moment, I knew I would have to rugby-tackle her. She could not walk down the aisle pissed as a drunken hobo. We were at a church, for crying out loud. She’d had my back when she was my bridesmaid, and if I let her get too shitfaced to walk down the aisle on her own wedding day, I would have to hang up my title in shame. “No more, woman,” I cried out.

She eyed me over the rim of the flute.

“I said no. You can do this. Shit, this is what you’ve been planning for over the last bloody year. You are not going to forget a damn thing about this day by being too drunk to remember. You hear me?”

She nodded solemnly and lowered the glass flute.

“Now, step away from the bottle, nice and slowly.” I had to get my timing right. Any sudden movements and I knew from the look in her eyes darting in that direction, she’d grab hold of the bottle with two hands and make a run for the bathroom. I edged toward the bottle of Champagne sitting far too close to the edge of the table and her grabby hands for my liking. “I mean it. Back away, Jo.”

She eyed me warily as I moved closer. She took a tentative step back, the Champagne flute lowered from her mouth. It was serious work. Hell, trying to talk a bride-to-be down off the proverbial ledge and not get shitfaced was one thing. Add to that, in just fifteen minutes she was due to elegantly glide down the aisle—as opposed to stagger and trip—and it was a whole new ball game. I had no doubt the staggering was in her imminent

future if I couldn't pry her away from the winking bubbles; it was hard bloody work. I just needed to gain one more metre and I could officially begin to rock my title of 'Best Bridesmaid Ever'.

Jo's eyes darted toward the table and then back to me. I froze and gave her the sternest look possible. This was when the last six years of staring down sixteen-year-olds in the classroom would finally pay off. I totally owned the don't-mess-with-me death glare. *I owned this shit.* I squinted slightly and gave a slight shake of my head, always maintaining eye contact. She stood a little taller at my movement for a moment, before she bit lightly on her bottom lip, in what I assumed to be defeat. She seemed to realise that she would not win this war. Not on my watch!

The door flung open behind me, forcing me to break my eye contact with Jo. A high-pitched squeal of, "You look beautiful," filled the room. *No, no, no!* It was too late. I had myself a runner.

Jo took the moment to lean forward, latch onto the open bottle of fizz and race towards the door at the opposite end of the room. I had approximately four seconds to make my move before she would be safely in the bathroom behind a door that locked.

I lurched forward, taking a leaping stride through the air, feet off the ground and cried out, "Nooooooooooooo ..."

I slammed into her back and latched onto her legs, wedding dress and all, as she plummeted to the ground, just one second away from her great escape. We both hit the carpeted floor with a cry. The Champagne flew from her hand and sailed in the air before smashing against the wall next to her escape door.

"What the fuck, El?" Jo cried out as she watched on in horror at her smashed bottle. "What the hell am I going to drink now?"

Feeling utterly proud of my sweet skills, if not a little bit breathless, I pulled myself up, smiling. "Get your arse off the floor, Jo. We've got a wedding to get to." I looked her over, amazed that she was Champagne-spillage free.

Jo turned and grumbled in defeat, and then held her hands out to me to pull her skinny arse to her feet.

"Oh, my! Girls, are you both okay?"

We spun and looked around at the horrified expression on her Aunt Jackie's face. Jo's dad chose that moment to step into the room. It took all of five seconds for him to take in the room and our frazzled appearances

before he looked to the ceiling and rubbed his face with both hands. “Just once, girls, just once, act your bloody age and get yourselves together. The cars are here.” He sighed heavily as he headed back through the open doorway. Before he fully left the room, he looked over his shoulder, smiled and said, “You look stunning, Jo. Beautiful. Come on, Jackie. Let’s wait for them outside.”

Alone, we turned and looked at one another. Picking up a tissue off the table, I wiped the small tears that began to sneak from my best friend’s eyes. “You’re ready. You’re beautiful and you’re going to totally blow Liam’s mind away.”

She nodded her head in agreement and took a depth breath. “And if his ex-shows up and tries to seduce him?”

My heart constricted slowly. The two of us had been terrified of weddings ever since my perfect moment was ruined. With my eyes glistening, I held her hand and squeezed. “Not going to happen, Jo. And if any crazy-arse woman attempts anything, I’ll be taking them down before they’ve even realised the idea has formed in their head. Liam *is not* Fuckwit. He loves you, and he’s going to be so pissed we’re already late.”

Holding hands, we made our way outside to the waiting cars.

\*\*\*

I gave myself a mental pat on the back. Looking around the hotel marquee, the evening party was in full swing. Wedding guests tore up the dance floor and Jo was sitting on her husband’s lap, laughing loudly.

Mission complete. I totally kicked bridesmaid’s duties arse!

I looked at the full bottle of Champagne that literally had my name on it—written on by the drunken bride with lipstick when I said I wouldn’t drink until I was sure everything was perfect—and I smiled at the scene around me. Jo had truly had her perfect moment. The wedding ceremony was exactly that: perfect. There were no floozy ex-girlfriends trying to hijack the wedding, and no one said anything inappropriate, with the exception of Aunt Jackie, who shouted “with tongues” when Jo and Liam had kissed after cutting the cake—not that they needed egging on, or anything. Everything was simply perfect.

I reached out to the bottle of Champagne with a smile, ready to take my fill when a masculine hand took hold of the bottle at the same time. My

hand froze and I stared daggers at the offending fingers. *I don't think so, buddy!* My gaze travelled up his arms that were partially covered by rolled-up shirtsleeves and finally landed on his face. My eyes widened momentarily, before they took on a threatening glare. "Back off, buster. Can you not read?"

Still firmly clasping *my* bottle of Champagne, Booze Stealer, raised his eyebrows slightly before smiling down at me. "Surely—"

"Not interested, buddy. I've waited all day for this moment, so I suggest you remove your hands before you get yourself hurt." This shit was serious. No one was getting between me and the light bubbles that I knew would taste so delicious when they popped on my tongue.

"You can't be serious—"

My raised eyebrows teamed with my death stare stopped him mid-sentence. He looked at my bottle and squinted at the writing. "Ella?"

I gave him a short nod before pulling the bottle from his hands. He loosened his grip with a quizzical smile. "Thank you," I said, not really meaning it; hell, he'd had his thieving hands on my Champagne. I sat and waited for him to continue on his merry way and leave. No such luck. Apparently, saying *thank you* was cue for sit-down-when-you're-not-invited-and-irritate-the-shit-out-of-me.

"So, Ella," he said with a slight smile, "why do you get the last bottle all to yourself?" He leaned into my space.

*Unbelievable!* I felt my quiet moment begin to slither away as the moron who sat in front of me attempted to smooth-talk his way into a glass of my Champagne. Clearly, he had no idea the special relationship I had with the bubbly stuff. My nectar of choice had been my saving grace since *that* day five years ago. It had helped me get out of my broken heart then and had continued to since work its magic over the years. Whether it was an idiot boyfriend who didn't make the cut, dealing with a boss who drove me to throw my shoe at his head as he got in his car—*it happened*—or even those wonderful moments of celebration. Either way, Champagne and I had a history. A beautiful, messy, poetic history. *Okay, maybe not poetic, but getting my fill of this stuff always manages to put a smile back on my face.*

"Listen, douche. This bottle and I are going to head over somewhere else, somewhere away, alone." I made to stand but hesitated when I saw his slimy smile.

He winked, actually winked at me, before he said, “Okay, Ella, baby. Give me five minutes and I’ll make sure we’re alone.”

I shuddered at the thought of Booze Stealer being anywhere near me, especially alone. “Erm, no. That’s not what I meant. I mean—”

“Shh, baby.” He put his finger against my lips. “Let’s keep it real, be honest with ourselves, and try to keep this quiet. I’ll just wait by the bar and follow you out.”

For the first time in a damned long time, I was rendered speechless. *Keep it real?* I wondered who spoke like that anymore. Seemingly, the dickwad in front of me. I wiped my lips with the napkin still on the table as he walked away and gagged a little. I dreaded to think where his sticky fingers had been. I shuddered involuntarily. I watched as he made it to the bar, picked up a drink, downed it, and then turned and faced me, another drink in his hand.

Shit. I wondered how the bloody hell I would escape from this one without him following me. I looked at my Champagne longingly and took hold of the napkin again to wipe away all signs of his sticky fingers. Hugging my bottle to my chest, I looked around the room, desperately hoping there would be some sort of miraculous escape route that I’d yet to think of.

I spotted Jo’s ancient aunt in the corner and considered hauling ass into the middle of their conversation, but thought better of it. They’d only look at me with pity and start quizzing me about my love life before trying to set me up with someone. I noticed Jo, who was now dancing in Liam’s arms. Love radiated between them. There was no chance I’d be getting in the middle of that. I risked a peek at the dickwad at the bar. His eyes were fixed firmly on me. When I made eye contact, he winked and licked his lips. I had to take action. I was at the point where vomiting was a great possibility.

I looked over my shoulder and spotted Preston looking in my direction, hands planted behind his head and laughing his ass off. “The little shit!” I harrumphed and turned away from him. Jo’s younger brother—maybe not so young, he was twenty-six, but it was hard to see him as anything else other than my best friend’s annoying shit of a brother—of course, had to witness my confrontation with the weasel at the bar. He’d have extra ammunition to wind me up with by witnessing my escape plan.

He’d spent the last twenty-three years irritating the crap out of Jo and me. From the first moment I met Jo at school when I was five, her then

three-year-old brother had been the bane of our existence: telling tales, playing jokes, teasing ... the list continued. In the last few years, while he'd grown up somewhat, physically, anyway—I still was yet to be convinced about his mental age—he'd become a firm friend. Obviously, still annoying, as demonstrated by his laughter, but a good friend all the same.

Countless nights, Preston had dragged my arse to bed after too much alcohol, especially once Jo had become so preoccupied with Liam. We'd spent a lot of time together. We still had our separate friends, but we usually caught up once or twice a week.

I hadn't seen him all night. He'd brought a trashy date with him to the wedding. Nobody I'd ever met before, not that I ever properly met his women. He always seemed to have a new victim on his arm every week. He was hot. I could understand it, but he was also my BFF's baby brother.

An idea formed in my head as I looked around the room for his date. She was propped up at another table, making out with one of Liam's friends. I looked back at Preston quickly. Still laughing, he shrugged his shoulders, clearly not giving a shit. I took a deep breath and stood up, still clutching my bottle. The sleaze immediately smiled when I looked in his direction and nodded at me. *Oh, shit!* I smiled hesitantly before heading over to Preston who was holding his sides in silent laughter.

"Don't be a shit. Come and dance with me. I need saving."

He laughed and gasped, "Classic. Now, why in the hell would I do that when it's such a pleasure to watch you squirm?"

"Preston," I complained, "please. I can't shake him. He's eyeing up my baby." I stroked my bottle affectionately.

"Heaven forbid." He smiled. "If we dance, what are you going to do with that?" He indicated my Champagne.

"Shit. I hadn't thought about that. Maybe—"

Preston's eye's widened and filled with amusement as he looked behind me and a voice cut me off. "So, darlin', you and me, and that bottle of Champagne."

His hand touched my exposed back. *Damn my bridesmaid's dress leaving too much skin on show.* I lurched forward, falling onto Preston.

He groaned as I landed heavily on his lap. "Sheesh, how much cake did you—"

My elbow to his stomach cut him off. I swivelled slightly and looked at the douche in front of me. "So, this is Preston. My boyfriend." My arm

snaked around Preston's shoulders, daring him to interrupt or laugh.

"Humph, you didn't saying anything before. I've been watching you all night and you haven't been with him up till now."

The thought that he'd been watching me freaked me the hell out. I would have to find out who this creeper was. I assumed he was someone Liam knew.

Preston chose that moment to interrupt. "Yes, sorry, buddy. She's with me. I've been catching up with family." He shifted slightly in his seat and looked up at me. I immediately angled my head at him and smiled in relief. "Sorry, baby. Have I been neglecting you?" I saw the amusement dancing in his eyes. He was having far too much fun.

"It's okay, *sweetie*. I don't mind. You can make it up to me."

Preston beamed, looking far too proud of himself. His lips quirked up in mischief. "I'll definitely make it up to you, El." His hand clasped the back of my head and he pulled my face down to his. My eyes widened in shock, wondering what the hell he was doing.

As his lips touched mine, I gasped. My open mouth gave him the opportunity to lightly run his tongue over my lips, before it flicked out and caressed my tongue. His mouth moulded with mine and I found myself leaning into the warmth and sweetness of his lips. At my added pressure, his hand gripped my head a little tighter and his other hand wrapped around my back and pulled my body closer to his. His lips moved against mine expertly, sending unbidden tingles down my spine and to my core. He groaned into my mouth, which I matched immediately.

At some point, I thought I heard a murmured, "Right, I'll be off then," but it didn't fully register as my hand gripped on to Preston's taut arms.

An insistent cough brought us out of the moment. We pulled apart slightly, just a few inches, and simply looked at one another. Both of us were panting. *Holy shit! I just made out with Preston. Baby Preston. My BFF's baby brother Preston.* The cough continued. We both looked in the direction of Jo, who held an amused smirk and sported a quirked brow.

She lifted her right eyebrow and folded her arms. "So," she spoke around a smile, "anything either of you want to talk to me about?"

Frozen on Preston's lap with my lips still tingling, I looked up at a laughing Liam who was standing behind Jo, his arms wrapped around her waist.

Preston's hands slipped to my waist and held me firmly, thoroughly confusing my muddled brain even more. I had no freakin' idea what had just happened. All I knew for sure was that I'd just had one hell of a kiss with Preston, whose thumbs were making slow circles on my waist, as *his* sister, *my* BFF was looking on. My body tensed and I made to move, wondering what on earth I could say. At my slight shift, Preston's grip became even firmer, a hold of possession.

It had all been an innocent save-my-ass kiss. But Preston's firm grip and the memory of our mutual groans and the damn butterflies dancing around my belly in response to his circles and firm grip had me pausing, and touching my lips. "I- I-" Being lost for words twice in one day was a new world record for me. I realised my mouth was still gaping open and snapping closed, so I firmly planted it shut and put my hands on my bottle of Champagne. Somehow, amidst the hot-as-hell kissing, I'd managed to not lose grip of my bubbly goodness.

Preston cleared his throat. "We were actually just going to head out, find a quiet spot and finish El's bubbly. You know how possessive she can be." He lifted my hips, urging me to stand. Taking hold of my hand, he tugged slightly, kissed Jo on the cheek, and said, "We'll see you in a week when you get back from your honeymoon. Have fun, sis." He briefly shook hands with Liam, who stood on with a smirk on his face, and pulled me toward the marquee's exit.

I looked back at Jo's face in shock. Hers I was sure mirrored mine. I had no idea what the fuck she was thinking, or what I was thinking or feeling, for that matter. Just before we left the marquee, she gave a wide smile and a thumbs-up sign. *Double shit. What the hell does that mean?*

My breathing became ragged as Preston walked quickly into the darkness of the hotel's grounds. I could hear the waves of the sea lapping against the shoreline. Feeling my feet sink into sand, I stumbled. Immediately, Preston's arms wrapped around mine, preventing me from falling on my arse, or more importantly, from dropping my bottle of bubbly. I had a feeling that I was going to need to drink the whole goddamn bottle to get my head around what was happening.

He looked down at me, his face cast in light and shadow in the moonlight. It was too dark to make out the colour of his eyes, but I knew they were a mesmerising green with flecks of hazel. His high cheekbones had always made me envious in the past. Looking at them under the glow of



moon, all I wanted to do was rest my cheek against his and maybe give him a quick lick. I paused in horror at the thought. *Lick Preston*. Nothing about that idea made sense. He was virtually my little brother, an annoying one at that.

I took a step back and shook my head. “No. Just no, Preston.” His face looked pained as he loosened his grip on my arms. He still wasn’t releasing me, so I took another step backwards. I knew I’d led him on, but all I’d really thought about was escaping. Okay, maybe I quite liked his kisses too, but the familiarity of his touch freaked me the crap out. His arms dropped to his sides.

“Thank you, for before, for helping me out.” I gave a tentative smile, which he didn’t return. His face had become an unreadable mask as I took another step away from him. My heart sped up at the change in him. It was rare that I saw the hard-faced version of Preston standing in front of me. I was used to funny, pain-in-the-ass Preston. Easy-going Preston. The Preston who cuddled me when I needed it and held my hair back when I was throwing up, but before me was the I’m-not-taking-this-shit Preston. *Oh fuck!*

“No!”

There went my gaping fish-mouth again. “No?” I questioned.

“I said no. You’re not backing away from this. From me.” He took a large stride forward and crashed his lips to mine. He took my breath away in an instant. My bottle of bubbly pressed between us as he held me tightly, his arms wrapped around me. Once again, his tongue slipped into my shocked mouth.

As soon as his tongue touched mine, all reason and rational thought whizzed right out of my head. I was burning up. His kisses sent waves of sensual heat pulsating through my body.

I felt his arm move and my precious bubbly was removed from my hand. His lips dropped to my cheek, and he rained kisses down my neck and across my partially exposed shoulders. *I officially love my dress. I’m screwed.* He leaned in slightly, and lightly put the bottle on the ground before kissing his way back up my throat and to my tingling, kissed lips. With no more obstacles between us, he pulled my body close to his, his body firm in all of the right places.

We kissed until our breathing gave out. If I hadn’t have gone up for air, I was sure I would have passed out. We slowly pulled away from one

another, Preston gently placing his forehead against mine. “I think I need bubbles.” I half smiled. I was in serious need of a shitload of booze. My head was spinning, even though not a single drop of alcohol had passed my thoroughly kissed lips.

Preston smiled, kissed me gently on the lips and pulled me to the sand. Our bodies pressed next to one another as he reached for the bottle and expertly opened it. I couldn’t pull my eyes away from him.

The light evening breeze lifted the few strands of my red hair that had come loose from my carefully-styled hairdo and tickled my face. I left them, too busy taking in the man before me. He was one sexy hunk. This I’d always known, but never *really* known. When Preston had turned twenty-one and had started working out even more, his surfer muscles had become more defined, bigger. I’d noticed back then, five years ago, but still, it was Jo’s annoying brother. He was not a sexy hunk who Jo and I would rate out of ten every time we came down to the beach to cool off in the summer heat. He had flown under my radar, and I had no idea how this was possible. He was my friend, for Christ’s sake. We met up a couple of times a week for drinks or dinner, or simply to chat, sometimes even alone. But not once had I thought or considered how beautifully kissable his lips were. Never once did I want to lean towards him and kiss a line up his chest.

I was officially freaking the fuck out. I couldn’t do this. There was no such thing as a simple kiss between two friends. I needed to get away and quick, certainly before I had another whiff of his divine masculine scent that I wanted to bottle up and pour onto my pillow. *Holy shit, it is definitely time to leave.*

I looked at my bottle of bubbly in his hands with longing. I would have to let this one go. His distraction with the bottle was going to be my ticket out. Taking a deep breath, I watched as he carefully removed the foil from the bottle’s cork. As stealth-like as possible, I removed my shoes, grasped them firmly in my right hand, pushed with my left, turned, stood and ran back to the hotel as quick as my 5’6 frame would allow.

His calling out spurred me on. I pushed my legs harder, trying to remember the last time I had run. Holy Christ, high school seemed a hell of a long time ago. *Note to self: Get off your lard arse once in a while.*

I made it to the foyer and refused to look over my shoulder. Chicks were always caught out in horror movies by looking back. It was bad. *I’m comparing running away from a pair of sexy-arse lips to being a goddamn*

*slasher victim*. I was officially losing the plot and was being too bloody ridiculous.

I slammed into the wall next to the elevator and repeatedly hit the call button. The *ding* made me sigh in relief as I quickly stepped into the elevator, swiped my key card that I'd pulled out of my bra—bras came in really handy when you had no pockets to carry your shit—and pressed my level. The door closed as I heard a frustrated Preston call out my name.

*Fuck! That was close*. I couldn't even begin to think about how I would have navigated my way out of that potential shit-storm. I'd been tempted, too tempted, and that really scared the crap out of me.

I rushed out of the lift when it hit my floor, half expecting Preston to jump out at me from the staircase. *I really need to stop watching so many horror movies*. I swiped my key card across my room's door. I'd never been so relieved to see the welcome green light. Pushing open the door, I stumbled inside and slammed the door behind me.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed myself away from the entryway, flicking the lock before I went. I dumped my shoes on the floor and headed straight into the bathroom. The harsh white light greeted me. Ignoring my reflection, I leaned in and turned on the shower. I foolishly rationalised that a cold shower would be all I needed to cool my flushed skin and clear my head. I shimmied out of my jade dress and allowed it to pool on the ground. Checking the temperature and ensuring it was just the right level of cold, I then stepped into the shower allowing the powerful spray to wash over me and wake me the hell up.

I sighed, standing under the spray. I had just a few hours to consider how I was going to deal with this mess. I would have to talk to him, even though I'd love to completely ignore the kiss—or rather *kisses*. When I realised my fingers were touching my mouth, I snapped them away quickly. *No thinking of sweet kisses*. Preston was my friend, a good friend, and far too important to me to allow a drunken—I seriously hoped he was drunk, even though I knew I didn't have that excuse—kiss ruin our friendship or my friendship with Jo. As much as she was my friend-twin, she was most definitely the evil half of our pairing. I'd seen the damage she could do with her right hook and horseshit; I did not want to be on the receiving end of that if I screwed over her little bro.

On this occasion, I would play the grown-up. I chose to ignore the fact that I'd run away from him, abandoning him on the beach. I would sit down

with him and apologise, think of some incredible and believable excuse and then it would all go back to normal. I scoffed at my crappy pep talk. I needed to do better. Apparently, I couldn't even convince myself.

I wrapped myself in the hotel's fluffy towel and eyed the mini-fridge, sitting proudly in the room. I risked a peek inside. No Champagne, but there was a whole collection of different yummy spirits that I was sure would help me get over the Preston incident. It may even help me ignore the butterflies distracting me whenever I thought of our kiss and the growing need in my groin.

Sighing at my stupid libido, I grabbed all of the miniature spirits. I also pulled out a can of Coke. A lethal cocktail it would be. I was sure it would do the trick.

Pouring half of the spirits into a tall glass, I topped it up with the Coke. I sat back on the bed and flipped on the FreeView TV while I periodically drank and grimaced. It tasted foul, but damn if it didn't get the job sorted. Before long, I refilled my glass and felt the welcoming buzz of alcohol racing through my system. I flicked over the channel and placed the remote back on the side table when I found a movie. *Love Story* was on. *Result!* Perhaps not the best film to watch, considering the craziness of the evening, but I'd grown up on this movie. My mum had made Jo and I sit in front of it when we were in our mid-teens. Before long, the two of us were ugly-girl crying, which involved hiccoughs, snorts and a bucket-load of tissues.

My mum could be one sadistic woman when she wanted to be.

The thought of my parents only just drifted through my mind. *Fuckety-fuck!* If they had witnessed Preston and I kissing, they'd be organising our freakin' wedding and doing fist pumps I'm sure. They loved Preston. Like, seriously loved his firefighting arse. But, knowing my interfering parents the way that I did, I was confident that if they found out about the kiss, it wouldn't take them long to concoct a plan to get me down the aisle. Geez, let alone Preston and Jo's crazy-arse parents, too. The four in the mix was a potential nightmare.

At the grand old age of twenty-eight, I would have hoped that I'd mastered the art of wise choices and discretion. Evidently not. Making out with your best friend's baby brother at her wedding, in the middle of the fucking evening reception, with *both* sets of parents close by, was so far from discreet that I wanted to run and hide. *Hmmm ... I may just do that. I wonder what the chance of scoring a job in Bali is.*

It was no good. *Love Story* had to go. I flicked off the TV, ignoring the look of longing on Ryan O'Neal's face. Sad, love movie, mixed with a crappy-version of a cocktail, combined with a wonderful, bizarre, emotional day and I was done for. I knocked back my gross drink, stood on wobbly legs to go take a pee in the cramped bathroom, and finally curled myself up into a ball underneath the blankets.

## Chapter Two

### Preston

I still had the taste of Ella on my lips. Since I was fifteen years old, I had been fantasising about kissing her. The real thing was so much better than the fantasy. I had a raging hard-on to prove it, even though I was still standing outside the elevator in the hotel foyer in shock. She'd run. I thought after we sat down, I'd finally be able to seduce her. There was so much more than hot kissing that I wanted to do with her.

"Shit!" I banged my palm on the closed elevator doors. I shook my head. I couldn't believe she had run. Ella, feisty, loudmouth, no-talking-shit Ella, had actually clammed up and run away from me. Part of me wanted to race up to her room, bang loudly on the door, and force her to deal with this. If it ended up with the two of us sprawled naked in bed getting heavy and sweaty, then all the better. But shit, she'd run!

"Preston." The voice of my mum behind me made me groan. There was one easy way to get rid of a raging hard-on, and she was standing right behind me.

"Hey, Mum." I turned to look at her and smiled. "Why aren't you at the party?"

"They're just about to leave. I thought you'd want to say a proper goodbye to your sister."

"Sure thing, Mum." I walked up to her, pulled her small frame into my side and wrapped my arm around her shoulders.

"Have you seen Ella?" Her voice sounded innocent enough, but when I looked down at her face, her eyes danced with amusement and her lips were curled into a smile.

"Nope."

"But I thought—"

“Please, Mum, just leave it.” I sighed heavily. “I think she’s gone to her room.”

Mum wore a frown. She didn’t say a word; she simply looped her arm around my waist and gave me a tight squeeze. I kissed her on the top of her head as we walked outside and back to the marquee.

My sister and Liam were making their way around family and friends, kissing, hugging and laughing. They were ready to leave for their week away in Hawaii. We waited near the door and my dad joined us. He raised his eyebrows at Mum in a silent question when he took in my strained face. I felt Mum shake her head. Dad nodded and made his way to Mum. I released my arm and he took over.

I needed to school my face better. I was too damned readable.

Jo and Liam appeared in front of me. I could see the look of concern in her eyes. Forcing a smile on my face, I gave her a tight embrace. “Have an amazing time, Mrs Mason. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do, and I’ll see you in a week.”

She held on for a little bit longer and kissed my cheek. “Love you, Preston.” She pulled away, looked at me briefly before moving on to our crying mum.

“Hey, Liam, you take good care of my big sister.” Liam shook my hand and leaned in for a slight hug and man-pat on the back.

“No worries, there, Preston. You say goodbye to Ella for us, right?” He formed a ridiculously large smile.

“Whatever, man. Just take care of her.”

He gave me a nod and moved on to my mum, who was still sobbing, while my dad was trying to release Jo from her vice-like grip.

After catcalls and waves, Jo and Liam left the marquee and the party officially began to wind down. I took that as my cue to get out of there. I said goodnight to my parents and made my way to the hotel.

Outside my hotel room, I looked at Ella’s closed door. I was tempted to go and knock, and demand that we talk or kiss it out. Either would do. I just couldn’t handle radio silence. Thinking better of it, I opened my door and made my way into my room. I’d deal with it in the morning. No fucking way was she running again.

\*\*\*

The heavy curtains blocked out all light, confusing the hell out of me as I picked up my phone to look at the time. It was just gone 8 am. I needed to get my arse out of bed if I wanted to get some breakfast at the hotel before I made the short journey home. I took a quick shower and threw on a clean pair of jeans and a white tee. Grabbing the key card, I left my room and hesitated outside of Ella's door.

*Screw it!* I refused to only be seen as Jo's brother and simply Ella's friend. I knocked on the door and waited for a few seconds. I leaned my ear against the door, listening for sounds. After what felt like ten minutes, but was more like five seconds, I heard a groan, followed by movement and unsteady footsteps heading toward the locked door.

Ella opened the door wearing her figure-hugging tank top, and barely-there sleep shorts. Hell, she looked hot. Her red hair was half up in a ratty band and partially covered her face. When she looked up at me with squinty eyes she grunted, turned around and walked back toward the bed.

Pushing out my arm, I caught the door and followed her in. She climbed into bed and hid under her rumpled sheets. The room, like mine, was bathed in darkness, so I headed to the thick curtains and opened them. The light spilled in, causing Ella to whimper. I took in the dishevelled room. The bedside table was littered with empty spirit bottles from the mini-bar, and a Coke can.

"What did the mini-bar ever do to you? Did you clean the damn thing out last night or what?" I made my way to her covered form and sat next to her on the bed. She grunted once again as the bed dipped under my weight. The scene before me—a hungover Ella hiding under the sheets on a Sunday morning—was not new to me. We'd spent a lot of time together over the last few years, especially since Liam came along. I reached out to touch her before reconsidering and bringing my hand back. For years it had been more than okay, expected, even, to pounce on her and cause her all sorts of shit, yet because of one fucking amazing kiss—scrap that, two fucking amazing kisses—I no longer felt able to.

My inner voice mentally whacked myself around the head a few times. I should have made my move years ago. If I'd said something before Fuckwit entered the scene, completely screwing her over and hammering it home that men were not to be fucking trusted, then this awkward shit would never have happened. Her heart would never have been crushed, and we'd be



lying in bed nursing hangovers together. I had no doubt in my mind that if she would give me the chance, it would be forever.

I was a prize dick for not going for it. Although, she'd never once looked at me as anything other than Jo's *baby fucking brother*, and the thought grated on my nerves.

It would change today. No more pussy footing around being the 'good' friend. I would find a way to make sure that she never looked at another man.

I took a deep breath, my plan of attack forming in my mind. I reached my hand over to her still form and started shaking the living shit out of her hungover arse. "Come on, El. The bacon awaits. El, El, El ..." I was going for familiarity, and playing innocent. "Get your sweet arse outta bed now, beautiful, before I get under the covers and make you scream." Okay, maybe I'd never tried this plan of attack before, but damn, I'd thought about it for years.

Her body froze under my hands; I felt her muscles become taut at my words. *Shit, did her breathing just speed up? Interesting!*

Her voice sounded strained when she spoke. "You wouldn't dare."

*That's it, baby. Play right into my hands.* "Is that a challenge, baby?" I lifted my hand and began to move it under the covers. It landed perfectly on her impressive backside. She squeaked, threw back the covers and ran to the bathroom.

I heard her voice through my laughter. "I'm up and awake, arsehole."

Ten minutes later, after the quickest shower I'd ever known her to take, she leaned out of the bathroom door, skin wet and wrapped in a towel. My eyes soaked her in and I shifted my jeans in discomfort.

"Erm ... I forgot my clothes."

My lustful eyes swept up and down her body. I'd seen her countless times in a similar state of undress, but had always had to rein in my appreciation. Not anymore. El was going to finally understand exactly how I felt about her.

I looked at her bag next to the side of the bed and raised my right eyebrow, taunting her, making no move to get off the bed.

"Fine. I'll get it myself," she huffed out.

She stomped out of the bathroom as it swung quickly behind her on its self-close hinges. As she took another step, her towel tugged against her

sharply, falling to the ground. Her towel had been trapped in the ever-loving door.

There was a freaking God after all; it was finally confirmed that he was a man.

My eyes bulged as she screamed and dropped to ground with a heavy thud, knocking her head on the small desk next to her. “Holy fuck! Ouch!”

“Shit.” I jumped off the bed and raced towards her. She lay, ass-naked on the floor, holding her head and swearing like a goddamn sailor. “Babe, let me look.”

Her head jerked up when she realised I was bent before her naked form. “You! This is all your bloody fault. You with your fuck-me eyes and sexy eyebrow-lift. I swear to God, if I’m bleeding, I’ll bust your balls, Preston.”

I froze. *Did she just say fuck me and sexy?* I grinned when I realised that she had said all of those things. “I’ll go get you some ice, babe.” I leaned down and quickly kissed her startled mouth.

I was convinced that she was mentally going over her angry cussing; it was the only thing that could explain her startled expression. I opened the door to release her towel as I headed to the mini-bar to grab some ice from the tiny freezer compartment. I found a washcloth in the bathroom and used it to hold the ice before heading back to Ella, who was now sitting on the bed securely wrapped in her towel that I would be stealing from the hotel and taking home with me. Who thought it was possible to have such a connection with a piece of linen!

I held the ice to the small lump that was forming on her forehead. She blanched and hissed as I pressed it gently against her. “Thanks,” she whispered.

I smiled, feeling thoroughly the hero. Damn straight, I could totally rock this hero shit. “Any time, babe. Is there anything else you need?”

She moved her head sharply and winced. “You can wipe that shit-eating grin off your face, now, Preston. This is your fucking fault.” She grabbed on to her towel, holding it firmly in her grip, threw the ice on my lap, grabbed her bag and stalked to the bathroom.

I moved the ice off my lap. It had done a pretty good job at cooling my hard-on, leaving a wet patch behind, and apparently, wiping away my dream of hero-worship status.

“So that’ll be a no to help then?” A bang against the bathroom door made me chuckle.

# Chapter Three

## Ella

Walking into the hotel's restaurant for breakfast next to a smiling Preston was simply awkward. After the whole *towel* incident, I wanted to ram my fist in his groin. The only problem with that was that it made me think of his groin, and then specifically his penis, and then sex. I was totally screwed. I was a crazy nervous wreck, and was in desperate need of space and double choc-chip cookie ice cream, yet from the moment his arrogant arse walked into my room, he hadn't stopped grinning and sidling up to me at every opportunity. This included touching and the random kiss on my lips, head, my shoulder, my cheek. Hell, I half expected him to throw himself on the floor so he could kiss his way up my calf.

My point was that it was frustrating, and sweet, and a whole lot of confusing. Nothing could or would ever happen between baby Preston and me. I'd decided I would deliberately start calling him that after the towel debacle. I knew it would piss him the hell off. Immature? Definitely. Satisfying? Absolutely.

I shuffled into the restaurant in desperate need of the bacon sandwich that *baby* Preston had promised me. I felt alcohol-induced crappy, and dehydrated. It took me a while as I was wrapped up in thoughts of penises and bacon—not together necessarily, though it may have proved interesting—to realise that virtually the whole restaurant, filled up with Jo and Liam's family and friends, which meant Preston's family too, and my parents, had all stopped their conversation and were openly gaping at us. It took all of ten seconds for individuals to nudge one another and smile over in our direction. We even got a couple of winks from Preston's Uncle Bernie and one from his elderly next-door neighbour, Dot.

My prayers weren't answered. The ground didn't open up and swallow me whole. I even stamped my left foot to double check, which inevitably sent a wicked pain through to my head. To make the whole nightmare even more surreal and completely screwed up, Preston clearly thought that it would be hilarious to take hold of my hand and pull me toward the two empty chairs on our parents' table. Of course, they were sharing a table; that's what close friends did.

Dumbfounded, I mindlessly allowed him to pull me along. As we edged closer, I played out the best-case scenario to get me out of what was likely to be an even more humiliating meal shared with both sets of parents than the one Jo and I experienced when we were ten years' old. My mum and Kate, Jo and Preston's mum, had decided that a Sunday evening meal with both our families would be the opportune time to discuss with us the facts about the menstrual cycle. My dad, who pulled out some paper and colouring pencils, then backed this up, and proceeded to draw a detailed illustration. Jo and I had looked at one another in horror, clinging to each other in our mutual humiliation. It was then that Collin, their dad, had slapped down medium-rare steaks on our plates. The steaks had oozed with so much blood that we screamed, gagged and ran away to our tree house in Jo's backyard.

*Note to self: When you have children, no bloody steak, illustrations or family discussions.*

So, this meal was going to be bad. The only play I could think of to avoid it was to feign sickness, which actually wasn't too far from what I felt like. If I didn't get bacon in my system soon, I would throw up, and I'd make damned sure I did so in Preston's lap. Begrudgingly, I carried on along my path of humiliation and interrogation, Preston firmly holding my hand the whole way.

I immediately sat down and pulled up the menu to hide my face and to avoid the smiling, questioning glances. We sat in silence. I had no idea what people were waiting for. I'd expected at least ten questions within the minute I'd been sitting down.

"So, darling, a good night last night?" Mum broke the silence. I considered pretending I couldn't hear her, but I knew my mum far too well to attempt it. My mum was no shrinking violet. I'd followed in her footsteps and had become a high school teacher; she'd since been promoted. As a

Head Teacher, there was no way I could lie, ignore or pull any other crap on her. She simply never bought shit.

I reluctantly lowered my menu and looked across at her. Collin was sitting to her left and there was a smug Preston to her right. I smiled, not quite having to force a genuine smile. It had been an amazing day. Everything I could have hoped for, for Jo. The wedding was perfect. I'd cried happy tears, mixed with a little relief that she hadn't succumbed to my cruddy fate, if I were honest. The meal was delicious. The marquee had been setup with spectacular views of the North Pacific Ocean. The sand was perfectly white and fans warded off the summer heat. Even the party had been fabulous. Jo had had such an amazing time. She'd laughed, danced and drank. Holy shit. I realised that I hadn't even said a proper goodbye to her. Some bridesmaid I'd turned out to be. Not only had I made out with her baby brother, but I hadn't even bothered to cuddle her and say happy humping. I needed to text her as soon as the nightmare breakfast was finished.

"It was a wonderful day, Mum. Jo looked stunning, didn't she? I'm so happy for them both." And I was. Liam was a good guy. They'd dated for the past three years, and it was obvious that he loved her. I smiled when I thought about their happiness. She'd found her perfect, and I was so freakin' beside-myself happy for her.

Mum returned my smile and agreed, "She looked beautiful. Everything was magical." Her attention turned to Kate. "I don't know how we held it together for so long in the ceremony, do you Kate?" Mum laughed and smiled at her friend.

"I managed to last halfway through the ceremony before I bawled. Collin's not happy though, apparently." She gave her husband a disapproving look. "He and John had a whole variety of wagers going on. At *our* daughter's wedding. It serves him right that he thought I'd break in five minutes."

We all laughed. Dad and Collin were renowned for their wagers. It had become their 'thing' over the last ten years or so. It drove Mum and Kate to despair.

The waitress interrupted and took our order. Just Preston and I needed to eat as our parents had already finished. Coffee and a bacon sandwich would quickly fix me up.

My dad cleared his throat uncomfortably, drawing our attention to him. “Are ... er ... I mean to say ... erm ... Are ...” He fidgeted in his seat. I looked at Mum, who frowned. I noticed it grew deeper as she took in his shiftiness.

“John,” she warned.

Collin chose that moment to step in. “So, what we’re all wondering, you two ...” *Shit, here it comes.* “... is are you two now together? An item?”

“Collin!” Kate snapped. “Mind your own business.”

I looked away from four pairs of gawking eyes. All four held questions, even though our mums were being too polite to take it any further. I glared at a grinning Preston, who looked entirely too happy to have the question asked. I kicked out at his shin, causing him to jolt his leg up high, knee the table and cry out, “Holy shit! What was that for?”

*Erm ... I don’t know, maybe for kissing me and tasting so damn delicious? Maybe for holding my hand in public? Maybe for looking far too hot in that sexy, snug tee when you should just be looking like Jo’s little brother?* The words were on the tip of my tongue, but I chose the much more sophisticated reaction of scowling, hard. I would have kicked him again, but I was convinced he’d moved his legs out of the way. *Coward.*

“You see,” my dad found his voice again, “it’s just that John and I—”

Both of our mums gasped in unison. Mum shouted, “John!” while Kate cried, “you didn’t!”

I widened my eyes in disbelief at the realisation that my own flippin’ father had bet on his daughter getting a new man. Nothing about that whole crazy sentence made sense.

I steeled my voice. “You bet on *us* getting together?”

Dad shrugged and gave a tentative smile. Preston laughed loudly and Collin smiled sheepishly. “Your own daughter, and you, Collin, your own son? What the hell is wrong with you two?”

“Now, now.” Collin attempted to placate the fiery rage that threatened to prove exactly why it was appropriate that I had red hair. “It wasn’t exactly like that. Well, it was, sort of. It’s just Preston has been swooning over you since he got his first pubic hair—”

A combination of “Dad” and “Collin” erupted from our small table. My eyes widened in a mixture of horror and shock. One, that Collin would choose to discuss Preston’s pubic hair at breakfast—flashes of womb

diagrams appeared before my eyes—not only that, but two, Preston had a crush now?

I couldn't take any more. I briefly glanced at Preston who had both hands covering his face, then at my parents and Collin and Kate. All of them were in mixed states of discomfort, although from the look on Mom and Kate's faces, I couldn't imagine either my dad or Collin finding amusement in this for much longer. The waitress appeared at that moment with our food and drinks. I unceremoniously retrieved my sandwich and coffee, and made like horseshit and hit the trail.

\*\*\*

I packed my weekend bag after eating my cold sandwich. It still took the edge off and did its job, stopping me from puking so I couldn't complain. Bag in hand, I left the hotel room with my head down and managed to check out and make it all the way to the car with no dramas or harassment. It was just a short thirty-minute drive to my little house. And I couldn't wait to get there and curl up in bed with my Kindle. Then my summer vacation would truly begin. Six weeks of beach, reading, and maybe a bottle of Champagne or twelve.

*Bliss.*

I did, however, also have a new vacation mission. This was to get some distance between Preston and myself, if he refused to let this go. Although, the thought of not seeing him a few times a week made my heart pang. He was my friend, and I loved him as such. If I couldn't do distant—and to be honest, I didn't want to—I would have to do something about his single status.

I would fix him up.

When I arrived home, I dumped my bag in my miniscule laundry room just off the kitchen, jumped in the shower to cool off from the morning sun and to get the smell of greasy bacon out of my pores, and then I curled up with my latest paranormal romance. I needed complete escapism and fantasy, and a ménage à trois between three werewolves would do the trick nicely.

As I was deep into a pretty hot and heavy scene, which would result in my needing another cool shower, my mobile pinged indicating a new text. It

was from Jo. Hell, I forgot again to text her. I was taking my new Worst Best Friend in the World Award to the extremes.

**Jo: ???**

Really? That was all she gave me. She was on her honeymoon in Hawaii, for crying out loud, and she sent me three ridiculous question marks. Okay, so maybe she was busy getting down and dirty with her husband, but still, my hands clammed up with those three question marks.

**Me: So sorry I didn't say goodbye! Shouldn't you be consummating, or drinking from a coconut shell?**

She responded immediately.

**Jo: Not worried. Have done. Three times. Currently indulging. Now, WTF—last night?**

As usual, Jo sent me a cryptic half-assed message. I just assumed her random short response was in the same order of my message. At least, I hoped to God that she wasn't putting out while texting me. That would just be awkward. I'd walked in on her and Liam getting jiggy with it too many times when we were housemates. My retinas had never been the same since. I sighed as I texted her back.

**Me: Nothing. He rescued me from a sleaze. Tell Liam he needs to kick the dude's arse for me.**

**Jo: Preston's arse or the sleaze's??? I heard you groan. LOUDLY. SLUT! Again—WTF!**

Holy shit! I was now officially convinced that Jo had a built-in bullshit radar; she could sniff out my lies from thousands of kilometres away. I hung my head in humiliation. I'd groaned, loudly, and I was convinced that it had been more than once. And of course, it had been in front of the whole bloody wedding party. I couldn't even blame it on my lowered inhibitions. I had been stone-cold sober, and had allowed myself to get caught up in the moment.

**Me: It was a moment. He was doing a noble thing. It'd been a long time since I'd had a kiss. It was just a silly moment. Nothing else. No more. And NOT to be repeated. EVER!**

There was a long pause before her next text. I hoped to God that she wasn't pissed at me, but thinking about it, she'd given me that weird thumbs up as Preston had dragged my arse out of the marquee, just before I had kissed him again on the beach. I decided I'd keep the beach between just Preston and I. It was safer that way.



**Jo: So nothing happened after?**

Fuckety-fuck, I was going to go to hell for lying to my bestie.

**Me: Nope!**

**Jo: So when I saw your tongue down my brother's throat down on the beach ...?**

I'd been caught out big time. It was even worse than the time she'd caught me lying about taking the last Tim Tam from her secret stash when we were living together. She'd made me pay my penance twofold—let's just say, shaving foam, sand and a bikini that itched like a bitch—a story and a penance never to be repeated.

**Me: Erm ... it was a full moon and he had my Champagne held captive???**

**Jo: Right! So are you meeting up or some shit like that?**

**Me: Nope. Just friends.**

**Jo: :) We'll see!!!!!!**

We'll see? What the hell did that mean? I was convinced the whole world had gone mad. Perhaps this morning I'd hit my head harder than I'd thought. I'd entered the *Twilight*-freakin'-Zone.

**Me: Not going there. Now, go and make out with your 'better' half!**

**Jo: See you in a week. And I'm all over it! Liam, that is! LOL! Love your face!**

**Me: Love your ass more! <3**

I was exhausted. Between Preston, my hangover and our families' reactions, I just needed the day to be over and to start afresh. Monday would be the official start of the school holidays. Monday would be the start of my plans for relaxation. I was also determined to make things right with Preston.

## Chapter Four

### Preston

I dried myself off with my beach towel before securing my surfboard to my roof racks. It was still early, probably just past 7 am, yet the beach was filling up already, making the most of the sun before the heat really kicked in. It was Monday morning and I'd desperately needed to get out into the water to work off my pent-up frustration. I'd left Ella alone since she disappeared after breakfast the previous day. I'd given her the space she needed to get her head around our session the evening of Jo's wedding. And what a sweet-ass session it was, too! The taste of her lips still gave me a twinge. And when she'd sat on my lap and groaned into my mouth, holy shit, I thought I was going to disgrace myself.

The time for space was now over. After heading home to shower and change, I was going to head over to her place and tell her how things were going to be. And I had a week to make an impact: a week of vacation before my shifts at the department started back up, and a week without my interfering sister.

Approximately an hour later, I pulled up outside her house. I spotted her sitting on her front veranda, curled up on the bench-seat, reading. She looked toward me as I closed the door on my Falcon GT. She was a beaut of a car. Not my surfing car, that was for sure; I had a beat-up piece-of-crap specifically for sand and salt destruction.

Ella gave me a tight smile as I bound up the few steps and sat beside her on the bench-seat. I immediately leaned in and kissed her on the cheek, just like I always did. I noticed her tense when I leaned, and heard her release her breath as I kissed her cheek.

This did not make me happy. It was clear that the space I'd given her had convinced her that a relationship between us wouldn't work.

“So, what’s our plans for the day?”

Her smile became more genuine and she removed her feet from the bench, putting them on the ground. “Coffee and breakfast would be a good start.”

I stood, held her hands and pulled her up. “Sounds like a plan.” I held on to her hands and stroked the backs of them with my thumbs. She was beautiful. Her red hair was swept up in a messy ponytail, and her eyes shone brightly in the morning sun. She looked down at our hands before pulling away.

When she stepped toward her front door, she called over her shoulder, “Let me just grab my keys and wallet.” A few moments later, I held the car door open for her and smiled when she quirked her brow at my gesture. She shook her head in irritation, but got in without a word. What; being a gentleman’s not okay now? So what if I’d never opened a car door for her before? I’d always wanted to, but now my feelings were finally out in the open. I’d be damned if I kept playing the part of Jo’s baby brother.

At the coffee shop, I ordered our coffees and a muffin each and we made our way to the seafront. We sat down on the grass under a shady tree, and gazed out at the rolling waves. She was avoiding looking at me and touching me. We usually had easy, carefree banter flowing between the two of us. I was usually making an ass out of myself to make her laugh, and she was usually chastising me, while hitting me affectionately on the arm. The significance being we talked, touched, and laughed, and we were always brutally honest. With the obvious exception of me never telling her that I’d been in love with her since I was fifteen years old. Yes, just a slight withholding of the truth on my part.

I was being a chicken shit. I needed to get my head out of my arse and finally stop fucking around. I moved closer to her side and turned to look at her. There was no hiding any more. She’d just finished her muffin and was taking a small sip of her coffee when her hand froze mid-air. Her eyes widened. I assumed in alarm, but who the hell knew what was going on in her stubborn head? I took the coffee cup from her hand and rested it on the grass next to mine. I leaned in toward her slowly. Her eyes remained steady on mine. Just as I was so close I could feel her warm erratic breath on my face, her hand landed on my chest.

“What are you doing?” she whispered.

Maintaining eye contact, I smiled, reached out, held the back of her head and pulled her closer still. “What I should have done ten years ago.”

My mouth slammed against hers. Ten years of pent-up lust and pining over her finally took its toll. All I could think about was needing her sexy lips on mine, and having her firm body pressed as close as possible. It took just a few moments for her to respond with equal passion.

This was it. I finally had Ella sighing and groaning into my mouth. My tongue caressed hers as her hand touched my face and she stroked my cheek. I could spend the rest of my life kissing her lips and worshipping her body. I just needed the chance.

Too soon for my liking, her kissing eased and she pulled away, her fingers still lingering on my cheek. I took the moment to hold on to her hand before I moved it and kissed her palm. “Totally worth the wait, babe.” I kissed her palm again and lowered her hand, which was still firmly in mine.

She remained staring at me, with her eyebrows raised and her eyes wide. I considered sweeping her up in my arms and diving into the sea with her, especially after a full minute of remaining frozen. I knew she’d need time to process, but shit, she was beginning to freak me the fuck out.

“Babe, say something.”

She seemed to shake out of the haze surrounding her. She squared her shoulders—never a good sign—and a look of resolve spread over her face. “I need to get you a girlfriend,” she said with absolute seriousness.

I looked at her in confusion, and wondered what the hell she was thinking.

She nodded, hand still in mine. “Yep, I have a friend from work. She’s your age. You’ll like her. I’ll give her—”

“I don’t think so. You’re not calling anyone, and like shit you are fixing me up.” I was momentarily surprised at the venom in my voice. But I was there, putting myself on the line and about to pour my heart out to her, while her reaction was talking shit to me about setting me up with some work colleague. “Never gonna happen, El. The only thing that’s happening here, is you and me are gonna spend the day together. I’m taking you out on a real date tonight, and it’ll end with me kissing those sweet lips of yours. That’s how today is gonna play out. Got it?”

“No.” She shook her head. “This,” she indicated her free hand between the two of us, “can never happen. It’s freaking me out. You’re Jo’s baby

brother. You're annoying, and a bit of a prick at times, and you're my friend." She released her hand from mine and wiped her hands over her face. "This can never happen. Ever." She made to rise, but I held her knees and kept her firmly planted to the ground.

I knew there was no reasoning with her at that moment. She was in flee-mode. Part of me understood what she was saying, but now that it was out there, that I'd made my stupid-ass feelings clear, there was no way I could sit on them. I'd have to grind her down. Annoyed wouldn't even begin to cover how pissed off she'd be with me after I wore her down. I'd be in her space until she finally realised that we were worth a shot. We could be so fucking good together. Her running scared was not a good enough reason not to risk it. "I may be Jo's brother, but in case you hadn't noticed, I'm no baby. If I hear shit about me being a couple of lousy years younger than you, I'll kiss the argument off your honey lips." Her eyes widened at the threat.

"You wouldn't—"

My raised eyebrows and no-shit expression cut her sentence off. It was a tried and tested reaction. "Try me. Any time, El. I'm more than happy to prove my point. One mention of my age and that kiss is gonna happen."

I saw her gulp. Good. That gave her what I imagined was a wicked visual. I just hoped I wouldn't have to wait too long before she mentioned my younger age. "Jo's a grown-up and she knows how I feel about you. She's always known." I watched the frown form on her face and inwardly laughed. Jo was going to get such a heap of shit from El when she got back from her honeymoon. I continued, "I know I've had moments of being a prick—no doubt I will continue to do so—but I'll be an adorable one." My chest swelled when I managed to get a smile from her. "We are friends. We know so much about one another, and that's why I know we'd be so fucking good together, El. I know you felt something on Saturday and just now. I didn't imagine that, so stop fooling yourself."

She took a deep breath before she spoke. "Just take me home. Please. I need to think. Take me home, Preston."

My face dropped. Think? She was going to go home and talk herself out of any possible us. *Shit.*

"I'll take you home, but we are going out tonight. Just a drink; no pressure."

A look passed over her eyes, one that I couldn't quite determine. She then looked resolved, her beautiful eyes squinting slightly. "Fine. But I'll meet you there. We'll meet at The Royal at 8pm."

I couldn't help the goofy grin from appearing on my face. I nodded a little too enthusiastically. I really needed to work on the art of cool. At the moment, I was grinning and nodding like a dog who'd just been scratched. "Okay," I smiled, a bit more subdued than the dick grin on my face a few moments earlier.

We stood up and made our way to the car. I kept close enough to brush against her arm, but didn't risk holding her hand. When I dropped her off, she turned and gave me a quick peck on my cheek. I smiled widely before I eased away, wondering what the hell I would do with the rest of my day. 8pm was a hell of a long time away.

# Chapter Five

## Ella

I knew he was going to be pissed at me, but there was no going back now. I'd called and asked Zoe to meet me at the Royal at 8pm. I hadn't told her the reason, exactly. I didn't want to embarrass her if things didn't work out, but I did want to prove to Preston, and maybe even a little to myself, that he'd be better off with someone else.

Zoe was as beautiful as she was kind and funny. She was a damn sight hotter than me. I had no issues with recognising the beauty in others, especially when they were beautiful on the inside too. Zoe was twenty-five and a sports teacher. She'd been in a relationship with a guy who ended up being a douche, but I knew that that relationship had ended six months ago. Amazingly, she was still single. I knew Preston would be attracted to her; I'd seen the array of women he'd dated in the past, and Zoe was ten-fold more beautiful than all of them, plus she had the smarts.

I ignored my slightly heavy heart when I thought about meeting for drinks thirty minutes later, and put it down to preparing myself for Preston being angry with me. It had nothing at all to do with how good his lips had felt against mine, and how readily my body had reacted to his sculpted muscles. I tried my hardest not to replay his hand on my neck, my hand on his face and his tongue stroking mine. It was hot. I finally had to admit it to myself. It had been months since I'd had a kiss, and to be honest, I couldn't remember a kiss that had affected me quite as much in my life, even with Fuckwit.

The memory of Fuckwit and his betrayal forced its ugly head into my thoughts. He'd really done a number on me. I discovered, not long after our non-wedding day, he'd been sleeping with his ex for a year prior to our

wedding. It was another blow to my already fragile state. While it wasn't the best experience of my life, it was certainly my luckiest.

The thoughts of my past betrayal resolved my heart and my head. I couldn't let myself be broken again. A part of me honestly wished I could move past the hurt, but the truth of it was I was too chicken shit. I didn't know if my heart could handle another break. It was simply easier to build a wall of ice around it, even though Preston, and my existing feelings for him, threatened to hack away at it with his sexy and caring pickaxe.

I finished applying my mascara and rubbed lip gloss over my lips. I wasn't dressed up, and deliberately so. I was wearing my cute 'Book Nerd' tee and a pair of denim short-shorts, teamed with my Havaianas. I looked at the time on my watch; it was time to leave.

I arrived at The Royal just a little before 8pm. I immediately spotted Preston sporting a pair of dark-blue jeans and a muscle-hugging tee. At the same time that I checked him out and entered the bar, he immediately looked in my direction. His eyes met mine and a look of relief flickered across his face. I gulped. He was going to be so mad at me. I knew this. I'd resolved myself to the fact, but once he met Zoe and got over his crush, he'd be thanking me. I knew I was full of shit. Yet still, I had to try.

He stood up as I stepped closer to his table. He leaned in and kissed me on the cheek before getting me settled. He then turned and headed to the bar going to order me a bottle of Corona. Of course, he didn't need to ask. He knew me far too well for that. Sitting down, I glanced around the room on the lookout for Zoe. It was still before 8pm, so I wasn't expecting her quite yet. I looked up at Preston, who was ordering my drink. His jeans fit his backside beautifully. I mentally shook myself. I was checking out his backside. I'd never done that. *Ever!* Obviously, I'd always known he was hot. I wasn't blind, but I'd never considered his appeal to me. Shit. I needed Zoe here, stat.

He waited for the bartender to fetch my Corona, at which point a young blonde in her early twenties sidled up to him. Her eyes raked over him. I sat back, a little in disbelief and fascinated. It was like watching a lioness on the prowl. The young woman then ridiculously fake-stumbled and banged into him, spilling a dribble of her drink on the bar. She was immediately apologetic. I watched on as she touched his arm and moved even closer to him.



“Stupid, idiot,” I mumbled. I wondered whether he’d fall for it. She certainly looked like the type of woman he usually had fawning all over him. When she then flicked her long golden locks over her shoulder, I scrunched the beer mat I hadn’t realised I was holding in my hand. She really needed to back the shit off. My eyes narrowed, burning a hole into her skinny ass. I was hoping for spontaneous combustion.

Preston turned and gestured in my direction. I didn’t school my daggers quickly enough. This was obvious by his intelligent eyes taking me in, and then his puffed-out chest and huge grin. He was virtually preening his feathers like a damn peacock. *Arsehole*. I heard him say the words “girlfriend,” and “not interested”. My heart constricted. *Take that, bitch!* I meant, no, not girlfriend, just friend. Once again, I was full of shit, and the voice in my head was getting smaller by the minute.

Preston settled my drink in front of me and kissed me on the top of my head. “Here you go, babe. You look like you need it.”

I huffed, muttered thanks, and took a large pull on my drink. Its cold, fresh tang flowed down my throat beautifully. I hadn’t realised how much I had needed to take the edge off. Setting the bottle down, I noticed Preston staring at me. Like, really staring. “What?”

I saw his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed back a gulp. He cleared his throat with a small cough and shifted uncomfortably in his seat. My eyes widened in disbelief. I was almost tempted to duck under the table to see if my suspicions were correct. He had a hard-on. His movements and the look on his strained face left no room for doubt. Was that from simply watching me drink from a bottle? My eyes mirrored his and I squeezed my legs together tightly. *No sexy thoughts. No sexy thoughts*, I chanted in my head.

He finally found his voice. “El, fuck, you’re so damn hot, especially when you pulled deeply from that bottle.”

I had been in the process of taking another mouthful of Corona when he spoke. I gulped in beer when I should have swallowed air. I coughed and spat the beer out. I made a choking, spluttering sound with one hand at my throat, the other across my mouth. My mouthful of beer was now sprayed all over the table, and all over Preston. Regaining my breath, I watched as a trickle of amber liquid slid down his forehead, down his nose until it finally dripped on to his lap.

“Holy crap,” I gasped, trying to control my air intake. “I’m so sorry, Preston.” I grabbed hold of my bag and pulled out a small handbag-sized pack of tissues. “Here. Take one.” I was mortified, yet I couldn’t help the burst of hysteria that bubbled in my chest. I couldn’t contain it or hold it back a second longer. A high-pitched laugh rocked my whole body. Tears streamed down my face. The tension and stress of the last few days had finally tipped me over the edge. The laughter was just what I needed. What we both needed, as Preston joined in and soon had a tear falling from his eye.

We laughed hysterically, unable to speak. Every time one of us tried, we’d simply double over again. I was really squeezing my legs together now. I seriously thought I was going to pee myself. I was mildly aware of people’s amused expressions as they watched on, entertained by our hysterics. Preston reached out to me and kissed me tenderly on my lips. Our laughter stilled. He pulled back, still close enough that I could feel his warm breath, and gave me a panty dropping smile. His eyes were bright with amusement and something so much deeper that a tingle shot through my entire system. I finally understood what people had been talking about all these years. That feeling that you feel travel from your head to your toes. That tingling sensation that makes you want to give a big smile and do anything within your power to make the other person match your smile in return. Not even with Fuckwit had I felt that.

He remained still, just a few short inches from my face. His eyes searched mine, and then looked at my mouth before making eye contact once again. I released a shaky breath, only just realising that I’d been holding it. I then reacted. It was almost as though my body was on autopilot. There was no grand thought-processing, or gesture, or even an amazing epiphany. My head moved forward of its own volition, as if there was a hot, sizzling magnetic pull between us. My mouth touched his tentatively, so unlike our previous kisses. His lips were smooth against mine. My lips took control and continued to gently press and nibble against his. My tongue slipped out and lightly licked his lower lip, before it slowly entered his mouth and touched his. As soon as our tongues met, our mouths pressed down harder, and our kisses became more frantic. After what I assumed was just a few more seconds, our mouths parted, with just a few more light kisses between us. With our heads close, Preston gave me a small smile, one that warmed my heart. He was so bloody hot.

“So ... erm ... El?” Zoe’s voice was like a bucket of cold water over me. *Shit, Zoe. I forgot about Zoe.* This was definitely not good.

Forcing a smile on my face, I looked away from Preston, who now had a small frown set between his eyebrows. “Hi Zoe, fancy seeing you here,” I rushed out, silently talking to her with my wide eyes, hoping to God that she understood my silent, freaked-out version of facial expression.

She raised her eyebrow quizzically and remained standing next to our table. “Er, okay. Yes, fancy. I was just meeting someone here, but apparently I’ve been stood-up.”

I smile-grimaced at her. My heart pounded in my chest. I had no freakin’ idea what to do. Here was Zoe, looking her usual self, potentially an ideal match for Preston, yet I’d just kissed him. *Me.* I’d initiated it this time. I had no idea what I wanted.

I took a sneaky look at Preston from the corner of my eye, half-expecting him to be drooling over Zoe. Hell, I was almost drooling. She was smoking hot, but instead, his eyes were fixed firmly on my face, trying to work out what exactly I was up to. I gave him a quick smile and looked back at Zoe.

Could I bear to see them together? Preston with anyone? Everything was so crazy confusing. Just four days ago, Preston was my friend and my bestie’s little bro, but now ... *shit*. Now, I officially fancied the ass off him and desperately wanted to explore us. *Geez, I just thought ‘us’.* *Cue freak out, in three, two, one ...* But it never happened. There was no panic. No screaming at the top of lungs and running away in horror at the thought of another man potentially breaking my heart. He was my friend, so of course I trusted him, but hell, trusting him with my heart should be making me break out the brown paper bag. Instead, a little flicker of something else sparked in my heart, something akin to hope. It felt warm and tingly, and right.

Deciding a course of action was required to get me out of the potential mess before me. I didn’t think Preston would be too impressed knowing I’d tried to set him up, so I used my stealth-like silent facial code and forcefully and repeatedly moved my eyes to the right, in between pointed looks. Zoe’s eyes tightened for a moment; she was clearly wondering if she needed to call for medical help. Finally, the light bulb flickered on and her mouth formed a large *O*. “Okay—”

“Hi, I’m Preston. And you are?” Preston stood and held out his hand to Zoe, effectively cutting her off.

She looked at me briefly before taking Preston’s hand. “I’m Zoe. I work with El.”

I looked up at Preston. A smile formed on his face, a sexy one—I’d started to differentiate between them, and this one was a sexy panty-melter of a smile. “Please, pull up a chair and sit. Maybe your *friend*,” he looked pointedly at me at that point, “will show up soon.” He sat back down and indicated the empty chair at the next table.

“No, no. I don’t want to interrupt. It’s clear you were ... busy doing what you were doing.”

I felt Preston’s eyes on me, so I turned and looked at him, not quite able to hide the sheepish look on my face. I was totally busted. “It’s fine, isn’t it, El? We weren’t doing anything important.” His raised his eyebrows at me, daring me to challenge him. I clamped my mouth shut. Stubborn was my middle name.

I tightened my eyes and returned his stare. “Sure is, Zoe. Feel free.”

The air around us crackled with energy and tension. I was convinced that I may just combust. I knew what he was playing at. He was proving a goddamn point. But hell if his reaction and challenge wasn’t turning me on.

“Erm, no, it’s okay. I think I may just leave.” Poor Zoe. I looked at her and gave her an apologetic smile. She was such a wonderful colleague. I had no idea why we didn’t spend much time together outside of work. In school, she was my sanity, and I was pretty convinced she would be an equally good friend outside of work too. *Note to self: Get your head out of your ass and start noticing people.*

Giving a genuine smile, Zoe winked and said goodbye.

I remained watching Zoe as she left the bar, knowing that Preston’s eyes were firmly planted on me. Turning around slowly to face him, I gave him a nervous smile. “So, that was Zoe. Zoe’s awesome.”

“Apparently so.” His eyes never wavered. “Was that your plan?”

I went to speak, but his face, which looked all sorts of pissed-the-hell-off, stopped me.

“Did you honestly think that I was going to be tempted by a pretty face?” His voice lowered as he continued, “For over ten fucking years all I’ve ever thought of or dreamed about was you.”

Again, I opened my mouth to speak, about to say something about the countless women I'd seen draped over his arm. I didn't have chance as he stood, pulled me out of my chair and stormed to the exit, dragging me behind him.

Once outside, the summer evening heat caressed my skin, a contrast to the air-conditioned bar. He didn't say anything as he continued to pull me down the street, my hand firmly in his. I spotted his car just a few vehicles ahead. When we stopped next to it, he pushed me against it, his groin pushed firmly against mine. *Holy shit, I'm going to explode.* He lowered his mouth to mine in a possessive kiss. A kiss that took my breath away—another first for me—and left me clinging to his shoulders.

Just as abruptly as the kiss had started, it stopped. He pulled me away from the passenger's door, opened it and told me to get in. His face was filled with passion, a look that I knew not to argue with. To hell with my car! I quickly sat in the passenger's seat, Preston closing the door behind me.

His house was just a short five-minute drive away. Knowing the route well, I knew that was where we were heading. He didn't say a word and I was too chicken shit to speak. I gulped when I saw his hands grip the steering wheel, his forearm muscles rippling with the tension. I wanted to lick them. I internally groaned at the stray thoughts that kept encroaching my mind. I had a feeling that tonight was going to be one hell of an evening. Somewhere deep inside me I knew I should be terrified, yet I forced the reality of my feelings to the surface, something I hadn't done in a long time. I was excited as hell, and if the tingles in my stomach and the dampness between my thighs was anything to go by, I was ready.

# Chapter Six

## Preston

Un-fucking-believable! She had tried to set me up on a date. When I overheard Zoe's conversation with El, and noticed El's less-than-discreet gestures, the knowledge had hit me hard. On one level I was furious that she could think that a pretty face and a brush-off would be enough for me to forget my feelings I'd held strong over the past ten years. On another, I took the fact that she'd set up the meet and then quickly tried to get Zoe to leave as a good sign. A sign that she was finally realising that I was serious, and that we were worth the risk.

As I dragged her ass out of the bar, into the car and on the journey to my house, all I could think about was my need to take her. I needed her naked flesh against mine. The heat of her wrapped around my limbs. It took all my willpower not to drag her into the toilets and take her in the cubicle, and even more not to pull over on the side of road. My stiffy was raging. I knew, however, that I couldn't do it. Don't get me wrong; I could do confined spaces and dirty sex, but our first time needed to be in my bed.

Pulling into my driveway, I switched off the engine, unbuckled both our seatbelts and turned to face her. She faced me. Her eyes were filled with an intense and raw heat, while she bit lightly on her bottom lip, indicating her anxiety. I knew when a woman was hot for me, and her eyes, as they kept flitting between my eyes and lips, told me all that I needed to know. I reached forward and planted my lips on hers. What started off gently, soon became hard as she pressed her lips firmly against mine. My hands slipped down to her breasts. I gently caressed one, allowing my thumb to brush over her nipple, eliciting a guttural groan from her. I couldn't take it anymore. I needed to be inside her; we needed to get to my bed.

I pulled away and swiftly exited the car and virtually sprinted around to the passenger's side—the time for playing games and playing it cool was long gone. I opened the door and pulled her out. My hands clasped onto her backside and pulled her tightly against my groin as I leaned down, kissed her neck and whispered, “I need you, baby. I need us in the house, now.”

She sighed lightly, a sound that made me pulsate. She nodded, giving her approval. I kissed her briefly on the lips and walked quickly up my porch steps, unlocked my front door and made my way directly to my bedroom. Once inside, I spun around and pulled her into my arms once again, no longer holding back. While kissing, probing and caressing, I somehow managed to remove her sexy-as-hell jeans, and the rest of our clothes. El was now standing naked in front of me, something I had been fantasizing about and jacking off to for the last ten years.

The swell of her breasts was perfect. Her beautiful, slightly rounded stomach had me salivating. I needed to kiss and taste every damn inch of her. After roaming her body thoroughly, my eyes finally rested on her face. Shit, she was beautiful and ... quiet. Seriously, freaky-ass quiet. She'd yet to say a damn word since leaving the bar. This, the woman, who liked the sound of her own voice more than she liked chocolate.

“Babe, you okay?” Using the pad of my thumb, I brushed over her cheekbone.

A small, nervous smile appeared on her face. “Yeah. I'm just, you know, shittin' it a bit. I mean, this is you. Preston, Jo's baby—”

My mouth slammed down on hers as I heard the word “baby” pass her lips. I pulled her away after a few seconds.

Panting, she said, “What—”

“Didn't I warn you about saying anything related to my age?” I raised my right eyebrow at her in jest.

She formed a sweet *O* with her lips before recovering. “Erm ... so yes, it's you. You're my friend, Preston, and our families ... shit! This could end up so freakin' bad. What if—”

“No,” I interrupted, loving the sight of her pissed-off face as I cut her off again. “We're not doing this. I will not allow you to back out of what could be amazing.” I kissed her briefly. “Now, get your sweet arse on the bed.” I smirked in challenge.

She looked from me to the bed and smiled. She defiantly crossed her arms and said, “Is that right?”

I picked her up and threw her on my bed. A scream left her lips and she landed, laughing. She looked toward me and the mirth died from her lips. *That's right. No more playing, baby.* She gulped as she raked her eyes over my body. I stalked toward her, climbed on the bed and reached out to touch her legs. I stroked, kissed, nibbled and caressed my way up her thighs and over her stomach until I landed at her nipples. I took an erect bud in my mouth and proceeded to make love to them with the heat of my mouth. She responded immediately. I had no idea how long I could last, but I knew that if her moans and gentle begging continued, I'd end up embarrassing myself before I got inside her.

My hand reached down to her mound. I stroked gently and reached her heat. She was on fire, and so slick that I groaned around her breast. I entered her swiftly with two fingers and felt her clamp around me. She pushed against my hand in barely restrained movements.

It was time. I needed to cement our joining once and for all. I knew once we had sex, there'd be no going back. I would never want to be inside anyone else ever again. "I've wanted you for so long, El. So fucking long," I said as I trailed my way up to her mouth. Removing my fingers from her heat caused a soft whimper from her mouth.

She smiled as I kissed her. "I want you too," she finally said as we pulled apart. I reached over to my bedside table and removed a condom. A few moments later, I was sheathed and gently probing her entrance.

I looked into her eyes as I entered her, not wanting to miss a single moment, a single expression. I entered her fully, up to the hilt, and groaned deeply as I slammed my mouth against hers. It was too good, too much. I was going to explode at any minute. I stilled, allowing her to adjust, but realised that it was unnecessary; she was ready. So ready that she moved her hips against mine. We continued to make love—a term that would have previously terrified me and had me slamming my head against a brick wall, but hell, that is what this was—until sweat covered our bodies, making us slick. I pushed harder against her, helping her release within a short few moments. And not a moment too soon, she unravelled around me.

Her muscles throbbed just a few seconds before I called out her name in ecstasy.

I was spent. I looked at El's half-open eyes and smiled down at her, kissing her forehead, her nose, her cheeks, before my mouth sought out hers. She kissed me back immediately, her tongue stroking my tongue. I



chuckled and pulled away from her. I swiftly disposed of the condom and then lay next to her warm body in the bed, pulling the light cotton sheet over us.

“Best sex ever.”

I laughed, completely surprised by her admission. “It sure was, babe.” I kissed her head and pulled her body to mine so that we were spooning, her naked back flush with my chest. “It’s everything I ever dreamed it would be, and more, if that’s possible.”

She shook her head in wonder. “Holy hell!”

“What is it?”

“We could have been doing this all this time, all these years. Shit.”

I sighed lightly. “I know. It’s killed me.” I frowned when I thought of Fuckwit and the other boyfriends she’d had over the years.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. She must have felt my body tense.

“Nothing. It’s fine. It doesn’t matter now. We’re here. You’re in my arms, in my bed,” I ground my already hardening penis against her backside, making her laugh. “It’s how it was always meant to be.”

She turned in my arms and watched me carefully as she spoke. “So, what now?”

I smiled down at her, hoping my voice and face would make it clear how honest I was being with her. “Now, we have fun. We make love. We tell our family.” She grimaced slightly at that, but I continued, “You learn to trust me.” She made to speak, but I put my finger on her lips. “I mean really trust. I know you trust me as your friend, but I need you to trust me with your heart.” My words had her smiling and her eyes glistening. I kissed her lightly on the lips. “Then, I plan for us to spend the rest of our lives together, having you in my bed whenever I want and having fun making babies.” I expected to blanch as my words formed. Me, not her. While I’d always loved her, doted on her, I’d never considered having a family. I was too young for shit like that, but hell, with El now in my arms, all I could think about was fucking her bare and hoping to hell to have some of my swimmers take, and have our baby growing in her beautiful stomach.

When I had been in hospital recovering from the accident a few years ago, it was Ella who had helped me through it. She hadn’t known this at the time; I didn’t think she even knew it now, but her daily visits and her compassion had stopped me from spiralling into despair. While others had looked at me with pity, she had looked at me with understanding. I’d loved

her before that, but damn, if her support and lack of judgment hadn't made me love her more.

I almost missed the tear trickling from her eye landing on the pillow. "Hey, what's wrong? Too much? You're freaking out, huh? I wasn't necessarily meaning babies now or anything, it's just ..." Somebody shut me the hell up. I was blabbering nonsense and annoying myself, let alone her. "Well, just think about it. I mean, don't you want to—"

"Preston." She laughed. "It's fine. Stop talking crap. It's just, you're beautiful—"

I scoffed. "I think you'll find the term is manly, or handsome, or I have rugged good—"

She smiled and cut me off. "Yes, all of those things." She rolled her eyes. "But what you said, about our future—I like the sound of it. Don't get me wrong; I feel anxious, crazy anxious. My heart is beating double-time at the possibility and at the thought of being hurt again." I made to speak, but she prevented me with a shaking of her head. "I know you would never intend to hurt me, but you've had this image of me, this idea of me in your head for the last ten years, and the reality may be vastly different. Sometimes shit happens and life can be a bastard. I'm scared of that crap. I don't know if I can fight or survive life's shit again."

I understood what she meant. I honestly did. But life didn't have to be that complicated, Women were always second and third guessing. Bollocks to that. "Sometimes, when life threatens perfect, it's time to step up and kick life in the balls."

Her laughter broke the tension from her face and transformed her into something beautiful. "In the balls, huh? So we're in agreement that life is a man, hence all the shit that it throws at us."

I nodded in agreement. "Yep. The asshole called life can kiss my arse. If not, I'll beat the crap outta him. This could be perfect, El. Us."

"Perfect?" I saw longing in her eyes and heard it in her voice.

I smiled back. "Perfect for sure. That doesn't mean I won't irritate the shit out of you, 'cause apparently, I do that sometimes," I mocked. "But what it does mean is that your heart is safe with me. I loved you as a friend before I started getting raging stiffies for you."

"Hey!" She punched my arm and laughed. She was so damn easy, but damn if I wasn't constantly stiff for her.

“And that friendship will always be at the centre of us. Okay?”

She nodded her head in agreement, and snuggled closer to my chest. Her breathing steadied out. I couldn't believe it. After ten years of praying for a night with El, it was finally real. I'd meant what I'd said, and I didn't give a shit at how pussy-whipped it made me sound. There's nothing in the world that I wanted more than to make her happy. And I was determined that I would do just that.

# Chapter Seven

## Ella

I woke up with a delicious feeling of sore muscles. The memory of the night's sweet and heavy kisses, Preston's heavenly caresses and him planted firmly between my thighs a total of three times, brought a smile to my face.

Every touch, every word had been perfect. We'd talked into the early hours, in between getting hot and heavy, and didn't succumb to sleep until after 3am. I turned towards his bedside clock. It was 10am. Thank goodness for holidays! Preston's movement and hand stroking small circles on my stomach made me turn my head to look at him. He smiled at me and kissed me tenderly on my shoulder. "Morning, beautiful."

I couldn't hold back the goofy grin that formed, nor did I want to. "Morning," I stretched and yawned. "Sorry." I laughed, clamping my hand over my mouth.

"No sorry needed. I love seeing you stretched out. You look hot." He pressed his groin against my leg so that I truly understood exactly how hot he thought I was. A delightful shiver travelled through my body at his touch.

I giggled. Yes, actually giggled. A grown, educated woman of twenty-eight years old giggled at the fine specimen of a man next to me. My giggle was quickly followed by a groan at my ridiculous response. I was acting like a seventeen-year-old.

"What?" Preston asked.

I peeked a look at him. "Just groaning at my giggling. Pathetic really." I'd always been blatantly honest in my friendship with Preston. I didn't want that to change. Honesty, no matter how tricky it could be, was by far the best.

A throaty laugh erupted out of his chest. “Only you would think a giggle is pathetic. It’s cute.” My raised eyebrow set in challenge did nothing to prevent him from continuing. “What? Don’t look at me like that. Cute is good. Sexy, even. Giggling gives me a stiffy.” His face was set in a broad shit-eating smile.

“Nice! Seriously. You talking about your erection as a *stiffy* is what? Meant to get me all hot and horny for you?” I said with a stoic face.

He laughed again. “It doesn’t matter the word, babe. The fact remains you’re beautiful and I’ll always be hard and ready for you.”

As hard as I tried, I couldn’t keep a straight face. Laughter burst out of my lungs.

“Come on. I’m starving and really need a shower.” I laughed when his eyes lit up at the possibility of a shower together. “You’re insatiable. You go and sort out breakfast while I shower. *Alone*. Please.” I kissed him lightly on his gorgeous lips, bounced out of bed and headed to the en suite.

Turning on the shower taps, I heard him grumbling and huffing around the bedroom before the echo of his feet padding away reached me. I stood under the steaming shower, trying my hardest to absorb the events of the past three days. Everything had spiralled so quickly, moved so fast that I didn’t think my feet had quite hit the ground yet. Truth be told, my head and my emotions were in a tailspin—part of me was still slightly freaked out that I’d seen Preston’s penis, let alone the fact that we’d had sex, not just once, but three times. Yet as well as being freaked, I also felt good and a little fuzzy. Good fuzzy. It had been a long time since I’d felt warmth in my stomach that wasn’t from a good hot and spicy soup. The warmth that had settled in the pit of my stomach was definitely a good kind of heat. One that was making me grin, and laugh, and think constantly about Preston’s cute butt muscles.

So far, I’d managed to push the freaked reaction away. I didn’t want to run and hide any more. I believed Preston, and I believed in his feelings for me. Even the thought of our family and friends knowing about our relationship—*EEK*—didn’t have me cowering in self-denial like it had just two days ago. I marvelled at how feelings could do a one-eighty in such a short amount of time. The level-headed, somewhat bitter, scared-half-to-death woman in me blanched a little at that thought. Surely, a change in emotions was fickle? How could there ever be any chance of a future with emotions that could change like the wind?

*Stop it!* I chided myself. I loved Preston. He was my friend. I wasn't crazy enough to contemplate the 'in love' part; hell to the no was I anywhere near navigating that whirlwind of emotions. I thought back to what Preston had said about trust. He knew me so bloody well. I gave an unladylike scoff in the shower while working the shampoo through my hair. Perhaps a little too well, if that were possible. On the flipside, though, I convinced myself he knew all the crap, all the skeletons, all of the stories that I would have preferred were long forgotten.

So, he knew it all. The good, the bad and the downright ugly, yet he still wanted me. I gave a little wriggly, albeit ridiculous, victory dance in the shower. I would deal with my trust issues and make this work.

My shimmying motion was interrupted by a burst of unrestrained laughter. I froze and turned. Preston was holding his stomach, once again laughing at my expense. I gave him the evil eye and then shrugged. "Like what you see?" Bloody arse thought he was funny. I'd show him.

His face straightened slightly, only small waves of laughter rippling out of him.

I squirted shower gel in my hands and proceeded to wash myself, taking my time, using circular motions and working from my breasts to my groin. I'd seen this on a dodgy porno once that Jo and I had checked out when we were eighteen. We'd done so out of fascination—honest—and watched on with equal amounts of horror, embarrassment and curiosity. Her mum walking into the den and catching us was the most humiliating part though. Just another example of Preston knowing all of my skeletons; he'd been following his mum at the time. A sixteen-year-old stumbling upon his big sister, and her apparently, 'hot friend' watching two dodgy 80s throwbacks going at it doggy-style, no doubt changed his perception of me. *Come to think of it, I wonder if that was when his crush on me had started.* I would definitely be finding out.

My hands slipped over my breasts and nipples, and I gave an exaggerated groan. "Ahhh ... mmm ... I need ... I need ..." I pitched my voice higher with every word. I looked at Preston then. His face was a mask of excitement and surprise. "Preston," I cried. He took a step forward and removed his shirt. I licked my lips, in what I hoped was seductive, rather than me looking like I had unwanted food on my face. "Preston ... I need ..." I gasped, "my towel." I stood up straight, switched off the water and held my hand out to him. "Thanks, Preston." I smiled innocently.

His eyes widened before narrowing slightly. “What the hell ...?” He adjusted his pants. “Shit, El.” His mouth was gaping before he looked around in wonder.

“The towel please, Preston.”

He harrumphed. “I should make you get your own, pulling that stunt. You trying to kill me, woman?” He handed me the towel without releasing it. He stood just a few centimetres away from me. “I have a raging—”

I covered his mouth with my hand. “Do not say that word.” He smiled beneath my hand. “I mean it, Preston.” I removed my hand, side-stepped him and dried myself off. While drying, I smiled at my ease and comfort around him. He'd worshipped my body so thoroughly the previous night, and this morning there wasn't an inch of me that he hadn't seen, touched or tasted. Because of that, there was no chance of feeling anything but comfortable in front of this man. A heat of desire flashed across my skin at the memory of his mouth, and I shivered.

“Come on. Get dry and let's get breakfast. I've made your favourite.”

I looked at him and smiled, picking up my pace. French toast and Canadian syrup were calling me—yet another reason why it could be so great having Preston as more than my friend. He could make one hell of a breakfast.

\*\*\*

After a day of failed surf attempts—on my part not his—I was exhausted. Just a few years of not enjoying the surf, and I felt like a novice all over again. I used to have fairly decent skills in my day. I rolled my eyes at the thought. Any sentence that started or ended with *in my day* was a serious sign that I needed to knock back a few beers and get with the program. I was just twenty-eight, at my prime, yet, today, while I'd had fun, I'd felt old, unfit and bloody shattered. Of course, Preston had no issues. A dedicated surfer, he could always be found in his free time down at the beach, searching for waves. And damn, if he didn't look mighty fine doing it. *Surfing that is ... not searching.*

At the beach, I'd recognised many familiar faces; his surf buddies, and a couple of his work mates, too. Of course, there were several young, and unfortunately hot, women within the group. I'd immediately felt self-conscious before I'd proceeded to mentally bitch-slap myself. I refused to allow myself to feel intimidated by twenty-two-year-old airhead girls. I couldn't even dignify calling them women when I thought about it. The airhead description soon became apparent when all they did was gush, and preen, and attempt to drape themselves all over Preston.

There was a moment when my blood may have boiled. I felt pissed off at one point, and rightly so. Not just because of my trust issues with men and infidelity, but two stupid bitches kept sidling up to Preston, stroking his chest and attempting to whisper in his ear. Fortunately, it didn't get to the point of bitch smack-down. Preston, without even looking in my direction, had immediately dismissed them. Initially, this was with no explanation, until the stupid-ass pouting started. *Imagine those ridiculous duck-face selfies you see of vaguely attractive women, trying to look sexy and seductive, but really all you want to do is scrub the heavy makeup off their faces, smack them around the head and tell them to get a grip. Well, they looked like that. Hello? Who wears makeup to the beach, for Christ's sake!* It was with the pouting that I overheard Preston say he was "taken" and that he "wasn't interested" and was definitely "not available".

When I heard this, a stupid-arse smile appeared on my salty face, but no sooner had it appeared than the doubts began to kick in. *Again.* After our hot and sweaty morning together and my liberated, "Hell yes, this could happen" moment post-shower, I'd been plagued with crappy doubts throughout the day. On one hand, some were valid and still lurking, with the trust factor being the main issue; that, in addition to potentially ruining our friendship, as well as my friendship with Jo. Yet there were other doubts I had, even though I knew deep down I was being ridiculous. My being older than him was a concern for one. But it wasn't really an issue; I knew this, but it still plagued me. That was the point. I couldn't help my stupid brain, which constantly over-thought everything. After years of protecting myself—my heart especially—my brain was pushing me into protect-your-heart warfare. This consisted of crazy self-doubt about everything and



nothing, which pissed me off something rotten, as I was not *that* woman. I was fiercely independent, and a ball breaker. *True story: It had involved Jo, a pool ball, and a stupid git who thought he could grope my arse.*

I took one last look in the mirror and forced a smile on my face. I could and would do this. *Trust.* That's all it would take. I trusted Preston. I knew he would never hurt me. We'd been friends for so damn long that there was no way he would break my heart. The forced smile eased into a real one. I grabbed my house keys and headed out to my car.

We were meeting at Johnny's Bar. They served fabulous fresh fish. My stomach rumbled at the thought of it. Surfing had really worked muscles that I hadn't used in a long time, too long—that, plus surfing had always made me ravenous. As I pulled into a parking space along the side street, I'd come to a conclusion that it was definitely time to get back on my board. I was a little ashamed of myself that I'd let Fuckwit ruin something that I loved. Stepping out of my car, I decided that this was good, a good step to my erasing all of my hard-ass feelings about the past. I knew life wasn't all chocolate rainbows and Champagne, but if I could at least open myself up to the possibility, then why couldn't it be? Preston was the start.

# Chapter Eight

## Preston

I'd only arrived in the bar a few moments before and had yet to find a table or order a drink. As soon as I entered, Dani had spotted me, and had yet to pause for a breath. Dani was a really nice girl. She had a fabulous body and was a laugh too, but I was expecting Ella to meet me any minute; yet in typical Dani style, she just wouldn't take the hint. I knew I should have simply told her the truth immediately; she was cool like that, and I knew she would completely understand. In some ways, though, because of our history, I just didn't want to hurt her feelings, but desperate times and the second hand ticking called for honesty. "It's really good seeing you, Dani, but I'm meeting someone." I looked at my watch. One thing about Ella was that she was never late. "So do you mind?"

It took a while for Dani's brain to register until finally, *hallelujah*, a smile formed on her cute mouth. She was cute. We'd hooked up a few times over the last year. It never developed into anything serious, for the obvious reason that I'd been fixated on and jacking off over Ella. Dani knew the score—not necessarily that I jacked off over Ella, but that I was in love with someone else, namely Ella. That's what had been so great about her. We'd hook up, have a good time, and share a conversation, but both of us had a case of unrequited love going on, sort of. She was still in love with her ex, even though she knew she was better off without him, so we understood each other. Plus, she'd been through a lot over the last six months because of some guy she'd hooked up with who had been making her life crazy-difficult. While we'd had fun in bed a few times, we'd become good friends.

A beautiful flash of red drew my attention to the door. *Ella*. She looked fucking hot. Her sexy-as-fuck jeans hugged every curve, and her top, while loose around her breasts, gave just a hint of her fabulous cleavage. I watched as she zeroed in on Dani and I could almost feel her eyes zooming in on Dani's hand on my arm. *Shit, just what I need*. I wondered how in the hell I was going to explain this one. I half expected Ella to turn around and leave the bar when I saw her hesitate. My muscles became taut as I prepared myself to dash after her.

Then she did something that I didn't expect, even though I should have. I'd known her long enough, and knew she was no wilting wallflower. She usually had a mouth on her that could give Jo a run for her money. The last few days had been the quietest I'd ever seen her. Maybe I'd kissed the fiery temperament out of her? I puffed my chest up a little at the thought. Damn straight, if anyone could make this woman submissive, it was me.

I watched her as she confidently strode towards us. Her beautiful flaming hair framed her face, and I'm sure her arse would look bite-worthy in her hip-hugging jeans. I almost felt like racing around behind just so I could take in her sweet cheeks. I scanned up to her eyes, and I couldn't help but gulp. Nothing about her eyes screamed submissive. Heading towards me was one pissed off Ella. I knew her well enough—the tightness around her eyes, her slight smirk and the gentle tilt of her head—to know that she was expecting an explanation.

Dani's hand left my arm, pulling my attention away from Ella. I saw her turn and look Ella over before she looked back at me, and back again at Ella. Turning to me slightly, Dani's face held a huge smile. "Damn, Preston. She's hot. I totally get it." Her voice was loud enough to carry, and I saw Ella's eyes and mouth relax a little.

Finally, Ella stood in front of me. Just as I was about to step forward, reach out and touch Ella, Dani stepped in and launched herself at Ella with a bear-gripping hug. "Holy shit, it's good to finally meet you. Ella, right?" She didn't wait for an answer before she steamed ahead, true Dani-style. "He talks about you, a lot." Dani took a step back and smacked me in the stomach, causing me to *oomph*. "You sly dog, Preston. You said she was hot, but holy mackerel! Is your hair that shade of red naturally? 'Cause one time, I attempted to dye mine, and it went pink. Like crazy-fluoro pink; shit, even dogs howled at me in the street when I walked by, but yours—"

I watched on as Ella's face went from shock, to amazement, to downright amusement. Ella took it all in her stride and it wasn't long until a beautiful smile lit up her face. "Dani," I interrupted, "breathe."

I took a step forward and kissed Ella soundly on the lips. When she sighed into me, I knew it was all good. This was just one of the reasons why I loved this woman. There were no dramatics and running off; okay, so maybe she'd already done that, but I honestly think she was just freaked out and maybe just a bit dramatic when I'd admitted my feelings to her. But around other women, I didn't expect her to put two and two together and get five-hundred-and-eight. She was smarter than that. I hoped she would be level-headed and listen, but who really knows what's going on in any woman's head. Obviously, she still had a hot head, but she'd always allowed that to build while listening for the truth. Depending on the outcome, she'd either go off like a firecracker, or she'd immediately get her head around it, take a breath and deal. She was one hell of a woman. There was no way I was letting her go.

"Hey, babe, this crazy imp is Dani." I stepped back so they could be introduced properly. Dani gave a geeky wave.

"Hey Dani, that was one hell of a greeting. Nice to meet you." Ella smiled before settling at my side. I immediately pulled her close and kept my hand around her waist. "So, how do the two of you know one another?"

*Oh crap!* I had no idea how this would play out. I tried my hardest to get my head around the right words without lying and without pissing her off. I didn't get a chance.

"We've known each other for a while now. Preston's a good friend of mine, and has really helped me through some shit." Dani's smile faltered a little as she thought about exactly what her shit was.

"Hey." I touched her arm and gave it a tight squeeze. "It's all good."

Dani shook her frown away. "You've got a good one here, Ella. Be kind to him. I may be small, but I'll come hunting for you if we need to have words." She spoke around a genuine smile. I knew the words with Ella would probably be around a bottle of tequila; there wasn't a vicious bone in her five-foot-two frame. Yet I also knew she cared about me and wanted to see me happy.

Ella laughed. "Okay, I got it."

Dani turned, pulled me down to her, kissed me on the cheek and whispered, "Don't screw this up. You got me?" I nodded and smiled.

Dani then hugged Ella close and whispered something in her ear, too. I wondered if it were the same as what she'd said to me. Ella's smile dropped a little and an expression I couldn't quite decipher formed on her face. It only lasted a moment before a small smile reappeared.

"Right, I'm out. Catch you later." The whirlwind that was Dani waved and left the bar.

"Wow!"

I laughed. "Wow indeed!" I pulled Ella into me and kissed her neck. "You look beautiful." I inhaled deeply, and kissed the sensitive spot behind her ear after trailing a few kisses up her neck. She smelt and tasted delicious.

I knew I had to stop. I'd already received a few raised eyebrows and winks from some of the patrons. The bar was not the place for obvious erections.

She leaned into me and sighed. "You look pretty handsome yourself."

I pulled away, making eye contact with her, my eyes drifting down to her lips that were just begging to be taken. I'd been dreaming of her lips, kissing them, her groaning my name out of them for years. It took all my willpower not to keep taking a taste. I didn't think I could ever get enough of Ella.

"How do you really know her?"

And there she went, always managing to read the unsaid. I knew it was the teacher in her. She had a bullshit radar, which had become more finely tuned over the years.

"Erm ..."

"It's okay, Preston. Just tell me truth. I don't want a minute-by-minute play here, but I do expect the truth."

"We've spent a fair bit of time with one another over the last year. Neither of us were looking for anything serious or complicated. She's good company, and we understand one another. She's in love with her ex. He left town about a year ago and it left her in bad shape. Her life's pretty crazy and lonely. And me, well—"

"You've had sex with one another?"

I nodded and swallowed back a nervous gulp. "Yes. On and off over the year, but—" She cut me off again.

"So it won't happen again? Not now?" Her gaze never wavered.

“No, never,” I rushed out. “She knows all about you. She knows you’re the one for me.”

Her face grimaced slightly. “Okay, that’s fine. But shit, did you talk about me when you were, you know ... together?”

I didn’t know whether to laugh out loud at the conversation I desperately didn’t want, or to tuck my tail between my legs and beg for forgiveness. She had her mask on, so I could not get a read on her at all. I wondered if this was how the naughty kids at her school felt when they’d been caught out. They had my damn sympathy if they did. Not getting a read on her made me more anxious than her anger. That, I could cope with. “Never,” I said vehemently.

A look of confusion passed over her face, until it finally settled into one of acceptance and relief. Her frown relaxed and her mouth tilted into a warm smile. “I like her.”

A broad grin plastered my face. “She is pretty cool. I thought you’d get on well. She’s honest, like you. A bloody heart of gold, she’s got.” I leaned in and kissed her, happily giving in to the temptation of her inviting lips. Pulling away, I kissed her nose and asked her to find us a table while I got us a drink.

*Bloody perfect.* She truly was.

I didn’t know why I was surprised. She’d proven herself to be the amazing woman she was on more than one occasion. During my rehabilitation from my accident was one such time. I wasn’t badly injured in the car accident, really. A few broken ribs and a concussion was nothing. But it was over the loss of Sophie, a needless, fucking stupid death that still racked me with guilt, where Ella had shown her true strength. I was not a murderer. I just happened to be driving the other vehicle when an unknown car—Sophie’s car—had spun out of control on the slick wet roads. She was an innocent victim, a young woman.

I’d never met Sophie. Everything I knew about her was from the newspaper cuttings I still had buried in a box at the bottom of my wardrobe.

No amount of counsellors could have achieved what she had. Her quiet, yet no-nonsense understanding of my situation had been my elixir. Even though I blamed myself for Sophie’s death, Ella hadn’t. Ella told me, however, quite matter-of-factly, that I should feel grief, and that I would no doubt always feel that way. The difference was that I was not responsible for Sophie’s death. The grief I felt was for the wasted life.

I brought our drinks over to the table. “Here you go, babe.” I placed her drink down on the beer mat in front of her and kissed her on her head before I sat down opposite her. “How are you feeling after the water?” It had been one of the best surf sessions I’d enjoyed in a long time, and not because of the size of the waves. Playful three-foot wave sets were the average, perfect for Ella who hadn’t been in the water for a few years. Over time, I’d tried relentlessly to get her back in the water, but she’d always refused, until today.

Her douche of an ex was the reason she’d stopped surfing; he’d hated the water. When Ella had allowed herself to be sucked into her ex’s bullshit city life, she’d allowed herself to stop doing something that she loved. After Fuckwit, formally known as Luke, had royally screwed up by fooling around on Ella—much to my relief—I’d thought she may have gone back to the water. She hadn’t. But today had been a turning point. She’d gone in the ocean and surfed. She’d looked beautiful riding in, scooted low on her board. It had been years since I’d seen pure and genuine happiness on her face: a happiness that was carefree. It had been amazing watching her.

Asking Ella about our day, I saw a similar glow as her face lit up. There was a hint of a younger, more innocent Ella when she smiled at me, rolling her shoulders. Not that I wanted the younger Ella back. The Ella in front of me was beautiful and perfect. However, knowing there was a chance to get back a bit of the happy-go-lucky Ella, a part of her that was lost on the day of her wedding that didn’t happen—well, that was worth everything.

“I’m aching already,” she fake-groaned, continuing to roll her shoulders. I knew when she was playing me, and her tell was her over-exaggerated groan. “I dread to think how I’m going to feel tomorrow.”

“You know, I have the perfect solution for that,” I said, smiling slightly.

“Oh, yeah? And what exactly is the solution, Preston?”

I raised my hands in front of her and wriggled my fingers. “My fingers can work all sorts of magic on that sweet-ass body of yours.”

She laughed, a sound that lifted my heart and shot a pulse of desire to my groin. “You mean, of course, on my poor, aching muscles, right? Nothing more, and I’m sure nothing lewd or crude, either?” Her face lit up

in a smile that left me wanting to lean in and kiss her. *Damn; she's all kinds of sexy.*

I coughed my growing desire away, attempting unsuccessfully to stop the husky depth that I knew would be obvious when I spoke. “Damn straight. Muscles, skin ... I will happily touch wherever you want me to, baby.” Shit, it was no use. My voice fell into a husky baritone as I finished the sentence, imagining caressing her body. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat and made eye contact with Ella. A blush brushed her cheeks, a sight that I was not used to. The only time I’d seen her blush was when she was kicking my arse in anger—not literally, although there was this one time that it had got pretty close. But hell, a fifteen-year-old horn dog hiding under his sister’s bed when Ella was sleeping over was instinctive. I had almost had my ass handed to me by Jo and Ella when they realised I was there. It had just been when Ella was changing into her cute Wonder Woman pyjamas, too. My excuse was I was fifteen; Ella was hot and I wanted to get a glance of her tits. Damn, I would have tried it again, but I knew they’d checked every possible hidey-hole after that. The only other times I’d seen her flush were over the last seventy-two hours. I was becoming increasingly fond of the look.

Taking a gulp of her drink, Ella kept eye contact. After an agonising display of hotness where I wished I were the bottle that she had her lips pressed against, she returned her drink to the table and smiled. The flush on her cheeks had gone and amusement danced in her eyes. “Maybe later.” She shrugged. “If you’re lucky.”

I laughed and nodded in acceptance. I’d be sure to do whatever I needed to ensure I was *lucky*. “So, what are your plans tomorrow?”

She shook her head and appeared to be thinking. She bit her bottom lip in concentration. “Nothing.”

“Nothing? It seemed like you were mentally going through one heck of a to-do list.”

Ella grinned, took another pull of her drink and spoke, “Nope, just thinking that for the next six weeks I like the idea of nothing and no long-term plans. Damn, just being able to go for a pee when I want to is a luxury. The amount of times that I push kids out of the doorway for me to rush to the toilet is not funny. I’m surprised one of them hasn’t made a complaint by now.”



Smiling at the visual, I could easily believe it. Ella was not known for her iron bladder. I had lost count of the amount of times that Jo or I had to be lookout so she could find a quiet place to pee after a few drinks. Not a pretty picture, but funny as shit!

“Why, what are you thinking? You’re not back at work until Monday, are you?”

“Sunday night. I have five nights from Sunday.” She nodded. “Well, I have this thing tomorrow,” I said. She lifted her eyebrow at the use of the word ‘thing’. To be honest, I had no idea why I was even telling her about it, let alone about to invite her. I only had a few more days before Jo came home to interfere, and I just wanted to spend as much time with her as I could.

“Thing?”

I cleared my throat. “I’m at the station for a few hours in the morning. You can come if you want?”

A small frown line appeared on her face as she mulled over why I would be asking her to come to the station with me. “The station?”

I sighed and decided speaking quickly would be the most effective way to rush through my embarrassment. “I’ve been roped in, well a bunch of us have, to be involved in this charity calendar. I think they’re taking photos and stuff. I don’t know. I just have to be there at 8am and it should take a few hours. I know ... it’s lame, but I thought ... as it’s for charity ... well, you know ...” With my growing explanation, her eyes became larger. Her mouth curved and her smile grew the further I mumbled and faltered until finally, she gave a loud and abrupt laugh.

“No freakin’ way.” She barely formed her words over her laughter. “You’re shittin’ me?” Her laughter continued. “You’re in one of those naked firefighter calendars?” She snorted. “Holy crap! Just wait until I tell Jo. Why in the hell am I only hearing this now? There’s no chance I’m missing this.” Her eyes gleamed with unshed tears caused by her hysterics.

Dammit. Me and my big mouth. There was no way I would be living this one down.

“I can bring my own camera, right?”

I glared at Ella. “No you bloody well can’t. It’s embarrassing enough as it is. You don’t have to come. I just thought—“

“No chance. I’ll be there. You’re not taking back this invite.” Her smile was warm and filled with mischief. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

# Chapter Nine

## Ella

I slammed off my alarm and cussed. 6am. It was my holiday and damn right criminal to be up at this time. I reached out and grabbed hold of my spare pillow that I'd thrown to the side of my bed and pulled it over my face with a heavy groan. I was too damn tired and my arms were killing me. Simply pulling my pillow over my head had hurt. Yawning, I turned and dragged my sorry arse out of bed. I headed toward the shower, a smile finally forming on my face when I thought about the day ahead. Preston stripping off for a calendar would be totally worth it.

The previous night, I'd ribbed Preston relentlessly. It was just too darn easy. Hell, he practically begged me to take the piss out of him when he shared his bare-butt plans with me. He was just lucky Jo wasn't here. We'd ended the night with a sweet kiss after he'd followed me home and walked me to my doorstep. He was determined to have a real date. And as far as dates went, it was pretty perfect. Yet in saying that, without the addition of the delicious kisses it was pretty much just like it always had been: laughter and free-flowing conversation was what we'd always had. I'd half expected there to be a bit of tension, maybe a few awkward silences thrown in, but nope. It was normal, awesome even, but most definitely natural.

I managed to get myself showered, dressed and even put together two cups of coffee in travel mugs by 6:45am. Never let it be said that I couldn't get a damn lot achieved in forty-five minutes. Stepping on to the porch, I didn't have time to sit down as right on time, Preston pulled up. He immediately jumped out of the car, engine still running, and bound up the steps to greet me. A warm smile played on his face as he planted a sweet kiss on my lips. I could definitely get used to these starts to the day.

“Morning, beautiful. Is that for me?” He eyed off one of the cups of coffee in my hand.

“Sure is, handsome.” I smiled and passed him his coffee.

He grinned, gave me another tender kiss and took the mug out of my hands. “Thanks, babe. You’re bloody awesome.” He took a sip of his coffee and smiled in appreciation. “And shit, you always make me the best darn coffee. I have no idea why you make us go out for caffeine when you make it so good.” He tilted his head and beckoned me to his car as he spoke.

I was surprised when an unexpected warmth filled my stomach. He always raved about my coffee. This was nothing new, but damn, hearing his praise almost had me going giddy. I shook myself out of my daze, unfortunately, spilling some of my own precious coffee on the ground. “Shit.”

Preston turned and looked at me. He rolled his eyes. “Come on, klutz, or we’re gonna be late.”

I shook the drops of coffee off my hand and picked up my pace. “We wouldn’t want that now, would we, hot stuff?”

He opened the passenger’s side door for me and rolled his eyes once again. “Hot stuff, huh?” he said, his voice filled with amusement. “You know what, babe? I’d be more than happy to show you exactly how hot I am after this stupid-arse shoot.”

It was my turn to laugh and roll my eyes as I got in the car. “Sure thing,” I scoffed, “porn star.” I added the words at the end.

He was in the process of closing the door when it tore open again. Preston’s head and shoulders leaned through the door, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “Porn star, ‘ey?” His hands grasped my wrists and held them down to my lap. He leaned in closer and stopped when his breath was hot on my ear. He caught my earlobe with his teeth, pulled lightly, and then trailed kisses and licks down my neck and back up again. My breath hitched. Once his breath was once again near my ear, he whispered, “I’m more than happy to spend some time re-enacting with you, baby. Just say the word.” He kissed me once more, pulled his body out of the car and closed it.

Holy crap on toast! My speeding heart felt ready to burst out of my chest. It was going triple time. I wondered just how he managed to get me all hot and most definitely bothered with a few simple words, kisses and licks. I groaned and then forced my slightly shaky hand to my mouth, which

amazingly, still held my coffee. Thank goodness for travel mug lids. If not, I was confident that the wetness I felt between my legs would have been caused by my spilling coffee on my lap.

Preston entered the car with a shit-eating grin on his face. *Arse*. He'd gotten me all hot and bothered, and now I was going to be watching him strip off. I was a glutton for punishment, for sure.

"So, I'm not sure how long this will take. Are you sure you just want to hang around with me all morning? I could always—"

"Not a chance in hell," I interrupted, grateful that his talk had severed the tension. I looked at his profile and smiled. "I cannot wait to see you in action. It'll be fun."

He grunted. "For you, maybe."

"Yes, definitely for me, but come on. You can't pretend that you're not just a bit excited. Professional photo shoot, having three women looking at your sexy abs? But obviously only one of them drooling."

"Huh? Three women? What? What are you talking about?"

I feigned being indignant. "Well, obviously, the only women allowed to look at your bod in the calendar are your mum—so she can be all proud of you—Jo, so she can rip the shit of you for your lifetime." He looked at me briefly and lifted an eyebrow. "What?" I continued, "You know I'm speaking the truth."

"And what about the third? You said three women. You also said something about ogling."

"Well, that will be me. I'll just duck into wherever this porn calendar of yours is being sold, and rip out all your pics. I can't have women throwing themselves at Mr November, or whatever month you're going to be. It'll just be awkward. And I don't know why, but I imagine it to be messy. I can't handle that. So yeah, that's the three of us."

Preston pulled into the fire station car park, looking thoroughly pleased with himself. Turning off the engine, he unbuckled his belt and turned toward me. "You not wanting other women to take in all of this handsome, baby?"

I raised an eyebrow. It was a look that I'd perfected over the years. "Erm ... no, it's not that, obviously." It totally was. "I told you, messy women rocking up in random places, ruining our dinner or some crap like

that just won't work for me." I sounded completely convincing. I was sure of it. But from the look on Preston's face, I expected him to call bullshit.

"Whatever you say, beautiful." He leaned in, brushed his lips against mine and gave me one of his shit-eating grins. Again. *Damn, I need to stop giving him ego fodder.* "Right, let's get this nightmare day over with." He stepped out of the car and walked around to let me out. Holding hands, we made our way inside the station.

After a brief talk inside with a multitude of people who were all speaking really loudly and milling around in what I hoped was some sort of organised chaos, Preston pulled me toward a room at the back of the station. Once inside, the noises cut off, much to my relief. I was in the midst of a sensory overload. The station was filled with men, some already in costume. It made me laugh; firefighters dressing up in firefighter "costumes". Go figure! I hadn't been able to take much in, mainly because it was too crazy and busy, but also because Preston ushered me out of the main room pretty darn quickly.

Once we're alone, I took in the space. It was a large bathroom with a shower cubicle and a changing space. I sat down on the bench seat and happily watched as Preston stripped out of his clothes and donned a pair of "firefighter" trousers teamed with red braces, of all things. I looked up at the row of hooks on the wall; above each was a name, paired with costume. Most were empty, including Preston's, who was now standing in front of me wearing his getup.

"I know, stupid, huh!" He laughed as he placed the helmet on his head. "You coming to the shoot, or are you just going to sit there gawking?"

I was seriously tempted to do just that. My bitter side, the side that knew thousands of women would be ogling the charity calendar with Preston's ripped naked chest made me scowl and ridicule his costume. But holy shit, he looked sexy. I wanted to pounce on him, and lick a long wet trail from the *V* of his stomach all the way up to his nipples and back down again.

"El?"

"Yes?" I squeaked. I actually squeaked. I was so caught up in my daydream, and now I was horny as hell.

He looked over his shoulder and held out his hand to me. "Let's get this over with. 'Cause if you look at me like that again, as though you want to

jump on my face, I'll be sporting a hard-on through the whole shoot. It's meant to be a sexy charity calendar, not a porno."

I took his hand, swallowed my desire and left the room with him.

\*\*\*

Wow. Who knew! Truly, Preston was hot; I was able to admit that freely and openly now that we'd got down and dirty with it. He could certainly be the object of many women's dirty, hot fantasies. He was a firefighter, a surfer, and he was mighty fine. But holy cow, I was surrounded by drop-dead gorgeous firefighters, and I had no idea what to do with my hands, let alone know where to look.

I had a few OCD tendencies. I was woman enough to admit it. Sitting on a chair, watching the specimens of half-naked firefighters on display, waltzing around, had me seriously hot and bothered. My usual need for cleanliness and order went flying out the window. Stage-grubby hotties, covered in baby oil, were totally floating my boat. I half expected to have the desire to get out a bucket of hot, soapy water to clean them down ... Okay, so I still definitely wanted to do that, but it had nothing to do with making them look all shiny and new. This was so much better than spending two hours browsing and salivating over stationery—it had happened more than once. No, this was something way better.

I expected the shoot to be long and tedious. I'd watched dodgy daytime TV during my holidays with models bitching about their hard days, and I was sure that was the case for them, but for all that was good and holy, this was one of my best days *ever*. For a moment, I missed having Jo with me. She always loved getting her ogle on. I quickly remembered that she was now a married woman, and that her baby brother was also here, so perhaps not the best wing-woman for the job. Yet still, I was in muscled, naked, testosterone-filled heaven.

A firm hand gripped my shoulder. "Okay, seriously, put your tongue away, Ella. I've been calling you for at least a minute."

I felt my cheeks turn pink when I looked up at Preston. I couldn't quite read his face. All I knew was I was totally busted. I gave a lackadaisical grin and a shrug. "What? I was just—"

"I know exactly what you were doing. Keep your eyes to yourself."

"That makes absolutely no sense; you know that, right?"

Preston glared at me. “You know exactly what I mean. I’m up next. Then we just have the final shot with all of us in it. Okay? You think you can behave until then?”

I took my time and allowed my gaze to caress his body. Just a couple of nights ago I’d kissed and nibbled virtually every inch of his sexy self, and now, he was oily and somehow even sexier. He must have seen something flash in my perusal, as the next thing I knew he was barely an inch away from me, his lips hovering over mine. “You keep looking at me like that, baby, I may have to find a quiet little room for us. Shit.” I saw him move and smirked. He adjusted himself. Beneath my smirk, though, my heart beat erratically. I was tempted to grab his hand, and maybe even his groin—I was that hot for him—and race him to find a secluded corner somewhere. His mouth hovered over mine before he took a step back.

I breathed out heavily, my half-arsed attempt at regaining my composure. “Put your goddamned hose away and put a shirt on while you go about it,” I huffed. “Seriously, anyone would think firefighters walk around half-naked all day.” I mentally shook away the thought that had blossomed in my head with my words.

He laughed loudly; clearly enjoying the blush I knew covered my face. *I swear, if there were a pill to stop blushing I would totally take it.* Winking mischievously, he turned and headed toward the waiting photographer.

I watched on as the photographer, who just so happened to be a ridiculously beautiful brunette—I was sure that should be illegal or something—caressed Preston’s chest lightly and walked around his body, taking him all in. He smiled on cue and answered whatever questions were coming out of her mouth enthusiastically.

*I will not freak out and cut the bitch. I will not freak out—*

“So, Ella, right?”

A tall, honest-to-God godlike man stood in front of me, blocking my view and ripping away my mantra. My eyes were immediately drawn to his toned chest before travelling up to his chiselled chin. *Holy moly!* I had no idea what this station was feeding their boys—and the few women firefighters floating around—but fuck me naked and hide my clothes, he was beyond—damn, I had no idea who or what to compare him to. He looked down at me, a beautiful smile on his face.

I managed to roll my tongue up off the floor and pressed my hand to my mouth to check for drool before I managed a pathetically squeaky, “Yes?”

I coughed my squeak away and smiled. “Hi, yes, Ella.” My cheeks began to ache with the extreme of my wide grin.

“Do you mind if I sit?” He indicated to the small space next to me. I looked at the space and then back up at his large, firm body. There was no way he’d be able to fit in the space next to me. Not unless I sat on his lap. My eyes widened at the thought. I needed to shake myself and maybe a slap or two would be useful too. *Preston, Preston—you’re hot for Preston.* I needed to cool it. But I also happily rationalised that drooling over someone was okay. Preston and I hadn’t even put a name to what we were—*Where the hell did that thought come from?*—but even so, I could have an innocent chat with someone.

“Not at all. I’m not sure there’s room, though.” I was now in control. Sort of.

“Thanks.” He sat next to me, his thigh flush against mine, and his arm pressed against my own. “I thought you were you.” He laughed. “I mean, Ella.” I could detect a slight quibble in his voice. He sounded a little anxious. “I mean, from Preston’s descriptions.”

I looked at him as he continued to speak, mesmerised by the depth of his chocolate-brown eyes. “Oh, Preston’s spoken about me?” Flutters filtered through my stomach at the thought.

“Yes,” he continued. “Sorry, my name’s Ben, by the way.” He reached out and took my hand in his, dwarfing my fingers. His hand felt warm and familiar.

“Hi, Ben. Nice to meet you.” I smiled and placed both hands on my lap, eyes still firmly fixed on his.

“Preston talks about you a lot. I feel like I know you already.” He blinked and looked toward my mouth.

Holy crap. What the hell was happening? Who the heck was this guy? I knew quite a few of the guys Preston worked with; we’d been out a few times together. I racked my brains, but I didn’t recall him mentioning Ben once. I smiled despite my confusion. “So, Ben, how long have you worked here?”

He pulled his eyes away from my lips and met my gaze. Slight crinkles formed around his eyes when he smiled. It seemed genuine. “For just six months. I recently moved from New South Wales.”



I'm sure that explained why Preston hadn't mentioned him before. "How are you finding the Sunshine Coast? Humidity getting to you yet?"

He laughed. "I'm good. I adapt well." He rubbed his palms across his trouser leg. "So, you and Preston? You're here with him today. He said you were *good* friends."

My smile faltered slightly. "Well, yes, he asked me to stop by. We've been friends forever."

He nodded in understanding. "Yes, he said as much." He looked away briefly in the direction of Preston. My gaze followed his.

Preston was now leaning against a brick wall, striking different poses with the photographer's help. She wasn't taking photos at the moment. Instead, she was adjusting and repositioning his body and clothes. My shoulders became taut, and my mantra almost started up again.

"Listen, Ella. You seem like a really nice person."

My head spun back to Ben's. He looked anxious and a little guilty, judging from his frown and his downcast look. "Is there something you're trying to say to me?"

He huffed out a breath and sighed before he continued. "Well, Preston, he's a nice guy. He speaks about you all the time. It's just ..." There was an uncomfortable pause as he looked at me briefly before lowering his gaze to his feet. I gestured for him to go on, even though I had a feeling that whatever I would hear, I wouldn't like one bit. He cleared his throat and made eye contact with me once again. "You know he has a girlfriend, right?"

And there it was. My stomach hit the floor; my heart constricted. Fuck. There were times in my life I wish I wasn't so in tune with knowing bad shit was going to happen. But damn, nothing about what Ben, a stranger to me, was saying made any sort of sense. Business, no-bullshit Ella was forced to the surface.

I froze, schooled my face and feigned indifference. My heart roared in my ears; I could feel a headache forming. I had no idea what he was going on about. There was no chance he was right. I knew Preston. He was one of my close friends. Any girlfriend he had, I'd know about it.

I racked my brains, thinking about his last girlfriend, but came up short. There weren't any, just a steady stream of one-night stands, with the exception of Dani. I wondered if that was whom he meant. I opened my mouth to speak, but he beat me to it.

“You didn’t know. Shit. I’m so sorry. I always just thought it was weird how he talked about you all the time, talked about getting together with you, but he’s dating Sarah. They’ve been together for, I don’t know, two or three months now?”

Sarah? I had no bloody idea who the hell he was talking about. He must be wrong. Logically, I knew this. “No, I have no idea what or who you’re talking about.” I looked back at Preston, who was now having his photograph taken. There was no way this was happening.

“Hey.” Ben touched me tentatively on my arm before he removed his hand. “Listen, I’m sorry. I was just confused. I saw you together earlier. It was clear something was going on between the two of you.” He rubbed his hands down his face, regret evident in his voice and the crease between his brows. I saw glimpses of pity etched there when he removed his hands. “So, shit, just forget I said anything. They must have split up and I just didn’t know. Preston’s a good guy. I can’t imagine him pulling this kind of shit on anyone, especially you.”

My jaw tense, I smiled. I knew it didn’t reach my eyes. “It’s okay, Ben. Don’t worry about it. I’m sure I’ll get this sorted.” Damn straight I would. There was no chance I would be played again. I just couldn’t quite believe that Preston, my friend Preston, as in *baby* Preston, would be capable of something like this. I refused to simply jump to conclusions and believe the words of a stranger. I gave a resolute nod, but my heart continued to beat erratically. A pit of raw anxiety and sickness filled my stomach. I couldn’t do this again. I had been trying my hardest to open up and trust Preston, but still my heart was shouting at me to get the hell out of there. It was only my rational brain that kept me sitting and waiting.

Ben’s name was called out by one of the staff. He gave me a reassuring light squeeze on my knee and a tentative smile. “It’ll be fine.”

I nodded and forced a smile to my lips. Everything was far from fine.

My head and heart were pulling me in different directions. Needing some air, I stood and walked toward the exit. I couldn’t continue watching the photo shoot, especially while the photographer was fawning over Preston.

# Chapter Ten

## Preston

I watched Ben sit next to Ella and was desperate to head on over to find out what he was saying to her. The damn photographer was too busy rubbing her crotch over me rather than taking photographs, which meant I had to stand back and look on with concern.

Ben had only been at the station for six months. He seemed like a nice enough guy, but something about him just didn't sit quite right; I just wasn't quite sure what it was.

The photographer had me standing in ridiculous poses. There'd been plenty of times in my life I had felt like a complete idiot; the photo shoot was being added directly to that list. I was plastered with greasy oil and had strategically-placed makeup dusted over my body to look like soot, I assumed. I had to keep reminding myself it was for an excellent cause. Without my constant reminders, I would have bolted.

My individual shots over, it was time for the final group photos. I looked over at Ella as Ben's name was called out. Despite the distance, I could see the deep frown set on her face. Worry ate at me when I saw her nod at Ben, look over at me and head toward the exit. It took everything in my power not to run to her—that and the photographer's cold hand holding on to my arm.

Getting into position, Ben headed toward the group and was instructed to stand at my side, axe in his hand. He greeted me wearing a thoroughly-smug grin, raising my hackles.

I nodded in the direction of where he had been sitting a few moments earlier. "What were you talking about with Ella?" There was no chance I

was beating about the bush. There was no room for playing coy, not when it came to all things Ella.

He shrugged his shoulder. “Nothing much. Just introducing myself to her. Nice girl.”

“Yeah, she is.” I couldn’t pinpoint my concern or my irritation, other than the obvious one of watching Ella leave after speaking to him. Ben had done nothing, until this moment, to get a rise out of me, yet I couldn’t shake the feeling that he wasn’t quite who he seemed.

“So, you managed to get a date out of her now? You’ve been talking about her non-stop since I’ve been here.”

I looked him dead in the eye. My face and voice were stoic. “That’s right. We’re working it out.”

A broad smile spread across his face, yet it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Good on you, mate.”

Our conversation was cut short by orders and directions. I really hoped Ella was just stepping out for some air, needing a break from the stink of man-sweat that was beginning to filter through the station.

\*\*\*

Finally, the shoot was over. The last shots seemed to take an age. After changing, I headed toward the exit. Oil and makeup still covered my body; I hadn’t bothered with a shower. I was too concerned about seeing Ella. Just as I reached the exit, a firm hand took hold of my wrist. I looked back at Jessica, the photographer. She smiled and stroked my arm.

Gently removing my wrist from her grip, I took a step away from her. “Erm, thanks, Jessica. That was great. I can’t wait to see the proofs.” I was about to turn on my heel and walk away, but her voice stopped me. I wasn’t a rude guy; I couldn’t just leave someone who was talking to me.

“It was great. You were great.” She licked her bottom lip, an action that barely made me look away from her eyes. Two weeks ago I would have probably jumped at getting some action with her, but all I could think about was Ella.

“Yeah, thanks. I’ve really got to go. My girlfriend’s outside waiting for me. Thanks again.”

I took in her momentary look of confusion. “Girlfriend? But I was told you were single and looking to hook up.”

I was completely thrown. *Where on earth would she hear that, and why would she think it?* I shook my head in question. “No, sorry.” I indicated outside toward the exit. “I have a girlfriend.” I knew I should question her, get some answers, but I just needed to get to Ella. I needed to get my arse out of the station to find her and figure out what was going on. The fact that she had yet to return concerned me.

That time, I spun on my heels and headed out the door before Jessica could respond. Making my way toward the parking lot, I looked around, trying to spot Ella. She was sitting under a large gum tree, surrounded by shadow.

A mixture of relief and anxiety filled me when I took in her sad form. Something clearly had happened, and since the only thing that had changed between her arriving and now was that she’d sat and spoken to Ben, no doubt it involved him, although maybe the over-friendly photographer didn’t help. Heading in her direction, I called out to her. She looked up slowly, her eyes complete with sadness and a tight smile formed on her perfect lips. I knelt down next to her.

“Babe, what’s wrong?” I wanted to ask her a million questions, including if I needed to go and beat the crap out of Ben. He was a built bloke, but I was a firm believer of the bigger they were, the harder they’d fall. And I would deck him if he’d hurt her in some way.

Ella pursed her lips as though to talk before she shook her head and sighed. “I’ll talk to you when you get me home.” She stood up, ignoring my outstretched hand to help her. *Fuck, this doesn’t look good.* I was so damned confused.

“Please, Preston. I just want to go home, okay?” She waited for me to nod before she walked around me and headed to my car.

The journey to her house was the complete opposite to the ride out here. Gone were the banter and the ease. Tension and doubt filled the car. They sat heavily on my chest. I tried to fight them off and attempted light jokes about the shoot a couple of times, but my words hit the steel wall that was solidly erected around her. I’d heard descriptions of Ella’s stubborn hardness; I’d just been lucky enough never to be on the receiving end, until that moment. It was a moment I hated. It took all my willpower to not pull over, kiss her silly and ask her what the shit was going on. But I knew Ella well enough, and knew her stubborn arse would not budge. She’d said she’d talk when we got to her house. And talk we would. I just didn’t know

whether to accelerate quicker to get there sooner, or ease off the gas, knowing she was all shades of pissed off.

Instead, I kept to the speed limit. As a firefighter, I couldn't afford to lose my licence, so I made sure I kept my twitchy foot away from the accelerator pedal. Indicating to the right, I pulled on to her drive. Before I switched off the engine, Ella had already gotten out of the car and was outside her front door with the key in her hand. I sat a fraction longer, watching her step into the house, leaving her door open for me.

Shit. This was not good. I felt it in my gut. I knew logically I'd done nothing wrong, so whatever had got her panties in a twist could be sorted. Sighing, I prepared myself as I made my way to her house. I was not looking forward to our next conversation.

I found her in the kitchen drinking a large glass of water. When she was finished, she sat on one of the stools and faced me. I leaned against the bench top, hands behind my back.

"Who's Sarah?"

My brows furrowed in confusion. I couldn't help but wonder why she was asking about Sarah. "I don't understand?"

"I'll ask again. Who's Sarah? Be straight with me, Preston."

Disbelief rushed through my veins when I took in her harsh voice and face. As she frowned, still maintaining eye contact with me, my eyes scanned her face looking for another tell about where this conversation was going. "Sarah? The only Sarah I know is Mac's sister. Why? I didn't see her today. Did she say something to upset you?"

Frown lines between her brows deepened before she looked away. This was her thinking face; she was clearly mulling over my answer.

"Talk to me, El? Seriously, you're freaking me out."

She turned back to me as I spoke and released a breath. "So Mac's sister, this Sarah, what's your story with her?"

Story? What the hell was she talking about? Sarah had hung around the station a few times, plus I'd seen her out at a few bars, and I supposed she may have had a crush on me, but it was nothing I ever pursued. She was far too clingy for me; I could tell by the way she'd always appear where I was, and her need for reassurance. Obviously, the fact that she was Mac's kid sister may have had something to do with it. "There is no story. Never has been and never will be." I pushed away from the work surface and walked

towards Ella. I leaned over the breakfast bar, closing the distance between us. “Now, what’s this really about? Why are you asking about Sarah?”

She worried at her bottom lip and tapped her fingers on the breakfast bar. I reached out and held her hand, half expecting her to pull away. Relief flowed through me when her hand remained in place. “So she’s not your girlfriend then? Never has been?”

“What? Hell, no. There’s never been another girl—”

She raised her eyebrows at my answer.

“You know what I mean. I’ve never been in a relationship. I couldn’t. I couldn’t pretend to be interested in anyone, nothing beyond something superficial. You know this. There’s just you.” I reached out and touched her cheek. “Who said we had a history, El?”

“Ben.”

*The fucker.* His smug grin after El had left the station hit me hard. The shit had done this deliberately, and I was damned if I knew why. What the hell had I ever done to him? “He’s full of shit, babe. I have no idea why he said the crap he did to you, but it’s all lies, every single last word.”

She looked out the window, contemplating my words. Returning her gaze to mine, her face still locked down, she said, “Okay, I believe you. I do. I have no idea why he told me about Sarah. He was pretty convincing. You need to find out why.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I plan on doing just that.” My muscles taut with anger, I had to talk myself down from heading to the station immediately. It was clear my distrust of Ben had finally been confirmed.

Ella’s eyes had lost their shine. Sadness filled her features, making me want to roar my anger, sweep her up in my arms, and kiss her sadness away. “Hey, babe, we good?”

She pursed her lips before she spoke. “I just have a headache. Do you mind leaving so I can take a lie down?”

I didn’t want to leave. She hadn’t answered my question, but pushing her to talk about our relationship at that moment would not end well. I knew her well enough to know when to push and when to back the hell off. This was a time for the latter. My shoulders sagged when I leaned in to kiss her goodbye and she turned her cheek to me. The barriers she had built up earlier were still firmly in place. I would do everything in my power to make her smile again. This was neither of our faults. Both of us had been screwed over by a jackass from my work. I’d bow out for now and give her

time to do whatever she felt she needed to. It would give me the opportunity to pound the crap out of Ben.

“Okay, El, I’ll call you later to see how you’re feeling. You just go and rest.” As I exited, I looked back, hoping to catch her eye and see a smile. Instead, she’d stood and walked to the sink, her back to me, remaining silent.

My desire to call Ben out surged through me, but I knew I needed to cool down first. As much as I wanted to confront and ideally punch the crap out of him, I also knew that the station officer would have something to say about it. So instead I headed home to grab my board, so I could take it out on the waves.



# Chapter Eleven

## Ella

The finality of the door closing was significant. I could not do this. Not again. Never again. What was worse was that I believed him, completely, but the thought alone of having my heart ripped out of my chest in any way, especially because of his cheating arse, I couldn't handle.

Deep waves of sadness flowed through my body, threatening to surge and overflow. Preston would never intentionally hurt me yet I stood, focusing on my backyard, my heart feeling heavy. Poor Preston had done nothing wrong. I hadn't even planted the seeds of doubt that had now implanted in my mind, sprouted roots and were firmly fixed to my heart and brain. I just couldn't risk it.

I hated it. I hated that I felt so broken. Surely, I was too young to be feeling this way. At twenty-eight I should be carefree, perhaps thinking about settling down, maybe even considering having babies. Every rational thought I had knew I was perhaps over-thinking this Sarah thing, but the doubt was now there, refusing to budge. And on this one, I knew my heart would win. At any moment, I would begin to rebuild the wall around my heart; the one that Preston had managed, in such a short few days, to pick at. I'd been feeling it crumble as I opened up to the possibility of love, yet now I just didn't think I could let whatever was happening between Preston and me go any further. I almost scoffed at myself. I'd already thought of the word *love*, and after just a few days. Having Preston as my friend, a friend who I loved beforehand, had made a difference to the crazy speed things had been moving. Now, though, fear began to wipe that away. I needed to protect myself. It really was as simple, yet as complicated as that.

I knew Preston would not take the news well. Shit, I was having a difficult enough time getting my head straight rather than collapsing to my

knees and sobbing on my kitchen floor. He loved me. I knew he would want me to be happy. I just hoped we could find a place to continue to be friends. There would be no chance of things returning to how they were. Seeing your friend's penis and riding it hard moved us beyond the point of no return. But I would do everything in my power to make sure we held on to some sort of friendship. Not having Preston in my life was not an option.

I missed Jo. In just a few days she'd be back, happily married, and no doubt putting me in place. I needed that. I also needed to drink tequila. This one I could manage by myself, however.

I opened a cabinet and pulled out some Advil. I hadn't been lying when I'd told Preston I had a headache. Knocking it back with a gulp of water, I made my way to my room, stripped off my clothes and lay down in bed. As soon as my head my pillow, my eyes welled with tears that spilled onto my pillow. I caught a sob in my throat, thinking about my ridiculous heart. I wanted to trust and make it work. I really did, but my damn heart was simply making me anxious. Love shouldn't make you anxious, right? Anxious for the next kiss, the next greeting, the next lay, maybe, but anxiety teamed with fear for my heart was not okay. While this thought filled me with resolve, it also pulled at my sadness.

\*\*\*

I awoke with the bright sun beating down on me, filtering through my sheer curtains. For a moment I lay in bed, allowing the sound of the kookaburra to calm me. The noisy kookaburra was my alarm clock, always greeting me in the morning, calling out to me to get my butt out of bed. I sighed and turned to look at the time. Right on cue, it was 5.30am. I groaned. Despite my holidays, my body clock and my kookaburra clock were both stubbornly fixed on school time.

As I allowed the call of the bird to wash over me, I stretched and then grimaced. My decision from the previous night crashed down on me. I knew I needed to have a conversation with Preston; it was unavoidable. But admittedly, my fear at his possible reaction left me feeling cold. I already felt the anxiety forming in my chest.

I dragged my reluctant backside out of bed, knowing that simply lying there procrastinating would not make me feel any better. Ignoring my heavy heart, I headed to the shower before pausing and detouring to the garage.

The light flickered on, chasing away the darkness of the windowless space. I hesitated at the doorway before my mind was made up. My red longboard stood, beckoning to me. It had been such a long time since I'd heard it call out to me, and a long time since I'd been out on my own conviction. I felt the draw, the pull to head out to sea, the need to feel the release only the cool waves could offer. Needing the adrenalin of the ride to wash over me and lighten my spirit, I smiled.

With no more hesitation, I stripped out of my sleep clothes, pulled on one of my bikinis, board shorts and a rash vest, and took hold of my board. Minutes later, my board was strapped to my roof-racks and I was headed to my local surf beach.

Paddling out, my soul filled with a calming lightness. It coursed through my body, lifting both my heart and my spirit. There were a few other surfers out enjoying the early morning waves. Like me, they were relishing the quiet before the tourists flocked to the beaches and filled up the waves with their foam boards.

I paddled out hard over the white foamy waves, wanting to head out to the clean, calm water before the sets rolled in. Scooping my hands through the crystal clear surf, I revelled in the burn in my arms. This was what my body had been craving over the last few years. The pure and raw escapism that only the surf could offer. I could have easily become angry at the wasted years I allowed to happen as a result of Fuckwit, yet the moment was too serene to mar it with thoughts no longer worth my time.

My muscles relaxed. A smile tugged at my lips as the refreshing spray hit my face. Perfect.

Landing in the green, I sat up, legs spread wide, feet either side of the board. I looked back to the shore before returning my gaze to the open sea. I counted the sets coming in, loving the feeling of catching the perfect wave created just for me. The wave that would lift me up, and allow me to ride it.

I saw it.

I counted it in before turning toward the coastline and paddling hard. Forcing my arms to work faster, harder, I breathed deeply before turning my head to see how close I was to the wave. Feeling the lift, I hopped to my feet, which was something more akin to a rusty clamber——graceful I was not! Bent low I steadied myself, before I got my balance. Then, I was flying. Gliding along the face of the wave, euphoria charged me to the core.

A smile so broad and pure spread across my face as I allowed the sense of ecstasy to take control. I had no idea how I had allowed anyone to talk me into giving this up. It was magical. A moment that was a close to perfect as I imagined I could get.

As the wave died off, I turned in to slow myself down and threw myself into the ocean. Water settled over my head. I pushed myself up to the surface and reached for my board, immediately pulling myself back on it. I laughed loudly and looked around me as I turned the board around and headed once more back out to the green.

After another hour or so of playing, I headed back to the beach. Walking to my car, I saw Preston leaning against it. Water dripped off his naked torso as he stood casually looking on at me, smiling. He was one fine-looking man. My heart stuttered a little when my eyes brushed over his chest and made contact with his eyes.

“Hey,” I greeted, a small smile on my face.

“Hey yourself. Have fun?”

My small smile formed into a grin. I couldn’t prevent it from happening, as much as I wanted to keep a little distance until I made myself clear. “It was amazing. You saw me?”

His eyes raked over my body before he answered with a breathy, “Yes.” I felt flames hit my cheeks; *perhaps I won’t be needing a towel to dry off today!*

“Oh,” was all I managed in response.

“It looked like you needed time to yourself, so I left you to it.”

He was so bloody thoughtful; this man would surely kill me with his perfection. *Damn it!* “Thank you. I did need some time to myself.” I hesitated before I walked closer to my car prepared to strap my board to the roof. Before I had chance, Preston took my board off me and secured it in place. “Thanks,” I whispered.

He threw a quizzical look over his shoulder. “No worries. Shall we go and get breakfast?”

I needed to speak to him somewhere quiet, and this moment seemed as good a time as any, if that were even a possibility. “Erm, perhaps we could just go for a walk on the beach?”

“Sure.” He smiled, although there appeared to be a false brightness to it. “Let’s go.”

I quickly removed my rash vest and placed it out on my car to dry, but then immediately thought maybe it wasn't my wisest move ever. Preston's gaze turned hungry as it settled on my bikini-clad breasts. *Oh hell, how am I going to have this talk with him when he's looking at me like that?*

We headed back toward the beach. We walked south, following the water's edge. The warm sand caressed my feet, still too early in the morning to be making me hop with its heat. I took comfort and strength in the sound of the waves as they lapped on to the shore, allowing the repetitive motion to help organise and settle my thoughts.

I swallowed before I spoke. I had to do this. "So yesterday, I'm sorry I accused you or questioned you, or whatever." My words were nowhere near as clear as I had hoped. So much for the calming bloody waves!

Out the corner of my eye I saw Preston glance at me, a smile playing on his lips. "It's okay. Well, it's not. Not that you're not, I mean ... Ben. I have no idea what his problem is." He sighed deeply and gave a nervous laugh. "I would start that sentence again, but you understand me, right?" I nodded ever-so-slightly. "Ella?" He stopped, reached out and placed his warm hand on my forearm.

Reluctantly, I stopped and turned to him. I knew I needed to get myself together. This blathering mess was not me. I steeled my resolve while ensuring there was no hardness in my voice. He hadn't done anything wrong. "I do understand you. I do, and I believe you."

"Why do I feel there is a *but* coming?"

"It's just ..." I refused to say the cliché lines that were sitting on the edge of my tongue *it's not you; it's me*. "Well, I just can't do this, Preston. We're so wonderful together as friends. As your friend I trust you implicitly, but I just can't allow myself to get involved." I forced myself to keep eye contact with him. His eyes closed briefly, pain flashing across his face. "I thought I could. I did, and I tried. But my heart, shit, Preston, my heart can't take it. Yesterday, the thought of you lying to me, cheating on me—"

"I didn't do anything, and nor would I ever."

"I know. Rationally, I know this, Preston. I do. But yesterday I just proved to myself I'm not ready to trust yet. I just can't do it. I'm sorry. I wish I could take—"

For the second time he interrupted me. My heart lunged at the pain and anger swirling in his eyes. "Don't you dare finish that sentence, El. No. I

won't hear it. What we have is good; hell, it's fucking great. You need to stop being a chicken shit and face the truth of it. I won't let you run from this—from me."

I shook my head, swallowing back the tears pooling in my eyes. I couldn't afford to cry. I needed to stay strong. I couldn't keep leading him on. Taking a step back, I gulped out, "I need to protect myself, Preston. I can't do that with you. I just can't. I'm so sorry." My heart was close to shattering; I was sure of it. It wasn't meant to be like this. Our friendship could survive this. It had to. I'd fight for it. Yet still, it felt like I was pulling and squeezing at my heart. Vomit settled in my stomach. I had to get out of there. I could not have a freaking breakdown on the beach. I knew I was overreacting and needed to pull my crap together. It wasn't like Preston was the love of my life. Damn, we'd only been sort-of dating in a no-label version of it for a few days.

I took a step back and whispered, "I'm sorry." I turned on my heels and ran. Not classy, not planned, and totally chicken shit and necessary.

As I ran, I half expected to feel Preston's strong hand clamp around my wrist. His face had paled as I spoke to him before he turned an angry shade of red. He was pissed, and I couldn't blame him. I was pissed at me too. I stumbled to my car, my tears finally releasing as I pulled my vest off the bonnet, jumped behind the wheel and grabbed my keys from their hidey-hole. Starting the engine, I swiped at my tears, failing to choke down the sob that was forming. *Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.* I pulled away, my mantra on repeat in my head.

\*\*\*

A cold silence filled the house. It truly felt lonely. I lived by myself; I had since I was twenty-two, so silence was nothing new to me. Rather, I usually embraced the lack of noise, loving the quiet after spending hours in the classroom with noisy teenagers. I glanced at my mobile phone that sat on the hallway table, and my fingers itched for the warmth of Jo. I didn't text her. The last thing she wanted was for her stupid-arse best friend to ruin her honeymoon with tales of woe after splitting with a guy who she'd been dating for a few measly days. Thinking of the reality of my situation made me cringe. If one of my friends came to me with a similar story after my initial pat on the arm—I wasn't the best with touchy-feely situations—I

would have no doubt rolled my eyes and told them to suck it up. It had been a few days.

Inadequacy at my overblown feelings raced through my system. *Am I really that pathetic?* Part of me scoffed and nodded in agreement, while another sneaky stealth-like bastard part, cried out, *No, it's Preston; it's not just any guy!*

I didn't like either response. I would wash my face, work out what the hell I was going to do with the rest of my day, and then work on a plan to apologise to Preston, as in my *friend* Preston, in a desperate hope that we could repair our friendship. It was going to be one heck of a task, but damn it, I was one determined woman when I wanted to be—not to be mistaken with stubborn of course; the term 'determined' sat a little more comfortably in my already irrational state.

# Chapter Twelve

## Preston

I'd deliberately left Ella alone for a few days, but by the time Saturday arrived, I'd just about had enough. There was only so much distraction that the surf, gym and hanging out with a couple of friends could offer. It had been a week since Jo's wedding, when my world had spun arse up in the air and had decided to crash-land in a shitty heap at my feet.

I mulled over what I was going to do about Ella. When we had been on the beach, I had been beyond angry. A fierce fist had hit me in the gut. It was ridiculous and had only started because of that tosser Ben—just one more reason why he was on my shit list. I was back at work on Monday and I'd already decided I'd have it out with him after our shift. My anger had toned down. Yeah, I was still pissed, but even though I wanted to shake the stupid out of her and kiss the trust back in, I begrudgingly understood she was protecting herself. Hence, the space I had given her. Yet that morning when I woke, I knew I couldn't keep my mouth shut any more.

With Jo getting back in the country the next day, I needed to sort out what was going on between Ella and me before the third interfering wheel—better known as my big sister—came barrelling in with her two-cents worth. Although, I doubted I'd solve all of our problems in twenty-four hours. I just had to hope that I could build some sort of bridge to convince her to change her mind. Again.

I pulled up at her house and found her sitting outside, drinking from a mug. It felt a bit like *déjà vu*, me rocking up at her house, trying to convince her we should be an *us*. I knew she was worth it. It didn't matter how long it would take; I would grind her shields down. I'd waited ten years already, and while I didn't want it to be that long again, I was one stubborn son-of-a-bitch when I wanted to be.



Ella nibbled on her bottom lip as she watched me approach. Dark bags were settled under her eyes. She shifted nervously on the bench as I stepped on to the veranda and took a seat opposite her.

Smiling tentatively, she squeaked out a “hi” before lifting her steaming mug up to her lips.

“Hey.” Not smooth, but I was relieved that my voice was calm and didn’t reveal the heaviness in my gut. Her pitiful face had my heart lurching. I just wanted to kiss the life back in her. “You been okay?”

Nodding, she sipped her drink and rested her mug on her lap, both hands gripping onto it. “I’m okay,” she replied with a shrug.

I assumed “okay” was girl-speak for I feel like shit, pretty close to the “I’m fine” response, which usually meant they were far from it. I’d learned some shit about women over the years, admittedly for having a pain-in-the-arse big sister. “You wanna do something?”

She closed her eyes and sighed. A pained expression formed on her brow. “Preston,” she opened her eyes, “I just don’t think that’s such a good idea.” She examined her mug and continued when I didn’t speak straight away, “you know, us do something together.”

The caveman in me wanted to beat against my chest, put her in her place, throw her over my shoulder and not give her any chance to sprout the crap coming from her delicious mouth. But even though the Ella in front of me was a million miles away from her usual loud, no-talking-shit mouth, I was sure pissing on her leg would push her over the edge.

I gulped back my frustration and put away my club. “So we can’t be friends? You don’t want that?”

Her eyes flicked back toward me. Doubt and hope flickered through them, a combination that sparked my need to reach out to protect and comfort her.

“I want nothing more than to be your friend. I just—I just don’t know how to be friends with you after ...” Her voice trailed off, with her eyes moving away from mine.

“Bullshit.” My voice was a little louder than I’d intended. She jerked back quickly, her eyebrows raised high.

Her mouth formed an *O* before her eyes pinched in, letting me know I’d managed to get a reaction from her. “What do you mean ‘bullshit’?” Steel entered her voice, and pink tinged her cheeks. She looked more alive, more herself with that touch of colour. “Do you think this is all some sort of

stupid fucking joke?” Her voice raised as she finished her question and her jaw clenched. “Nothing about this is bullshit or easy, you arse. Seriously, Preston ...” She allowed her voice to dwindle, shook her head and looked away from me.

I wasn’t sure if I was happy I’d managed to get something real from her, or shit scared she was going to chew me out. She looked thoroughly pissed off. But pissed-off Ella was easier to handle than sad Ella. Pissed-off Ella I was used to. I had been winding her up for as long as I could remember, and there had never been a time I hadn’t succeeded in winning her over and being in her good graces once again. *Hell, yes. I can totally do pissed-off Ella.*

“Exactly that. I call bullshit. You either want to make this work or you don’t.” I deliberately didn’t make it clear exactly what relationship I was referring to. Damn if I’d make this easier on her. At some time between saying “hey” and calling “bullshit”, I’d decided the only way to win her over was for her to come to the realisation herself. I’d already pushed her, and that hadn’t ended well. She had to come to me herself, on her terms. Obviously, I would be there the whole freakin’ way, playing dirty when I could. Hell, I could be stealth when I needed to be. But the point was, she needed to deal with her shit and then realise that I was the only one for her. I tried not to give away a facial tell when I realised that in my epiphany of Win El Over, I had grown a fucking vagina. Immediately, Chesney fucking Hawkes’ “The One And Only” played out in my head. Definitely a vagina moment. *Note to self: No more karaoke nights with dodgy 90s music.*

Her face relaxed at my words, her eyes softening. “I do. I really do. I don’t want to lose you. We’ve been friends forever. The thought of you not in my—”

“Never gonna happen,” I interrupted. “You’re not going to lose me.” I was pissed at her use of “friends”, but I fumbled for my plan of attack in all of twenty seconds, while she was speaking. It didn’t take a genius to know my plan probably wouldn’t work. But I had no better strategy at the time.

Her eyes lifted to mine, a sheen of unshed tears evident. A smile lit her face. “Okay.” She sighed.

Her softening expression made me speak out before she could think things through properly. “I’m back at work on Monday. Jo’s back tomorrow. I really want to get this, *us*, straight before she interferes and makes things

worse.” She smiled at my words. “Plus, I’m working shifts next week, so I won’t be around much.”

“I’m not working, remember? School holidays.” She took a sip of her coffee. Using her mug as a shield, she looked away.

I couldn’t hold back the grin. “True. I forgot that. I’m so used to you being buried in work and not having a life.”

She placed her empty mug on the floor and stretched out contentedly. “Tell me about it. Five more weeks of this before the real world of having no life kicks back in.”

“So, a bunch of us are heading to Bryon Bay. We’re going to leave in about an hour and be back on Monday morning. My shift doesn’t start until Monday night, so I thought I’d make the most of it.” It was all total bullshit. Yet another brainwave I’d had while talking to her. I figured since she kept retreating to the safety of her home, and with Jo being back tomorrow, the two of us being away would at least give us another twenty-four hours. I looked at her, hoping to hell my game face was in place. She could usually smell my bullshit from a kilometre away. However, her eyes lit up at the mention of Byron. *Result.*

“There’s a fantastic swell coming in, so we thought we’d make the most of it. We’ll just camp out and spend the next twenty-four hours completely relaxing and making the most of the water.” I watched on as she nibbled her bottom lip. I barely suppressed a groan. I wanted to gently bite and suck on that lip, drawing out small whimpers from her. *Damn if I’m not getting a stiffy.* “So what do you think? You in? I’m meeting the guys in an hour.” *I hoped.* Fuck, I needed to get the boys on the phone and get to grovelling. I wasn’t lying about the swell, but we’d had no intention of driving the three hours south to Byron. I would be on Shit Street if I couldn’t pull this off.

“So there’s a bunch of us going?” I stopped myself doing a fist pump when she said “us”.

“Yep. Not quite sure exactly who yet.” I was sort of telling the truth, at least. “Some of the guys had to organise some stuff first, but yeah, there’ll definitely be a group.”

El looked away momentarily, so I couldn’t read her face. No doubt she was over-thinking shit again, but what was a guy to do? I’d already created my half-cocked plan; it made sense to follow through. She turned her face back toward me, a look of resolution in her eyes. The brightness was still

there, and she couldn't quite keep back the nervous smile that played on her lips. "Okay, I'm in. I'll be ready in an hour."

Holy shit. Whoever said half-cocked plans don't work needed to look at the genius that was me. She totally bought it. I backed away with a smile, needing to get the hell out of there and make some calls. Plus, I didn't want her to change her mind.

"Awesome. I'll pick you up in an hour. Just pack your gear, no need for a tent; I've got mine." She raised her eyebrows, preparing to stop me. "Hey, it's not the first time we've shared a tent. We've been doing it since we were kids. No need to stop now." She didn't look convinced, so I simply spun around, calling out that I'd see her in an hour and took off.

I headed straight to the beach, hoping to find Mac and John. They were work and surf buddies of mine. I knew they had the weekend off. I raced down the beach when I saw their empty cars parked along the shorefront. Waving frantically, no doubt looking like a total prick, I called out to them. After five minutes of frantic waving and hollering, John finally spotted me and paddled in, and not a moment too soon. I was just about to tackle a kid for his board to take off out to sea to drag their arses back to shore.

"Hey, Preston, what's going on? You look like you're preparing for an aneurism or some shit like that. Take a breath, man!" Mac had joined us by the time John had finished speaking.

"You two, you're not busy, right? Can you be packed and ready in—" I looked at my watch. "—shit, forty minutes? Just grab your boards, your swag and clothes. I'll sort everything. The next twenty-four hours are on me. We good, yeah?"

Both John and Mac looked at me like I'd lost my mind. They simply stood back and waited for me to explain myself.

I groaned. "It's El." That got a reaction. They both broke out shit-eating grins and continued to wait to understand my request that was verging on hysteria. "We sort of broke up, but we're trying to fix it. I mean, I'm trying to fix it. I may have told her a group of us were heading to Byron. We'll leave in forty and head back tomorrow morning before shift starts. If we leave on time, we'll be there for midday. We good?"

Mac stood in silence, a bemused look on his face. John, in contrast, let rip a loud laugh. "Why do you do this shit, Preston? I swear to God, I never know what the hell you're going to do next."

“What do you mean? It’s not like I usually organise made-up weekends away.”

John continued to laugh his arse off at me and shake his head in amusement. “You’re notorious for half-cocked ideas, my man. None of them work out. Ever.”

“Hey, you’re still here, right? I may have got us in a few scrapes—”

Mac interjected. “A few scrapes? How about the time you thought it would be a great plan to head out to that bar and be my lover? Dick.”

“What? Hey, I saved your arse. Did you see the size of those women who were after us? I went home with bruises on my arse that night from their constant pinching.”

“I was thinking more of the guy built like a brick shit-house who decided that we should be adventurous and try a fucking threesome, you moron. I’ve never been so fucking terrified for my arse, ever. I was close to losing my virgin-arse status because of you.”

“Okay, so maybe that one plan didn’t go down quite so well, but you have to admit, it was funny as hell.”

“One plan!” It was John’s turn apparently. “Erm ... how about the time you ‘planned’ to fix your roof. If I recall correctly, at two in the morning, you thought it was a fantastic idea to finally change half your roof that had gone rusty.” I made to speak, but John continued. “With no new sheets, with no ladders and without checking the weather forecast.”

Damn, when he put it like that ... but I’d been inspired and had been working nights the previous week, so it was hardly surprising I was awake at two in the morning. He made it sound like I did crap like this all the time.

Okay, so maybe I sort of did, but this was different. This was for El. I sighed and rubbed my hand over my face. Time was ticking by. “So, you coming or not?”

They looked at one another, grinned and replied in unison, “Hell yeah!”

We headed toward our cars. “I’m not going to miss the chance to see you making a dick out of yourself, man. You must know that.” Mac clapped me on the back.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, dick. This is El. I can’t screw it up, so keep your stories to yourself.” The last thing I needed was for El to know of all my dick moves over the years. She knew a lot already, but not *all*.

John laughed as he fastened his board to the roof. “Don’t sweat it, Preston. We’ll look out for you.”

I huffed. "That's what I'm worried about."

"Hey, don't be like that. It'll be good. I'll give a few others a call on the way home. The weekend's on you, right?"

"Yes." I hoped this didn't get out of hand. But I'd be damned if I sat back and did nothing to sort things out with El. I had no idea when things had become so urgent. I couldn't explain it and I most definitely couldn't reason it. The last few days had been the fastest, the best and the worst in my life to date. Once again, I wanted to bitch-slap myself, but I had no choice. I didn't want to be without her. I knew it had to be now. I knew, if we were to make a go of it, I had to keep fighting and this was the moment to do so. So, despite my friends' constant mocking, and despite my vagina status, I would do what it took to ensure Ella made the right decision and chose me over running. "Thanks, man. I'll meet you in thirty-five. Does here sound good?"

"Sure thing." John nodded before jumping in his car, Mac close behind.

I watched them pull away. Damn, I needed to get a move on. I hopped into my car and mentally did a checklist. It had to work.

# Chapter Thirteen

## Ella

I debated whether I should take my one-person tent, or maybe my swag, rather than sharing with Preston. Part of me was too freaking scared to spend the night under the same fabric as him. His closeness had a great chance of being my undoing. Yet at the same time, I had said I wanted to be friends. And this was what we did. As friends, I had never batted an eyelid or had my heart threaten to beat out of my chest at the thought of sharing a cosy tent with him. With that thought in mind, I knew I simply had to keep my composure, pull up my big-girl panties, and try my hardest not to snuggle closer and go down on him in the middle of the night.

*Fuck.* There I went again, thinking of Preston's damn penis.

I'd just finished fastening my backpack when Preston pulled up. I'd already placed my surfboard outside, so I lugged out my Esky and my backpack.

"Esky?" Preston questioned, a look of amusement on his face.

"Hey, don't dis the Esky. I have wholesome food in there. No doubt all you've packed is crap and beer." I also had a cheeky supply of Tim Tams and marshmallows, but there's no chance I was sharing unless I had to. I'd seen Preston virtually inhale a whole pack of Tim Tams by himself in the past. The babies hidden underneath the fruit and water in my Esky were my emergency stash. My plan was, if I thought about Preston naked, I would eat a delicious piece of chocolaty-biscuit goodness, and my hormones would be satisfied. Not a great plan, but any chance at munching on a Tim Tam was worth it.

He quickly raised his hands in a 'calm down' motion before whisking my bag and the Esky away from me and stowing them in his ute. I locked up my house and picked up my board, a tiny bundle of nervous excitement

in my stomach. Obviously, completely down to having some amazing surf. I couldn't get caught up thinking about Preston in any other way than as a friend. I needed to get my head straight, not screw around with Preston, and behave like a grown up. *Sometimes being a grown-up sucks hairy balls!*

I positioned my board on Preston's roof racks. He then strapped it down while I got myself settled in the passenger's seat. I noticed there was no one in the backseat, and I assumed we'd be meeting up with his friends shortly.

I fastened my seatbelt and Preston got in the cab and did the same. He turned and smiled, lighting up his face. Heat hit my cheeks; I was immediately pissed off at my stupid-arse self. "We're just going to meet up with a few of the guys, and we'll head out. Hopefully, we'll get there for about midday."

"Sounds like a plan."

He started the engine and headed out to the beach.

\*\*\*

Just over three hours later, we were pulling up to the camp spot, wanting to get ourselves settled before hitting the waves—much to some of the guys' frustration. I told them our plan when we'd had a pit stop. But I knew exactly what they were like. I knew John and Mac fairly well. A few times out socialising, both of the guys had been there. A couple of guys I didn't know, Simon and Jase, were also with us, as well as a couple, Jen and Ste, plus Dani had tagged along.

When we pulled up back at the Sunny Coast and initially spotted Dani, I felt Preston tense. He had no idea if I'd be okay with her being on the overnigher. One, there was nothing going on between Preston and me for a start, so it really didn't matter, but most importantly, I'd already decided I liked her. She greeted me in a whirlwind of a hug. It was hard to believe we'd only met briefly for about ten minutes a few days ago as her delight and genuine warmth had immediately welcomed me. I couldn't help but return her excitement. She was as mad as a hatter, in a ditzy, loveable way.

On our pit stop she'd heartily agreed, elbowing a bemused Mac in the ribs, eliciting a cry and a nod of agreement. Poor Mac had rubbed his ribs and then followed her with his eyes as she got in the car with Jase. He'd looked momentarily pissed off, before he'd sighed and got back in his car with John.



We'd managed to get a spot on a campsite, a short distance from the beach. Not immediately ideal, as we couldn't fall into the water with a few steps, but it was a damn sight quieter than the heaving couple of sites closer the ocean.

Preston made quick work of our tent. I'd shared it with him before, but I was convinced it had shrunk. The thought of the confined space with the scent of Preston sparked my flutters again, so I distracted myself by heading toward Dani, who had pitched a couple of tents away from ours. She was already in her bikini and boardies, asking a perplexed John to apply sunscreen to her back. There didn't appear to be any flirtation or awareness of the effect she had on the men around her. Taking in her size, one would immediately describe her as cute. However, her natural excitement transformed her cuteness into a woman who was strikingly beautiful. Not a beauty you'd necessarily spot at first glance, but one you'd be bowled over by when you looked away after speaking to her for fifteen minutes and returned your gaze back to her. In many ways, Byron suited her. She was free and relaxed, a bird refusing to be contained.

John hesitated before applying sunscreen, looking over his shoulder and making eye contact with a pissed-off Mac. Interesting. I watched on as John looked back at an oblivious Dani and then he spotted me. His face altered immediately. Relief relaxed his frown. "Here, El." He virtually threw the bottle of lotion at me before he made a hasty retreat.

I couldn't help but look on and laugh. Dani looked over her shoulder, her eyebrows scrunched in confusion. She shrugged, looked at me and smiled. "Thanks, El."

"No problem."

After slapping on our lotion, we piled our boards on Mac's and Preston's vehicles and made our way to the beach. Excited chatter filled Preston's car. It didn't take long before I joined in with their enthusiasm, and I was virtually bouncing up and down in my seat by the time we pulled up. A few times, I felt the pull of Preston. Every time I looked at him, his eyes were always on me before they returned to the road. A soft smile played on his lips. I couldn't help but smile back every time. I was already excited, and I'd yet to hit the surf.

We headed into the water, Preston holding back slightly. "Honestly, Preston, it's fine. You head out with the guys. I need to build up to the waves out back. Years out of the water will do that. You know?"

“You sure?”

I knew if I said no he would give up the peeling waves in a heartbeat. I felt guilty at the thought.

“Hey Preston, bugger off already.” Dani was atop her board paddling lightly as she reached us. “Seriously, we want girl talk.”

I smiled. “You heard the woman. Go. We’ll head out later.”

He hesitated for just a moment before turning on his board and paddling hard out and through the waves.

“Geez, what the hell’s his problem? I thought he was gonna hook his leash to your board or some shit like that. What’s going on between you two?”

I should have felt weird talking about Preston to Dani. They were ex-fuck buddies. I couldn’t help but wonder if they would start up again. The thought made me blanch. I sighed before I spoke. “I screwed up.” She raised her eyebrows at me. “No, not like that. I mean, shit ...” I stopped paddling. “I was screwed over a few years ago. It hurt. I don’t know; changed me, I suppose.” I shrugged, not liking that I was unable to move past Fuckwit. “I’d only end up hurting Preston if we’d carried on and become serious. We’ve been friends forever. I just can’t do that. I couldn’t live myself. Plus, Jo would kill me.”

Dani had stopped paddling too. We were both now sitting on top of our boards, the waves rocking us. “Do you not think it’s too late?”

I squinted my eyes in confusion. “I don’t—”

“Preston.” She rolled her eyes at me. “Do you not think it’s too late for that ‘serious’ shit you just spouted?” She actually air-quoted the word serious. “I mean, considering he’s beyond the point of serious, and is on the path of loving the arse off you. Shit, El. Do you not see that he worships the ground you walk on?”

I was rendered speechless. Dani surely had no idea what she was talking about. Everything was too crazy fast; I was at risk of getting whiplash.

“Hell,” she continued, “you could stink of dog shit and fart gremlins and he’d still be a lovesick pup around you. It’s pretty sad, really.”

I had finally heard everything, fallen into a coma and drowned, apparently. I had no freaking clue what the crap she was talking about. My world shifted and I felt my head spin. *Damn, is she right?* It made no sense. We’d dated for a few lousy days. Had earth-shattering sex that I would miss

desperately—even my B.O.B. couldn't hit the spots Preston had—but listening to Dani talk about love confused the crap out of me.

I flapped my mouth open and closed a few times. I didn't want this. I couldn't deal with it. I'd had a man say I was his everything before, only to find him dick-deep in hoe.

“El, did you really not know? I don't understand how you couldn't. He's so freaking obvious. That man wears his heart on his sleeve, for Christ's sake. Ask any of the guys here and I guarantee you they'd all say he was crazy loved up with you. As in, wanting babies, and all that jazz with you.”

Just great, just what I needed to make myself feel like even more of a bitch. Everybody knew about Preston's feelings, and by now would no doubt know I'd screwed him over with my pathetic reasons, even though they felt so far from pathetic to my troubled heart.

I still hadn't spoken. I had no freaking idea what to say. I lay on my board, faced the waves and pounded my arms hard into the water. “Come on. I need to surf.”

I allowed the splash to ease my heavy mind, and relished the burn in my arms. I was exhausted. Exhausted was good. It stopped my brain from functioning too well. Dani and I had made it out into the green after a play in the smaller waves. It had been what I needed. Surfing the waves provided freedom, and total focus on the exhilaration and the task. After a while, we were both ready to play with the big boys. I was thankfully caught in the thrill, so when I reached a grinning Preston, I happily grinned back. The surf was beautifully clean.

My arms heavy, I paddled harder. I was determined to catch the growing wave heading toward me. I popped onto my board and turned into the wave, riding the face. My heart sped up with joy as freedom flowed through me. It was beautiful. The roar of the waves became my soundtrack as I bobbed along with it, gliding fearlessly across the high face of the wave. With a drop of breeze, I heard a call, but was too far away and too absorbed in the ride before me.

A force hit my side, catapulting me from my board. I glided through the air momentarily, before I felt the tug of my leash. I hit the water hard. The roaring of the waves was no longer friendly. Under the surface, another heavy blow hit me, this time on my head: my board. Pain exploded behind my eyes as the aching in my ribs beat to a similar rhythm as the pounding in my head. My energy became lulled. I forced a heavy kick, needing to find

air before my exhausted lungs exploded. I headed toward my board that now floated on the surface. Managing to break through, I gasped before another wave crashed down on me, forcing me under, sending my board spiralling and tugging at my leg.

No longer sure where the surface was I searched frantically, the water stinging my eyes as I kicked hard, hoping it would lead me to oxygen. The tug on my leg stopped when the leash broke. I spotted my board being swallowed and thrown by the waves.

A firm grip took hold of my arm, tugging me harshly, the grip bruising. I refused to yell out in pain, not wanting to swallow any more water as the body now close to me knocked my aching side. Finally, air rushed into my lungs. I gasped and spluttered, my head throbbing as I coughed.

“El? El?” Preston’s frantic shouts brought me out of my oxygen deprived daze.

I coughed some more.

Two hands grabbed under my arms and lifted me onto a board. Hitting the hard shell, I gasped in relief. I could breathe. *I hurt like hell*. I wanted to throw up, but damn, I could breathe. A warm comforting breath appeared near my ear. “I’ve got you, baby.” Immediately, my tension eased. I hurt like hell, but those words almost undid me.

I lay on my front, my face splashed by the gruelling waves as we followed the wave on to shore. The moment we were shallow enough, I felt Preston’s strong arms lift me. He held me close to his chest, his muscles bunched and his breathing heavy.

Beneath my haze of pounding head and nausea, I faintly heard a female voice shouting. I turned to look before the motion sent me dizzy. Preston lay me on a towel next to John, who was on his knees beside me. His face was deathly pale.

“Holy shit. Is she all right? Fuck, do we need an ambulance?”

“An ambulance?” I managed to murmur. My eyes felt heavy. All I wanted to do was sleep. I also wanted the shouting to stop.

“Fuck. El? Ella, don’t go to sleep, okay?” I heard more talking and mumbling before I blacked out.

# Chapter Fourteen

## Preston

I purposefully refused to allow myself to become absorbed in the waves. They were amazing and it was hard not to focus on the inviting rhythm of the sea, but my mind and my eyes kept a careful watch on Ella.

She was a strong surfer and swimmer, but I also knew it had been a long time since she had properly been out in the waves, with the exception of twice this last week. And these waves were pretty big. When I saw her head out toward the green, some of my tension finally released. Closer by, it was easier to keep watch. I'd always been protective of El, even though she was older than me. When I was younger, I would argue with Jo that I was simply being brotherly protective of the both of them, but even back then, in my late teens, Jo had called bullshit and called me out on my feelings for El.

It had amazed me that despite all of these years, Jo had stayed true to her word and never let on to El how I really felt about her. Initially, she'd taken the piss out of my so-called infatuation, but when El had become involved with Luke, she had seen how affected I was. Shit, I'd been heartbroken. Jo and I had one deep and meaningful chat about El many moons ago, and she'd promised to allow me to tell El when the time was right. Who would have thought that time would have been at her wedding.

As El paddled closer, her infectious grin pulled at me. I wanted to paddle across and crash my lips down on hers. I also wanted to shake the crap out of her and tell her to get the fuck over her past already. Instead, I grinned back.

I watched as she focused on an oncoming wave and enjoyed seeing her face fill up with excitement when she'd made the decision that the wave

was hers. She turned and beat down at the water, driving her arms through, determined to claim it.

It was at the moment that she popped up on the board, when my heart filled with pride, that I noticed a surfer veering in from her right on the same wave. The douche was heading right for her.

Fear travelled to the pit of my stomach as I yelled out to El. The greedy wind snatched up my calls and threw them out to sea. *Fuck. The fucker is going to take her out.*

It was obvious the guy saw her. I saw him look in her direction more than once and angle his body, trying to pick up speed. Dani's voice screamed out Ella's name behind me and I forced my arms through the waves, desperation driving me forward.

"Noooo!" Once again, my words were snatched away from me. I cursed and shouted as I helplessly watched on to see the man barrel into her. Flying through the air a couple of feet, I saw her leash become taut before she slammed down into the waves. A moment later, I saw the fucker grab for his board and paddle off, leaving Ella Christ knew where.

I couldn't see her. Her board popped up in the distance, but still no sign of Ella. I watched in horror as the bobbing board broke free just as I was a few metres away. My heart constricted; she had yet to come up for air.

I dove off my board close to where I had watched hers snap free. Saltwater brutally stung at my eyes and the waves created an impenetrable mist under the water. I couldn't see anything. As the wave rolled by, the sand and bubbles settled. I saw a flash of red. Hope leaped into my chest. She was wearing red board shorts. My straining lungs were ignored as I dove deeper and reached out for El. I clamped my hand on her arm and pulled, kicking myself to the surface. Air for El, air for me, that's all we needed at that moment, and we would be fine. The thought pushed me harder.

Breaking the surface, Ella immediately coughed and spluttered. The raw tension in my chest eased. I needed her to be okay. More than anything in the world, I needed her to speak. "El? El?" Her answer was more coughing. Holding her close to me, I eased us towards my board and heaved her on to it. That's when I noticed the blood. A gentle flow trickled down her face. Her eyes closed, her breathing still frantic, the realisation hit me: there was no more playing. She was mine and I loved her to the core, with all that I had. I needed her to be mine.

The intensity of my feelings made me wobble. I needed to get El safely to shore. I had never been more terrified in my life. Even after my accident, even after all I went through years ago, this moment was it. She was it. Ensuring she was safely on the board, I whispered close to her ear, “I got you, baby.” *And I’m never letting you go.*

The following ten minutes were a whirlwind of blood and terror. Ella lay broken on the beach. It was enough to force my calm into panic and rage. I’d had countless emergency callouts when it was my job to deal with the rage and brutality of fire. Fire was unforgiving, but this, the water engulfing, trying to swallow Ella, and her falling into unconsciousness had me unravelling.

Being a firefighter, I had to be level-headed. I had to be in control, but when Ella closed her eyes, her pulse weak, my years of training disappeared and I was pushed into a rage. An explosion of rushing blood filled my ears. The ambulance was on its way, but I needed it now. John was by her side, keeping a close eye on El, every thirty seconds or so checking her vitals.

That’s when I heard Dani’s shout.

It wasn’t a shout for help, or a shout of pain; it was a shout mirroring some of what I was feeling. My ears and eyes zeroed in on her. She was about twenty feet away. Her hands were flying around wildly, her face red with anger, tears streaming down her face. I watched on in slow-motion as she pushed at the man before her. He instantly grabbed hold of her arm and refused to let go as she pulled at it.

It was him. The fucker who had wiped Ella out. His green and black rash-vest was proof enough for me.

I leaped up and charged toward him. His back was facing me. He was built, definitely bigger than me, but there was no chance that would stop me. Steel and fire rushed through my veins. I needed to take this fucker out. I’d consider asking questions later.

As I charged into him, he slammed on to the sand with me landing on top. I heard a faint yelp from Dani, and John or maybe Mac in the distance called out my name. I lifted my arm, formed a fist and immediately slammed it into his head. The stupid fuck would pay. I hit again, still not seeing him. The image of his board ramming into El, his body hitting into hers; that was the only vision filling my mind. Going in for another punch, a fist hit me in my ribs, causing me to grunt in pain. This is what I wanted. Hitting me back would just make his pain worse.

I faintly heard a louder, closer shout. It barely registered before I was thrown off from the man under me and Mac was in front of me, trying to hold me back. I roared, "Let me the fuck go, now! This fucking idiot could have killed El." Saying her name made me turn toward her. I'd left her alone. Guilt ate at me. I closed my eyes, seeing John was actually with her, as were two paramedics.

"Hey, Preston."

The voice made me freeze. Icy tendrils of dread filtered through my system and settled in my bones.

I knew that voice.

How could I have not seen it? Realised it? All I had seen was red, my anger.

I turned my head.

Ben.

It was that fucker Ben. His lip was cut; an eye was swelling shut, and he wore a smile that had me lurching for him. Mac's arms held me back. I knew I could have broken through and continued to batter the crap out of him. My body protested when I didn't, but Dani's voice made me stall. "They've put El on the stretcher and are taking her to the ambulance, Preston."

I nodded, letting her know I heard. "You," I spat at Ben. "I have no fucking idea what the hell went down here, but let me tell you this ..." The urge to pummel his face with my bloody fist was strong. I needed to cause him pain. Shit, I wanted to rip his fucking head off. "... this is far from fucking over. When I see you next, you better hope you're already behind fucking bars, because if I catch up with you, you're going down."

His smile looked sinister in his bloodied face. A new look filled his features and his eyes, one I had never seen before, or at least not in real life, only in the movies, and usually from the crazy-arse psycho. How the hell had I not seen this before?

My fists still clenched, I turned and ran towards the paramedics. I heard the words, "You're right. It's far from over," being called out after me.

*You better believe it, buddy.*

I reached Ella's side, my heart rapidly pounding when I took in her pale skin. A burning, searing pain hit me hard; she was still unconscious. A mask sat covering her mouth, providing her with oxygen. Walking quickly by the side of the moving stretcher, I kept my eyes firmly fixed on the



mask, watching the steady stream of condensation forming of it. She was breathing; as long as she was breathing, everything would be okay and would make sense.

It took me a few moments to realise the paramedic was asking me a stream of questions. John was answering him for me. When we arrived at the ambulance, they secured her on the back and instructed me to sit up front. I did so dumbly. I looked around at my group of friends before I closed the door. “You got this?” I looked Mac firmly in the eyes as I spoke, knowing I could trust him.

He nodded without hesitation. “I’ve got this.”

I looked over at Dani. Her face was almost as pale as Ella’s. Her eyes were glazed and a steady stream of tears fell down her face. Just as I closed the door, I thought I heard a faint, “It’s all my fault.” I shook it off. This was no one’s fault but Ben’s.

If only I had sorted Ben out as soon as he had shit-stirred Ella a few days earlier, this would never have happened. I was still clueless as to what the hell had really gone down, and was desperate to find out, but sitting in the front of an ambulance, speeding down the street with the sirens on, just wasn’t the time.

I had failed to protect Ella, something that didn’t sit well with me. I saved people; that was what I did. I couldn’t help but think back to the last time I felt this helpless.

*It had been a long night. Between my late-night studies, my strict fitness regime and my two part-time jobs, I was exhausted. I looked over at the time on my dash, and the glowing green light told me it was 2:33am. Helping close up the bar was a drag on a Friday night—or rather, Saturday morning. A packed bar meant a shitload of empty glasses, spilt drinks and abandoned bottles. All I wanted to do was head home, fall on my bed and sleep. I had a shift at the garage the next day, and needed to get in some training as my firefighting tests were coming up.*

*The roads were still fairly busy considering the time, or they were in comparison to what I was used to at home. I’d been staying with my aunt on the Gold Coast for the past few months while training and working. Getting into the fire brigade meant fierce competition, and while the stations in my local vicinity weren’t training recruits, the Goldie was.*

*The sprinkle of rain began to pick up again. It had been raining throughout the night. The roads were wet and several drunken groups of*

people were stumbling around, heading home, trying to outrun the quickening downpour. A few lone souls were also caught out, their heads down, rushing forward, no doubt desperate for their dry beds. I took it all in while keeping my eyes on the road ahead, noticing the occasional taxi indicating off to the side to pick up a fare. Coming up to the lights at the crossroads, I sat behind a vehicle, and idled in neutral. Sleep was looking increasingly fine at that moment. Fortunately, my aunt's place was only a ten-minute drive away, so I knew before long I'd have the satisfaction of my soft pillow.

Green lit up my car as the lights changed. Upping the speed of the wipers as the rain grew heavier; I edged forward at the same time as the vehicle in front. Before long, I was doing a steady 60kph with the same vehicle in front of me. Another set of traffic lights were ahead; their lights on red. Just as I shifted down a gear to slow down and eased on my brakes, the lights changed, enabling me to pick my speed back up. Midway through the junction, I heard a screech and a crash. It took me a moment to realise that the crash was a car hitting mine. The force hit hard, spinning me around and nudging me over into oncoming traffic. My car came to a stop. I took a breath and looked up through my smashed windscreen, my pain yet to register. The car that had rammed into me was barely recognisable as a car.

The bonnet was caved in. The windscreen was now a spray of glass on the road, noticeable from the glint of the streetlights. It was an old car, one that must have been crumbling and barely roadworthy to begin with. I shook my head at my torrent of insignificant thoughts. Still the pain and horror were yet to register.

I knew I had to get out of my car. I couldn't see any movement in the wrecked vehicle a few metres in front of me. Reaching out my right arm, I attempted to unclasp my buckle. Sharp, searing pain immediately washed over me at the movement. It hit my arm first before travelling down to my legs. I needed to move my legs, but nothing seemed more alien to me at that moment. I willed them to move. I looked around in a panic, hearing cars screeching to a stop, voices hollering in the distance, and the rain hitting my roof even harder. I just needed to move and get my arse out of this car. Nothing I did worked. Wild panic hit my chest. Panting, gasping breaths ripped out of my lungs, creating a new onslaught of pain. I saw the flashing lights before I blacked out.

It wasn't the same. I couldn't allow that to happen. This time, I wasn't helpless. There was no way ... Ella would be just fine. I desperately hoped and needed to believe she just had a mild concussion and would wake up with an egg on her head, feeling hungover. There was no other possible outcome I was willing to imagine.

I pushed open the door as soon as we pulled up outside the hospital. Racing around to the back of the vehicle, I paced while they removed her from the ambulance. I listened carefully, half expecting to hear machines beeping in a frantic rhythm. I was losing my shit.

"Is she okay?" I asked one of the paramedics, all the time keeping my eyes trained on Ella.

The older of the two spoke. "Her BP's stable. It looks like the bleeding has stopped too."

"But she's still unconscious. Surely, that can't be right."

"She's been in and out on the drive over here. She was able to tell me her name. You're Preston, right?"

I nodded, too anxious to speak. Relief poured through me knowing she'd spoken, but I was too freakin' terrified to celebrate just yet.

"She asked for you. Said something about you having magic?"

Holy shit! She must have been delirious. Just a few short days ago, we'd been lying in bed and I'd worked her over with my tongue and fingers. She'd gasped, panted and screamed at the time, calling out that I had "magic fingers" and a wicked tongue to match. I'd made her cry out until my tongue ached and I was in fear of my tongue needing some sort of surgery from cramping. *Who the fuck gets a cramp in their tongue? I had no fucking clue that was even possible.*

Heat spread across my face, and my dick twinged at the memory. When I got her out of here, I was determined she'd be shouting I was a fucking magician. *Magic Mike* had no flies on me. I'd be taking her to a whole new level.

In the emergency room, with the curtains drawn around us, Ella was now bandaged and medicated. She woke enough to smile at me, glassy-eyed, and whisper she was okay before the doctor had finally said she was now fine to sleep.

When they'd cut off her rash vest to check her over, I'd almost charged out to find Ben, desperately needing to inflict more damage. Her side was already forming a large, black bruise spanning her ribs and waist. They'd

X-rayed her and discovered two broken ribs, but had determined that her head was fine. As predicted, she had an egg the size of a mountain on her forehead, and just below it, a gash from where I assumed the fin had caught her.

Knowing she was going to be fine but no doubt as sore as hell did something to ease the ache in my chest and the dread in my stomach, but not completely. This should never have happened, and I had no idea why it had. One thing was for sure, though: I would do everything in my power to make Ben pay.

# Chapter Fifteen

## Ella

I could barely believe Ben was the reason why I was stuck on my sofa, aching with every breath in. It simply didn't make sense. He'd been so nice to me at the station—that was, if I ignored the fact that he'd lied to my face and told me bullshit about Preston. But still, nothing about him had screamed psycho.

It had been an uncomfortable journey home. Every bump in the road caused me to gasp, and with every gasp, I could see Preston's frown become more pronounced. By the time we arrived at my house the next day, Preston's knuckles had turned white. I half expected him to have difficulty taking my keys out of my bag and opening my front door.

He'd virtually carried me into my house, helped me shower despite my protests—I could walk and stand just fine—and then fussed over me before he'd randomly disappeared with a soft kiss to my forehead, and a long glance at me before I heard him start his truck and speed away.

Confused and sore, I switched off my TV in frustration. I'd been by myself for about thirty minutes; it was thirty minutes too long. My brain was overthinking every minor and major detail of the last week, from my whirlwind relationship with Preston to my conversation with Ben. When I had woken properly in the hospital, through my haze I'd felt Preston's hand gripping mine. It was almost painful. I'd known it was him without even looking. As soon as he realised I was awake enough to speak my first words of, "Why the fuck are trolls dancing in my fucking head?" he'd stood up to lean over me so I could see his face properly without turning and aching even more.

His face was ashen. I discovered I'd been in hospital for just twenty minutes, but the events had seemed so long ago, and by the look of Preston,

you would have thought I'd been unconscious for a week. Worry lines creased his eyes and forehead. He'd looked at me, a look which honest to God took my breath away. Worry, fear and a tender warmth spilled out of him. He leaned towards me, painfully slowly. I knew he was going to kiss me. I assumed he was moving so slowly to give me the chance to stop him. I considered it for a moment before a light squeak slipped out of my parted lips. If I hadn't felt like crap, I would have grabbed hold of his head and hurried him up. I needed this man's lips on mine.

As the squeak—a noise at any other time I would have been embarrassed by—passed my lips, his eyes widened and he looked at my mouth. Finally, his lips touched mine. A fierce resolve flowed through me. When I'd felt his hands tug at my arm and his words in the ocean, my heart had swelled and practically burst. He was it.

I had been so freakin' blind and allowed my past to haunt me, so much so that it was necessary to do a gigantic face-palm. Instead, I allowed his lips to press and move against my lips, and revelled in the feel of his tongue as it slipped into my mouth.

The moment brought a whole new meaning to having sense knocked into me. Part of me wanted to thank psycho Ben; obviously, I still wanted to kick his arse, but damn, with my heart filled, I couldn't help but shrug my shoulders and think *ç'est la vie*.

Preston's arrival pulled me away from my thoughts. His squealing tyres let me know it was him. I heard him open the door and then walk straight into my bedroom. A few drawers slammed closed, before he headed back to me.

"Okay, I'm all set. I still have to go on shift tonight as there's no one to cover for me, but I've already spoken to Jo—"

"What the hell? Shit ... please tell me she's not—"

He quirked his brow and gave me a look of disapproval. So that would be me shutting up, then. My head still ached, making it too difficult to argue. "She's heading over in two hours. When I spoke to her, she was on the drive back from Brisbane. I'll try my hardest to see if I can swap a shift tomorrow night." He paused when he could see I made to speak. I did not need a freaking babysitter. My ribs were aching, my head was throbbing, but I'd never been one to succumb to feeling sorry for myself. Admittedly, I'd never broken anything before, but still. "No, El, this is what is

happening. I don't want you being alone right now. Not until I ..." He rubbed his face in frustration.

"Until what? You know everything is okay, right? People break ribs all the time. The hospital wouldn't have released me if they thought I was going to slip into a coma, or something, with my head. There's no need to be so ... I don't know ... overprotective."

A hard steely gaze was locked on me by the time I'd finished my speech—my speech which was supposed to be reassuring. Apparently not though, judging by the look on his face. Preston sat on the floor next to the sofa and brushed a stray hair away from my cheek. The gesture was loving and gentle; it didn't match his steel. "Babe ... I thought I'd lost you. Honest to God lost you. When I watched you take the hit and not come back up ... just ... I need to do this, okay?"

My stomach warmed at his words. How could I refuse him whatever he felt he needed to do? I just hoped the "need" he was referring to was about looking after me, and had nothing to do with Ben. Preston had told me that John had been in contact with the police, and that the next day I had to make a statement.

I thought the whole thing was crazy. He'd ploughed into me, but that shit happened all of the time in the water. Preston was adamant though. "Okay," I whispered.

A smile lit his face and reached his eyes. "Okay." He leaned in and kissed me again; our first kiss since the day before. We still hadn't had a talk about our relationship, about us. I didn't have the energy to think bigger than the here and the now. All I knew for sure was that I'd been kidding myself thinking I didn't have feelings for him. My trust issues could kiss my arse.

"Come on, baby. We have two hours before Jo takes over. I've given her a brief breakdown of what happened, but I'll leave the rest to you."

I groaned, not because of the heat flowing through me from Preston's delicious mouth, but from Jo causing a fuss. But I did miss my girl, and I'd take the crazy and chaos for a hug. I'd just have to remind her to go easy on my ribs, as damn; the girl had some strength in her arms.

Helping me up off the sofa, he led me to the bedroom. "I just need to hold you for a little while, okay?" I nodded in response.

Stepping into my room, I paused. His watch was on the bedside table. His shoes were in the corner of the room, and I had a sneaky suspicion that

if I opened the wardrobe or went into the en suite, I'd find it filled with masculine crap. He'd only been gone for half an hour or so, and was in the bedroom for just a few minutes. I wondered how on earth he'd managed to make my room smell like him already. "Erm, Preston? You need to talk to me about something?"

"Nope." He smiled and popped the 'p'.

"But—"

He stepped into my space and pressed a trail of searing kisses along my collarbone. Gently, he removed my clothes. He was so tender when removing my top, trying so hard not to touch my bruising, or hurt my ribs. "I ..." kiss, "said ..." kiss, "nope."

His lips won as heat rippled through me and headed straight to my knickers. He was being an arrogant shit, and damn if it didn't make me hot as hell. I was used to a different sort of confident Preston, but to be honest, he'd always bent to my will and done what he could to make me happy. This assertive, take-charge Preston, I could get used to for sure. I leaned into his kisses and immediately regretted the movement. "Ouch. Holy crap that hurts."

He pulled back. "Stop moving then."

I rolled my eyes at his instruction. "Well, what do you expect me to do when you're kissing me like that?"

He paused and looked up at me, his mouth hovering over my naked nipple. I felt the heat from his breath caress it as he spoke, "You want me to stop, baby?"

"Erm ... no." If he'd stopped, I may have had no choice but to jump his bones, ribs be damned. A fire was building deep inside me. I needed the release from the hot man before me. A bit of aching and pain would be completely worth it.

He grinned as he slowly licked my areola, and pulled me into his mouth. I groaned and tried my hardest not to push into him and remain still. When he pulled away from me, I grumbled and took in the small smile playing on his lips. He helped me to the bed and lay me down gently. Using the pillows to get me comfortable, I sighed in relief as my pain eased with my stillness. I watched as Preston stripped down, leaving his boxer briefs on, his erection straining against them. He was so amazingly hot. I squeezed my legs together, the cotton from my knickers rubbing against my heat. He'd stripped me virtually naked; I was just wearing my Wonder Woman panties.



He'd laughed when he'd seen them. He could laugh all he wanted; Wonder Woman could kick arse, and she was a hot babe.

He stretched out on the bed next to me, lying on the opposite side to my injury. With a gentle hand, he trailed soft caresses over my skin and followed it down with delicate kisses. At times, I could barely feel them, just his breath against my skin. I didn't think I'd been hotter for a man until that moment. The crazy of our week and the hurt from the day before gave me an all-new appreciation for all things Preston. I desperately wanted and needed his hands on me. The slow torture of his gentle movement almost had me coming undone.

His fingers finally reached my panty-line and he pressed kisses along my stomach. I tried hard not to breathe in sharply, knowing it would hurt if I did. Slowly, Preston edged toward the end of the bed, fingers hooked into my knickers and he eased them off me. Carefully spreading my legs, my breath hitched. I bit down the pain, needing him to continue. I was confident I would grab hold of his hand and begin riding him at any moment if he didn't give me release; holding back, pain and embarrassment be damned.

Finally, his mouth clamped down on my heat. I almost exploded and tears sprung to my eyes at the sensation of his mouth on my most intimate area. Within moments I spiralled in ecstasy, somehow managing to keep my body still and not thrust against his face. As I was trying to control my breathing from the intense climax, Preston nipped gently at my inner thighs before he snuggled up against my uninjured side.

"Better?" he asked.

A tired laugh escaped my lips, causing me to flinch at the tightening of my stomach. "Yes, much. Thank you."

He kissed my shoulder and sniffed against my neck. "You rest. I'm going to have a shower and sort some stuff before I have to head out. I'll wake you when it's time for me to leave and for you to have your painkillers."

I grunted at him, too tired to speak. My eyes were firmly shut as I released a content sigh. I heard the click of my bedroom door as he went for the shower. Fully sated, I could rest peacefully, not only after a fabulous and much-needed orgasm, but knowing the shift between Preston and I was real.

\*\*\*

“Where the hell is she? Don’t tell me to *shhh*, asswipe. Don’t think you’re too old or freaking hairy for me to take you out. Now, get out of my bloody way, now.”

Jo was back.

I heard a deep muttering, no doubt from Preston, who had more than likely tried to hold her at bay while I slept. A small scoff escaped my lips. Pfft, like that would ever happen. Very few people were brave enough or dumb enough to disagree with Jo. I was impressed Preston had even tried. Yet I also knew she was not above being devious and using threatening tactics. I’d seen her give Preston numerous nipple twists resulting in bruising over the years. Damn, she’d even tried it on me once. The only person who could handle her ‘Jo-ness’ was her new husband. Liam had somehow managed to temper her wildness. Sort of. Okay, so not exactly tamed, rather his sexy arse and general hotness had flipped her over and turned her inside out. I was completely allowed to call him hot, too. Best friend privileges, and all that jazz.

I struggled into a sitting position, pulling up my blanket, remembering Preston had stripped me bare and made me all sorts of hot and wet. Not a thought I should have been having at that moment, since Jo had entered the room.

“What the hell, woman? Shit. It looks like you’ve been dragged through a hedge backwards, and hit a bus while you were at it.”

Jo, never one to mince her words, told me exactly what I already knew. The large lump on my head pulsed in reminder and I finally settled upright with my sheet covering my breasts. The motion had my ribs kicking out at me.

“Hey,” I croaked, my voice still filled with sleep, “how was your honeymoon? Pregnant yet?” I guffawed. Not the wisest move as it hurt like hell, but I couldn’t be blamed for needing a diversionary technique. Jo was not renowned for having the warm and fuzzies over babies. She said she’d have a child someday, as long as Liam did the touchy-feely bit and shitty nappies. She certainly had no intention of stopping taking her birth control anytime soon.

It worked momentarily, before I saw her incredulous face turned a bright shade of red. “Don’t you dare change the subject? I saw you a week

ago and you were cradling a bottle of bubbly, making out with my brother —” I made to speak but her raised brow stopped me in my tracks. “—which you denied, by the way. Only to come home after a bout of the shits from a dodgy piece of meat, but amazing hot sex once I’d recuperated, to find out you’ve spent the night in hospital, some freakoid tried to kill you, and you’ve now shacked up with Preston.”

I peeked around her, looking for help in the form of Preston, only to find an empty doorway. Chicken shit.

“Do you mind telling me how the hell I managed to miss out on all the good stuff? Seriously, jack-shit has happened with you at all—like seriously, nothing at all—over the last few years, yet the moment I step out of the country, it all goes down? You know I’m never leaving the country again, right?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “I think Liam may have something to say about that.”

“Pfft, like he gives a crap or makes the decisions. As long as there’s a chance of hot and loud holiday monkey-sex, he’s happy.” She sat down on the empty side of the bed next to me. “Talk.”

I groaned. I knew I’d need my painkillers to numb the next moments out. I still had no idea how she was feeling about the whole Preston thing. She didn’t seem overly concerned, but Jo was the mistress of guerrilla tactics and warfare. She could just be biding her time to pounce and break my other rib. Who knew?

I reached for my painkillers and bottle of water, which Preston had presumably left next to my bedside while I was sleeping, and winced. “Ouch. You’d think I wouldn’t forget how much moving freakin’ hurts, but apparently I’m a glutton for punishment and keep doing it.”

“That or you’re getting kinky, and are going to start trying out BDSM.” She smirked before her smile dropped and she looked at me in horror. “Oh, my God, are you and Preston into that whole BDSM kink?” My face turned beet-red as I gaped like a goldfish. She seemed to think this was an admission of guilt. “Holy crap, you are! You dirty, little hoe-bag. Eww—”

“No! Stop it! Seriously, stop thinking about Preston and me for one, and next, no we are not.” I couldn’t keep the embarrassment from my voice. Don’t get me wrong, I’d read plenty of books over the last year since *Fifty Shades of Grey* paved the way for hot-as-hell literature. Had I been turned on when reading it? Damn straight. Was I tempted to try any of it myself?

Erm ... no. I could handle the idea of sex toys and a bit of role-play, but anything else, and I knew I'd feel like an idiot. Not ideal for my self-esteem in the bedroom.

Jo's eyes scrunched as she looked for my telltale lying-out-of-my-arse giveaway. Apparently, I had one, but, bitch that she was, she refused to tell me what. My folks had caught me out more than once in a lie. Some best friend Jo was. If she'd told me when we were younger what my tell was, half the crap I'd lied to my parents about I would have gotten away with.

"Okay, so no kink. So take your damned tablet and spill, missy. And no holding back. I'll know if you're lying."

I did as she said and gulped my drink, swallowing the tablets. Just as I was beginning to speak, Preston appeared at the door. Damn, he was hot. He leaned against the doorframe, looking around the room. He was wearing a pair of dark blue jeans and a T-shirt that while not tight, exposed his lickable muscles nicely. My eyes swept over his body before they rested on his face. He grinned at me.

"Hey, baby, I have to go." He walked into my room and headed straight for me.

In my peripheral vision, I saw Jo quirk a brow and smirk. I tried my best to ignore her, while also trying to gauge her reaction. "Okay."

Bending down to my level, Preston searched my face before he leaned in closer and kissed me. It was a tender kiss, one that hinted at a promise of a return and a whole heap of sweet feeling. "I expect I'll be back close to eight. Make sure you're still in bed ..." My face glowed, again. "... asleep," he continued with a smirk. He kissed me once more, before standing straight. He then looked over at Jo. "You're good to stay the night, yeah?"

Jo rolled her eyes. "You're really telling me how to be a best friend?"

Preston sighed in frustration. "Just answer the question. I don't want her here by herself."

"Yes, it's fine. Liam said he may stop by later too to check on us, but I'll definitely be here all night. Now bugger off before you're late. Me and El here have some serious crap to catch up with. And unless you want to know this new thing I learned to do with my tongue when going down on my husband, you may want to leave."

"Shit. There's no need for that." Preston's face blanched, while I simply laughed. "I'm going. Just call me if you need anything." He turned back to me. He looked like he wanted to say more, but he pursed his lips instead.

“I’ll see you soon.” He left the room with one last look over his shoulder. I smiled at him in reassurance. He was getting all worked up over nothing.

“Finally. I thought I was going to have to get a cattle prod to get him out of here. Needy much?”

“He’s not needy,” I defended. “He’s just concerned about me.”

“Yeah, I could see exactly how concerned.” She wiggled her brows, and then turned slightly to her side so she could look at me properly. “Okay, you can start now. From the beginning, and leaving nothing out.”

I sighed. There was no getting out of it. Plus, I knew I needed to share it all with Jo. We never kept anything from one another. I hoped by telling her the events of the last week, I could finally get some perspective on the crazy of my life. Because without her input and putting me straight, I was sure I was going to spiral into a fit of confusion and brain overload.

# Chapter Sixteen

## Preston

It was damned lucky that Jo returned from her honeymoon the day I was back at work; else there was no way I would have been able to go do my shift. I felt a bit shitty pouncing on Jo the minute I knew her plane had landed, but El was more important. It wasn't like I'd called her and Liam while they were still away, plus I knew Jo would be pissed at me if I hadn't told her what had happened.

I was hoping that my shift would allow them to talk crap out. There had been a definite shift between Ella and me, but we'd yet to hash stuff out between us. No doubt hours of yakking with my sister would give her ample time to work out that this was it for the two of us. Meanwhile, I was heading to my shift with a mixture of dread and eager anticipation. I wanted nothing more than to beat down on Ben, but now that John had filed an initial report to the police I knew being rash and kicking his arse—no matter how much I'd love to get my fists bloody tearing him up—wasn't the best approach. Instead, I needed to find out what the hell he had been thinking.

Twice, now, he'd screwed El over and me by proxy. More importantly, he could have fucking killed her. Just the thought of it had my temperature and anger spiking. I needed to get my head clear though. If we did get a call-out during the night, I couldn't let all this fucked-up shit put me, or the guys, in danger.

Pulling up into the station parking lot, I searched for his car. It was there. A brand-new Land Cruiser. I had no idea how he afforded that on our salary. Don't get me wrong; I had my baby and my rust-bucket truck, but it had taken me years to fix my baby up. I was sure it was nothing, but every thought related to Ben stirred unease and distrust.

John was waiting outside the main doors as I approached. He nodded in greeting, and flicked his head to the right, indicating he needed to talk. No humour or normal greeting, which usually consisted of him making some lame-arse joke, welcomed me. He had his game-face on. A face I had seen on a few other occasions since knowing him. I had a feeling I was not going to like what I heard.

I was right.

Barely containing my rage and raw need to charge inside and pummel the ever-living crap out of Ben, I tightened my fists and looked away from John. Looking at his mixture of pity and outrage was too much; it became kindling to the fire already burning in my gut.

I took a few steps away from John, looking out into the car park. I tried my hardest to take a calming breath, only to hear how ragged and uneven it was. It frustrated me even more.

“Preston—“

“Don’t. Just don’t, John,” I bit the words out. I didn’t want John to catch the fallout of the cluster-fuck I’d just walked into.

Crunching gravel alerted me to John’s slow approach, no doubt thinking if he made any sudden movement I’d take my desire to beat the shit out of Ben, out on him. That would never happen. All of the fire burning in me was for Ben, and Ben alone.

“I know, man. Shit, I get it, but you have to pull yourself together. You have five minutes to get yourself under control, and then you have to go to a meeting.” He paused and stood to the side of me. “I shouldn’t even be telling you this. If Sam knew, I’d be up on charges myself, but damn, I know it’s all a load of shit and couldn’t have you walking in there and facing the firing squad without a heads up.”

I turned, looked at John, and nodded. I knew he was right. If Sam, our station officer, was aware of the conversation, he’d be pissed. Not that he wasn’t a nice guy, but he was a firm believer of doing everything by the book, a book I wasn’t exactly in the habit of reading. “I know. I’m glad you did. Thanks, John. I owe you one; shit, I owe you even more than that.”

“Don’t mention it. I know you’d have my back if the situation was reversed.”

He was right. I would fight fiercely for my brothers. Having each other’s back while out fighting fires, meant that we’d always be looking out

for one another. The only way to save your own arse and the life of others was to watch out for each other, both on duty and at home.

Apparently, Ben had no such moral code.

No, instead, he'd decided to screw me over in yet another way.

I nodded once more and headed inside, aware of the bitter, thick tension filling the station. The station was our second home. It had always been a place filled with laughter and pranks, but also an unconditional promise to be there for one another. As I walked past Tony and Phil who were just clocking out, they each nodded once. I knew they didn't believe any of the shit from that one simple gesture. Immediately, my shoulders lifted a little, and I stood taller. There was no way everything I'd worked so hard for over the years would be taken from me. Not without a fight, at least.

The chief, as we fondly called him, knowing he hated it, greeted me at his office door. His eyes told me immediately shit had just gotten real. He ushered me in with keen, wide-eyed focus, followed by a sweeping of his arm. As soon as I stepped in, I understood why. We were not alone.

Two suits—one in a uniform that left me gulping—were sitting on straight-backed chairs at Sam's desk. They both stood when I entered.

"Preston Craig?" asked the shorter of the two. He had greying hair, a rounded belly and a stern mouth, and he held out his hand to give mine a firm shake. "I'm Superintendent Barry Maxwell. This here," he indicated to the much taller man beside him, "is Detective Richards. He's travelled in from Brisbane CBD Police Headquarters." I looked over at Detective Richards and gave a curt nod, which was returned with a squint. "Please take a seat, Preston."

Sam sat next to me in the chair to my right. I hoped desperately he had my back. A stickler for rules, I knew I'd pushed Sam a few times, like the time I'd talked the guys into emptying his office of all furniture when he'd been leading a tour of the station, showing around a local MP and a reporter. I'd thought he was going to have an aneurysm, but damn if it wasn't funny as hell. He'd practically measured his desk and cabinet's positioning, ensuring that I placed them in the exact spot the furniture had been to begin with. Of course, anyone without balls would have used that moment as a learning example. Taken it as a time to grow up and stop riding Sam's arse.

Not me.



Admittedly, a few of the things I'd done were a little outlandish, but never dangerous, and never putting anyone at risk.

I still had no idea what the meeting was about, exactly. John had clued me in that there was a cop and a Supe of some sort waiting to see me, and the rumour spreading like bushfire all morning was that earlier today, Ben had been locked in the office with Sam, and wouldn't be working tonight's shift. About an hour before my shift started, the two officials had shown up and had been meeting with Sam ever since.

Both men sat down on chairs behind Sam's desk and began to flick through a variety of files and papers. I held myself still, desperately trying not to shift uncomfortably.

The Superintendent cut the uneasy silence first by clearing his throat and fixing me with a hard stare. "We've received an allegation about your involvement in a case that Detective Richards is investigating. Detective Richards has kindly come along for an initial conversation with you before he makes a decision whether or not there's a possibility that the allegation is true."

I wanted to charge up out of my seat and begin ranting at how fucking crazy this all was. Anything out of Ben's mouth was a load of shit. Instead, I sat stock-still and asked, "What allegation, exactly?"

Detective Richards spoke up. "There have been a series of arson attacks on businesses over the last six months. There have just been tentative links between them all, but it's now been brought to our attention that you may have some information about this?"

My thudding heart was set to explode. Shock and rage built deep inside me, and my stomach tied up in a knot at how ridiculous the whole damn conversation was. I bit back my desire to curse and shout, but I couldn't quite restrain the sarcasm from my words, "Arson? Seriously? You're asking me, a firefighter, if I'm responsible for arson attacks?"

"I asked if you had information on them. Are you aware of these attacks?"

Of course I was. I was a firefighter, and any fire I fought, or fire I heard on the news, I paid attention to. I was aware of the reports that there was a series of random attacks on businesses, but as far as I was aware, there were no links. The businesses ranged from a bar, to a car dealership, to a local news station. I nodded. "I watch the news and have been on duty when a few of the attacks occurred, so yes, I know of the events. What I don't

understand is why you would think you need to have this conversation with me?" *Ben. That bastard, Ben, was responsible. I knew this with absolute certainty.*

Sam shifted in his chair and looked at me. "We just need to get this whole mess cleared up. I have no doubt you're innoc—"

"What the hell?" I cut in. "You're actually talking about me being guilty?" I aimed my question at the cop. "You think I am responsible for this?" I knew my face had turned red in rage and my hands shook. I gripped on to the arms of the chair.

"No," Sam interjected, "I'm not saying that. We're not saying that. I have no doubt in my mind that this can be fixed up really easily. I talked to Maxwell and asked him to come here for this conversation, rather than hauling you off to the station."

"What exactly is the accusation you're talking about?" I spoke directly to the Detective.

"I have an eyewitness who has located you at three of the six buildings within twenty-four hours of the attacks. I would sooner be asking you this question at the station, but Sam and I go way back and he asked me to come and chat quietly with you beforehand."

Eyewitness? What the hell was happening? I racked my brains for the other locations of the attacks, but came up with nothing more. I certainly hadn't been to the Toyota dealership, or the news station. I had, however, been to the bar that was attacked in the past. I thought harder and tried to recall if it was twenty-four hours beforehand but I couldn't be sure. I couldn't remember when the fire had been. I just knew I wasn't on duty that night so I hadn't been called out. "Evidence? What sort of evidence, beyond that of an eyewitness. Because obviously, if was just one eyewitness that would put *him* at the same location, right?"

The Detective didn't flinch or acknowledge my response to the eyewitness. "We can also access surveillance footage from two of the businesses, who had their recording fed to a central online hub."

"So this is all a coincidence, right? I can explain every one. And I sure to hell can have people back me up about where I was." I paused before weighing up my next words. "It wouldn't be Ben making these accusations against me, would it? You know he has a huge problem with me, right? My girlfriend, Ella, has just spent twenty-four hours in the hospital as a result of

his handiwork. She's going to be making a formal statement at the police station tomorrow about it."

The Detective's brows lifted and the Supe sat forward as he released a breath. His deep frown had relaxed a little.

"Damn, is she okay? What happened?" Sam asked, his voice filled with concern.

"She has a couple of broken ribs," my fists clenched at the thought, "and a mild concussion. I thought I'd lost her. I also have at least six witnesses of my own who can verify that what happened down in Byron was absolutely no accident." I was becoming increasingly frustrated. I just wanted to get to the bottom of the crap storm that was brewing. I also needed to have a quiet word with Ben; one that I hoped would involve my fist connecting with his jaw. "He also spoke to Ella a few days ago at the calendar shoot, and told her a bunch of lies. Again, Ella can back me up on that. Over the last six months, I've had nothing longer than a five-minute conversation with Ben, mainly because we tend to work different shifts, but also because there's something not quite right about him. Clearly, he's a lying piece of crap."

The Detective looked thoughtfully at me, weighing up my words. "Saturday before last there was an arson attack over at Dodson's Mechanics on Carlisle Street. Sam, here, said you were on a week's vacation."

"That's right. I was. Today's my first day back."

"What have you heard about the fire?"

I sighed, but didn't break eye-contact. "Just what I heard on the news the next day. They reported it as an electrical fault, though. I didn't watch the news til later that evening when I finally got home from my sister's wedding." I breathed a little easier. I had been out of town.

Sam interrupted with a pat on my back. "You see, he was at his sister's wedding last weekend. Damn, I could have told you where he was if you'd told me that was the weekend you were focusing on."

The Supe, who had been quiet all of this time, spoke up, "So, Detective Richards, where do you want to go from here?"

Leaning back in the chair, the Detective pressed the tips of his fingers together in front of him. He looked at me long and hard. "What's your girlfriend's name?"

"Ella Simmonds."

“Okay. What I’m going to do is wait until we get her report. Tomorrow morning, did you say?” I nodded. “I’ll then have a conversation with Ben ...” he looked at his notes, “... Townsend, and see if we can get to the bottom of this. Best not talk about this to anyone here, and stay away from Ben.”

I fisted my hands and made to speak. Sam prevented me. “That’s fine. I’ll make sure of it. Ben’s no longer working tonight’s shift, and I’ll change the schedule to make sure there’s no clashes.”

“You can’t be serious. That son of a bitch—”

“You’ll damn well do what you’re told, Preston,” Sam ordered. His tone was clipped.

“Fine,” I growled. I knew I sounded like a petulant child, but the need to confront Ben was a thick urge travelling through me. Trying not to listen and act on that took a whole lot of self-control; a self-control that turned my knuckles white.

“Okay. I just need to have a conversation with your superiors, Preston, and I’ll be in touch as soon as I have more information.” This time he stood and clasped my hand. I hoped this was a sign that he didn’t believe the bullshit about me.

I gave his hand a firm shake, did the same with the Supe and left the office without looking back.

The next few hours, or days, or however long this crap was going to last for was going to be hell. I just needed to get through them. And I did get through things best by throwing myself into my shift.

# Chapter Seventeen

## Ella

Jo shared my bed with me and we chatted on and off through the night. I was exhausted, but every time I moved in my sleep I would wake myself up in pain, which inevitably woke Jo up. At some point in the night, or rather early hours, we gave up, got out of bed and drank hot chocolate. I'd shared everything with Jo. Well, everything apart from the hot monkey-sex Preston and I had had. I thought that might have pushed her over the edge a little.

When it had been clear we had done the dirty, Jo had frozen momentarily before she'd schooled her face, something I wasn't used to from her. She usually spouted whatever popped into her brain; not this time however.

We sat on my veranda and watched the sunrise while sipping our hot chocolate. Jo had even given me marshmallows, so I knew she was pissed at me. Sitting out on the deck, trying my damndest not to move more than necessary, Jo finally found her voice and opinion. She'd had a lot to say about Ben—a hell of a lot—but she'd kept her opinions about Preston to herself.

“He's been in love with you forever, you know.”

Apparently, there was no more pussy-footing around. I nodded. “So I've been told.”

“Did you really never know? Never suspect?” Her voice was filled with disbelief and wonder.

“Never. Your wedding, well, I was completely thrown,” I looked at her, “but you didn't seem to be. Preston said you've known all this time too, and your text ...” I laughed.

She returned my smile. “I made a promise. Hey, don't look at me like that.” I had one of my eyebrows quirked. “I know we've always told each

other everything, but this was different. I didn't know how I felt about Preston's feelings for you. To be honest, it made me want to gag. My best friend and my baby brother? Don't even get me started on the *baby* part," she teased. "But seriously, I suppose part of the reason why I made and kept the promise was I didn't want you to be together. It would have been just freaky weird. The thought of seeing him with his tongue stuck down your throat ..." She made a gagging sound.

"Hey." I laughed and interrupted her, "he has a very nice tongue, I'll have you know."

"No." She put her fingers in her ears and hummed an out-of-tune la, la, la. I wanted to kick her or throw something at her. Usually I would, but I knew the jolt would hurt me more than the kick to her shin would her. She removed her fingers and smiled.

"So, what do you think now?" I asked tentatively. I had no idea how I would react or respond if she was not okay with everything. Her random wink pre-honeymoon and her text, and the fact she didn't want to kick the crap out of me last night I hoped were all good signs. But still I'd decided, after the crazy events of Byron that life was too short to hold back any longer. I hadn't said as much to Preston, yet my actions of spreading my legs wide and allowing him to wreak delicious havoc on my body the previous afternoon, I assumed pretty much cleared up our non-relationship to being back on in full-swing.

"Now?" She smiled, a bright smile that immediately brought stupid tears to my eyes. "Now, I think it's pretty awesome. You're both adults, and damn, if it'll stop him from pining over your arse, that's got to be a good thing, right? Seriously, the constant interrogation I received whenever I saw him was enough to make me want to kick him in the nuts. I've threatened him more than once."

I could just imagine their conversations and had no doubt he had come close. Jo was not renowned for her patience.

"Plus," she continued, her voice becoming serious, "you've been through so much shit with Fuckwit. It's about time you had some happy. It's also time you moved on. I'm sure B.O.B. would appreciate the time out." She laughed and shuddered at the same time.

This time I threw the cushion at her. I immediately gasped in pain, but it was worth it as the cushion hit her square in the face.

"Hey!"

“Hey, yourself. You’re lucky it wasn’t something harder. You leave B.O.B. out of this.”

She laughed. “I am happy, though. Five years is a long time to still be living in the past. Don’t get me wrong: if either of you screw this up or hurt each other, I will be kicking both your arses. I’ll have both of your backs, and I’ll never be forced to choose.” I opened my mouth speak. “No, El, I’m serious. Sometimes shit happens. I’m sure it will work out. I really hope it will work out, but I’m just putting it out there. The two of you be stupid, and I will come after the both of you. And just don’t give me sex details, okay?”

My heart beat rapidly at her words. *God, I love Jo.* “Thank you. I promise I will try my hardest not to screw this up.” My words were true and filled with conviction. The last thing I wanted was to mess with any of our friendships, but I knew with absolute surety that Preston was worth the risk. “So,” I asked through a sip of my hot chocolate, “you never finished telling me about your honeymoon with that hot husband of yours. What’s it feel like being a Mrs?”

A light blush crept over her cheeks. I grinned as red spread across her face. I could count on one hand how many times I’d seen Jo blush, and this blush now certainly piqued my curiosity. “My, my, Mrs Mason, what has you all hot and bothered?”

With a deep groan, she put down her hot chocolate and covered her red cheeks with her hands. She peeked a look at me through a gap in her fingers. “It was ...” She trailed off.

“Holy crap! What is it?” I struggled to read her reaction. She was embarrassed about something, but I would be damned if I knew what. It took a lot to make Jo uncomfortable. Damn, in our late teens, she regularly tried to talk me into flashing or mooning passing cars when we travelled down the highway. She’d only swayed me once while I was drunk; she, however, had done it all the bloody time. Damn, she’d done it just two weeks ago when we were on her bachelorette party.

“It was great. Amazing, in fact.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“I think I broke him,” she whispered, and looked at me with a genuine face of concern.

I couldn’t help it. I laughed and immediately regretted it when I jolted my ribs. “Ow, I’m sorry, but what are you bloody well talking about? Broke

him?” Images of a broken Liam flittered through my mind, but I had no clue what she was referring to. I assumed she wasn’t serious, or he wasn’t truly broken since she’d spent the night with me.

“Stop laughing, Cougar.”

“Hey, no fair, low-blow. He’s only two years younger than I am. Now, tell me, what do you mean broken?”

With a deadpan face, she spoke in earnest. “His penis. I broke his freaking penis.”

For a moment, I thought that I misheard, a moment when I could almost hear crickets. *Did she just say ... She really did ...* I knew it would hurt and probably do a whole heap more damage, but damn, how could I not react by choking on my hot chocolate and spitting it out? I laughed until tears rolled down my cheeks, and clenched my side in pain when I did. “Enough ... enough ...” I was going to pee myself. I clenched my legs together to stop my pee in its tracks. There was no way I was going to give her ammo against me by peeing my pants; not when she’d just told me she’d broken her husband’s penis.

“Hey, it’s not funny.” Her look of horror and concern eventually turned into a wide grin. Unable to keep it in any more, she laughed along right with me. “Oh, my God, it’s not funny.” She continued to laugh. “I really did break him.” She snorted, with tears streaming down her face.

Taking in a shaky breath, I forced myself to calm, or as best as I could. I wiped my eyes and said, “Okay, I need answers.”

Jo took a shuddering, laughing breath, and resumed some semblance of self-control. “Damn, El, it was awful, shit, funny as fuck really, but not—you know?” She picked her drink back up and continued. “It was great. The hotel was amazing. Everything was bloody awesome, better than we both hoped, and the sex? Geez, you’d think we’d been saving ourselves all these years with how we were going at it. By the fifth day I was sore, like, seriously sore. I almost couldn’t stand thinking about his penis.”

I pursed my lips together, wondering and dreading where her story was going. Biting back the laughter that was threatening to escape, I looked away and took a calming breath before looking at her and indicating her to go on.

“So, on Thursday afternoon we went for a lazy swim, and things got steamy pretty quickly, but I reined myself in. I also told him that I was sore, so he suggested we use some lube—”



It was too much. A laugh erupted out of me. Holy crap, it hurt, but there was no way of holding it back.

Giving me a filthy look, she chose to ignore my outburst and continue. “I said it might work, take away some of the soreness, but of course, we didn’t have any with us. So Liam went on a mission to find a pharmacy, or a market, or *something* where he could buy himself some. I waited at the hotel while he was gone. About forty-five minutes later, at which point I was a bit pissed as he was interrupting my read, he came back looking all kinds of flustered. Obviously, he’d struggled with the language barrier a bit, but he’d managed to get a bottle of lube.”

I clenched my teeth together, refusing to interrupt.

“Well, I reluctantly put my book to the side, and being the good wife I am, grabbed the bottle and poured a generous supply directly onto his penis.” I laughed as her face took on a picture of horror. “I may have gone a little overboard with how much I squirted, but I was trying to be sexy. It was only after I was massaging it in, all over his balls, his helmet, I mean every millimetre of it, that I felt the heat on my hands.”

My hand covered my mouth. “Holy shit, it wasn’t ...?”

Jo bit her bottom lip and nodded. “El, I swear to God, when he started screaming, and then when I looked down and saw his junk and all of his groin a raging red, I almost died. That, and my hands were burning. I mean, seriously burning. They hurt like hell.”

“Holy crap! What did you do?”

“At this point, he was screaming bloody murder and crying. I headed to the bathroom and washed my hands over and over; I even got my exfoliator on them. They were still burning. Liam jumped into the shower and attempted washing it off, but shit, the oil really does the trick of absorbing into the skin almost immediately.”

It did. I’d used a similar sort of oil when I’d pulled a muscle a while back. It burnt like kindling for sure.

“I slapped some cream on his junk then, but this simply seemed to stoke the fire and he rushed to wash it off. It was so freaking red, El. I swear, I thought it was going to self-combust or something. I kept looking at it. I couldn’t help it. I imagined it pulsating in the heat until it blew up, and I’d end up with bits of dick and balls all over me.”

I snorted as I howled in laughter. “You could have really been a dickhead. Holy shit, too funny!”

“We tried everything. Eventually, I had to call the hotel doctor to come and take a look. He arrived just as I was pouring the small carton of milk I had on his groin. I think the doctor thought we were some kind of pervs.”

“Do you think?” I grinned. The craziness of the last forty-eight hours fell away from my shoulders during her story. Jo was amazing at making me feel better about myself. If she could handle a husband with a glowing penis for the rest of her life, I was sure I could handle anything.

“Thank God the doctor spoke amazing English. He looked at the bottle, laughed, and shook his head. The pharmacy had recommended the bottle for soreness, just not the kind we needed.” She shook her head.

“Apparently, the milk was actually a good idea. He also gave us some ointment that didn’t reignite the fire, but Liam’s still crazy sore and walking funny. I don’t think he’s going to want to have sex again.”

I put my now empty cup down and patted her arm gently. Despite the laughter, she was genuinely concerned. I could tell by the slight wideness to her eyes. “Hey, I’m sure he’ll be fine once he’s nicely healed. Just baby him a bit and he’ll be good as new before long.”

With a tilt of her head, Jo returned my smile. “I know. It just freaked me the shit out. Even though I know it’s funny as hell, he was in so much pain. I just—I don’t know, I hurt, you know?”

“I know, hon.” I attempted to lighten the mood and change the subject. “So, when are you heading back to work?”

“I have another week, thank God. We both booked two weeks off. So I can spend some time catching up with you this week, especially now Liam’s out of action.” She smirked and laughed. “He’s such an idiot. I swear. Who gets his wife to put hot oil on his dick?” She laughed some more while I tried my hardest not to. I didn’t think my ribs could handle it. Standing up, Jo stretched, a movement that I was damn jealous about. “Okay, I’m going to grab a shower before Boy Wonder gets here, and then I’ll head home.” She paused at the door. “You need anything first?”

“No, thanks. I’ll just sit out here for a while and wait for Preston.” It felt unbelievably natural, and gave me a whole heap of the fuzzies talking about Preston to Jo, especially as she wasn’t freaking about it. It also made me smile in the way that implied we’re a couple. It was a feeling I was planning on getting used to.

As Jo headed inside, I had a quiet giggle to myself. I wasn’t too surprised that Liam had managed to buy hot oil for his penis. Between the

two of them, they were always getting themselves into scrapes, with a little bit of mischief and mayhem thrown in. It always surprised me when I considered both of their professions. They'd met at university while studying for their degrees in architecture. Liam was in his final year when Jo had started, and she'd managed to sweep him off his feet. Literally. For a hard-ass, feisty woman, Jo had always been, and still was, the queen of mishap. Regardless of plans and precaution, the little bit of klutz in her always worked its magic. Somehow, despite this inner-self she tried desperately to remain hidden; she'd always managed to get the business side of life sorted. To be honest, I had no idea how they managed being a couple without seriously hurting themselves or each other.

Two years earlier, they'd made the leap and opened up their own company. They also had a silent partner, Liam's brother, Simon, but he was the money behind the amazing talent of the new Mr and Mrs.

A car pulling up outside my house brought me out of my thoughts. It was a black Jeep with blacked-out windows, one I didn't recognise.

I wasn't sure of the time, but the sun was now up. I knew it was still early, too early for Preston to have finished his shift. The car idled a moment before the engine was switched off. The driver's door opened out into the road, so I still couldn't tell who it was. It wasn't until he stood up tall and the sun struck him that I realised it was Ben. He still looked as smoking hot as he had the first time I'd seen him, but this time there was an aura of ugly around him. The lies he'd told me, on top of the whole almost-killing me incident—which I still thought Preston was being OTT about—was enough for my heartbeat to quicken and my breath to hitch. I wasn't convinced Ben was someone I could trust.

For a moment, I considered calling for Jo, but then I remembered she was in the shower so she wouldn't hear me, plus I was sure I was being overly dramatic. As he stepped fully around his car and was directly in front of my home, he gave me a tentative smile. He was anxious, and I was pretty sure feeling damn guilty from the awkward glances he was directing my way.

"Hey, Ella." His deep voice was barely above a whisper.

I smiled at his quiet greeting. "Hi, Ben. It's a little early for a visit."

He paused and looked around for a moment before remaking eye contact with me. "Erm, I'm sorry, I didn't even think. I just needed to see you. To see how you were, and to say sorry. Shit, Ella, I'm so sorry." He

walked closer to me as he spoke, his foot landing on the bottom step of my veranda as he finished. “Do you mind?” He indicated with a nudge of his head, seeking permission to enter.

“Sure.” I shrugged and regretted it after the sharp pain I felt from the movement. Ben reacted to my grimace and gasp of air and stood by my side, concern etched on his handsome face.

“Damn, I really am so sorry. I didn’t even see you. I was just—and the next minute you were there. I don’t even understand what happened.” He sat to the side of me and looked me over. “How badly are you hurt?”

“I’m okay. Honestly, it’s okay. It was an accident. I have a couple of broken ribs and took a hell of a knock to my head, but I’ll live.” As I spoke, he closed his eyes. A look I couldn’t quite decipher passed over his face.

When he opened his eyes again, he looked at me in earnest. “I truly am sorry. I’ll make it up to you.” He reached out and lightly touched my hand. I recoiled immediately; it didn’t feel like the same Ben who I had met just a few days before. He seemed genuine enough, but still, the lies didn’t make sense. His eyes tightened when I moved my hands away from him. I immediately smiled to soften the blow.

“You don’t have to do anything.” I paused briefly. “I suppose you could just promise you won’t crash into me again, and we’re good,” I said half-heartedly, not liking the intensity forming in his eyes. It amazed me how quickly a person could shift, could turn and practically transform in front of your eyes. As a teacher, I had seen it many times—usually involving sixteen-year-old boys—when a simple request became a challenge. A certain hardness would appear, and it would reach that moment when you knew the crap was going to hit the fan and you had to calm the booty out of it; if not, there was going to be a big, old ruckus.

Ben did exactly the same in front of me at that moment. I watched the sudden change, the switch of focus and emotions, almost as if watching a play-by-play. It was textbook for *the kid’s got a whole heap of issues going on and I’m in his warpath*. “So,” I began, knowing that neutralising the flare up of angst was my priority, right next to getting him the hell out of here before Preston returned, “I was just making a coffee. Want one?” A coffee was friendly and normal. I could also give him the “chat” time I assumed he needed, and then give him a nudge to leave.

Something close to a smirk appeared on his face before he stood up and broke out into a proper smirk. “Sure, let me treat you to one.”

“It’s okay. I can just switch on the kettle and grind some beans.”

Placing his hands in his back pockets, he rocked on his feet. My eyes were drawn to his taut biceps. Admittedly, they were delicious, but the desire to lick them was no longer there. “We can do that if that’s what you prefer, or we could also pop over to Julian’s and grab a skinny, hazelnut, double-strength cappuccino.” I knew my eyebrows were planted firmly next to my hairline. “Hey, I listen. Preston talks about you all the time; remember?”

I had no doubt after the last week’s events that Preston did in fact talk about me a lot, and had done so over the past ten years. I knew Preston would be pissed at the idea of Ben and me together, but I also wanted to find out why he’d lied at the photo shoot, and hopefully solve the mess. Ben and Preston had to work together, so solving the ridiculous boy-dramas between them I knew would be a good thing. If I could solve it by taking a quick coffee before Preston came home—and according to my watch, I had an hour—then I would be able to give myself a firm pat on my back.

Taking a deep breath, I replied, “Okay, we can do that. But I really need to be back before Preston goes home.” He beamed down at me. “Plus who can refuse a yummy coffee from Julian’s? Let me just grab my purse.”

“No need, my treat.”

I stood up carefully, pushing myself off the arm of the bench seat. I was barely decent in my short-shorts and my Rolling Stones tee, but I’d do. I was just relieved I’d pulled on a bra before I came out for coffee with Jo. “Let me just let Jo know where we’re going. She’s taking a shower.”

“Jo? Preston’s sister? Looks like I wasn’t your only early-morning visitor.”

“She stayed last night. She’s rarely up at this time in the morning, but my fidgeting kept her awake.” Poor Jo, she rarely did well at the crack of dawn; she’d managed surprisingly well. I opened my door and called out to Jo, but realised she couldn’t hear me because of the running water. “I’ll just leave her a note.”

Ben’s jaw tighten before he nodded and smiled. I shrugged it off. It looked like he was a bit grumpy without caffeine in his system. I could totally relate.

I scrawled a quick note on the back of an envelope, letting her know I’d be fifteen minutes and would grab her a coffee too. I hesitated about letting

her know if I was with Ben or not, but decided to be truthful, else she'd wait until I healed so she could kick my arse.

I pulled the door closed. "Okay, I'm good to go."

He held my arm firmly, helping me down the steps. "Wonderful. I'm desperate for a decent coffee." His voice was low and didn't quite match his words. Reaching his car, he opened the door for me and helped to strap me in. A genuine smile was now on his face, and there was a brightness to his eyes. I couldn't help but think *damn, he really is excited about having a caffeine fix.*

# Chapter Eighteen

## Preston

It was one of the longest shifts of my life. Not only was I still seething about Ben, but I was also worried about Ella. My fingers constantly hovered over my phone, wanting to call or text her, but it was still early and I didn't want to risk waking her. No doubt a late night with Jo would mean she'd need a lie-in, and I didn't think she'd appreciate a 6am wake-up call.

It had been a quiet night, for which I was grateful. While I could have done with the distraction, my own distraction would not have been ideal out on a job. When the day-shift clocked in, I headed out to the car park with John. We'd only been able to catch up briefly during our shift, enough for me to confirm what had happened, and while Ben's name had been mentioned in the meeting I was beyond a doubt sure it was him who had set me up.

"Are you heading straight to the police station when you get back?" John asked as we stopped behind my car.

"She has an appointment at 9am, so we'll head out pretty soon. I'm hoping Detective Richards will have prepped them, so they pay special attention to what she has to say. I just—damn, I don't know, John. This whole thing stinks like a pile of shit. Were you able to speak to your sister?" John's sister worked at the main depot in Brisbane as part of the recruitment team.

"I asked her yesterday before I started the shift to see if she could pull Ben's file. She was a bit hesitant, for obvious reasons, but she agreed that the whole situation sounded a bit too weird. He was transferred, what, six months ago now? I've never shared more than a couple of sentences for the guy in one sitting, and not for lack of trying, either. He says little, but

always seems a bit too nice, plus he always seems to just be there, you know?”

I did know. I felt it too. To be honest, over the past six months he'd barely made it on my radar, but John was right. In the middle of conversations, or in the thick of a job, he always seemed to be standing back and looking on. When I thought about it, his eyes always seemed to land on me, too. Something seriously stank, and it smelled a lot like bullshit.

“She’s in the office today so will have a look when she gets the chance. I’ll let you know as soon as I hear anything.” He clapped me on the back. “Now go home and look after that woman of yours.”

It sounded like a fine idea to me. I knew she was still in need of major TLC; that I could most definitely provide. All I wanted to do was inhale her sweet-smelling skin and wrap her in my arms. I had a plan to do just that when I got to hers. I was glad that I'd shifted half the contents of my wardrobe around to her place. It made life a whole lot easier. Amazingly, she hadn't even kicked up too much of a fuss. The power of the tongue was an amazing thing. I would happily distract her over and over again if need be.

With the memory of her taste and her scent firmly locked into my senses, I hopped into my car and headed to Ella's.

One of the good things about finishing a shift at this time was that it meant I went against the flow of rush-hour traffic. For a Monday, the chaos was expected, with a mountain of cars heading south while I headed north. The journey only took twenty minutes. Pulling up outside El's, I immediately spotted Jo pacing the veranda. When she spotted me she froze, her face pale. She clutched her phone to her chest and worried on her bottom lip.

Something was wrong. It was rare I saw Jo stressed, and to be ghostly pale meant she was crazy-arse worried, too. I leaped out of my car, my seatbelt barely finishing retracting and jogged to the house. “What is it? What’s wrong? Where’s Ella?” I stood facing her and then headed indoors before she had the time to reply. “Ella?” I knew there was a chance she could be sleeping, but there was no way I was going to let that stop me. At that moment, I just needed to know she was fine, and that Jo's concern was nothing to do with my woman. I knew it was wrong to hope Jo had had an



argument or something with Liam, but my selfish need for Ella to be well was pushed to the forefront.

“She’s not here.” Jo’s voice was quiet and unsteady.

I stopped in my tracks, my hand on El’s bedroom doorhandle. I opened it anyway, only to find a made bed. I turned to face Jo and took several steps in her direction. From Jo’s physical reaction alone I knew some major shit had gone down. This wasn’t about Ella heading to the station by herself, or being stubborn and going out for a walk. This was something completely different. Something that had my stomach plummeting and my heart racing. I forced my jaw closed and felt the tight tick as I clenched it together. I knew if I spoke, I would end up shouting. I had no desire to shout at my sister, even though my body and heart compelled me to do so.

“She went out for a coffee.”

Those words should have sounded innocent. Six simple words, words with nothing sinister or unnatural attached to them. Yet Jo’s haunted look as she spoke them sent a bolt of fear up my spine. I indicated with my head for her to continue, still unable to be fully in control of my voice. Ella’s car was still in the driveway. Not that she’d be able to drive anyway; she’d be in too much pain if she tried.

“She left me this note.” I stepped closer to her and took the note from her outstretched arm.

*Just popped out to get a coffee. Won’t be long.*

*Ben came ‘round to apologise. Won’t be any longer than twenty minutes.*

*I’ll pick you one up. :)*

I hadn’t realised it was possible to feel an icy-cold sensation in my bones while feeling a hot rage flowing through my veins until that moment. The one word, “Ben,” seemed to pulsate off the paper. “How long ago did she leave?” I dreaded the answer.

Jo looked at the clock on the wall. “I finished my shower forty minutes ago. I was in there for maybe ten minutes, so anytime between then.”

*Fuck.* “Her mobile?” I made to reach for mine, which sat in my pocket.

“It’s here, along with her purse.”

“Damn, Jo, why didn’t you call me? Shit, this is bad, so fucking bad.”

“I didn’t know how long ago she’d left, so I waited twenty minutes, but then thought there must be a queue or something. Then I just thought you’d be mad, and I knew you’d be on your way home.” The roar of a bike pulled

up outside the house. *Liam*. “I freaked, but didn’t know how much to freak, so I called Liam.”

A moment later, Liam stepped into El’s house. It felt wrong and alien to be here while she wasn’t. I looked across as Jo stepped into Liam’s arms, and found myself turning away, feeling a mixture of dread and envy as he leaned down and kissed her head.

“It’ll be okay, right?” Jo asked in a muffled voice, her face pressed against Liam’s chest.

Liam’s deep voice rumbled when he spoke. “Sure it will, baby. You know what she’s like. She likes to chat as much as you. She’s probably stayed to finish her coffee and will be back in no time.” He rubbed her back, comforting her.

It was total shit. There was no way she would stay out. She was a little anally retentive when it came to time-keeping. If she intended to be gone for no longer than twenty minutes, then she would be sure to keep that promise. I looked at Liam, a deep frown on his face, one I was sure mirrored my own. “We need to find her.”

Liam nodded once, kissed Jo and then told her to stay put with the phone. “You call me if you hear anything. Okay?” She nodded. “Preston?” He indicated with a curt nod outside, and I swiftly followed after giving Jo a kiss on her cheek. “Anything and you call me. You understand, right? This is serious, Jo.”

“I know. I got this. I’ll do some calling around; maybe call the local coffee houses.”

Outside, I headed toward Liam who was now sitting on his Ducati, helmet in his hand. “What’s the story?”

“It’s this Ben creep.” I raked my hands through my hair. “Shit, man, this is fucking serious. He’s been spreading bullshit at work about me, even got the police involved. Between that, his taking El out at Byron, and the lies he told her last week—”

Looking confused, Liam interrupted, “What was he saying to get the police involved? Damn, man, what the hell’s been happening over the last week?”

“He accused me of being responsible for the arson attacks that have been going on. I met with the police last night. I think they believe me—that it wasn’t me, that is. Also last week, he told El some bull crap about me screwing someone else. I have no idea what his game plan is, but he clearly

doesn't want El and me together. But now the police are involved ... I have no freakin' clue." I needed to go. Sharing all of the stupid crap that had gone down reignited the urgency I felt. I needed to get out there and find Ella. *Now.*

We briefly discussed which areas of town we'd search first. I'd already decided I'd give it an hour, and then I'd make a call to Detective Richards. The fact that she had left me a note held me back from making a call immediately.

We agreed to keep in touch the whole way, and check in at least every ten minutes. An ice-cold dread filled my stomach. I'd had several moments in my life when I'd felt the strangling grip of fear, but this was on a completely different level. I'd seen death. I'd faced true horror, not only with Sophie, but on at least fifteen separate occasions at work. It never got any easier, any better. But the fear of Ella being hurt, beyond that of a knock to the head in the ocean, made me want to tear, shout and rage.

There was only one clear thought in my mind at that point, a miracle in itself. I would do whatever it took to find El, and if there was a single hair damaged on her beautiful head beyond her current scrapes and wounds then Ben would be going down, and I didn't give a shit about the consequences.

I jumped in my car and revved my engine, signalling to Liam before I headed east. I drove towards the beach; there were several places I knew where she liked to grab a coffee. Liam headed to hub of the town. The short drive was the longest of my life. I jumped out of my car when I parked at the north end of the beach. I couldn't start running around aimlessly. I needed to keep my head together. I weaved in and out of the tourists and systematically headed into each coffee house, not even bothering to flash the picture I kept in my wallet. There was no point. With the tourist season in full swing, there was no chance anyone would remember her.

I knew she was remarkable, with her fiery-red hair cradling her lightly-tanned face, but to a stranger she would be simply another customer among two hundred. After my sixth coffee-shop or restaurant, I called Liam. He'd had no luck either, so he'd called in a few of his friends to help. For a guy with a standard, straight job, and a successful company, he had an interesting crew of contacts. Having some of them onboard wouldn't be a bad thing.

Drawing closer to my hour deadline after continuing to the next group of businesses a short drive away, I knew it was no use. I needed to contact

the police. I just hoped that by going directly to Detective Richards, I wouldn't get the brush-off and have to wait the standard twenty-four hour missing person period.

I pulled over to the side of the road, and let my car idle in neutral. I noticed I had several missed calls from Dani and a text letting me know I had voicemail. The last thing I wanted to do was worry her about Ella; no doubt she was calling to check up on Ella's injuries. I would call her once Ella was safely in my arms. I punched in the number from the card he gave me, and on the third ring Detective Richards picked up.

"Richards speaking."

"Detective, it's Preston Craig. We spoke yesterday."

"Yes, Preston. I remember. Have you got new information for me?"

My left hand gripped the steering wheel as I held my phone to my ear. "It's Ella, my girlfriend, who I spoke about yesterday. She's missing, with Ben. I think, damn, I know something's not right."

There was a pause on the line and I thought I heard a door open or close. "What happened?"

I went on to tell him specifically what had happened based on what Jo had said. He interrupted a couple of times with questions to ask me to elaborate, but other than that, he listened in silence. I hoped to God that meant he believed me.

"Okay, Preston, I need you return to her place, while we follow this up."

"But—"

He didn't allow me to interrupt. "An officer will meet you there and I'll be in contact shortly. Just go straight there." He didn't allow me to respond before he'd put the phone down.

Nothing about me returning to El's felt right, but with no idea of where to start searching, I may as well have been looking for a nun in a strip bar.

"Shit!" I threw the phone on the passenger's seat and placed my head on my knuckles as they gripped the steering wheel tightly. I breathed deeply. I needed to do something. There was no fucking way I could sit back and do jack-shit. The way Detective Richards had responded was almost as though he didn't seem surprised. He certainly had wanted me off the line.

A calming breath later, I turned my head to the side and looked at my phone. I needed to find Ben. He should be my focus. Find Ben, and I was damn sure I'd find El. Grabbing my phone, I hit John's name from my

contact list. Six rings and there was no answer. I knew he was likely asleep; I just hoped his phone wasn't on silent.

Finally, a gruff "Hello" answered the phone.

"John, I need you to call your sister now."

"Shit, Preston, I just got—"

"It's El; she's missing. I need his details right now. Shit, man. I need to find her."

I could hear John reacting, the shuffling of his sheets and him clambering out of bed. "Give me five." The phone went dead.

I strummed my fingers on the steering wheel, waiting far too impatiently for his return call. My mind was going a mile a minute; I couldn't help but begin to think of the worst. Visions of El with Ben almost drove me to distraction. I felt it in my gut. She was not safe. Nothing about this situation was right. At that moment, I felt defenceless and weak, never a situation I liked to be in.

I was pissed. Pissed at myself for going into work the previous night. If only I had stayed at home, if only I had not gone to work, then she would never have been in this situation. I couldn't help but to feel responsible.

The shrill call of my phone brought me out of my self-pity. I needed to get it together. I needed to make this right. "What have you got me?"

"Damn, man, it's not good. Shit, you're not going to like this."

I felt his words in the bottom of my stomach. The fear and dread rolled around in my gut, causing me to bite back bile. "Just tell me."

"It's to do with your accident." I heard the shift in his voice, the definite change. "The woman ... the woman who was killed in the accident."

Sophie? Surely, he couldn't be referring to Sophie. Despite the many years that had passed, Sophie's death was still fresh and raw in my mind. With my own injuries, with my own healing, there was not a day that went by where I didn't think about her. I had healed, and I had, with the help of Ella, managed to come to terms with the tragedy. But that didn't mean I didn't grieve, that I didn't feel guilt and sadness. "Sophie? I don't understand."

"Did you know she had a fiancé?"

I did. I had wanted to go to the funeral. In many ways, it was a good job I didn't. Being in hospital, being confined to my hospital bed with my own injuries had meant that I was unable to attend. I was convinced Ella and the rest of my family wouldn't have let me go anyway. And I knew they were

right. If somebody I'd loved had been taken from me the last person I would want to see was the person responsible—or at least, the person involved. It was important that I corrected myself. I was not responsible for her death. A daily reminder, a daily mantra, one that I forced myself to listen to.

*Trapped in my car, in between the blackouts, the nausea, and the intense pain, I could only look on in horror as the firefighters cut open her car. It wasn't until thirty minutes later that I found myself in a similar position—being cut out of my damaged and crumbling car. But in those thirty minutes of waiting, my pain was almost forgotten. The horror of watching a bloodied, torn body being removed by the firefighters would irrevocably change me. It was obvious she was dead.*

*Her lifeless body was carried carefully from the wreckage. I had watched on as the paramedics tried desperately in vain to bring her back, to give her life. But it was too late. She was gone.*

*Almost four days later from my hospital bed, I had learned she was engaged to marry. She was twenty-four, happy, and with a whole future ahead of her. It didn't take long for the investigators to determine the cause of the crash. Faulty brakes on her car. Something that should never have happened, something out of my control. The wrong place at the wrong time. I'd heard it all, told myself it all. And with the help of Ella, I had begun to believe it all.*

I blinked as I considered what John was telling me. “Yes I knew, why?”

“It was Ben; he was the fiancé. This is un-freaking-believable. When I spoke to my sister, she'd already begun to do some research. Damn, nothing can get past her. All that was on his file, and in addition to the basics was his previous work history. Shit, man, did you know he used to be in the army? I had no idea.”

This was all too much; too unreal. I didn't even know where to begin with my questioning. I had no idea if Ben knew who I was, if he really was a danger; all I knew was I was worried. Hell, I was beyond worried. “How the hell did your sister manage to get the link between Ben and Sophie? This is too fucking crazy.”

“I told you, Preston, she's like a dog with a bone and watches far too many CSI episodes. She managed to gather more information about him by using damn Google. Shit, nobody can hide from Google.”

“Do you think he’s dangerous? Is Ella at risk?” I honestly didn’t need to know the answer to those questions. It was my desperate attempt for reassurance, to convince myself that everything would be okay, to talk myself down from the unimaginable.

He reassured me without hesitation.

“Thanks, John, seriously. I’ve got to go. Just get the word out please, and let Liam know. Call me if you hear anything more.”

“Sure thing, Preston.”

I ended the phone call immediately and opened my phone history. I immediately called the Detective. The phone rang just twice before he answered. I didn’t wait for him to speak before I began, “It’s Ben. I have no idea where he is, but I do know who he is.”

“Link to Sophie Davies.”

“What the fuck? You knew? You said nothing to me. Where the hell is Ella?” My anger could no longer be contained. I didn’t care that I was speaking to a person who was meant to be helping me, a person who should be finding Ella. Instead, I was a whole heap of pissed. How could he know about Sophie, about my link, and do jack-shit about it?

“I need you to listen,” he said with authority. “We are a step closer to finding out where he is. We are confident he is with Ella, and that she is fine.”

A tiny bit of relief flowed through my system. “How do you know?”

“We picked up some footage thirty minutes ago. Listen, Preston, I know this is hard, but you need to keep your cool. The last thing you can afford to do right now is to lose it. I need your head straight. Do you understand?”

Instinct determined I should tell him to piss off or to demand more information. Trying to keep my cool, keep calm, was proving difficult, but from his frighteningly even tone I knew there was more he was about to tell me. This was not the time to explode. I sighed deeply. “Okay, I’m listening.”

“From what we’ve discovered, Ben knows who you are. He’s been out of the forces for eighteen months now. He did a year up in Townsville before heading to the station where you’re based. He asked for the transfer.”

It didn’t make sense. How could he be the same ranking as I was with just eighteen months experience? I shared my confusion with the Detective.

“He was a firefighter before he joined forces. It was almost immediately after Sophie’s death that he enlisted. Where are you?”

My initial thought was *in hell*; instead, I answered, “I’m just pulled over outside of Chasm Hills. I’ve been driving around the cafés and bakeries hoping to find her.”

“Okay, I need you to stay there. I’m sending a car out to you now.” I attempted to interrupt, but he stopped me and continued. “You need to listen to me. Someone will be with you in less than ten minutes. When they get there, just follow the instructions and I’ll be in touch.”

The line went dead. This whole situation was crazy. It was too surreal, too strange, too much like a bastard nightmare. I called Liam, letting him know the recent turn of events. He was in disbelief, almost as much as I was. I promised to contact him as soon as I knew more while he promised to keep his ear to the ground.



# Chapter Nineteen

## Ella

As soon as I sat next to him in his truck, I felt the unease and tension. Ben was almost rigid as he drove. Attempting to make light conversation, I asked him about his trip to Byron. Asked him why he was there in the first place. He was being evasive. There was a clip to his tone, a clip that sent my nerves into warning mode.

It didn't take long before I realised we were driving in the opposite direction of the coffee house. I slowly felt at my pocket, immediately realising my mistake; I didn't have my phone. This whole situation was screwed.

"Ben," I tried desperately to keep the tremble from my voice, "the coffee shop is in the other direction. How long did you say you'd lived here again?" I aimed for smooth and nonchalance. Instead, I knew my fear was on the surface, and easy for Ben to see and hear.

He didn't say anything for a moment, his eyes glued to the road ahead. An uncomfortable few seconds passed, his hands firmly on the steering wheel. Just as I was about to speak, he finally spoke. "There's somewhere I want us to go first. Somewhere I need you to see."

"Really? Do you not feel like getting a coffee first? I promised Jo we would only be fifteen minutes. She's being crazy protective and will begin to worry, plus I need to take my painkillers." I looked at Ben and all around me, taking in the direction we were travelling. I knew the area, knew it quite well. Before I knew it, we pulled over to a small car park near a crossroads. Rush-hour traffic passed by, oblivious to my fears. Daily commuters were speeding in all directions, no doubt heading to work. For a moment, I considered leaping out of the car and heading toward the cars. A niggling in my gut stopped me. "Why are we here, Ben?" I needed answers.

I needed to understand what was going on. Ben had clearly brought me here for a reason.

Ben removed his seat belt and clipped mine. He turned to face me. The moment my eyes met his, a mixture of dread and sorrow filled me. He was in pain. Not the physical pain of our collision, but the pain of a broken man, a broken human being. His eyes were filled with an emotion I could barely describe. It was so different from my own heartbreak and devastation of my destroyed wedding. No, this was so much more.

“Ben,” I whispered softly, my hand reaching for his. Fear still laced my system, yet it was impossible to ignore the sorrow of the broken man in front of me. “Why are we here?”

A softening of his eyes and a glistening of tears was there for a fraction of a second before they were replaced by bitterness. “Do you know how easy it is to disappear? To be broken? To be left behind?” He turned his head away from me and focused on the traffic lights to our right. I followed his gaze before returning them to him. “Everything was perfect. I was due to get married, but it was all ripped from me. Having your heart pulled out of your chest, ripped in two, is beyond comprehension. Nothing can ever be the same again.” He was still talking into the distance, no longer even speaking to me anymore.

“If she hadn’t been out that night, stubbornly determined to pick me up, then she would still be here. It would never have happened. It shouldn’t have happened.” Ben’s gaze returned to mine.

I looked around once more, really taking in the road and area I was in. Realisation hit me, hard and fast. It was impossible. It couldn’t be true. It made absolutely no sense. “Oh, my God,” I gasped. “How is this even possible? I don’t under ...” My voice trailed off.

“It was Preston. It was his car that killed her and destroyed me. The report said it was her brakes; they were faulty. Did you know she’d only just gotten them fixed the previous week? Apparently the garage had replaced them.”

My hand covered my mouth. I shook my head no. Was this why he was here? Did he really think Preston was responsible? A rush of blood thrust into my heart, causing a pang in my chest and an ache in my ribs. “No, that’s not true. Preston was not responsible. Her car ran a red light; there was no way Preston could have stopped. I know it was not her fault. She was not in control of her brakes locking up. It was wet; she spun out.

Nobody could have prevented this. It was a tragic accident.” And it was. I’d had so many similar conversations with Preston over the years, especially just after it happened. My heart ached for Ben, but whatever he had planned, whatever he was trying to do, I knew would solve nothing. I repeated one last time, “Why are we here?”

“They’ve all been made to pay. Everyone who should have stopped this from happening. They’ve been made accountable. Now there’s just Preston.” His voice was devoid of emotion. No anger, no shouting for vengeance; instead, what his lack of emotion said seemed a whole lot worse.

A deep-seated fear was firmly planted in my stomach. I had no idea what he was talking about, or what he planned to do. “Ben,” I spoke tentatively, “I’m so sorry, for Sophie.” His eyes whipped to mine as I mentioned her name. “Yes, I know who she was. Preston spoke about her a lot. He was devastated about her death. Broken, even.” He frowned and looked all shades of pissed off. I rushed ahead, trying desperately to talk him down from whatever he was planning, and I just hoped I didn’t make the damn situation worse. “He blamed himself for a long time, but I stopped him from doing that to himself.” I anxiously watched his knuckles become white as he gripped the steering wheel. “I did. It wasn’t his fault. It wasn’t her fault. It was a freak mechanical problem. Nothing could have prevented this. It’s devastating, and I’m so sorry for you, Ben, so, so sorry, but this isn’t Preston’s fault or yours. You can’t keep doing this to yourself. You have to mourn Sophie’s death and move on.” I hadn’t realised until a sob caught in my throat that tears had spilled out of my eyes and were rolling down my cheeks.

“No.” He shook his head. “This is the only way for it to be over.” With his eyes firmly fixed on the crossroads, he started the engine and revved it.

I reached the door handle in panic. I needed to get the fuck out of there, and fast. When I grabbed onto the handle, it was slack in my hand. I pulled, pressed and shoved at it, but with no success. “Ben, you need to let me out.” He revved the engine and dropped the car into gear. “Ben, please, let me out of this car.” I sobbed loudly, now hammering at the window. Pain crushed my side from my broken ribs as I hit heavily on the glass. The car lurched forward. “No!” I screamed. “Let me the fuck out, now.” This was bad, beyond what was comprehensible.

The car picked up speed as he raced around the car park heading toward the exit. With no seatbelt on, I heaved myself over the seat, falling into the back, crying out as I landed on my ribs. I called out in pain. *Fuck.*

*Everything hurts.* I clambered for the doors in the back, but found them the same. The lifeless handles filled me with despair.

I groped around the backseat, looking for something, anything to break the window. My foot would have to do. After one kick, I knew any healing which had started on my ribs was now destroyed. “Open this fucking car door now, Ben.” We were on the road, weaving through the traffic, which had begun to thin out. There was no one in front of us, just a red traffic light. “No. Don’t fucking do this.” I launched myself at Ben, reaching over and grabbing for the steering wheel, the handbrake, anything I could touch.

Pain exploded through my head, similar to the pain of the surfboard beating down on me a couple of days earlier. I fell back behind Ben onto the back seat and rocked to the footwell. I heard the screeching of tyres, not ours, and the blasting of horns, before my head was thrown back, hitting the car door with a deep thud.

I had barely a moment to know I was screwed before darkness took over. Again. I was getting really tired of this shit.

# Chapter Twenty

## Preston

I got out of my car while I was waiting for the police to meet me. I bounced on my feet, too worked up to wait patiently. With every vehicle that drove by, my head whipped in its direction. Two minutes felt like two hours. Every fifteen seconds I'd swipe my phone open to check the time; it didn't help. Time still moved at a fraction of its usual speed.

I just wanted to be woken up from the nightmare I was living. The events of Sophie's death, the absolute finality of the grief I had experienced and managed to be dragged out of was still thick and clear. But now, years on, it was still haunting me. Finally, I thought I'd found my peace. I had the most beautiful woman in the world who was mine. Damn, we still hadn't even had a conversation to discuss *us*, but I knew without a doubt that there was and always would be an *us*.

As far as I was concerned, she was the woman who I was going to marry. I'd throw her over my shoulder and drag her there if I needed to. But with absolute certainty, she would be wearing my ring.

I couldn't do it. Barely three minutes had gone by, but waiting around for fuck-knows-what to happen was simply more time to put distance between Ella and myself. I just couldn't live with that risk. "Shit!" I exclaimed aloud. I pulled open my door, jumped in and started my engine.

There was only one place I could think of worth driving to. A place filled with memories that haunted my dreams. I jammed the car into gear and sped off, heading north. I pressed my history button on my phone and dialled Liam. He answered immediately. "Meet me at the intersection out at Noosa. Get your arse there, quick. I'm ten minutes out." I threw my phone down on the passenger's seat without switching it off. Liam would know where I was heading. I just hoped he was even closer than I was.

Racing down the roads, cursing at the traffic, I kept my eyes glued to the streets, refusing to clock watch. My phone began to ring after just a few minutes. I considered ignoring it for a split second, but instantly changed my mind. It was the Detective. “Where the hell are you, Preston? One of my officers arrived to find you gone.”

“I know where they are. I hope, damn, it’s the only place I could think of to look.”

I heard voices calling out in the distance from the other end of the line and a car engine starting. “Where to? We’ve tried his address and—”

“Noosa.”

“Damn, the site of the collision. We were following his next suspected arson attack site. We’re six minutes out. Hold tight, and whatever you do don’t approach him. He’s dangerous.”

Like hell I wouldn’t. He was telling me Ben was dangerous and expected me to sit back and twiddle my goddamn thumbs? Not in this lifetime.

He continued to speak when I didn’t answer him. “Preston, I’m serious. Ben’s responsible for the arson attacks. We were able to get a warrant for his property.”

“Shit. I’m two minutes out. Just hurry.” I ended the call and cursed. I hoped I was right and I was heading right for Ella. If they weren’t at Noosa, then I had no clue where to look. It didn’t bear thinking about.

Pressing my foot on the accelerator, I turned the corner, knowing I was just a kilometre away. Traffic had built up, forcing me to slam on my brakes and press my horn. I navigated around vehicles and entered the opposite lane, not giving a crap about the oncoming traffic who were pulling over to the side. I saw a space up ahead and re-entered the correct lane.

That’s when I saw a black jeep speeding across a car park, about to enter the road ahead. As the car pulled out, I caught a glimpse of the driver. *Ben*. I could see no sign of Ella in the split second I was able to look through the front window. The rest of the windows were blacked out.

I accelerated and overtook the two vehicles in front of me. I was gaining on the traffic lights and the Jeep. Nothing was in front of it. I watched in horror as the lights turned to red and the Jeep picked up speed. *Fuck*. This couldn’t be happening, not like this.

I had no idea what to do. I was confident Ella was in the car in front, and if they ploughed into another vehicle at the speed they were going, I

had no doubt Ella would be lucky to survive. Hell, I knew from experience the likelihood was slim.

I had no choice, and I had just a few moments to make a difference. Knocking into a lower gear, I pumped the accelerator and took off at a breakneck speed. I had to reach them.

I had to get them off the road. The only way to do that was to create damage. It wasn't the best plan in the world. Damn, it was dangerous as fuck, but it was all I had. Ella would most likely be hurt, but I had to weigh up my options. A nudge and a spin compared to a head-on collision? My odds were on my bullshit plan.

Finally positioned behind and to the right of the Jeep, I went for it. I nudged left with a heavy and fast turn of the wheel. I sent out a silent prayer, hoping I wasn't screwing this up even worse, and jolted at the impact.

My car immediately fishtailed out and spun before making impact with the Jeep. I spun out a few feet away from the other vehicle as I saw it do the same. It hit the pavement and crashed through the row of bushes before crunching against a tree. I managed to breathe a sigh of relief before I was jolted forward, my head cracking against my side window. I heard the loud crunch and felt myself come to a sudden stop.

I looked around. The sensation felt too much like *déjà vu*. I tested the use of my legs as I caught sight of the Jeep in the distance. My car was in the opposite lane and I was pushed close to another vehicle. I checked the car I'd crashed into briefly and saw the owner get out, a look of fear on his face. He was fine.

Wiping the moisture out of my eyes, I barely paid attention to the smear of blood on my hand and arm. I crawled over to the passenger's side—my door too crumpled to open—and pushed open the door. Sirens wailed in the distance, but I still had to get to Ella. I had no idea if she was okay.

As I stumbled toward the car, a feeling of unease spread through me. This time I had really caused the collision. If I'd lost her, I would never be able to live with myself. I half-ran, half-staggered to the Jeep. It was stationary. The front window was smashed and the airbags had been deployed.

I reached the passenger's side door and took hold of the handle. It felt loose and wouldn't budge open. "Shit. Open the door, you bastard." I continued to pull at it, my energy ebbing with every yank. My adrenaline

spiked, refusing to feel the pain in my shoulder and arm. I needed to get in the car.

I tried the rear door but it was the same. I looked around my feet, searching for a brick, anything, to break open the window. When I did, my attention was drawn to a call of my name and pounding feet. It was Liam. Thank God, he was here. “I need to get her the fuck out of there, Liam. Get her the fuck out.” My heart pounded heavily; my heart constricted and I felt a shortness of breath in my growing panic. I couldn’t hear anything, not Ella, not even Ben. *What if she’s dead?* A rush of nausea and deep-seated fear hit me in my chest and threatened to overwhelm me. I staggered backwards, and a firm hand took hold of my arm and pulled me back. I went to fight, almost laughable in my state—I was pretty sure I’d broken my collarbone—but stopped when I saw it was Liam carrying a crowbar. I had no clue where he’d managed to pull it from, but I was damn relieved at the sight.

Two heavy hits to the window had it shattering. Preston cleared out the shards of glass with the bar, before he peered inside. “Shit,” he bit out. “Ella? Fuck, Ella?”

Fear, a fear I had never heard before laced Liam’s words. The force of them hit me square in the chest, and almost brought me to my knees. I could not even begin to imagine a world without Ella in it, and this time, I would be the one to blame. I deliberately drove them off the road. There was nothing I wouldn’t do to help her, save her, yet in just a moment, I had screwed it all up. A pain unlike any other I’d ever experienced before, threatened to crush me. My heart was close to splintering. My breathing was shallow and sped up.

My world crumbled and shattered around me. I fought for breath. “Liam,” I cried out, unable to keep the fear or tears out of my voice, “is she —” I couldn’t even finish the question. I sent a silent prayer to God, or Allah, or whoever the fuck was up there, that Ella would survive. None of this was her fault. It was all down to me, and that fuck, Ben. I hoped for his sake he was dead. If not, with absolute certainty, I would kill him with my bare hands.

Liam didn’t answer. Instead, I looked on, weak and broken, as he climbed through the window. A moment passed before I heard loud bangs and saw the passenger’s door shudder. I dreaded the door opening. If she was gone, if she hadn’t made it, I knew my world would be over. Just as the



door flung open, I heard screeching tyres, sirens and then shouting. The paramedics and police were here.

I leaned in towards the car, needing to get to Ella. She was lying in the footwell of the back. Her eyes were closed; her face had fresh cuts and scratches, and a terrifying amount of blood covered the right side of it. “Ella? Oh, my God—”

“Preston.” Liam’s voice was clipped, harsh, and demanded my attention. “She’s alive. She’s breathing. Now get the fuck out of the way so the paramedics can do their thing.”

I stepped back, trusting Liam completely. A few steps away, my legs finally gave and I fell to my knees. A paramedic was immediately by my side, while two more rushed past me and headed to Ella.

The paramedic attempted to ask me questions, but all I heard were murmurs. My eyes and focus was completely on Ella. It didn’t take long before they were able to remove her from the Jeep and place her on the waiting stretcher that one of the paramedics had collected. It became clear to the paramedic who was trying to assist me I wasn’t going anywhere or doing anything until Ella was secure in the ambulance and safe.

Watching a mask being secured to Ella’s face, my heart briefly stopped as I waited for condensation to form. The moment it did, I closed my eyes. The terror of losing her stuck in my throat. I had to force it down, knowing I had to keep my shit together.

I followed the trolley to the ambulance, refusing to let Ella out of my sight. I thought of all the times I had managed to screw things up in my life, or simply fucked around a little too much. The ridiculous moments that now seemed insignificant. This was it, the future, and there was no chance in hell I was going to screw up again.

Just as I was climbing into the back of the ambulance with Ella, completely ignoring the paramedics requesting me to get on the trolley in a different vehicle, Detective Richards made his way over to me.

He’d briefly spoken to me when he’d first arrived, but at that point I was still mute, too in shock and in fear, waiting for absolute confirmation that Ella was okay. At one point, I saw him speak to Liam before they shook hands, and Liam had left telling me he was collecting Jo and meeting us at the hospital.

“I told you to wait.”

I looked at him hard, not giving two flying fucks what he said or what he did. I certainly didn't bother responding.

"I'll stop by the hospital tomorrow to take your statement. You were damn lucky though, Preston."

I looked over at Ella and then back at him. "Yeah, I know."

He nodded. "His truck was filled with petrol canisters and igniters."

I let the information sink in. I wasn't an idiot. I knew it took more than a few bangs and knocks for that to have gone up, but I also knew there were enough sparks from the collision that it could have happened. I closed my eyes briefly, trying not to imagine what could have been. The thought left a bitter and desperate taste in my mouth. Opening my eyes, I nodded to him. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Movement drew my attention to over his shoulder.

Ben.

His lifeless body was covered in a sheet, lying on top of one of the stretchers. Through my hatred, I felt pity. He'd lost the woman he had loved; between that and who-knows-what the hell he'd experienced while in the armed forces, he had snapped. I understood it. Coming close to losing Ella, again—I grimaced—I would have been near cracking point too. That being said, I was pleased as hell that the fucker was dead.

I hauled myself into the waiting ambulance and secured myself in the seat, my hand touching Ella's arm.

# Chapter Twenty-One

## Ella

My mouth felt like a possum had snuck into my room and done a crap in it. I was pretty confident it would smell like it as well. I smacked my lips together, needing moisture. I was damn thirsty, and would consider granting all sorts of favours and promises to whoever could get me a drink. A cold wetness attached to what felt like a sponge touched my lips. Who would have thought a tiny drop of water could feel so heavenly, so precious. The sponge was removed.

Eyes still closed, I croaked, “More.”

A moment later, the delicious wetness returned. I opened my mouth and bit down on the sponge, taking a hard suck of it, desperate to get the water into my system.

“Hey,” a familiar voice reprimanded, “you’re going to get me in trouble. You’re only allowed a little bit on your lips.”

Preston. I smiled and released the sponge. I gulped and coughed at the dryness. Immediately, I cried out in pain, and remembered my ribs. I also remembered Ben. Prying my eyes open, my eyes landed on Preston. His arm was in a sling and a large bandage covered the right side of his forehead.

“Be careful. You need to be still and try not to move too much.” He reached out with his good arm and held on to my hand, smiling.

“Ben?” I needed to know what had happened.

Preston stilled, his hand still on mine. A frown formed on his face, a flash of hardness there, before his eyes softened. “Do you remember what happened?”

I nodded, ignoring the pulsating pain in my head.

“He was trying to kill you both. He was heading straight through the traffic lights. I stopped the car before it had the chance.” My eyes roamed his body, taking in his injuries. He had risked himself for me, everything for me. My heart filled with love for the man before me. For his selfless desire to protect me, his fierce love for me.

Before he had a chance to continue, I interrupted him. “I love you.” To hell with it all. I threw all caution to the wind. I didn’t give a damn about anything else that came out of his mouth, I just needed him to understand the three words I spoke to him. I needed him to understand his love for me had saved my life.

There was no hesitation, no fear, no doubt when he leaned in close to me. “You are the love of my life, Ella. You always have been.” He placed a gentle kiss on my cracked lips and then pulled away. “I love you.”

He was right. I felt it too. He was it for me. We’d had so many years to love one another, but over the chaos of the last week, my love had grown to something so surreal, so amazing and beautiful, that I felt it to the tips of my fingers and the bottom of my toes. I lifted my head, indicating I was in need of his lips against mine. He responded with a smile and a kiss that set my heart aflame.

“Seriously! I would say get a freakin’ room, but that would be no good,” Jo interrupted with an overdramatic sigh.

Preston pulled away from me, his eyes still on mine before he winked and looked toward his sister. “Ever heard of knocking?”

“Erm, no, not for a hospital room where clearly my best friend has just woken up,” she snapped.

My eyes travelled to hers. She was upset. I heard it in her voice and now, looking at her pale face, I knew she had been terrified. “Hey, honey.”

Her eyes filled with tears, making mine immediately do the same. In a few short strides, she pushed Preston out the way and hugged me, a small sob escaping from her mouth while tears fell down her cheeks. We remained that way for a few moments longer; I felt safe and loved in her arms, despite the extra ache her fierce hugs caused. I loved her so damn much, and hated her looking so unwell. I laughed at my thoughts.

Jo pulled away and wiped her eyes. “What’s so goddamn funny?”

I smirked and took the tissue Preston handed to me. “Just thinking you looked like shit, so I dread to think what I look like.”

She harrumphed. "Please, I totally rock the whole pale, tear-stricken look. You, my dear, look like a bag of shit."

I laughed again and held my side in pain. "Ouch. Stop it. It freaking hurts too badly." I looked past Jo to Preston. "Did they say what the damage was?"

Preston stepped forward, retaking his place by my side as Liam walked in, took hold of Jo and pulled her into his arms. "There's an extra rib broken, and you had to have surgery." Preston straight away read my panic as did the beeping heart monitor. "It's okay, nothing major. There was a little bit of internal bleeding, but you're all patched up now. The doctor will tell you more about it."

"I've told the nurses you're awake," Liam interrupted. "They'll be here in a moment. Your mum has just rushed to the toilet to wash her face. She broke down when I told her you're awake." He shrugged his shoulders and then smiled at me. "You okay, kiddo?"

"I'm here, so yeah, I'm okay."

Looking satisfied, he leaned down and whispered in Jo's ear. She nodded, accepted his kiss on her neck, smiled, and left the room. I had no idea how he did it. It was like a modern day version of *Taming of the Shrew* was unravelling before my eyes.

Preston pulled his chair close to my bed and held my hand. He squeezed it lightly. "Ben died in the car crash, babe." I half expected to hear venom, maybe even a little bit of victory in his voice. I heard neither. I looked at the gorgeous, kind man next to me. I loved him, truly loved him, and this was just another reason why. I heard compassion in his voice and saw it in the tiredness of his eyes.

I got it. I understood how he felt. Ben was a crazy psychopath who deserved to be locked up, but the heartbreak and loss he had experienced was devastating. That was what I understood.

I didn't even bother to hold back my tears. A man's death deserved them. His family deserved them. "Does it sound strange if I say I want to go to his funeral?"

He shook his head. "No, babe. We can do whatever you need to do."

I needed to pay my respects. I was lucky. I knew this. Some may have danced on his grave, but not me; never me.

"Preston?"

"Yes, El? What do you need?"

I smiled when I thought of all my possible answers. I settled with just one. “Just you, Preston. I just need you.”

# Epilogue

## Jo

The few weeks since my wedding had been beyond crazy. Ella and Preston getting together, both of them nearly getting killed, and me nearly destroying my husband's penis was taking its toll. I felt like shit. My body felt like it had been used as a punching bag; my head was pounding so freaking much, and I felt like curling up in bed and giving the world my middle finger and telling it to get screwed.

After Ella had been released from hospital, my parents and Ella's parents had fought over care rights. No word of a freaking lie. Both Kate and Mum had organised a freaking schedule for cooking, cleaning, and who'd be wiping Ella and Preston's goddamn arses. It was crazy, but damn hilarious at the same time.

Preston was still staying around Ella's since he'd half moved his crap in after her surfing catastrophe, and since they were both injured, Preston was still off from work while Ella was still on school break. Damn that lucky bitch and her school holidays. I'd tried to stay away as much as possible, one reason being because I was still getting used to the fact that Preston was humping Ella, and the second was because I still looked and felt like shit.

After the stress of the whole Ella kidnapping and attempted murder horror, I naturally assumed I'd no longer need to be lying in a foetal position, terrified I was going to lose my best friend. Instead, I felt like shit.

I assumed it was a stupid bug, or maybe a random parasite from my honeymoon, but the fifteen positive tests surrounding me on my bed would be a pretty solid argument against that. Fuck. I had no goddamn idea what to do, how I felt, or how in God's name I was going to tell Liam.

It wasn't like I was fifteen and knocked up. I was married to an unbelievably gorgeous and infuriating guy, who I loved the arse off. It was

just that me and the whole kids thing just didn't make sense. Okay, so the idea made me want to vomit even more.

I knew in my heart that I wouldn't be giving this baby up though. This baby, no doubt created in one superhot sex session, was made out of a whole heap of love and lust. But the thought of being responsible for another human life instinctively had me wanting to flee. Stupid, I know. There was no freaking chance of fleeing this.

I was twenty-eight years old. I'm sure that was supposed to be some sort of 'ripe old age' shit right there for getting knocked up. Damn stupid statistics and their perfect crappy timing.

I heard the front door open and close. I knew I should do something. Burying my head under the cover seemed like a grand idea. I even considered climbing out the window and hiding for a little while; instead, I lay on my bed, surrounded by pee.

*Note to self: Wash sheets on hot wash.*

'Jo?' I heard Liam's footsteps getting closer. The door then opened and I was greeted with silence.

I didn't look, too afraid by what I may see. "Holy shit, Jo! Why the hell are there pee sticks everywhere?"

For a virtual goddamn genius, I was sure my husband was a walking penis in a former life. He still said dumb shit sometimes, which included asking freaking obvious questions.

I heard him step into the room and felt his legs touch the bed. "Jo?" His voice was soft. Too soft. "Are you ... Are we ... shit ... We're having a fucking baby."

A fraction of a second later, I heard a thud. I looked up to find empty space. I pulled myself toward the edge of the bed to see Liam on the floor. My hard-arse man had fucking fainted. Proof and point: walking penis.

The End

Continue on with Jo and Liam's story later on this year in *A Perfect Love*.