So Much to Learn

Jessie L. Star

Copyright © 2007 Jessie L. Star

Smashwords Edition

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Cover art photo: Romantic Couple Holding Hands © Beemanja. Licensed from Dreamstime.

Cover art design by the incredibly talented Master Ning.

Please note this novel is written in Australian English and was originally published under the penname star123.

Dedicated to the glorious FP-ers, whether you were with me from the beginning (stalwart stars that you are!), or once spent a few minutes reading one of my one shots. You beautiful people taught me how to be a writer and I’m incredibly appreciative. Cheers!
Chapter 1

"Jack, I need you!"

Never had truer words been spoken.

Although how true I had no way of knowing at the time. This sentence was just one of many things that turned out to be somewhat prophetic that night…note how similar ‘prophetic’ sounds to ‘pathetic’ and you have the whole scenario pretty much summed up.

However, I've begun at what is not technically the beginning. The impetus behind me uttering those four rather fateful words is not pretty, in fact it’s downright humiliating, but spilling the beans – the more embarrassing the beans the better – is inescapably cathartic. And thus I must take you back, back to 7 in the evening on a Wednesday night not so long ago….

~*~

The music for the 7 'o' clock news started as I walked into my boyfriend's flat, my bag weighing heavily on my shoulders and my body weary from a very long day. I dumped my bag on the floor and staggered over to the kitchen where I turned on the kitchen tap and, cupping my hands beneath it to capture the water, took a long drink. Okay, so it would've only taken a couple of extra seconds to get a glass, but it was one of those days where even that tiny amount of additional effort could have been my undoing.

I hate Wednesdays. Thinking of all the crap you've gone through by Wednesday and then realising you've got that much time again before the weekend rolls around is absolutely heartbreaking.

I hated this Wednesday in particular.

My classes had been interminably boring, I’d missed lunch due to unfinished coursework that I had to complete in my break, and work had been hellishly busy. The only saving grace was that I’d got off duty early as one of the other girls was desperate for more hours. I’d willingly given them to her and headed off a couple of hours earlier than I normally would’ve done, not with a spring in my step as you’d imagine, but with a heavy heart knowing that I’d just use the extra time to get some reading done.

Well, I’d get onto the homework after visiting my boyfriend, Brad (not the best of names I know, but we work with what we have). After all, aren't we university students always being told that study isn't everything and that we have to have a balance between work and play in our lives? Well, that was the line we were being fed at the moment anyway
due to the worryingly high levels of stress being detected amongst those of us doing first year law at Grove University.

Wiping my wet hands on my jeans, I wandered down the corridor towards Brad's bedroom wondering why he hadn't come out to greet me. He must have heard me come in, after all I wasn't exactly tiptoeing about.

I began talking even before I'd put my hand on the doorknob, an old habit of mine, and so it was that the true awfulness of that Wednesday began with, "Brad, are you busy? Sorry to just barge in, but...huh."

The 'huh' came out as it did because of the huge, heaving, naked bosom I encountered as the door swung open. Well, really, what was I supposed to say? 'Nice rack?' I think that would really have pushed the boundaries of decency which were, by the looks of it, already being severely tested.

So, we've established that my first reaction was 'huh', the second, I'm afraid, was no more dramatic. The only thing I could think of was covering up those massive mammary monstrosities (yes, even in my darkest hours I can pull off a good bit of alliteration) and so I grabbed one of Brad's jumpers which was hanging over his desk chair. I then wordlessly passed it to the girl who had the enormous responsibility of lugging those bazookas around everywhere.

Finally, thankfully, the breasts were put away into the dark and my visual boundaries expanded dramatically. I lifted my eyes up from the chest area and saw that I actually recognised the girl standing awkwardly in Brad's hideous, knitted jumper.

"Hi, Allison," I said politely. "What the fuck's going on?" Okay, so I said that less politely, but I believe, under the circumstances, I had fair reason to use the profanity.

"Hi, Talia," she said nervously. "I'm just, um, going to go..." She started edging around me towards the door, but I put an arm out to stop her.

"You've only got a jumper on. Get your stuff," feeling I was being a bit too nice I added in a harder tone, "and then go."

It was at this point that I finally looked at Brad. He was lying in amongst the dishevelled bedclothes, but had propped himself up on one arm while the other searched about on the floor for his boxer shorts. While Allison collected her clothes and hurriedly changed, I watched with no small amount of satisfaction as the tips of Brad's fingers continually just missed the silky fabric of his undergarments.

The whole thing felt so surreal. Brad and I had been dating for about six months and I'd thought we were pretty solid. He was two years above me in law and we had met at one of the 'get to know you' BBQs the uni was constantly holding. He was good looking in that 'I spend my spare time brooding about the futility of life in dark rooms' way with pale skin, black wavy hair and similarly dark eyes. Despite his looks he wasn't one of those deep,
philosophical types who wanted to take me to indie films in different languages. No, he was just a typical third year law student meaning he drank a lot of beer and knew more than was decently possible about torts.

I'd been a bit astonished, to be honest with you, when he'd approached me and asked if I'd wanted another drink. The older students, as a general rule, didn’t often descend from on high to mingle with the first years and, although passing pretty when I made the effort, I didn’t consider myself attractive enough to have voided the year group divide.

My honey brown hair leans towards blonde on some days, while on other days couldn't be described as anything other than brown. Following the example set by my hair, my hazel eyes never seemed to be able to decide what colour they should be either. I'm medium build, medium height, medium everything really. Even my dress sense screamed medium; I usually went for t-shirts and a pair of jeans, perfect for my life that revolved around uni and work, neither of which required an excess of halter tops or miniskirts.

Considering the situation I'd walked in on with Allison, by all rights on that first day I met him Brad should have leeringly asked me if I wanted some sausage, which would have seen me walking away very quickly. That wasn't what had happened, however, I’d accepted the offer of a drink and, after he'd brought back a plastic cup filled with tepid beer, we'd spent the rest of the afternoon talking together.

He was polite, interesting and, most importantly, he didn't treat me like a JAFFY (Just Another F-ing First Year) as most of the other older law students had done. When the sun had begun to set and we'd realised that just about everybody had left, he’d asked me out for a proper drink and I'd had no hesitation in saying yes.

After that we dated as much as possible, but as we had different classes and jobs, it wasn't always easy to snatch time together. Still, we'd managed to go out a couple of times a week and I’d been happy with that.

Fine, there’d been moments when I'd thought he was a bit of a dick, like when he'd not turned up at my cousin's wedding when he'd promised he'd be there, or when he'd said he didn't understand why people got so het up over footy. Still, I'd forgiven him those trespasses and the other little niggling things weren't worth getting upset over. So what if he was a touchy feely person and I, well, wasn't? He respected that I liked to keep my distance and we got along fine.

Or so I’d thought. Clearly the Brad fumbling around to cover his nakedness wasn't the one I knew.

Allison finally had all her stuff together and she'd thrown on a skirt, not bothering to fix it as it hung askew off her hips. Scuttling to the door she paused only long enough to mouth 'sorry' although whether it was directed at me or at Brad I don't know. She closed the
door behind her with a soft thump and my boyfriend and I were left staring at each other in complete silence.

I wasn't trying to unnerve him with the silence or anything, I just honestly didn't know what to say so I waited for him to begin. He'd finally found his boxers and he wriggled them back on under the covers, making him look for all the world like a pale grub amongst his dark sheets.

Apparently my silence got to him and he snapped, "Well go on then, yell and scream and all that. Let's get it over with."

Thinking back I can't believe how I managed to hold my temper. How dare he be angry at me? I hated when people did that, turned the tables when they were feeling guilty. However, I was so much in a state of shock that I only lifted my eyebrows slightly in response, something that seemed to unnerve him even more than if I'd pulled a full harpy act on him.

"For God's sake, Talia, say something," he exploded after another few moments where all that could be heard was the traffic outside his window.

Finally emerging out of my stupor I said, rather randomly, "You don't even like Allison."

He snorted and then shrugged in that kind of 'what's a guy to do?' sort of way that finally succeeded in cutting through my stupor and woke me up to what I'd walked in on.

"You were having sex with Allison, in your flat, on a Wednesday evening while I was at work?"

Don't ask me why I felt the issue needed clarification, it wasn't as if the situation was in any way ambiguous. He opened his mouth to answer, but I cut across him. "How long? How long have you been rooting her?"

"Allison? Only for a couple of weeks. Honestly, she meant nothing, baby." Brad got off the bed and came towards me with his arms outstretched, but I stepped quickly out of the way. Something about the way he'd wanted to check if I meant Allison in particular made my stomach feel queasy.

"She's not the only one, is she? You've been having it off with other girls while we've been going out? Jesus, Brad, how many?"

He reached for me again. "Not that many, don't make a big deal out of it. It was only sex," he added as an afterthought.

What a cliché! Did any guy out there actually think that made it okay?

I thought about calmly explaining to him that I had this thing called a conscience and believed in the concept of fidelity, but it seemed too time consuming, so I settled for the shortened version.

"You bastard." There. That about covered it I felt.
He dropped his arms and his conciliatory tone then and looked angry again. "Well come on, Talia, you can't really have been surprised," he snarled.

Not surprised? Was he insane? Did he really think I would have stayed with him if I'd suspected he was cheating?

"Why wouldn't I be surprised?" I asked with, what I considered, admirable self-restraint. What I really wanted to do at that moment, you see, was smash something hard into his private bits.

He laughed, a little irritating laugh that made me clench my hands behind my back to hold myself in check. "You can't possibly be that naïve. You know things have been awkward for ages now ever since Rory's party."

I winced.

I hadn't thought about that for ages now. In truth I had tried to block it completely from my memory, but it was one of those moments that I knew, no matter how hard I tried to erase it, I would always remember.

Rory was one of Brad's friends renowned for the extravagant shindigs he threw where what felt like the entire university was invited and nearly everyone showed up. They had been known to carry on over the entire weekend, only breaking up on the Monday when people blearily staggered off to lectures.

Brad and I had been officially an item for about five months at the party in question, and so I was feeling pretty good when I rocked up on Brad's arm that night, confident on having a good time. The evening had passed in a blur of dancing and chatter, although the blur hadn't been alcohol induced on my part. I'm not a huge drinker in large groups, after a rather unfortunate incident with a guy at a friend's 16th I preferred to keep my head at parties.

At a little after 3 in the morning I was beginning to droop and I headed upstairs to try and find Brad to tell him I was off. My brother was going to give me a lift so Brad didn't have to leave if he didn't want to. I found my boyfriend coming out of the bathroom upstairs smelling very strongly of beer. He slung an arm around my shoulders and steered me into one of the bedrooms talking loudly in my ear about what a good time he was having. I laughingly allowed him to prattle on, ignoring the steadily increasing pressure of his arm around me. Slowly, though, his attitude changed and he had begun backing me towards the bed. My legs hit the edge and I fell backwards onto the mattress at which point Brad climbed on top of me. Enjoying the attention, I had let him kiss me, ignoring the sour taste of ale and that I wasn't really comfortable making out with him where anyone could walk in. However, once I realised that the hand that wasn't sweetly caressing my face was undoing the buttons on my top, my mood changed abruptly. I broke my lips free from his and pushed him off of me without any warning so he toppled to the floor where he had looked up at me, balefully.

"What was that?"
"Not here Brad," I said curtly, closing my top and getting off the bed. "Not here, not anywhere," he'd grunted. "My girlfriend, ladies and gentlemen, harder to get into than the best restaurant in town."

"I've told you I'm not ready to have sex with you yet," I said with dignity. "And my first time certainly won't be upstairs at one of Rory Murragh's parties."

"I won't wait forever you know. There are plenty of other girls prepared to do the business with me even if you're not," Brad had mumbled into the carpet, already looking as if he was about to fall asleep.

Stung, I had left the room in a hurry, running into my brother, Matt, in the corridor. He'd come looking for me and wasn't impressed to find me upstairs in the designated 'for couples only' area. Older brothers, what can you do?

Anyway, Brad had been profusely apologetic the next day, doing everything up to and including getting down onto his knees and begging for my forgiveness, and like the idiot that I am, I’d let the incident slide. It was only one time in six months, and I’d believed he was truly sorry.

So the fact that he was bringing up that night, when he’d promised that it’d been nothing but drunken idiocy, really, really hurt.

"You knew the deal early on, Brad," I spat. "I told you when we first started dating that I wasn't going to just jump in bed with you."

"Yeah, but I didn't realise the embargo was going to last for the entire time we were going out. Are you waiting until you're married or something? What's wrong with you?"

"Yeah, because your attitude right now is making me feel so stupid for not sleeping with you the first chance I got," I said sarcastically.

The problem was that he was cutting a bit close to home. I didn't know what was wrong with me, I'd just never felt that comfortable with the physical part of relationships. Maybe it was having a protective older brother, or leftover psychological damage from my run in with the guy at that party where I’d ended up in a bad situation, that made me how I was. I didn't know, but every time action with a guy went further than a kiss, I became tense and uncomfortable. Being with Brad, who had seemed so understanding, had quieted my fears about being a prudish freak, but all my insecurities were back with a vengeance now.

"You can be as bitchy as you like, babe, but the truth is that you're never going to be able to hold a boyfriend for long if you can't put out a little more...actually a lot more," he continued cruelly, perhaps sensing he had the advantage.

"When did you become such an arsehole?" I snapped, my eyes filling with unwanted tears. "I can't believe I didn't notice what a wanker you are until now. Honestly, Allison and the other girls can have you and welcome!"
I stormed out of his bedroom and back down the corridor, realising almost immediately that he was following me and that he had morphed back into caring, sensitive Brad.

"Talia, baby, I'm so sorry I didn't mean it. I'm prepared to wait, I really am."

Grabbing my backpack, I wrenched the door open and only waited long enough to shout, "Oh piss off and die!" before beating a hasty retreat down the path and to my car.

I could only drive a couple of kilometres before I had to pull over to the side of the road because my tears were obscuring my vision too much to drive safely. Turning off the engine, I put my feet up on the seat and, wrapping my arms around my legs, sobbed against the denim of my jeans.

A little while passed with me in this state, and it was only when I could feel the tears that had seeped through the fabric becoming cold against my skin that I realised I’d stopped crying. Reaching into my bag for a tissue, I cleaned myself up and sat back feeling completely drained. What a day. I knew I hated Wednesdays for a reason.

Replaying Brad's cutting words over and over in my head made a few more tears beat a hasty retreat out of my eyes, but it was having another effect too. I was becoming very angry. Furious in fact. And not, as you might expect, at Brad. No, I was angry with myself. How long had Brad been playing me for a fool? How long had I let myself think he was the perfect bloke for me? How long had I let my fear of physical relationships stop me from living life to the fullest extent?

The last question was causing me the most upset and I turned the problem this way and that in my head trying to figure out how I could overcome it. Only an hour or so ago the obvious answer would have been to let myself ‘go all the way’ with Brad and be done with it, but that was not an option now and, anyway, I still baulked at the idea of doing it just to make someone else happy.

Suddenly, like a bloody great lightning bolt, the answer came thundering into my head. I couldn't believe it hadn't occurred to me before! What I needed was someone to teach me about those parts of a relationship that I had such trouble with. Someone who cared enough about me to understand my plight and who would be considerate and patient with me. Someone who was like a brother, but clearly not my brother (ewgh!) and I knew just the person.

I turned the car back on and slammed it into first gear. I raced home, smashing the speed limit to pieces, but luckily not encountering any police officers as I doubted they would have been entirely sympathetic to my reasons for breaking the law. Whizzing my little car into my parking space, I hurried across the asphalt towards the block of flats I lived in and up the steps to my flat door. I had to wait there for a moment as I fumbled in my bag for my
keys, but, eventually, I found them and I burst into the living room in an explosion of urgency.

Throwing aside my bag, I practically ran across the open plan living room/dining room/kitchen area to where there were four closed doors. I flung open the door second from the left and gasped, "Jack, I need you!"
Chapter 2

Before we get to Jack's reaction to my sudden exclamation, I guess I need to sort a few things out. Namely, who Jack is.

Explaining him is pretty difficult, it's like being asked to describe a member of your family or your best friend, you know them so well it seems incredible that someone doesn't know their full story like you do.

Jack, for almost as long as I can remember, has always just been there. Like the ugly lamp in the lounge room that remains part of the décor year in and year out because no-one can be bothered getting rid of it. Okay, that's not very nice, Jack isn't the ugly lamp he's like… the teddy bear you've had ever since you were a baby and which is now tucked away in a box up in the attic. You don't need your teddy every day, but it's still comforting to know it's there if you need it.

My brother met Jack at Little Athletics when they were both 8. Jack was the first person to ever beat Matt at anything, an event which I think was very good for him. My brother, bless him, tends to get a big head about things and, if he's not watched, has an annoying habit of surrounding himself with yes men and women who sing his praises and generally inflate his already substantial ego. Matt has two saving graces, though, the first is his ability to laugh at himself and the second is his friendship with Jack.

Matt, after watching in disbelief as the new kid smashed his high jump record, went to congratulate Jack and, being the boys they were, they ended up in a tussle in the mud, by the end of which they were best friends. I don't pretend to understand the bonding rituals of guys, all I know is that the strongest ties are usually formed after some sort of violence has occurred. I remember asking when I was little who had won the fight that had cemented their position as the greatest of mates and receiving scornful looks in reply. Apparently that wasn't the point of the exercise, maybe there wasn't a winner, I don't know.

However, if I had to guess who had won I wouldn't know which one to put my money on. They are so evenly matched it’s ridiculous. They are both big buggers, height-wise, standing about a head over me, and they both play on the University's football team, the Grove Rovers, so they are pretty built. This is a purely clinical analysis, by the way, clearly I don't check out Matt and Jack, but the fact that they are tall and have footballers’ arms are obvious things that, as this is an explanation, I don't feel should be left out.

Matt has similar hair colouring to me, although his definitely leans more towards the brown end of the scale, and his eyes are a sort of light brown. He wears his hair in a shaggy pile which I would think would be a disadvantage on the footy oval, but he doesn't seem to mind. I think he tries to pass it off as a style, but I, and those who know him well, know that
it has ended up looking like that because he's too lazy to do anything with it. Including brushing.

Jack, however, wears his dark brown hair quite short although he follows Matt's example of not bothering to do much with it, letting it instead stick up at all sorts of random angles. On special occasions he uses gel to achieve... exactly the same effect so I don't know why he bothers. His eyes are this amazing light blue and pretty incredible. This is not to say I've spent time gazing adoringly at his eyes or anything yucky like that, it's just that they are so blue and piercing you'd have to be blind not to notice them.

Well honestly! This is my brother and his best friend we're talking about! I'm not going to describe them as good looking, they're not hideously deformed and they seem to stack up the dates so they must be passably good looking. What I think is really going on is a little case of their personality corrupting their looks. You know when you see a good-looking guy and then find out he's a complete jerk and he suddenly 'looks' different? His features haven't changed, but you start noticing all the faults and his personality has somehow leaked onto his looks making him incredibly ugly. Matt and Jack are the opposite of that guy. They're just good people and seem to garner friends wherever they go. They're friendly and affable and people are won over by their charm. Believe me, I've seen it happen. Girls are only passably interested at the start of the conversation, but, a few minutes later, they're completely hooked.

If you're thinking they're players then I've described them all wrong; they're not characters from an American teen movie. For a start they're 20 years old and, although incredibly immature in some respects, are a bit more together when it comes to girls. They don't treat them like dirt, but the whole dating thing is never taken particularly seriously either.

Matt and I are closer than any other siblings I know. That is not to say that we are sickeningly good mates all the time, that would be bloody ridiculous. Oh no, we fight as much as the next brother and sister, but, underneath it all, we'd do absolutely anything for each other. My relationship with Jack is harder to describe. He's been a constant fixture in my life since I was six, a comforting and solid presence, but not someone I really think that much about. I know that sounds a bit dismissive, but that's the only way I can think of describing him. Refer back to the teddy bear simile, if you will...

Once the pair of them had turned eighteen, Matt and Jack had moved into a flat together near the university and happily begun their lives as popular, single, 'it' boys around campus. A couple of years after that, however, before they'd become too cosy in their bachelor pad, I finished grade 12 and began attending the same university as them. The obvious thing to do, according to my parents, was for me to move in with the boys. Bet they loved that phone call! But, honestly, they were really good about the whole thing and, in a
couple of weeks, had moved all their junk out of the third bedroom which they used as a storage/study/anything else room, and hidden away all the porn. Well, that is to say, I hadn't found any porn yet, but I'm not naïve enough to assume it isn’t there somewhere.

Despite the occasional waft of male musk, I love our flat. It’s kind of pokey, my room is the smallest one and there is pretty much only room for my bed, my bedside table, a small bookshelf and my stereo, but it seems like just the right size for us. The whole place is a simple rectangle with the dining room/living room and kitchen all merged into one large room and then the four other rooms lining the far wall. The bathroom is furthest on the left, then comes Jack's room, Matt's room and finally my little box is tucked into the corner on the furthest right as you entered the flat. Furniture and decoration are pretty sparse, but we've done our best and the random mess scattered about ensures that it always has a 'lived in' feel to it.

Anyway, back to the bit where I burst into Jack's room. He was sitting on his bed, his back propped against the wall, a book open in his lap. A slight lifting of an eyebrow and then a slow glance up, his expression, when it was revealed to me, one of extreme bemusement, rewarded my announcement that I needed him. The look on his face abruptly changed when he caught sight of me, however, and he dropped his book and got to his feet in a way that could only be described as alarmed.

"Tally? What's wrong? What's happened? Are you alright?"

Jack has always called me Tally. I asked him why once and his answer has always stuck with me. 'It's because,' he'd said, 'your family call you Natalia and your friends call you Talia, but I'm stuck somewhere in the middle of those two groups.' He'd created, I guess a whole new group to put himself in when it came to me and a nickname to go with it.

"Wow, you're good," I said in surprise, impressed with his ability to see something was wrong. "I haven't even told you-"

He interrupted me, gesturing towards my face. "You look awful. Why've you been crying?"

Then I got it. OK, so I'm no movie actress. If I cry then I cry properly. None of that tears dripping off the dead centre of my eye and then falling prettily down my cheek nonsense. No, like any other normal person on Earth my tears come out from the sides and the middle and every which way and dribble down merging with my nose and sometimes drifting off into my ears depending on the angle. My nose runs like crazy and the skin beneath my eyes blows up like a puffer fish and turns a nice bright pink to match my nose and bloodshot eyes. Get the picture yet? I'm not a pretty crier.

Plopping down onto Jack’s bed I began to tell him the whole story. Beginning with my horrible day at uni, I let the whole thing just roll out, no holding back. He sat beside me, listening intently, his face getting steadily angrier and angrier as I went on. When I told him
about what had happened at Rory's party he swore softly under his breath and when I began to cry again (we'd reached the 'what's wrong with you?' stage of the story) he wordlessly passed me a box of tissues, but didn't take his eyes from my face.

In short, he was the most attentive, kind listener and I felt so vindicated by his anger on my behalf that I gave him a quick hug when I'd finished my story. His arms tightened around me ever so briefly and then he let me go. Knowing me for so long means, of course, that he's aware of my touching phobia and he's always been careful to give me a light pat on the back or a quick hug, but nothing more, whenever the situation warranted a touchy, feely moment.

I stared down at the used tissues in my hand and wondered how I was going to break it to him that his kind consideration of my need for space needed to be turned on its head. Obviously misinterpreting my silent contemplation as despair, he ran a hand through his hair in frustration and said,

"Look, Tally, I know you're miserable now and everything, but, honestly, you're better off out of it. He's a complete jerk and doesn't deserve anyone, least of all you. You get that right?"

I nodded mutely, but didn't lift my eyes and he sighed uncomfortably. I thought I heard him mutter, "This is Matt's job," but, in the next second, he gave me a soft bump with his shoulder which made me look up him. "Come on soldier. Buck up," he said kindly. "Tomorrow is another day, everything will look better in the morning, and all those other upbeat clichés."

Seizing upon the moment, I grabbed his arm and looked at him with wide eyes which, fortunately for my performance, still had tears swimming about in them.

"Jack," I croaked out, "I need you to do me a favour."

He looked a bit taken aback, but, to his credit, he wasn't fooled into promising he'd do whatever I asked which is what I'd been hoping for. Instead he said cautiously, "I'll do what I can."

This was it, the moment I threw my dignity to the wind. I took a deep breath and looked down at the floor, not because I was trying to act sweet and innocent, but because I honestly couldn't bear to see the look on his face when I told him my idea.

"I need to learn," I said in a very small, quiet voice. "You have to teach me…" I faltered here as the whole thing was really just too sordid to put into words. I thought I had a good grasp of the English language, but I had no clue how to put my dilemma to him.

"Teach you…?" he prompted.

"Teach me it!" I finally choked out. "What happens when you actually like the…touching and the…the…fondling and the…it, you know." I had never been so embarrassed in my life. The age old 'you could have fried on egg on my face' adage actually seemed kind
of plausible I felt that hot and flustered. But - would you believe it? - Jack still hadn't cottoned on to what I was on about. He looked at me completely blankly and I could almost see his mind whirring as he tried to connect the bits.

"I can't put out!" I finally screeched. "You have to teach me how to put out. Sex, Jack, sex and all that comes before and after, do you get me?"

And, finally, he did get me.

"Jesus Christ, Tally!" He leapt off the bed and stood in the furthest corner of the room, his expression verging on horrified. "You can't be serious!"

I stood up as well, but didn't go towards him, considering his reaction to my idea he might have panicked and jumped out the window if I got too close.

"Just listen to me, please," I begged. "It's not as awful as it sounds." A damn lie by the way, it was exactly as bad as it sounded. "Being so scared of physical contact all the time is holding me back. I want to enjoy being with guys, but I can't at the moment. The only way I can see round it is to be taught what it's like by someone I trust."

"When you're with the right guy I'm sure it will happen anyway. You can't force it," Jack, rather predictably, stated. Poor guy looked as uncomfortable as I felt.

"I don't want to wait that long," I said petulantly. "And what if I never find the right guy because I'm too chicken to get close to him? I could drive my perfect man away through being such a prude."

I could see that I wasn't convincing him. It was time to up the ante.

"Fine!" I stormed, grabbing my mobile out of my pocket and scrolling through the address book until I found Brad's number. "I'll just call my ex then and tell him I've changed my mind and he can have his nasty way with me after all."

Jack's face darkened and he took a hesitant step towards me. "You have more self-respect than that, Tally," he said seriously.

"Do I?" I asked shrilly, my finger still hovering over the call button. "Because I don't know anymore. I'm so desperate, Jack, I'll go out to a pub and latch onto a random guy. I'm sure someone out there is prepared to teach me what I want to know."

"Give me your phone." He held out his hand and, after a moment, added, "And your car keys. You're not going to call Brad and you're not going to pick a bloke up at a bar."

I clutched my phone more tightly, glaring at him defiantly. "You're not grasping the situation here. It's you or the next guy I see. I'm anyone's tonight, but I had just enough sense to come to you first."

Jack stepped back into his corner looking as if the world as he knew it had come crashing down around his ears. He searched my face intently, looking, I suppose, for any sign that I was joking. 'You wish buddy,' I thought grimly bringing my finger closer still to the call button.
"You're serious, aren't you?" he asked as our stand-off dragged out another few seconds. “This is surreal! What about Matt?"

"Yes, I'm serious, and what about Matt? This isn't anything to do with him. Please Jack."

It was perhaps the little wobble in my voice as I resorted to begging that made him heave a deep sigh then, and close his eyes briefly.

"Give me your mobile and your keys," he repeated. When I hesitated, he continued, "Go wash your face and calm down. If, in the morning, you still feel this way then…" he stopped and the moment dragged on, the air crackling with tension. "…then I'll consider it."

I felt like leaping into the air and punching my fist in celebration, but I restrained myself and, instead, meekly handed over my phone and keys. As I dropped them into his open palm I pressed my fingers against his briefly and whispered, "Thank you."

"I haven't said I definitely will yet," he cautioned, but we both knew that he had all but lost the battle.

Feeling suddenly exhausted, I followed his advice and went into the bathroom to give my face a good scrub down. Catching sight of myself in the mirror I saw that I really did look awful: pale, but with red blotches here and there on my face and with watery, bloodshot eyes. How could he have resisted me for as long as he did?

Staggering into my bedroom, I pulled my pjs out from under my pillow and quickly immersed myself in their fuzzy warmth. Pulling my hair out of its ponytail, I crawled between the covers and snuggled into the softness of the mattress.

I was wiped. Exhausted physically and emotionally.

As I lay there, I heard the front door slam and my brother's heavy footsteps walk into the kitchen. A moment later the tap in the kitchen started running and I smiled, picturing Matt cupping his hands under the tap just like I had done at Brad's not so long ago.

Thinking about Brad made a big bubble of unhappiness rise up through my chest and constrict my throat. Turning my face into the pillow I whimpered in pain against the smooth material.

Dimly, I heard Jack's door open and the boys greet each other. Matt asked whether I was home and, when Jack answered in the affirmative, the familiar footsteps came towards the door. They halted abruptly, however, as Jack called out that I was asleep.

"Asleep?" Matt asked disbelievingly. "It's not even 9 yet."

"Yeah, I know, but she looked pretty wiped when she came in, she said she was just going to go straight to bed."

Oh how I loved Jack at that moment, what a mate. I knew it would have taken a huge amount of effort to lie to his best friend like that. I hadn't strictly told him not to tell Matt about my break up with Brad, but he obviously knew to leave it to me to deal with.
Yep, I'd definitely picked the right guy to be my teacher.
Chapter 3

When I emerged from my room the next morning, Matt and Jack were moving around in the kitchen, staggering slightly in the way that all of us in the early morning are prone to do. I paused for a moment in my doorway, unseen by the boys, and happily surveyed the little scene of domesticity as they moved with the practiced precision only those who are truly comfortable with each other can achieve.

As I watched, Matt got the orange juice and milk out of the fridge and, without even looking up from his task of filling two bowls with cereal, Jack slid two glasses across the counter to my brother. Matt filled the cups with OJ whilst simultaneously sliding the milk down to Jack who poured the milk over the cereals and sent the milk whizzing back down the line. Matt caught it just in time, put both cartons back in the fridge and then picked up the glasses to wander over to our little round kitchen table. Jack followed him with their breakfasts and they sat down and tucked in at almost exactly the same time, all without exchanging a single word.

I'd had a rotten night, waking up every hour or so and having to deal with the horrible swooping feeling of anger and embarrassment in my stomach when I realised why I felt so bloody awful. Watching two of my favourite people in the world go about this simple little routine, however, made me smile fondly.

I didn't know what they would do without each other, I really didn't. Matt needed Jack's steadying influence to stop him from being a real wild child and Jack needed Matt's crazy antics to stop him becoming submerged in his fondness for the serious. He hadn't always been so grave, our Jack, but a tragedy when he was fourteen had made him grow up awfully quickly and he'd never been as happy-go-lucky since. In the way that everybody does in times of crisis, but especially teenage boys, he withdrew into his shell to protect himself from the pain and he still only rarely emerged. Still, with the support of our family, which had already pretty much adopted him anyway, he got through it and, much as I wish he'd never had to have gone through that hurt, the experience made us into the close little bunch that we are. Shaking off thoughts of the past, I allowed myself to actually get past the doorway.

"Morning boys," I sang cheerily, sauntering over to the kitchen to grab myself a bowl and trying to pretend I didn't see Jack start so violently at my entrance that he began to choke on his breakfast.

Matt helpfully thumped his friend on the back while looking over at me curiously. "And what happened to you last night, Natalia, sister dearest?" he asked. "You were asleep by the time I got home, what was up with that?"
I shrugged nonchalantly as I got the milk out of the fridge. "I had a hard day is all, and I just wanted to jump straight into bed."

Jack, poor thing, began choking even harder at that and I had to duck my head to hide the smirk that appeared on my face as I realised what I'd said. Double entendre, much?

"Dude, chew first, then swallow," my brother advised, fairly hypocritically considering the way he was shovelling his food into his own mouth. He turned back to me and said, fulfilling his brotherly quotient of the day, "But you're alright now, yeah?"

I took a seat opposite Jack and smiled broadly. "I'm fine. Jack’s going to help me with an assignment so I'm feeling pretty confident about things."

Jack glanced at me with eyes watery from the force of his choking. His expression clearly read, 'don't push it.'

"Cool." Matt finished his cereal and dumped his empty bowl into the sink. "Right, I'm off then. I should be back around five or so, oh, and the guys are going to crash here tonight, alright?"

I sighed heavily. The 'guys'. Otherwise known as Tommo, Micky, and Samsa. How terrible it must have been for their mothers who had given them the quite nice, ordinary names of Tom, Michael and Sam and had to watch as they were transformed into names that their friends could more easily grunt. Matt and Jack were known as, and it pains me to admit it, Matt-Man and Jack-Hammer or Hammer for short.

The realms of masculine stupidity really do know no bounds.

"As long as they don't prance around in my underwear again," I muttered remembering the last time they all came over en masse. I have to keep my clothes in a big chest of drawers and cupboard out in the lounge room because there is no space for it in my little room. Rifling through its contents while drunk one night the boys had found my bras. Some of my lingerie was stretched beyond recognition once I'd finally rescued it. Enough said.

Matt snorted with laughter as he grabbed his backpack and shook his head. "Nah, no worries," he said easily. "They learnt their lesson with the lecture you gave them the next morning, although I think that probably had more to do with their hangovers than your teacher voice. See you later." And he walked out of the flat, still chuckling.

Jack and I kept our eyes averted and stayed silent as we listened to Matt thunder down the stairs and then the unmistakable sound of his wreck of a car roaring into life in the car park. It was only when the screech of tyres alerted us that he'd pulled out into the street and properly gone that we looked at each other.

"So, how're you feeling…I mean really?" Jack asked, leaning forward over the table and looking at me seriously.
I twisted a piece of hair around my fingers self-consciously and gave him an uncertain look. "Not sure," I confessed. "A bit pissed off, a bit humiliated, but quite a bit hopeful." I checked to make sure he knew what I was hopeful about and, as I saw him awkwardly lean back in his chair, I knew he'd got my point.

"So you're still keen on... that then," he faltered crossing his arms defensively.

I nodded. "It wasn't just the ramblings of the broken-hearted, I honestly and truly want to learn about... that. And I'm not doing it simply to get back at Brad, I promise."

"It wasn't so much the getting back at Brad that I was worried about, but the getting back with Brad." He frowned. "If we do this, and I'm only saying if," he added as he saw my face light up, "you're not going to go running straight back to that prick are you?"

"Yes, Jack," I said sarcastically. "Because I'm sure there's some part of my self-respect that he hasn't had a chance to carve up with a chainsaw, and it would be a shame to walk away from this with any sense of dignity left at all." I shook my head. "This is for me, get it? I'm sick of having to constantly watch myself around guys in case I give some sign that it would be alright for them to go for it and then having to run a mile to get away from them."

"In that case it's not yourself that you have to watch, it's them," Jack countered. "And it's a bloody good thing that you do run a mile from most of them."

I stood up and almost threw my bowl on top of Matt's in the sink before whirling to face Jack again. "Look," I bit out, "as sweet as the whole protective thing is, I already have an older brother for that sort of nonsense so you can lay off. I'm not asking you to teach me how to tell the difference between a decent bloke and a bastard. Apart from the Brad glitch I'm pretty good at knowing the distinction between the two without any help from you. What I need to learn from you, is what to do once I've found a decent one."

OK, so maybe I should have been trying to be nicer to him considering the circumstances, but, honestly! He'd been pushing my limits with the whole 'running back to Brad' thing and if I let him get away with being patronising during the preliminary negotiations then he'd think it was OK to always treat me like an imbecile. Like my mum always says, 'If people know what you want, there's more chance of you getting it.'

There were a few moments of silence and then Jack blew a long breath threw his lips and stared down at the tabletop. I knew what two warring factions were doing battle inside his head. He could help me, therefore protecting me from other guys whilst, in all probability, ruining the close friendship dynamic that ran between the three of us in the flat. Alternatively, he could not help me and pave the way for my full on emotional breakdown culminating in, yet again, the ruination of the close friendship dynamic that ran between the three of us in the flat. Whatever he chose to do, things were never going to go back to the way they used to be.

Damn, but I was a bitch.
Suddenly he got to his feet, the chair he'd been sitting on scraping back noisily on the floor and making me jump.

"I'm going to regret this for the rest of my life," he muttered.
And that was as close to a yes as I was ever going to get.
I bounded over to his side and grinned up at him. "You're a star, Jack."
"I'm an idiot is what I am," he disagreed, shaking his head. "Look, let's sit down for a sec and sort some things out, rules and that. I'm still not entirely sure what I've got myself into."

I agreed and we walked over to our crummy, saggy couch and settled ourselves at either end of it, Jack looking as if the distance wasn't nearly great enough. Well that was going to have to change for this whole thing to work...

"Right then." He ran a hand through his short dark hair. "You want me to, er, accustom you to touching and that ...um...stuff, yeah? God, I can't believe I'm saying this."

I ignored the last part. "I just want to get used to it and, I don't know, enjoy it a bit maybe." I looked up at him through my eyelashes. I wasn't trying to be coquettish, I was just trying to avoid looking at him directly.

"And how..." he coughed uncomfortably. "...how far do you want to go?"

I went bright red. Without the hysteria of last night this really did seem like the stupidest idea. I mean talking about this kind of thing with Jack was...kind of gross.

"Let's just play it by ear, shall we?" I suggested, backing down a little from my earlier position. It didn't mean that I was still wasn't up for, well, everything, but in the glaring light of day, it just seemed too distasteful to spell it all out.

He looked somewhat relieved at this small reprieve. "OK then, I'm going to lay down some rules." He got to his feet once again and started to pace around the room. "Rule number 1, what I say goes. If I say we're not going to do something because you're not ready, or whatever, then we're not going to do it. You're going to follow my lead, alright?"

I opened my mouth to protest. No, that was not alright! If that was the case he'd just say no to everything! He caught my eye and held my gaze for a long moment. "I'm serious, Tally, you're a bit weird at the moment so I think it's best if I'm the one to lead the - what do you want to call them? - lessons?"

"Fine," I said sulkily. In any case I could agree to his stupid rules now and then argue my case later on if needs be.

"Rule number 2, no dating. I won't and you won't. That way we can at least try and keep this whole thing from diving completely off the cliff of morality."

Why did I get the feeling that he wasn't completely convinced about the merit of my idea? Still, this second rule seemed sensible so I nodded in agreement.

"Rule number 3, no mind-altering substances during lessons."
"Yeah, 'cos you see me injecting heroin on a daily basis," I snorted. "Be serious, Jack."

"That description includes alcohol," he said simply and my eyes widened.

OK, that changed things. Yes, I didn't like to drink at parties, but the very occasional make-out sessions with Brad had been helped with a bit of beer. Oh God, it sounded awful put like that, but I'm trying to be truthful here. I don't mean I had to get completely sloshed for him to come near me, but a little outside help to relax was always appreciated.

"Have you got that then? There's already enough people in the world who use alcohol as a precursor to sex, but you're not going to be one of them, understood?"

Man, but he was taking this rule thing seriously!

"Yes, sir, anything else?" I asked clasping my hands together in my lap and looking up at him innocently.

"We don't tell anyone," he replied quickly and I nodded fervently.

"Well that's a given. Anyway, it's not like people would believe us."

"Yeah well, let's not test that theory, alright?" Jack suddenly sat down on the couch again staring fixedly down at his hands. His last words had been no more than a mutter. I could tell there was something else he wanted to say, but he couldn't find the words to express himself.

For once in my life I sat quietly and waited for him to pull the words together.

"One other thing..." he finally began, and I nodded encouragingly even though I was a little apprehensive about what aspect of the situation had been just too uncomfortable for him to be able to spit out.

"You know how people who...um...play more interesting, ah, sexual games have a safe word?"

"What, like if they get scared or whatever they say a random word which means whatever is going on should stop?" I nodded, hoping this wasn't part of his planning for the 'lessons'. "Yep, I'm with you. Some word like...sheep!"

Jack sent me a little lopsided smile at the last bit, but became serious again almost immediately, one of his distinguishing personality traits. "Yes, like sheep, except I'll take anything. Any sign that you're not comfortable, any look, movement, or word and everything stops. I won't hurt you, Tally, I'm not going to do that."

Have I mentioned that I absolutely adore Jack? Well I do.

"I know you won't hurt me, that's why I came to you for help." There was a pause as I delighted in the true loveliness of my brother's best mate, but then I moved on. "Right, so, sheep it is then," I said cheerily, glad that that seemed to be the end of his list of rules. "So just a recap then, no disobedience, no dating, no drugs, no telling anyone and no you hurting me. I think I can deal with all that."
I bounced off the couch preparing to go into the bathroom for a shower. Jack stood up as well, however, and called me back before I high-tailed it into the bathroom. As I turned around, I saw that he had his right hand stuck out towards me. "Shake on the rules," he said calmly.

Dratted boy had probably picked up on my hesitation over the first rule, darn and blast it! I reluctantly took his hand and shook it quickly. As was my usual habit I went to let go quickly, but his grip on my hand tightened, not so much that I wouldn't be able to pull away if I struggled, but enough to let me know that he had control of the situation. I looked up at him in surprise and was taken aback by the force of his gaze on me. His blue eyes, so rarely shown to me fully, firmly caught my gaze. It was the first time in a long while that Jack seemed fully present, his eyes neither hooded nor slightly averted as was so often his wont. And, my God, when Jack Whitby let himself be, he was one hell of a presence!

His hand was warm and firm and...absolutely huge! I don't know why I'd never noticed before, but I might as well have had doll hands the way his completely enveloped mine. They were nice, his hands, clean, well cared for, but slightly rough in that 'I am man, man will not moisturise' kind of way.

Hmmm, was it my imagination or was I getting tingles in the belly and warmth in my cheeks? Christ!

Jack, because he is neither stupid nor blind, noticed my reaction and the slightest hint of a smile curled the corners of his lips. Was he laughing at me? Surely my sweet Jack didn't find my discomfort amusing? Although, now I think about it, discomfort wasn't really what I was feeling...

Just as I was about to open my mouth and ask Jack what he was doing he leant down until his mouth was close to my ear and his cheek was almost resting against mine. "Lesson number one," he said quietly, his voice, for some reason, making the tingles in my belly shoot up in a burst towards my throat, "the simplest touch can sometimes be the most effective."

He pulled away, but I stayed frozen. Seeing my stunned mullet impersonation he really did smile. With a chuckle he released my hand and then grabbed his bag off the floor. "See you later, Tally," he called out over his shoulder, walking towards the door and then exiting it with a final wave.

As the door banged shut I finally relaxed. What the hell had that been all about? Getting that little bit of frisson going with someone was as simple as a handshake? Well that was easy! Why hadn't I managed to figure that out before? Shaking my head to clear it of the last bits of Jack-induced fuzziness I headed for the bathroom.

Better make that shower a cold one.
Chapter 4

For the rest of the day I couldn't get lesson 1 out of my head.

The simplest touch can sometimes be the most effective? Well maybe when you have hands like Jack’s, but I couldn’t see myself giving guys tingles in their bellies with just a handshake. Do guys even get the tingles? Whatever, all I can say is that Jack has a great talent.

I arrived home from work that night, thankful that the Thursday was over as I only had one class on a Friday and no work, so it was basically the weekend for me. I hadn't seen Brad at all throughout the day, but I did have a lecture with Allison which had been a bit awkward.

I'd been looking forward to some lazing about in my pyjamas and maybe even another 'lesson' from Jack when I got home. Unfortunately, I had forgotten about 'the boys.'

I know technically there are only five of them, but when they're all together in a clump it seems like there are millions of the buggers. There's always one in the loo, another rifling through the fridge, two having a ridiculous argument, another three or so challenging each other to a drinking competition and at least ten others doing something they're not supposed to. Yes, I know that it is not strictly possible, but it damn well seems like it.

As I entered the flat they all looked up from the television and I was greeted by a chorus of grunts which, in boy land, passed as a greeting. I waved unenthusiastically in reply and headed to the kitchen for an apple. Someone once told me that an apple is more effective than coffee at waking you up and, since I hate coffee anyway, I've chosen to believe them. Just as I was about to take a bite of the wonderfully cold, crisp fruit (always keep apples in the fridge, no matter what people tell you) the phone rang.

"Phone's ringing," Matt offered helpfully from the couch. This was his ever-so-subtle way of saying that he wasn't going to be the one to answer it. I made a face at him and picked up the receiver.

"Hello?" I greeted, eyeing my apple enviously. I could virtually see its wonderful coldness seeping out.

"Darling, did you know that the Neanderthals’ brain was bigger than modern mans’?"

I bit into my apple, after all I was going to need the sustenance. It was my mother.

"You don't say?" I mumbled through my mouthful. "And where did you pick up this spicy piece of gossip?"

"At my adult education class. I told you I learn such interesting things there, didn't I? Well it's true and Professor Clarence said that my views were thorough and insightful. He's quite good looking, you know. Not as good looking as your father maybe, but if I wasn't
married, or if I had an unhappy marriage I'd get with him like a shot. I bet that's where he gets most of his girlfriends from. Oh, that sounds mean, doesn't it? I didn't mean to imply that he was so pathetic that…"

And on it went.

I slumped down at the kitchen table and continued to eat my apple. I got down to the core and was nibbling away at those gross bits that surround the seeds and she still hadn't stopped her monologue. I threw the core away and, as I did so, I caught Matt's questioning look.

'Mum,' I mouthed at him and he nodded sagely before turning back to the TV. I laid my head down on my arms with the phone resting next to me. My mum's voice was loud enough that I could hear every word she was saying, although I was struggling to put them into any kind of coherent order in my brain.

"…but I do think it'd be nice to do something big for a change. So what do you think?"

I jerked out of my almost catatonic state and put the phone back up to my ear, aware that this question wasn't rhetorical, and that I had absolutely no idea what she was talking about.

"I think it's a great idea, Mum," I said jovially, hoping against hope that this was the right answer.

"Oh good!" I could virtually feel her beaming down the phone. "Now if we could only convince your father then I could start preparations right away. You'll speak to him, won't you? And tell him that you think it's a good idea?"

"Of course I will," I said with a great deal less certainty in my voice. Mum's idea of a good plan was often vastly different from my dad's and, subsequently, Matt's and my own. What had I given my endorsement to?

"Excellent. Then you can bring your boyfriend, Brent is it?"

"Brad," I corrected her without thinking. Catching my mistake I quickly added, "But we've broken up."

"Wonderful! I'm sorry to say, honey, but I never really liked him. Shifty eyes. Or was that your brother's girlfriend? I can never keep track."

And there you have it. Perhaps the best example of the inner working of my mother's brain. According to her own admission, she can't keep track between my boyfriends and Matt's girlfriends. Speaking of whom…I looked across the room and saw that my brother was now watching me out of narrowed eyes. What was his problem? Then I suddenly remembered that I hadn't told him about breaking it off with Brad or, more importantly, my reason for doing so and he must have overheard me. Crap, he looked pretty annoyed. Still, I didn't have to worry about this for too long as my mother had started up again.
"Have those daffodils outside your building flowered yet? I thought they would’ve, but your father seems to think it's too early."

Bam! Onto another train of thought, dismissing my boyfriend-less state in one swift movement. This is why I love my mother so much, she believes in three main codes of life: no histrionics about things in the past, life is too short for regret, and, her favourite saying of them all, move on!

"How's my favourite boy then?" she asked, taking another leap to a different line of thought.

"Oh Jack's fine," I said absentmindedly, still looking at Matt's angry expression.

"Good. Is he eating well?"

I smiled, my mother adored Jack and was constantly fussing over him.

"Yeah I think so. Ask him yourself in a minute."

"Yes, but he knows how I worry so he might lie to me to set my mind at ease."

The thought of Jack lying to my mother was patently ridiculous, but as I wanted to speak to Dad before midnight, I agreed with her and asked for the phone to be passed over.

"Oh, of course, honey, he's right here. Love you," she chirped.

"Love you too, Mum," I said with a grin.

There was a pause and, over the scuffling noises as the phone was handed over, I could hear my mother telling my father not to talk too long as she wanted to talk to the boys. I rolled my eyes at her bossiness, my mum thinks she has a greater claim over us than my dad because she carried us in the womb for nine months. The fact that she didn't even meet Jack until he was eight doesn't seem to register.

As is probably blatantly obvious, our family follows the age old stereotype where the mum is closer to the son and the dad closer to the daughter. They even had an agreement before either Matt or I were born that Mum would get to name the child if it was a boy and Dad would name it if it was a girl. I was born on Christmas Day and my dad chose Natalia as it means Christmas in Latin. This was all very well for formal stuff, but I much preferred to be called Talia day-to-day.

Finally I heard Dad shush my mother, not a small feat.

"Hello, sweetheart." His voice sounded long-suffering although I knew he was just putting it on to annoy Mum.

"Hi, Dad." I smiled, bringing my legs up to sit cross legged on the kitchen chair.

"How're you going?"

"I'd be a lot better if your mum would just drop this anniversary thing. If I've told her once I've told her a thousand times I don't want to have a huge party, let alone one involving a massive tent in the backyard."

Ah, so that was what I'd said was a good idea. Whoops.
"We've gotten to know an awful lot of people over three decades of marriage, and most of them are imbeciles. Why on earth would I want to be stuck with them in an expensive pavilion that's probably churning up my lawn?" he continued crossly.

"Because then you'll know where to organise the air raid?" I suggested playfully. He chuckled. “Well there is that I suppose.”

We chatted for a bit, but, after a while Mum's squawks in the background became too insistent and we reluctantly said goodbye.

"Tell Mum that I tried to convince you of the merits of a huge garden party for your anniversary, alright?" I joked and he groaned.

"If I have to be there so do you, missy, so I wouldn't get too cocky," he warned. "Take care."

"You too," I replied before shouting out, "Heads up Matt," and throwing the phone across to him.

He caught it and began to talk to Dad, oblivious of the racket his friends and the TV were making. I was just about to trudge off to my room to change when Jack came up behind the chair I was sitting on and leant down to whisper, "Somebody's in trouble."

I looked across to where Matt was still looking at me with an annoyed expression even though he was carrying on a perfectly normal conversation over the telephone. Sighing, I nodded my head. Considering Matt and I were super close, the fact that I hadn't told him I'd broken up with Brad had obviously made him pissed.

"Yep," I whispered back. "It looks that way, but I honestly didn't have time to tell him. Not to mention I would have spent the whole day expecting to hear that my brother had threatened to kill Brad and who needs that kind of stress?"

Even though I couldn't see Jack I could feel that his posture had suddenly stiffened. I craned my neck round to look at him and saw he was staring off to the side like he was deliberately avoiding looking at me.

"Did you see Brad today?" he asked, still keeping his voice low as if he didn't want the others to hear us.

"No, why?" As he continued to avoid my gaze, I sighed heavily. "Jack Morgan Whitby what have you done?"

Before he had a chance to reply, a high-pitched phone ring erupted shrilly from somewhere quite near us. Swearing softly, I reached down under the table for my bag. I dug through the layers of trash until I found the sparkly blue phone (I painted it with nail polish at a boring party) and answered it.

"Hey, Simone. I'm about to extract some sort of confession from Jack so could you make this quick?" I asked having noted the caller ID.
"Quick it is," my friend agreed; I do love her so, no questions just straight to the point. "Did you see Brad this afternoon at all?"

"No," I answered succinctly. That was the second time in a matter of seconds that I'd been asked that. I smelt a rat.

"Yeah, well, I'm not surprised. After this morning he's probably going out of his way to avoid you," she said, sounding positively gleeful.

"Why? What happened this morning?" I asked, conscious of the fact that Jack had left my side and was just now slipping into his bedroom and closing the door quietly behind him. Suspicious much?

"You didn't hear? Everyone's talking about it. He was warned off you! Apparently this morning he was telling his friends that you were frigid, but he was still going to...um...bed you before the end of the year." My guess is that it had been a word other than 'bed' and Simone was censoring it a little. "Anyway," she continued hurriedly, "your brother overheard him and threw him against a wall. Apparently Brad was fairly wetting himself and it was only his friends pulling Matt off that stopped there being a major fight. It's nice how your brother looks out for you."

"Yeah, it's just great," I said sarcastically. "Especially when I get two brothers for the price of one."

It seemed that my theorising had to be turned on its head. Matt wasn't angry because he didn't know about the break up, he was angry because he'd had to find out about it through gossip. And Jack wasn't guilty because he had done something himself, he was guilty because he knew about Matt making a scene and he hadn't told me. Oh the drama!

"But the other reason I called was to tell you that Brad called me about ten minutes ago," Simone continued and my eyes widened in astonishment.

"Really?" I asked. "What did the scumbag want?"

"He wanted to apologise, he said he couldn't call you directly because you'd just hang up, but he wanted to apologise for sleeping around and then dissing you to his friends." She spoke quickly obviously wanting to get the message out as soon as possible.

"Oh yeah?" I said coldly. "And what did you say?"

"That no-one messes my best friend around and, if he ever treated another woman like that, I would get you to tell the entire campus that the only reason you never did it with him was because you don't sleep with morons with bigger dicks on their heads than anywhere else."

I cheered at her response. Sometimes Simone comes up with these beautiful little put downs and she delivers them with the speed and cutting of a whip crack.
"Oh that's too bad," I exclaimed. "I did that already. Hey do you want to come over, Simmy? The guys are here and I think I'm going to need some feminine support this evening."

"They're all there? Oh that's nice when you're grieving!" She sounded very indignant, what a sweetie.

"You make it sound like someone's died," I chuckled. "So I'll see you in a bit?"

"Definitely."

Jamming my phone into my pocket, I uncurled myself from the chair and slunk past Matt, who was busy trying to disentangle himself from a conversation with my mother, and into Jack's room.

I shut the door behind me and put my hands on my hips. "You could have told me, Jack," I said accusingly, without any sort of preamble. He looked up at me in surprise and then slowly shut the text book he'd been flipping through.

"Told you what, exactly?" he asked slowly swivelling around in his desk chair so he could look at me more easily.

"That Matt had attacked Brad, I mean it does concern me somewhat. And why didn't you stop him? Were you there?"

His brow crinkled as though he was confused about something and then he very slowly nodded his head. "Yeah I was there," he said cautiously, as if he wasn't very sure about that fact. "But I didn't stop it because Brad deserved it."

"Well, at least Matt didn't hit him," I said, trying to look on the bright side.

"Yeah, there is that," Jack agreed, but he didn't look too happy about it.

Something wasn't quite right. Jack looked ridiculously uneasy and I could've sworn he was lying about something. He was fidgeting something shocking and I'd just opened my mouth to ask him what was wrong, when the door burst open and Matt appeared, still holding the phone.

"Your turn Hammer and, for God's sake, don't ask her about Professor Clarence, I already hate the man."

Jack grinned and took the phone. "Mrs D! How are you?" he began, his voice fairly dripping with affection. His face was transformed from being creased with worry to open happiness. Seeing him so cheerful made some of the tension in my body melt away and I smiled fondly as he wandered out of the room, listening intently to my mother's prattle in a way I'd never seen anyone else manage to do.

I was brought sharply down to Earth, however, as it was my brother's turn to close Jack's door in preparation for a confrontation. "Anything you want to tell me, Natalia?" he asked sardonically and I sighed loudly.
"Don't call me that. But yes, I broke up with Brad yesterday. And I'm sorry you found out like you did, but if you sit down and behave nicely I'll tell you all about it."

He rolled his eyes and I could tell he wasn't really angry just a bit hurt. Of course, due to masculine pride, he couldn't really express that. He brushed a sweep of hair out of his face, instead, and glowered at me. "I'm not going to like this story much, am I?"

Shaking my head, I led him over to the bed where we both sat down and I proceeded to tell him everything that had happened the day before. Actually, scrap that, I didn't tell him everything. The bit where I forced his best friend to become my teacher in matters of the physical I left out for obvious reasons. I felt a hard little knot forming in my stomach as I lied by omission. Damn my closeness with my brother! Lots of people I know have no qualms at all about lying left, right and centre to their siblings.

By the end of the story his fists were clenched, just as Jack's had been when I'd talked to him about it, and I was suddenly thankful that I hadn't told him earlier because he probably wouldn't have stopped at throwing Brad against the wall.

"You should have told me before," he said tightly and I gave him a quick one-armed hug in apology and then bounced off the bed.

"Come on, let's join the others," I said to distract him from his anger. It seemed to work as he followed me without complaint back into the living area to see that Jack was still on the phone over in the kitchen. Micky, Tommo and Samsa, meanwhile were still sprawled comfortably on the couch and armchairs, completely oblivious to the emotional upheaval going on around them.

Tommo had been friends with Jack and Matt since grade eight and the three of them had met the twins Micky and Samsa in the first year of uni. Tommo was my favourite of the boys; I’d even had a major crush on him for about six months in grade 10. Thankfully I got over that and nobody except Simone knew about it. See, sometimes it is good that boys are oblivious! Tom is Maori and, although he was born in Australia, it’s fun to tease him about the faint New Zealand accent he inherited from his parents. He has a shaved head, which he swears lends him an aerodynamic advantage on the footy oval, dark brown eyes and a penchant for tattoos. Maori symbols circle his upper arms and are present across his shoulder blades in that greeny ink that looks so good against dark skin. I may have moved past my crush, but there was still no denying the boy was fine!

Micky and Samsa are twins, but not identical. Micky hates me and the feeling is entirely mutual. He once told me that when the boys were hanging out they didn't need 'no f-ing chicks hanging around.' Misogynist to the max that one. Despite his nasty personality Micky plays the guitar beautifully, even I couldn’t deny it. Both him and Samsa are shorter than the other three and have the same shade of blonde hair, although Sam swept his up into a
ridge along the centre of his head with copious amounts of gel, whilst Micky left his hair pretty well alone.

Sam is like his brother in many ways, but his jokes are not malicious and he doesn't have a problem with women at all as far as I can see. He's usually too busy talking about sport to notice who he's conversing with, male or female. He's the captain of the uni football team which is where he and his brother met Tom, Jack and Matt. I've always thought that he and Simone would make a good couple, but there have been signs of anything like that emerging yet.

Speaking of Simone, as Matt and I re-entered the lounge room and settled ourselves in front of the television which, for some unknown reason, seemed to be playing an Italian movie without subtitles, there was a soft knock on the door.

"Come in," I yelled wondering why Simone didn't just walk in like she usually did. However, as a head of mousy brown hair poked through the open door rather than Simone's strawberry blonde curls I realised it wasn't my best friend. I suppressed a groan as I saw that, instead, it was Haley who lived downstairs with her elderly aunt.

When I'd first moved in I'd tried so hard to like this girl, but it was too ruddy difficult! She always completely ignores me and gravitates immediately to the boys. If she ever comes over and they're not at home she immediately leaves, but if they're present she pretends that we're the best of friends as an excuse for her continued visits. I can't believe that Jack and Matt can't see straight through her superficiality, but she's caught them hook, line and sinker.

I personally don't think she's much to look at, but she certainly has that wide blue eyed, pink lips thing going for her although any girl could tell at a glance that they were achieved by cleverly applied make-up to make it seem like it was natural. Her light brown hair was pulled back into a loose plait today and she wore a little white pleated skirt with a loose, blue chiffony type top and white sandals on her feet.

"Hello," she said, smiling shyly (completely fake, I'm sure) around at the tumble of boys surrounding me.

"Hiya, Haley," Matt grinned, pushing Tom off one of our squishy, patchy armchairs with his foot to make room for her. Tom got up and promptly tipped my brother's chair so he fell out and Tom settled himself in the vacated spot. As you may have guessed, considering the amount of people we have around, there are never enough chairs. I saw Matt eyeing my bean bag and grabbed hold of it determinedly.

"Don't even think about it," I warned him and Haley laughed prettily as if I had just said something incredibly witty. Man, she's annoying.

Just then the door opened again and Simone bounced into the room, her grey eyes sparkling. Seeing me, she skipped over and threw herself down beside me on the bean bag, making me rise up as the beans shifted.
"Hi all," she grinned and the boys grunted at her like they did with me.

Jack finished talking on the phone and, after bringing a kitchen chair over for Haley, settled himself on the floor beside Matt, completing the group. So there we were, the eight of us forming a sort of motley friendship crew. In my opinion Haley didn't really belong, but the boys had kind of adopted her so we were stuck with her.

We fell into a companionable silence as we all watched the foreign movie and I soon figured out that we were watching it because the Italian women in the film seemed to have something against clothes and threw them off at every opportunity. Still, it was oddly absorbing, especially after the twins started adding their own commentary and the plot began to revolve around a woman called Hotchick and her love of two hunky men called Sam and Michael.

At one point in the movie the love interest grabbed hold of Hotchick's hands and gripped them tightly as the camera zoomed in. Unable to stop myself, I glanced sideways at Jack and, as if he could sense my gaze on him, he turned to look at me. Ever so slightly the corners of his lips lifted up in a little smile and his warm eyes danced with amusement.

Uh oh, there were those damn tingles again…

Feeling my cheeks beginning to burn, I quickly got up - well as quickly as you can get up from a beanbag - and hurried over to the kitchen.

"Anyone want a drink?" I called out to give myself an excuse for virtually running away from the group.

"Yeah, I'll give you a hand," Jack said.

Oh crap! So much for getting away from him.

Opening the fridge, I grabbed a six pack and starting breaking the cans out of their seals. I popped the tab to drink one myself, but Jack's hand closed around the can and pulled it away from me gently.

"What?" I hissed, annoyed. "I can have a beer; you're not teaching me at the moment, are you?"

"Aren't I?" he said in a low voice grabbing a couple of the other cans. Something in his tone made me lean back against the counter and, observant little bastard that he is, he saw the result of his words and grinned widely.

"Lesson number 2, Tally," he murmured. "Sometimes no touching is necessary at all."

To which I could only reply, after I had a moment to collect myself, "Yes, very educational, but not exactly the point."

He looked amused and seemed like he was about to say something else when Micky's voice suddenly intruded upon our little moment.

"Oi! Stop whispering over there and bring us the bloody beers!"
Thank god the Italian woman had taken off her top again, causing somewhat of a
distraction, because Jack and I looked distinctly guilty. We quickly rearranged our features
into pictures of innocence and brought the drinks back to the group. It would have been fine
if only we'd thought to remember that naked breasts, in this group, only entranced the
males…
"Which in absence of…" Yada, yada, yada...

I swear, if your job was to present information to students so they could pass their exams and, hopefully, go out and make a difference in the world, would you deliberately make your lectures as boring as possible? Well, I wouldn't, but apparently this view isn't shared by my professors. You know that expression 'I can see your lips moving, but all I'm getting is blah, blah, blah'? Well I never realised how true that can be until I came to university. Even my classes at high school weren't this bad because at least then we were usually given something to do rather than just sitting there.

I sighed heavily and began doodling on the corner of my lecture notes. I say notes, really it was just a load of gobbledygook that I'd scribbled down so I wouldn't walk out of the lecture with nothing. Nope, I would proudly walk out with notes that I wouldn't be able to read tomorrow, brilliant.

The guy next to me appeared to be asleep, lucky sod! As bored and tired as I was I couldn't imagine just dropping off in the middle of a lecture. This guy was either really tired or incredibly unselfconscious.

"In chapter 3 of the Australian Constitution Act 1901, the role of the judicature is examined…"

Wow! I actually heard each word distinctly then! I flipped the pages of my text book to the part concerning chapter 3 of the Constitution and looked to see what the lecturer was talking about. Unfortunately my enthusiasm ended there. My focus drifted off again and I found myself seeking out the clock, subsequently noticing we only had fifteen minutes left of the lecture. So why did I know they were going to be the longest fifteen minutes in history? I sighed again and propped my chin up with my hands as I gazed, albeit unfocusedly, at the lecturer.

"Regarding the duration of the appointment for a Justice of the Court…"

There was a long pause and, as it became awkward, I focussed back on what was going on. The lecturer appeared to be staring right at me! In panic I looked down at the book and saw that the passage he was referring to was at the top of the page my book was opened to. As I looked back up, the lecturer continued, "Well, perhaps the man asleep in the back row could tell us all about it as he obviously has a good enough grasp of this to not pay attention."

For a moment I was simply relieved that he wasn't catching me out on my seemingly drugged state, but then, as people in the lecture started staring and sniggering, I began to feel
bad for the poor guy next to me. I nudged him surreptitiously with my elbow causing him to jerk awake and gaze blearily around the lecture hall.

"Ah, I see you've emerged from your slumber, how kind. Would you be able to tell us all the answer to my question?"

What a snarky prick that lecturer is!

The guy next to me stiffened and starting going red and the professor should really have accepted that he was the victor and moved on, but he continued to look expectantly up at the back row. Feeling a bit squirmy at the uncomfortable silence and the hostile looks being shot up towards me I waited until the lecturer looked pointedly at the clock and shoved my text book across the desks so it rested in front of the poor unfortunate next to me.

"There," I whispered pointing at the passage in my book that he was supposed to know. To his credit he immediately caught on and, without even seeming to read from my book, he quoted the section perfectly. I'd like to see you fault that Professor Gray, I thought triumphantly trying my hardest not to smirk down at the lecturer.

The professor pursed his lips looking extremely disappointed and snapped, "Well, that's the passage, yes, but your friend won't be able to point out the appropriate parts of the textbook in the exam so I suggest you try and pay more attention in my lectures in future."

The guy next to me nodded contritely and murmured an apology.

I flushed at being included in the criticism and bowed my head over my notes to avoid the continued stares of my fellow students.

Finally the end of the lecture came and I quickly gathered my stuff off the desk and into my bag. Being in the back row, I managed to escape the majority of the crush as people virtually stampeded in their desire to leave the lecture hall. Throwing my bag onto my back, I turned onto the path which led down to the large library situated pretty much smack bang in the middle of campus. I needed to research some cases for my tutorial on Monday, but, after that, it was the weekend for me.

I was just considering what I was going to do with the free time my split with Brad had afforded me, when I heard someone shout, "Hey!"

I turned my head to see if the shout was directed at me and saw the guy who had been asleep in the lecture hurtling down the path towards me.

"Wait up!" he called and so I stopped, although I wasn't completely sure it was me he was talking to. Barely a second later he arrived, panting, next to me. "God, you walk fast," he exclaimed with a wide grin as he pushed some floppy hair out of his eyes.

I shrugged. "I guess," I said, eyeing him somewhat suspiciously. Now I was seeing him without his cheek squished against the desk in the throes of sleep there was something about him that was very familiar. Where did I know him from? OK and, more pertinently, what did he want?
Seeming to sense my confusion he thrust something at me and, looking down, I saw that it was my textbook. I had completely forgotten that he had it in my haste to leave the hall.

"Oh," I said in recognition. "Thanks." I took the book and shoved it into my already cramming bag.

"No, thank you," he objected. "You saved my life back there. Professor Gray is a twisted old codger."

"I totally agree, but it was nothing, honestly."

He lifted his eyebrows unbelievingly. "I bet not many of those sycophants we share that lecture with would have helped me out. I'm Adam by the way." He held out his hand and, after only a tiny little pause, I took it.

"Talia," I replied before quickly dropping his hand. The memory of my last handshake was a little too fresh for me to want to extend the moment any longer than necessary. Hmm, that somewhat goes against the point of my lessons with Jack…

If Adam noticed my quick withdrawal he didn't show it and instead continued, "Nice to meet you, Talia. Hey, listen, do you have to rush off somewhere now or do you have time to let me buy you a thank you coffee?"

I opened my mouth to decline, but then hesitated as I thought it over. Why was I immediately going to say no? He seemed like a nice guy and there couldn't be any harm in getting a drink with him. Noting my hesitation he spread his hands out in a gesture of openness.

"Hey, if you're busy I totally understand. It's just that that was my last class of the day and I'm meeting up with a friend in about an hour so I have some time to kill."

I liked the way he gave me an excuse so I could get out of it if I wanted, plus a deadline showing he wasn't going to try and seriously crack onto me. Very gentleman-like. Switching into my somewhat disused flirty mode I put my hands on my hips.

"Oh, so I'm just a stop-gap, is that it?" I teased.

He glanced at me as if to check that I was joking and, seeing my smile, nodded vigorously. "Yep, I'm afraid so. You saw right through my ploy. I just don't want to look like a Nigel-no-friends in case my street cred suffers."

"Well," I sighed seriously, "I'd hate to be responsible for your suffering street cred. Make it a smoothie instead of a coffee and you're on."

"Great." He smiled widely again and I found myself grinning just as warmly back.

We started walking slowly towards the uni café bitching about the long, long lecture we had just suffered through as we did so. He explained that he'd fallen asleep not only because the lecture was interminably boring, but also because he'd been up most of the night watching a Kung Fu movie marathon on TV.
He couldn't have said anything more endearing if he'd tried. I love Kung Fu movies.

"Oh my God, you watched them all last night?" I exclaimed in amazement and admiration. "I couldn't because we had people over, but I totally wanted to."

"I was just going to watch a couple, but then I got sucked in and I'd be dammed if I was going to go to bed just to make Professor Gray happy."

There was a pause after he said this as I tried desperately to bite back a smile and he turned a brilliant shade of red. "That did not come out right," he said hurriedly as even his ears started glowing.

"I should hope not," I choked out. "Otherwise suspicions may arise as to how you're passing first year law!"

Arriving at the café, I ordered a mango smoothie and, after Adam insisted on paying, we snagged a table near the window making the most of the feeble, late winter sunshine. I took a moment as we both settled ourselves and took the first sips of our drinks to study him. He wasn't good-looking really. His nose was quite long, his ears stuck out a bit too much and, although I've heard some women find it attractive, his red hair and subsequent pale, white skin just didn't do it for me. However, he was friendly and open and had a great smile which made up for a lot. Not to mention I'm hardly Helen of Troy myself! The fact that I couldn't place his face was bugging me, though. Where did I know him from? I shied away from asking 'Have we met before?' because it just sounded too much like a cheesy pick up line. Maybe I was just remembering him from past lectures.

Sensing that the pause while I gave him a quick once over had gotten uncomfortably long, I searched about for something to say. Before I had time to think of anything, however, Adam brought up the paper we had to hand in next week and soon we were, once again, happily embroiled in conversation. It was good to talk to someone about uni. All my close friends were doing degrees in other faculties and the friends I'd made in Law all turned out to be the sort of people who didn't turn up to lectures and only rarely to tutes. Also, the girl I usually sat with in Friday's lecture was a friend of Allison's so it was no surprise that I'd found myself alone that day.

To use a well-worn, but seriously truthful, cliché, time flew by as we chatted. Adam was incredibly easy going, fun to talk to and, probably because he knew it was his best feature, he smiled a lot, making me feel as if I was a truly entertaining and interesting person to talk to. Nothing like a bit of a self-esteem boost on a Friday morning!

We'd just started discussing what we were planning to do with our law degrees, i.e. do good for the world or make pot loads of money, which seem to be the only avenues to take, when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw someone striding towards our table. Glancing up, I was most displeased to see it was Micky and, from the look on his face, he wasn't too happy to see me either.
"Hey man, is it 11 already?" Adam asked, seeing Micky too, but not seeming to notice that Micky and I were glaring daggers at each other. Or maybe he did, but wisely decided not to mention it.

"No," Micky said curtly. "It's 11:30, the band has been waiting near the fountain." He paused significantly then added, "You know, where we agreed to meet."

Adam swore, downing the rest of his drink in one large gulp. "Sorry, mate." As he started to gather up his things, something clicked in my mind.

"Wait a minute, band?" I exclaimed. "I knew I knew you from somewhere, you're in the Wheelwrights!"

Adam looked over at me in surprise. "You've seen us play?" he asked unbelievingly.

"Yeah, a couple of times," I answered before slapping my hand down on the table.

"Thank god I figured out where I'd seen you before, that would have driven me insane!"

"Like we'd have been able to tell the difference," Michael scoffed, looking over at Adam and adding, "She's only been to our gigs because she tags along after her brother all the time."

"Well, that would make two of us," I snapped.

Adam was looking a bit uncomfortable at our obvious animosity, but he did his best to reclaim some civility for the proceedings, asking, "What did you think of the band?"

"You were pretty good, apart from some crappy guitar playing." I glared at Michael who, as my slight sunk in, looked like he was going to sock me one.

"Adam, we should go," he growled starting to move towards the door, but Adam hung back.

"Hey, you know, we're playing a set at the uni bar tomorrow night, you should come," he said looking intently at me.

After glancing past him to where Micky was glowering at me I smiled prettily up at Adam and said sweetly, "Yeah, maybe I'll see you there. Thanks for the smoothie."

"Anytime, and I mean that. Thanks again for..." But Adam didn't get to finish as Michael, obviously having had enough of the goodbyes, grabbed the back of his collar and yanked him away from the table. He waved resignedly at me as he was dragged away and I waved back before grabbing my bag and also heading out of the café.

~*~

After spending two or so hours in the library I walked home, glad that it was finally the start of my weekend. As I crossed the car park and patted my little car hello I found myself in quite a positive mood. I was, therefore, most annoyed to see Haley, in another one of her floaty top and little skirt combinations (seriously, didn’t she feel the cold like other
people do?), about to enter the flat complex. She held the door open for me and I had to force myself not to deliberately slow down to delay the moment I had to speak to her.

"Thanks," I said politely as I walked past her into the building.

"That's alright, Natalia," she said, and I had to hold back a shudder at her sickeningly sweet tone. Reason number 1268 why I don't like Haley: with her ridiculously innocent expression and her tendency to make things a lot wordier than they have to be, you never quite know if she's taking the piss.

We walked up the stairs together in silence, our footsteps echoing up the ugly concrete stairwell. When we reached the door to my flat on the third floor, I slipped the key in the lock and prepared to slip inside with nothing more than a hastily muttered goodbye to see Haley on her way, but it seemed like she had other ideas as she suddenly spoke. "Is Jack home, do you know?" she asked shyly and I couldn't stop a small sigh escaping my lips.

"Um, your guess is as good as mine since I arrived here when you did," I pointed out, trying to stop myself sounding too rude.

"Oh, I suppose so." She bit her lip and looked away and I realised, with a swooping feeling of resignation, that if he was home she was likely going to invite herself in.

"Hang on, I'll check if he's here," I said, with a decided lack of enthusiasm in my tone. Skirting the furniture in the main area I dumped my bag in my room and called out for Haley's benefit, "Well he's not in my room."

As I walked back out into the large room I saw that she was hovering in the doorway expectantly. Biting the inside of my cheek to stop myself snapping and telling her just to bugger off, I threw open the door to Matt's room and poked my head inside. The room was empty, although, technically, there could have been about ten decomposing bodies in there considering the smell and mounds of stuff piled everywhere.

"Not behind door number 2," I commented to Haley as I moved to Jack's door. "Let's check behind door number 3. I opened the door and clocked Jack sitting on his bed plugged into his MP3 player and scanning some papers. He glanced up as I walked in and smiled warmly. Removing the ear phones from his ears he opened his mouth, obviously about to greet me, but careful to make sure I was hidden from Haley's view, I desperately pressed a finger against my lips and shook my head to tell him to be quiet. Without waiting to see what his reaction was, I walked out of the room and closed the door.

"Nope, not in there either," I said cheerily to Haley as I quickly marched over to the bathroom door. I rapped on it a couple of times and called, "Jack? You in there?" Not receiving any response, for obvious reasons, I turned back to Haley and shrugged.

"I guess he's not in. Do you want to leave a message?"
She blushed a light pink, probably never doing that awful blotchy bright red blush the rest of us deal with, and shook her head. "No that's alright. Thank you, Natalia, I'll see you later."

I hoped to god she meant that figuratively, and wasn't threatening to come back. As she closed the front door Jack emerged from his room and gave me a look.

"Well, that was very high school of you," he commented, crossing to the kitchen and pouring himself a glass of juice.

Dropping onto the couch, I stuck my tongue out at him. "Is that all the thanks I get for saving you from a fate worse than death, otherwise known as an afternoon spent in the company of the amazing clinging limpet?"

He took a gulp of his drink and shook his head in bewilderment. "I don't know what you've got against her, I really don't," he said, but, seeing me about to start on my well-rehearsed diatribe about Haley, he held up a hand to forestall me. "But I don't want to get into it now. Have you had lunch yet?"

I was slightly thrown by the abrupt change of topic and simply shook my head in answer as I forced myself to let go of the negative thoughts Haley had given me.

"I haven't had time either, so how about we go and grab some?" Jack asked, finishing his juice and running the glass under the tap.

"Go and grab some lunch? Jack Whitby, are you asking me out?" I asked coquettishly, batting my eyelashes at him.

"I hadn't thought about it like that," he said easily, refusing to rise to my bait.

"Ah well," I sighed theatrically as I hauled myself off the couch, "I guess I only broke up with my boyfriend a couple of days ago, going on a date with someone else so soon could be misconstrued."

"Perhaps," he replied, clearly not really listening as he cast around for his wallet.

"Are you going to take me somewhere romantic?" I teased, taking advantage of the fact he obviously wasn't paying attention. "Somewhere we can play footsies under the table and nudge meatballs towards each other with our noses?"

"Considering how likely it is that we'll be seen by people we know, no," he answered, still absentmindedly, finally locating his wallet and slipping it into the back pocket of his jeans. "Are you ready?"

Feeling a little bit put out at his obvious lack of interest I brushed past him into my room where I grabbed my phone, wallet and lip balm out of my uni bag and threw them into a smaller 'going out' bag. Running a brush through my hair I re-emerged and presented myself before Jack.

"Private Davenport reporting for the lunch mission, sir," I said, saluting him facetiously.
He rolled his eyes and held the door open for me. "At ease, soldier. But keep your eyes peeled for citizen Haley, the last thing we need is hostile relations with our neighbouring nation."

"Too late," I muttered, beginning to descend the stairs.
Chapter 6

"Soggy fish and chips in newspaper, you sure know how to treat a girl," I told Jack as I kicked my shoes off and rested my feet up on the dashboard of his ute. I reached into the greasy newspaper resting on my lap and pulled out an oily chip which I proceeded to eat with relish.

"Yeah, I'm all class." Jack reached over and plucked a piece of battered fish out of the warm depths of the package.

We gazed out of the windscreen at the deserted beach and lashing ocean waves beyond. The feeble sunshine from earlier that day had long since departed, leaving us with low grey skies emitting a soft drizzle. Perhaps not ideal beach weather, but it ensured there was no-one about as we sat at the lookout eating lunch.

Munching away happily and wiping our greasy hands on our trousers we whiled away 15 minutes or so in companionable silence. Once the fish and chips were finished, I wound down the window and threw the scrunched up newspaper into a nearby bin with perfect precision. It sailed in cleanly and I gave a little cheer.

I turned to Jack. "High five!" I laughed and he obligingly slapped his palm against mine.

"Nice shot, Jordan."

We descended once more into a drowsy silence, listening to the gentle patter of drizzle as it hit the roof of the ute, watching the scraggly grass surrounding the lookout and banks of the beach wave back and forth in the light wind. The dreary scene out of the windows succeeded in making the warm interior of the battered old ute seem particularly cosy and comforting.

Caught up in the fuzzy moment I lifted my eyes up to Jack's face and smiled at him fondly. If I was expecting a smile in return I was sadly mistaken, however, as he was looking out of the front windscreen with a completely blank expression and so completely missed my glance. Seeing him looking so far off I suddenly had a strong desire to pull him back from whatever internal thoughts he was focussing so heavily upon.

It frightened me sometimes how serious he could get in the quiet moments. It had been six years since he'd lost his mother and his younger brother and sister in the horror crash which had left our small town reeling, and everyone, but my family, thought he had moved on. Personally I don't know how anyone could think that. How do you move on from something like that? However, as much as I respected his right to continual grieving it simply wasn't healthy the way Jack cut himself off from those around him and sometimes, when he
was looking as he did at that moment, I sometimes got scared that one day he wouldn't come back at all.

"Jack?" I said quietly, not wanting to startle him, but determined to get his attention. "Want to know something weird?"

For a moment I thought he wasn't going to answer, but then he seemed to return to himself and he turned to me with a small smile. "Always," he replied, the tiniest hint of amusement creeping into his voice.

Glad to have succeeded in pulling him away from his, no doubt melancholy, thoughts, I allowed myself to say something I'd been working up to since the beginning of the year. "I missed you."

He seemed to focus more fully upon me and his brows creased in confusion. "When? We live together, when would you possibly have had time to miss me?"

"Not now, you idiot," I laughed. "When you went away to uni without me. I missed you like crazy for two years. You and Matt both."

Which, all things considered, was a bit of an understatement. I'd thought I was going to go mad without Matt and Jack around back then. It had been like a rug had been pulled out from underneath me. Everything changed. When I woke up in the morning and went to sleep at night the house was quiet, no thunderings up and down the stairs or doors slamming. There was no racing to school with Jack and I hauling Matt along. No recess or lunch meetings where we would swap our food around because, as a basic rule, mum had decided the lunches we had packed weren't acceptable and replaced our packets of chips with soy burgers or, once, a can of whipped cream. And, although not particularly fond memories, no more afternoons when the three of us would hide underneath the house when Jack's dad came round demanding his son return home.

Going from living in a chaotic, bustling, bursting at the seams house to one in which you could hear the clocks ticking was a very disconcerting experience. I got used to it, of course, I'm not saying I drew myself into a ball of misery for two years, but it wasn't the same. Mostly I spent less time at home, finding solace in the continued anarchy present at Simone's house and, when the hole the boys left felt too gaping, I would catch the bus up to their flat.

I should've known better than to think that Jack wouldn't have noticed how despondent I felt at being left behind. He shifted slightly in his seat and then sent me one long look which told me, without doubt, that he knew I had missed them. That look made me feel as if he had taken up residence inside my head and had therefore known what I was going to say before I'd even said it. It was disconcerting, but, I realised with a start, I had done the same to him only seconds before. Hadn't I known what was going on inside his head and wanted to pull him away from it?
"Missed us?" he said quietly. "And yet weren't you the girl who cheered as we drove away saying, if I remember correctly, 'hooray for the banishment of the terrible twosome'?

I rolled my eyes, as much as I should have known that he knew I missed them, I should also have known that he wouldn't let me get away with too much sentimentality. "A blind monkey would've been able to tell that that was just me masking my feelings. You knew I was just putting up a front," I accused him.

He shrugged. "Maybe, but I suppose a blind monkey wouldn't have missed that we, that I, missed you too." There was something in his voice that told me that, despite having 'blind monkey' in the sentence, he was being very serious and I felt my cheeks beginning to heat up.

I couldn't believe I was getting embarrassed again, seriously, it was ridiculous! I didn't need to be awkward around Jack. He was Jack! To cover my embarrassment I laughed lightly and shook my head.

"Sorry, buddy, but that doesn't count," I told him sternly. "You can't say that you missed me too practically right after I say it. It makes it seem insincere. There has to be a time delay otherwise it doesn't count."

"Who says?" Jack asked.
"Everyone, it's a well known rule."
He nodded gravely. "I'll wait a while then."
Well, that hadn't been quite what I’d had in mind, still, I had definitely brought him out of his shell for a while there. Silence descended once more, but I felt that I still had Jack's attention and the cab felt smaller for it.

After another ten minutes or so, Jack straightened up and turned the keys in the ignition. "We should get back," he said simply and I nodded in agreement.

We drove the fifteen minutes it took to get back to the flat in silence, but, after Jack had expertly manoeuvred the ute into the parking space next to my car and I was just about to hop out, he reached out and caught my hand in his.

I looked at him in surprise, but didn't move, inwardly I was relishing in the heavy warmth of his palm.

"Tally," he said quietly in a tone that made me feel as if it was the whole of me being cupped in his palm as opposed to just my hand. "Lesson number 3. Make sure he's in your head before he's in your pants."

Which, considering my earlier musings about his ability to see inside my mind, was more than enough to send shivers down my spine.

"Okay," I said, my voice sounding more like a croak than my usual, confident, speech.
"And be sure to let me know when I can safely tell you I missed you," he added before getting out of the car and beginning to stride towards our building.

~*~

It was Saturday morning.
I couldn't believe it'd only been three days since I’d walked in on Brad and Allison. My world felt so different. Not as normal or safe, but certainly more interesting.

As bright early morning sun shone merrily through my gauzy curtains, I sat up in bed, hugged my knees and looked around. My room was painted a cheery yellow which matched the large sunflower my mum had embroidered onto my plain white quilt cover. The sun made the wood of my bedside table and bookshelf glow a deep honey colour and revealed the collages of photos I had put up around the walls. I had worked hard to make the room a safe harbour from the storms raging on outside its four walls and, usually, the upbeat vibe of the room kept my demons at bay. Not this morning though.

As much as I loved my room I had woken up with only one thought pulsing constantly through my brain. It was not in my happy, sunny room that I wanted to be. Yellow was not the colour I wanted to see on opening my eyes. Instead I longed to see a deep, masculine, navy blue. The exact colour of Jack's room.

I groaned and banged my head against my knees. It was not good. My stomach was tight, my head was buzzing, my heart was pounding and all because I had dreamt that it wasn't my bed I had gone to the night before, but Jack's. And that was only dreaming. What if I did actually pluck up the courage of Wednesday night again and 'go all the way' with Jack? I'd be a wreck! Hardly conducive, I would imagine, of an unforgettable night of passion.

Taking several deep breaths I forced the butterflies to recede and gradually began to feel like I had some control over my body. I was just nervous, I told myself firmly. Nothing more. So why was it then that the tingles in my belly had felt nothing like nerves, but more like...excitement?

~*~

Emerging from my room some time later I was disconcerted to find myself literally running straight into Jack as he passed my door on his way to the fridge.

"Woah there," he said, as if he was talking to one of the horses his dad trained, putting out a hand to steady me.

I jumped as he touched me and banged hard into my doorframe. His expression clouded at my reaction and I could see he was about to ask me what was wrong. Thankfully,
at that moment, Matt wandered out of his bedroom and Jack took one huge step away from me.  

"Morning," Matt yawned slumping down at the kitchen table. "God, I'm glad it's the weekend."  

"Yeah, me too," I agreed, skirting around Jack and joining my brother at the table. I knew Jack must have thought my behaviour bizarre considering I was supposed to be the one keen on contact, but the dreams of the night before were still a little too fresh for me to brush aside and so, for a little while at least, I preferred to keep my distance.  

"We should do something tonight," Matt announced suddenly, lifting his head and looking at Jack and I blearily. "Something to celebrate the end of the week and the demise of Brad the bastard."  

"Demise? Has someone offed him then?" I asked glibly, trying to cover up the fact that I had visibly winced at the mention of Brad's name. One glance at the boys told me that they had indeed noticed my reaction, but were pretending they hadn't to spare my feelings. Bless 'em.  

"I only meant his demise in terms of his relevance to us," Matt said after a beat. "To my knowledge no-one has actually killed him."  

There was another pause and then he added, "Not yet at any rate." At the exact same moment that Jack growled,  

"Give it time."  

I laughed and I wasn't putting it on for the boy's benefit. I actually was feeling okay about my break up. My response to his name had been an automatic one, but on probing my emotional depths, I found that I still didn't feel particularly upset about his cheating. It was the anger that was still quite happily churning away.  

"Do you have any ideas?" I asked, and then, seeing the looks on Matt and Jack's faces I added, "About going out, I mean, not about how to kill Brad."  

"Oh right." Matt stretched then got up and gave Jack a nudge to get him out of the way of the fridge. "I was thinking of going and seeing The Wheelwrights, they have a gig at the uni bar tonight." He took a gulp of orange juice straight out of the carton then headed for the bread bin to pop two slices of bread in the toaster before turning to face me. "I know you and Micky don't exactly get along-" he began, but I waved my hand and cut him off.  

"I was thinking of going anyway," I yawned. "I met this guy, Adam, yesterday and said that I might drop by."  

"You met Adam? He's a decent guy," Matt said, fortuitously turning away as his toast popped up and, therefore, missing the odd look Jack sent me.
I was disconcerted to find that I couldn't figure out what the look meant and so sent him a 'what?' look in return. I didn't get an explanation, however, because Matt began to prattle on about how we'd all go in a big group to support the band.

"Us three, Tommo, Samsa, Simone, Haley, we'll all make a night of it."

~*~

And as my brother had decreed, so it was.

I spent longer than usual getting ready that evening. At first I told myself it was because this would be my first night out after my break up with Brad, but then admitted that it had to do with the fact that Jack so rarely saw me looking nice. It would be good for him to see me in something other than my pjs or uni clothes, I decided, it could only help my cause.

Ah the things we'll tell ourselves to escape the cold hard truth, which was, of course, that after the dreams of the night before I'd begun to realise what should have become blatantly obvious after my reaction to a simple handshake. I’d realised Jack was hot and I wanted him to see me that way too.

I wore dark denim jeans with a subtly sparkly, deeply v-necked top in a gorgeous royal purple colour. Well purple is the colour of kings…or sexual frustration depending on which school of thought you hail from. I tugged on my high heeled ankle boots and went for the smoky eyed/neutral lips make-up effect. After mussing up my hair I was ready and, if I do say so myself, not looking half bad.

The whole thing took about three quarters of an hour to perfect, which is why I nearly cried when, after spending five minutes in the bathroom, Jack emerged looking hotter than anything I could ever create. Boys suck! He wore a dark blue shirt and black jeans and I just know it had taken him all of two seconds to decide that was what he was going to wear.

"What?" he asked, seeing my eyes narrow in annoyance.

"Nothing," I sighed, grabbing my bag. "But, if anyone asks, you took longer than me in the bathroom, alright?"
Chapter 7

The seven of us, Tommo, Samsa, Matt, Jack, Haley, Simone and I, met outside the uni bar and paid our $5 student concession fee to get in. Considering the amount of time Micky spent practising at our flat I felt kind of cheated to have to pay to see him play, but then I reminded myself that it wasn't him that I was there to see.

We arrived about half an hour before The Wheelwrights were supposed to play their set so we commandeered a large table up the back and based camp. It felt like most of the uni had turned up, but that was probably because the bar was quite a small one and everybody had to press up against everyone else to make room. Despite the crowd, people frequently battled their way over to say hello to us and I would be lying if I said it wasn't a good feeling seeing how well liked our little group was. When I noticed that hardly anyone said hi to Haley, however, my enjoyment was somewhat tempered. I would have thought that she had a circle of similarly obnoxious friends who would come over to squeal with her, but she seemed almost lonely even surrounded by so many people.

A few seconds later, my sympathetic feelings towards Haley vanished as Jack, clearly noticing her lack of visitors as well, turned his attention to her. Her eyes lit up and she shifted closer to him, leaning her head close to his in the pretence of listening to what he was saying. Egh, she was such a fake!

Simone noticed the direction of my glare and elbowed me. "Don't look so worried," she shouted above all the noise. "I bet he can see right through her."

Annoyed at having been caught staring at Jack - how well did that bode for the future? - I tried my most nonchalant expression. "Worried?" I shouted back. "Who's worried?"

She lifted her eyebrows pointedly, but I was saved her scathing reply as The Wheelwrights came on stage.

"How you all doin'?" Micky yelled, taking up his position at the front of the stage, his guitar hanging at his hip looking for all the world like it was an extension of his body. The crowd screamed its response and Micky struck the first chord.

They were not bad at all. In fact they were pretty amazing.

Adam played bass guitar, but, although I tried to focus on him as he was the one I had come to see, it was their front man prancing all over the stage that more often than not caught my eye. For all the hatred I felt towards Micky, I couldn't deny that, on stage, he was a hell of a charismatic guy. The crowd went nuts for him and even I found myself shouting approval as he went into an all out rock and roll guitar solo, complete with jumps and writhing on the floor. We were all on our feet jumping with him and feeling the bass thumping in our ribcages. It was an awesome gig.
When The Wheelwrights finished their prescribed set everyone screamed for an encore and Micky came back on stage alone, an acoustic guitar in his hand. A bar stool was passed up and he settled himself down on it before angling a microphone to catch the soft notes the guitar rendered. A hush settled over the bar as the first few distinctive notes of a ballad wavered out.

I loved the song and found myself subconsciously swaying to it, forgetting for the moment that the beautiful music was being played by misogynist Micky.

Micky had just started singing in his smooth, deep voice when I became aware of someone standing beside me. I mean obviously there were people standing very close to me on all sides as I was in a crowd, but there was something different about this presence, it was solid, but not intimidating, and very, very familiar.

I twisted my neck round to look up at Jack, and his light blue eyes, their startling colour visible even in the gloom of the bar, caught my gaze and held it steadily. Then, under the cover of the hoards of people crowding in around us, he put his arm around my waist and rested his hand on my far hip.

For the briefest of moments I tensed, old habits die hard after all, but then, as the warmth from his hand seeped through my jeans and caressed my skin, I told myself to relax. There was no pressure inherent in his touch, after all, it was the kind of half-hug friends would share, and yet...I knew it wasn’t just a friend thing. It was a guy’s touch Jack was teaching me about; the touch that meant more, forewarned more.

After a couple of minutes, once the first startle of his approach had passed, I began to appreciate the feeling Jack's arm was giving me. I had thought his handshake was good, but the feeling of being sort of cradled against him was a million times more impressive.

It was as if my body had sent all the nerve endings racing along to where his arm and hand touched me and they were all jumping up and down in interest at this new sensation. Almost without noticing I was doing it, I leant in against Jack’s side, only just managing to stop myself resting my head against his shoulder as, crowd or no, people were going to notice that.

Well that was a turn up for the books! One moment I'm freaked out the next I'm stopping myself going further? This added up to be more progress on the touchy, feely front in a few moments than I’d achieved since I was fourteen! Feeling immensely satisfied with my apparent progress, I zoned out everything going on around me and immersed myself totally in the music and being nestled against Jack. Which was why I nearly jumped out of my skin as his weight shifted and he leant down to talk to me.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "Do the sheep need to be called in?"

For a moment I had no idea what he was talking about, but then I realised he was asking if he was moving too fast. Ha! I shook my head no and placed my hand over his,
keeping it at my hip in answer as moving to whisper back into his ear might dislodge him and that was the last thing I wanted to happen.

I will never complain about crowds again. With so many people our closeness did not look at all strange and the dark, along with further disguising our contact, made the whole thing feel intimate, somehow. But all good things must come to an end and, as Micky strummed out the last few chords, Jack gave my waist a quick squeeze then, reluctantly I felt, pulled away. I stumbled a little as he moved away from me and I was sorely tempted to grab his arm and pull him back to me. This wasn’t an option, however, the lights were coming up and people were beginning to blink and look round for their mates. Talk about reality kicking you in the nuts.

"Talia, weren't they awesome!" I turned and saw Simone bounce over to my side, her ringlets swinging and her eyes shining. She'd always been a sucker for a good gig.

"Yeah, they were," I said, trying to collect my thoughts together and appear natural. "For all Micky's a knob I have to admit the boy can play."

Simone grinned and nodded, then set off towards the table we had previously occupied, "Come on," she called over her shoulder as she went, "I'm buggered, I need to sit down."

"Right behind you," I promised, but instead of following her, I looked back at Jack who was standing with his hands in his pockets watching me. I had no idea what to say to him. Even though I'd never experienced one, the moment seemed like a morning after a one night stand. We had been so tucked into each other a few moments ago that now it felt like there was really nothing to say. Except that something needed to be said, otherwise we would stand there like idiots forever.

"You okay?" Jack asked again, breaking the silence between us.

I nodded and opened my mouth to explain that I’d had an incredible moment of overcoming my phobia and that it was all thanks to him, but, at that moment, Micky stepped between us, deliberately cutting me out.

"Hey, Talia, you came!"

"Holy-!" I exclaimed, putting a hand over my wildly beating heart as a voice bellowed in my ear. Looking up, I saw that it was Adam who had so thoroughly startled me and I
gestured with my free hand for him to take the spare seat next to me. "You scared the absolute bejeebers out of me!"

"Sorry," he apologised easily, settling himself down next to me. "How did you like the gig?"

I smiled warmly and turned to face him more fully. "You were excellent. You're like a different band from the one I saw a while ago."

"Yeah?" he asked eagerly. "We've been hell bent on practising so it's awesome to think it's paying off."

And, as we'd done the day before, we slipped easily into a flowing, natural conversation. Adam was really good fun to talk to, one of those easy going people where you never have to search for something to say or worry that they might take offence at an offhand comment. It felt like we were already good friends. And so, as good friends can do, we zoned out the people around us and talked for the next hour or so until my throat felt hoarse from having to talk loudly over all the noise.

After a particularly enthusiastic debate over fruit versus vegetables (including the immortal line 'a celery stick could kick an orange's arse any day of the week') we lapsed into a lull, whereupon I took stock of where the rest of my group had got to. Simone and Samsa were dancing crazily up near the stage where a D.J. had set up, Jack, Matt and Tommo were leaning against the bar each with a bottle of beer in their hands, and Micky was talking to Haley near the exit. Obviously during our conversation everybody had left the table and I hadn't even noticed.

"Hey, do you want to dance?" Adam asked suddenly, leaning forward so I would be able to hear him.

"Oh!" Without meaning to, my eyes flickered straight over to Jack. He, however, was deep in conversation with Matt and didn't notice. "Um, okay, sure," I said hesitantly, getting to my feet and threading my way through the crowd to a clear space.

I was an alright dancer, not fantastic or anything, but I could move in time with the beat and didn't make a complete tool of myself which is always good. I didn't dance too close to Adam and he didn't make any attempts to draw me nearer to him so I found myself having a really good time.

We'd been dancing for perhaps about three quarters of an hour when, during a slower bit of the music, Adam leant in and asked, "Do you ever get the feeling you're being watched?"

I looked at him in confusion then followed his gaze over to the bar where Simone, Tommo, Samsa, Matt, Jack, Micky and Haley were all looking over. They'd obviously just been talking about us and the expressions on their faces told me that they knew they'd been caught in the act.
I rolled my eyes at them then turned back to face Adam. "Ignore them," I told him, making him laugh and say,

“I’ll give it a go.”

And here was a shining example of the flipside of being such a tight-knit group of mates. We all knew everyone else's business and, as wonderful as that could sometimes be, there were times when it felt claustrophobic. My shoulders started to feel heavy, but it wasn't just because I was being watched dancing with Adam, it was because I’d realised how impossible it was going to be keeping Jack’s and my arrangement a secret.

We continued dancing for another half hour or so, but it wasn't as much fun as before and I begged exhaustion to head back to the table.

"Hey," Adam said suddenly as we made our way across the room. "What are you doing next Friday night? 'Cos the cinema near here is doing a Kung Fu marathon."

"Really?" I asked, perking up immediately. "New ones or old ones."

"Old I think." He grinned at my excited response. "So what do you say? D’you wanna go?"

"Yeah, absolutely! Oh, actually, hang on." Jack's rules came flooding back and I belatedly realised I might be contravening the 'no dating' one. "You mean just as friends, yeah?" I asked cautiously and saw his expression falter slightly.

"Well, taking my cues from what you just said, I would have to say that I definitely mean just as friends," he grinned, recovering quickly and holding out a seat for me.

"It's just that I broke up with my boyfriend really recently," I said quickly, not wanting things to get awkward, “like Wednesday recently, and cheesy as it sounds, I'm not going to date for a while."

"Hey, that's cool," Adam said reassuringly. "But we can be friends, right?"

"Of course," I said, relieved he was being so cool about it.

"Great!" It looked like he was going to say something else, but then something caught his attention across the bar and he grimaced. "Gotta go, it looks like Micky wants to give us a critique on tonight's performance."

I looked over and saw that Micky was indeed gesturing at Adam to go over and join him and the rest of the band.

"Wow, I bet that'll be fun," I said sarcastically, and his lips spread into yet another wide smile.

"Yeah, I'm looking forward to pointing out that he mixed up the verses in the first song. I may not have a head tomorrow, but it’ll be worth it. See you." He fleetingly pressed a hand on my shoulder and then was gone.
He'd barely moved out of earshot before Simone flew into the vacant seat beside me and regarded me solemnly with her big grey eyes. "That was very nicely done," she congratulated me after a moment. "Full marks."

I sighed and crossed my arms in annoyance, "I suppose it would be too much to ask that I could have a conversation without everyone listening in," I said crankily. "It was embarrassing earlier with all of you watching us."

Simone shrugged unapologetically. "You were dancing with a guy you only met yesterday, it was weird is all," she explained. "I was going to ask if there was anything going on, but, having just overheard you turn him down, I guess I'm barking up the wrong tree. Any particular reason you limited yourself to just being friends?"

"Considering you were listening in so closely you should already know why I don't want to date him," I said brusquely. "I broke up with my boyfriend of six months on Wednesday, Simone, today is only Saturday." I didn't like only telling the partial truth to my best friend, but I'd promised Jack we'd keep our arrangement quiet, so it couldn't be helped.

"Fine," Simone smiled, letting it go. "God, wasn't tonight great?" And off she went in a long tangent about how good The Wheelwrights had been and how much fun she'd had dancing with Sam. I half listened to her, but the truth was that I was getting tired. Looking at my watch I saw that it had gone half 1 and I was more than ready for bed.

"Hey girls," a voice said from behind me and I twisted around to see Jack bending down to talk to us. "You about ready to go home?"

Right on cue! "More than ready," I said with a sigh and Simone nodded her agreement.

"Yeah, I'm meeting Samsa early tomorrow for a run so I should be getting back."

Sam and Simone, really? I was too tired to latch onto this interesting little titbit, but I filed it away for future perusal.

"OK then, let's go, Haley's already waiting for us with the others." Jack gestured towards the door where Tommo, Samsa, Matt and a whole bunch of other guys were loitering.

With great force of will I kept back my shudder of annoyance at Haley's continued acceptance by the boys who I considered 'mine' and instead asked, "Is Matt coming back with us?" I didn’t think for a moment, as I gathered up my bag and coat, that the answer would be yes. My brother wasn’t the type to leave at half 1, he was more of the stagger in at 6 the next day kind of person.

Sure enough, Jack shook his head. "Nah, he met up with some guys from sports science and I reckon they're going to pull an all nighter."

We headed across the room saying goodbye to various people as we did so. I waved at Adam who winked in return then turned back to his conversation with Micky.
Haley separated herself from the others as we neared them and, smiling prettily, placed a hand lightly on Jack's arm. This patently pathetic move made me clench my teeth so that Simone laughed softly and murmured, “Easy, tiger.”

I switched my attention to Matt and gave him a light punch on the arm. "I'll see you later. Don't die of alcohol poisoning."

"I'll do my best," he said in the least reassuring way possible. "Jack's walking you back is he?"

I nodded. "His week, is it?" I asked sarcastically. From the day I’d started at uni, Matt and Jack had formed a sort of babysitting rotation for me whenever we went out anywhere within walking distance of our flat. "Nothing like taking a trip back in time and seeing what it was like in the 1800's," I sighed as I shrugged my coat on in preparation for the cool, August air outside.

"Oh you think it's for your protection, do you?" Matt asked, reaching up and fixing my collar which had become twisted. "Well you're wrong." He leant down so the others couldn’t hear him and added, "It's so you don't kill Haley on the way home. Now behave for Uncle Jack,” he said jovially as he gave me a nudge towards the door.

I stuck my finger up jovially in reply.

Jack, Haley and I walked Simone to her car and waved her off and then I turned to Jack.

"Right then," I said briskly. "Home, James, and don't spare the horses."

He sketched a quick bow. "As madam wishes."

Haley looked between us as if she wasn't quite sure what we were talking about and I found myself smiling at how little she obviously knew about Jack. Like, for example, that his real name, as in the one written on his birth certificate, is actually James, but that from pretty much birth onwards everyone has called him Jack.

Ha! I thought. Dance around in your frilly outfits and bat your eyelashes all you want, but we've a past that you can never get your hands on. I felt like doing a little dance and singing 'na na na na na', but held myself back with great strength of will.

Jack and I didn't talk much as we made our way back to the flat, but Haley kept up an almost constant stream of chatter. It sounded like she was nervous, but I can't imagine why she would be. I was sorely tempted a couple of times to tell her to just shut up, but that was being too rude, even for me, so I just kept my head down and plodded along the familiar paths home.

I almost jumped for joy when we finally reached the flats and walked Haley to her door on the second floor. She, however, seemed reluctant to say goodbye and stood, with her hand on the doorknob, waffling on for quite some time until I had to resort to yawning loudly.
Jack looked at me with an expression that told me he knew exactly what I was doing, but turned to Haley anyway and said that we'd better call it a night. She thanked him for walking her home, said goodnight and then, finally, went into her flat and closed the door.

"God, I thought she'd never stop," I exclaimed as we continued up the stairs to our floor. "We could have been there all night!"

Jack rolled his eyes and held the door open for me. "Calm down, Miss Melodrama," he said wearily. "I've said it before and I'll say it again, she's not that bad."

"Yeah? Well, it's pretty clear you think so," I said cattily. "Pretty attentive of her tonight, weren't you? Since when have you been her knight in shining armour?"

I was aware that I sounded jealous and petty, but was unable to stop myself. Jack had always been attentive to Haley, in fact he was attentive to everyone because he was a nice bloke, but tonight it had particularly bugged me.

Annoyed that what had started out as a good night had ended with me feeling bitchy and cranky, I started towards my bedroom fully intending to fall straight into bed and sleep off my bad mood. In a few quick strides, however, Jack was in front of me, blocking the way to my door.

"Tally," he said, but I stared down at the carpet and refused to be drawn in by him. "Tally," he said again, this time with a smile in his voice, "I'm not Haley's knight in shining armour." When I still continued to avoid his gaze he crooked a finger under my chin and gently turned my face up to him. "How could I be when I'm already fully booked looking after another damsel?" He took his finger away from my chin and tucked some of my hair behind my ear, his fingers brushing my cheek as he did so. For the briefest of moments I thought he might kiss me, but then he seemed to come back to himself and simply said, "Sleep well," as he pulled away.

I watched him go into his room, barely able to breathe, then staggered to my own and flopped down on the bed. Sleep well? Who was he kidding? It felt like every molecule I possessed was buzzing, I was practically shaking. And, on top of that, I was sure that the second I closed my eyes I was going to dive straight back into the dreams I'd had the night before.

Sleep well, my arse. I was never going to be able to sleep well again.
Chapter 8

The next morning I was awakened brutally early by a loud thump on my door. I opened my eyes and blearily looked at the clock, it read 6:15. For a moment I was all at sea as to what the noise was, but then I heard my doorknob turning and sat up to see Matt stagger into the room.

I should have known.

"Sorry," he grunted. "Had a bit of trouble finding the handle."

"So, by the sounds of it, he had attempted to walk through my door. You couldn’t fault the decision making of the truly hungover.

He lurched the short space to my bed and then collapsed down upon it, burying his face into my quilt. I tried not to think of the alcohol and whatever else fumes he was blowing into my bedspread and instead gave him a little poke to see whether he was in the 'I'm still slightly drunk and therefore the pain is slight' hangover stage or the 'I want to die' hangover stage.

"Help," he croaked. "I'm in pain, help me."

Well, that answered that question.

I sighed, clambering over his body and going out into the kitchen. I returned a moment later with a huge glass of water and a couple of painkillers.

"Good night then?" I asked as I watched him down the water and drugs in a couple of large gulps.

"I have no idea," he groaned. "The pain has wiped out any memory I've ever had."

"Oh, poor baby." I ruffled his hair, eliciting another groan in the process.

I collapsed down on the bed beside him and gave him a shove so he’d roll over and I’d have space to lie down. My bed is a double so there should have been enough room, but, unfortunately, he just kept on rolling and I had to grab him before he rolled completely off the other side of the bed. Exclaiming in frustration I anchored him with my foot and then used my hands to roll him flat on his back, a safe distance from the edge.

"You're a good girl," Matt croaked, obviously compos mentis enough to know he had been about to roll off the bed, but not aware enough to stop himself.

I smiled slightly then snuggled back under the covers and murmured, "And you're a good boy, now shush, I need my beauty sleep."

After our night out it was easy enough to fall back asleep, but unfortunately it wasn't too long before my slumber was, once again, disturbed. I gradually awoke as the sound of smothered laughter entered my consciousness.
Flicking open my eyes, I saw three people squashed into my doorway. My heart made a huge thump and then seemed to stop and I only just managed to hold down the scream which had risen in my throat. Sitting up and dragging the covers up to my neck I glared at the group.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" I screeched, sounding uncannily like my old English teacher.

Simone, Sam and Jack grinned back at me, quite unabashed at being caught watching Matt and me sleeping.

"Calm down," Simone laughed, leaning against my door frame and looking ridiculously perky for, I checked the clock, 9 on a Sunday morning. "I was just going to ask if I could borrow a jumper and then I saw you two looking so cute. My brothers rarely consent to even being in the same room as me, it's so sweet how you and Matt get along."

I glanced down at Matt who was still oblivious to the world, occasional snorts and snores emitting from his wide open mouth. He looked dishevelled and dirty and I could smell his boozer’s breath from where I was sitting.

Cute? Sweet? I think not.

"Whatever floats your boat." After a moment I looked over at Samsa and Jack with raised eyebrows. "And what's your excuse then?" I asked. "I can't see you enjoying the cuteness or the sweetness."

They both shrugged, looking a little sheepish. Clearly Simone had called them over and the allure of the sports crazy, macho Matt looking all warm and fuzzy had been a sight too good to miss.

At that moment Matt gave an especially loud grunt and woke himself up. Lifting his head up slightly he blearily opened his eyes and started, as I had done, at the sight of our audience.

"Christ!" he exclaimed loudly before clapping a hand to his head and moaning, "Ow."

I rolled my eyes and slid out of bed, aware that I was only wearing my pjs, but, considering the company, not really caring. Pushing past Sam and Jack, I went to the wardrobe out in the main room, pulling a jumper out for Simone. I threw it at her then went to the sink and filled another big glass of water for Matt. I returned to my room and placed the water on the bedside table before rounding on the others, my hands on my hips.

"I think the show's over, was there something else you wanted?"

"Nope, just the jumper." Simone smiled sweetly and then tugged on Sam's arm.

"Come on, let's get going." She looked over at me. "We're going for a run then we're going to be studying for the rest of the day so I'll call you tonight."

Her and Sam together all day? My, my, my. Looks like I'd been right about them all along. I sent Simone a significant look then waved her away.
"Sure, talk to you later," I said, before switching my attention to Jack. He had moved past me and was sitting on the edge of the bed with the water trying to get Matt to drink it.

"Don't want to," Matt was grumbling, sounding like a three year old. Jack seemed to have no sympathy and, taking hold of Matt's arm and hauling him into a semi upright position, he thrust the glass into his hand.

"Don't be such a pussy, drink the water," he commanded and, with no further protests, Matt did.

I smiled, I couldn't help it. It was such a perfect portrayal of their friendship. Matt was always the one doing the idiotic things and Jack was the one who swooped in afterwards and smoothed things over.

Jack looked up and, seeing me looking at him, got to his feet. "I'm going to be out all day," he said quietly, so as not to disturb Matt who had flopped back down into my pillows. "But I'll be back for tea if you want me to cook." I nodded that I understood and, for a moment, it looked like he was going to say something more, but then seemed to think better of it. "See you later then," he murmured and then he left the room.

I watched through the open door as he gathered together his stuff then exited the flat. I wondered what he was going to be spending the day doing and what he had originally wanted to say. I was what my father called a 'nosey parker’ and usually if one of the boys were going out they’d submit to giving me a run-down of their day's movements to satisfy my endless curiosity so why had Jack been so reticent? And I hated when people changed their mind about saying something, it leaves me forever wondering what I'd missed out on hearing.

I shook my head and determined not to think about it. If Jack was doing something that he wanted me to know about then he would have told me and as for the thing he didn't say, well you could waste your life wondering what people were thinking and mostly it just wasn't worth the effort.

Proud of my mature approach, I bounced down on the bed and poked Matt. "Just you and me, brother," I said in an unnecessarily loud voice making him groan and pull my pillow over his head.

Great, so actually it looked like I was on my own. I wandered out into the main room and flopped down on the couch. I flipped the TV on, but turned it off again almost immediately. Nothing really much on the box on a Sunday morning.

I twiddled my thumbs for a couple of minutes, growing increasingly bored. Being so used to having so many people around constantly, I found the silence a little oppressive. Fantastic, I whine when I'm being watched by all my friends and always around the flat, but now it turns out I've become institutionalised! I was just smirking over life's little quandaries when my phone rang.
Seeing a way free of my boredom I virtually raced over to my bag and snatched my mobile out, disregarding the caller ID.

"Hello," I said cheerily. There was a long silence on the other end of the line and I strained my ear to hear anything. "Um, hello," I said again, a touch of impatience creeping into my voice.

"Hey, Talia, it's me." He spoke so quietly I barely recognised his voice, but it was definitely him.

"Brad?" My voice was almost a squeal, what the hell was he doing phoning me?
"Yeah, how've you been, baby?"
Un-bel-eiv-able.

My face flamed red, my heart rate picked up its pace, and I was generally so flabbergasted that he’d had the cheek to call me that I sat down heavily on one of the kitchen chairs.

"Did Simone pass on my message?" he asked after it became clear that I wasn’t going to be engaging in any of the usual pleasantries with him.

"Yes," I replied shortly. There was another long silence and I sighed loudly. "Why have you called? What do you want?"

His voice, when he next spoke, sounded incredibly frustrated. "I want things to go back to how they were."

I snorted and, before I could stop myself, asked, "What, when I was obliviously having a good time while you rooted anything that moved behind my back? Oh yeah, those were great times, we should go back to those, really."

"Don't be sarcastic, I meant when things were good and everybody got along. I can barely go two steps on campus now without running into one of your brother's bully boys."

His voice whined with indignation and then he obviously checked himself as his tone became more coaxing as he added, "I mean, I'm sorry. And, hey, we could even get back together if you like, as long as your brother's goons back off."

Completely forgetting about Matt sleeping in my room I shot to my feet and full out yelled, "I dumped you, dickhead, not the other way round! And I'm sorry if you feel you're being given a hard time, but, hey, you fooled around in the bed now you have to lie in it."

I slammed the phone down and stared at the wall, breathing heavily. How could I ever have dated him? Did I have absolutely no self respect?

I vaguely heard my door opening and Matt's footsteps across the kitchen. Then I felt his arms come around my shoulder and I leant back against him for a moment and breathed through my anger.
It wasn't long before I felt better and turned to face my brother. He was looking very wan and ill, his hair lank and greasy and his clothes rumpled and smelly. I knew I wouldn't be looking that much better, but that I'd be red rather than grey.

“Have you and your mates been giving Brad a hard time when you see him?” I asked, not putting it past Brad to be lying about that too.”

“Yes,” Matt croaked, with no hint of apology and in a way that suggested there was no point in me protesting...so I didn’t.

"C'mon,” my brother easily brushed the topic of Brad aside and ambled towards the couch. “Let's lock the door and spend the day watching crappy movies, whaddya think?"

"I think it's the best idea you've ever had," I replied honestly.

~*~

I slogged through Monday as everyone else did, with much grumbling and wishing it was still the weekend. I had a double lecture and tutes in the morning and then I worked a shift at the uni bookstore through the afternoon. I liked my job in that, apart from at the beginning of the semester, it wasn't that stressful and the people I worked with were nice, but it was still a job and I was more than happy to get home.

When I got back to the flat it was to see Matt and Jack sitting on the couch having what looked like a very serious conversation. My heart leapt for a second as I thought that Jack might have told Matt what was going on between us, but, as they looked up, I saw no hint of guilt in Jack's eyes and no anger in Matt's and sagged slightly in relief.

I flopped into a chair and looked at them enquiringly. "What's going on?" I asked.

Jack looked at Matt and nodded as if to say, 'you can tell her.' So I shifted my attention to my brother and shot him a look that clearly said 'go on then!'

"Jack's applied for a scholarship," Matt said and my face relaxed into a smile.

I almost said 'is that all?' but stopped myself just in time as obviously there was more to the situation than met the eye. Why were they looking so intense about it?

"So how much money would you get?" I asked after a beat as neither boys seemed like they were going to offer any more information.

Jack looked at me properly for the first time and I saw that, far from the excitement you would expect from the situation, he looked worried and drawn. "They would pay off my entire degree," he said quietly and my jaw dropped.

"Jack, that's huge," I exclaimed. And it truly was. No degree was cheap, but, as Jack was doing architecture and it was in one of the higher brackets, it would take years for him to pay it off on his own. Matt and I had to work to pay for rent and food and stuff, but our family would always help us out if we ever got stuck financially and Jack didn't have that.
Well, that’s to say Mum and Dad had offered hundreds of times to help with his monetary load, but he always refused. Jack preferred to go it alone on most things.

"Yeah, and there's more," he said in a low even voice that I just didn't understand considering the circumstances. "I would do a year, maybe more, of post-graduate work at Cambridge…in England."

I felt like a heavy weight had just landed on my chest. So that was why it seemed so subdued. If he won the scholarship we would lose Jack for at least a year, I glanced at Matt and, this time, I saw exactly what he was feeling. He knew this was a huge opportunity for Jack and could set him up for the rest of his life, but a tiny, selfish part of him wanted to tell him not to go for it. In short he was pretty much feeling exactly as I was…and that just wouldn't do!

"Wow!" I said, mustering up my reserves of enthusiasm. "That’s really awesome, what do you have to do to get it?"

Jack looked down at the stack of papers in his lap although I had the feeling he already knew it all word for word. "A requirement test, an aptitude test and an interview all of which take place at the end of next month. The aptitude test will just be one of those wanky personality test things and the interview I should be able to wing, but the requirement test will basically be on everything I've learnt over nearly three years."

"Geez, not asking for much, are they?" I joked. "And you've got a month to get it all down pat? Harsh."

"Yeah," Matt agreed, leaping on the bandwagon that I had started rolling. "So let's get going."

I nodded and bounced to my feet. "Right. This flat is now officially Jack scholarship headquarters." I looked over at Jack. "Show me what you need to learn and we can get on with it straight away. I hereby appoint myself chief tester in charge. Sorry, matey," I added with a smile at Matt, "but we all know you have the attention span of a gnat and would never be able to sit for hours testing someone on things out of a book."

Matt simply laughed. "You will get no disagreement from me," he said easily. "I'll do Jack's chores so he'll have as much time as possible to study, and I'll keep the others away from here so it'll be quiet."

"Great!" I clapped my hands. "You are totally going to blitz this, and-" I broke off as Jack stood up abruptly and turned away from us, running his hands through his hair.

"I don't want…" he began awkwardly, but then he revised, "I can't let you guys go out of your way to help me."

Matt and I exchanged looks of incredulity and frustration.
Matt also got to his feet and walked slowly towards his friend. "Hammer, mate, I know you don't like being indebted to anyone, or whatever, but you've got to let us help you. We wouldn't be going out of our way."

That last bit would be a total lie as both Matt and I would do everything in our power to help him win the scholarship and Jack knew it.

"I have to do this on my own," Jack muttered and, before Matt or I could protest further, he strode out of the flat, banging the door closed behind him.

I went to go after him, but Matt called me back and, when I turned to look at him, he was shaking his head. "Nah, let him go," he said, sinking back down onto the couch.

"But he's probably only gone up to the roof," I protested, knowing that that was Jack's usual retreat.

"He needs to calm down and think it over. He'll come round," Matt insisted and I reluctantly sat down as well.

We sat in silence for a couple of seconds before I blurted out, "Why does he have to do that? Retreat and try and do everything on his own? It's so bloody frustrating! He must know we don't mind helping, we're basically family for God's sake!"

"It's just the way he is," Matt shrugged. "He's always been an independent sod, but this is more than that. He's feeling guilty about applying for the scholarship."

"He's what?" I looked at Matt in surprise. "Why on Earth would he feel guilty?"

He picked up a pen from off the coffee table and began fiddling with it, a sure sign that something involving emotions was about to be discussed. God, guys were wimps!

"Well," he said slowly, "even though it's not like he goes to see his dad all that much I don't think he wants to leave him alone up there."

"His dad?" I snorted derisively. "An honorary title if ever there was one. Not exactly done much fathering has he?"

"Come on, Talia, cut him some slack," Matt said awkwardly. "He's had a rough time of it."

"Well, it hasn't exactly been a barrel of laughs for Jack either," I pointed out hotly. "He wasn't exactly father of the year before the accident, why should I cut him slack when he's never given one to his son?"

"You don't know the half of it," Matt muttered darkly, but then he shrugged and got to his feet. "Whatever. When Jack gets back we'll try again, for now let's start tea."

~*~

An hour or so later, when I was sitting in my room talking to Simone on the phone, I heard the door slam and knew that Jack had returned. A second later Matt yelled at him to get his butt in his room and I smiled, knowing that it was all going to work out.
It sounded like Matt gave him an earful for about half an hour, during which time I only half listened as Simone waffled on about how she'd enjoyed hanging out at Sam and Michael's flat. Finally Matt's voice quieted down, and I could hear the pair of them beginning to speak at a normal level.

Simone and I had just finished our phone call when I heard a soft knock at my door. Knowing full well that it would be Jack, I sat up and called, "Yeah?"

Sure enough a head of dark hair appeared around the edge of the door and Jack smiled his gentle smile at me."Alright if I come in?" he asked and I nodded and waved him forward.

He took a seat on the edge of the bed and looked down at his hands. The moment reminded me of the previous Wednesday when I'd adopted the almost identical pose on his bed. "So, uh, I just wanted to apologise for earlier," he said gruffly. "You were just trying to help and I was a total jerk, so I'm sorry."

I shuffled closer to him across the bed so I knelt beside him. "I'm sorry too. I just sort of assumed that you would want our help and I was pushy. I know how you like to handle things yourself and I should have been more sensitive to that."

He smiled suddenly and looked up, though not at me. "Are you and Matt doing a good cop, bad cop thing? He's just spent the last half hour roundly abusing me for being such a tool and here you are saying you were the one in the wrong."

I smiled too, but didn't say anything as I suspected he had more to say. As I predicted, after a moment, he finally looked at me, his expression serious once more. "I shouldn't have said no to your help like that. It's just that I spent all of yesterday thinking over whether I was going to apply and I kind of internalised it as a personal thing. I almost told you about it yesterday morning, but I thought that if only I knew about it then I could still decide not to do it without any repercussions." He smiled wryly. "I knew if I told you, you’d bully me into applying whether I wanted to or not because you think it'd be great for me."

Ah, so that had been what he was about to say. The mystery was solved! "I do need your help," he continued. "I knew yesterday that I’d need it and I knew today I’d need it, but I didn't think it would work out."

"How so?"

"I thought maybe that you would be more of a hindrance than a help," he said solemnly and I reared back in shock and a little bit of annoyance.

"How so?" I asked again, but much more aggressively.

"I thought that if you were in the room with me while I was trying to revise I'd be distracted by you. You know, think of nothing, but our arrangement." He chuckled ruefully and shook his head. "Of course after spending an hour on the roof being unable to think of anything but you, I realised that this was a pretty stupid plan."
I felt my anger dissipate and a hint of embarrassed pleasure creep in. He'd been unable to think of anything but me? Still, he didn't seem to realise what he'd said so I pushed away my little ego trip and focussed on him again.

"I want to help you, Jack," I said seriously. "You deserve this scholarship and I really think you're in with a shot at getting it so please let me do anything I can to help you. We can call off the stupid lessons thing if you want, it'll only be a distraction." I heard myself saying that last sentence before I'd properly thought it through and then panicked. No! I didn't want to give up the lessons. I'd made such progress already and I didn't want to lose that.

He seemed just as surprised as I was about my sudden about face. "Is that what you want?" he asked. "Because, if it is, then we shouldn't do it anymore."

"It's up to you," I said, bouncing it back to him. "If you think it would be a distraction then-"

"It wouldn't be a distraction," he said quickly and I almost sighed in relief.

"OK then," I said slowly, "the lessons continue."

"Yeah, the lessons continue," he repeated. "And I would really appreciate your help studying for the requirement test, if you have the time."

"I have the time," I assured him.

"That's sorted then." He stood up and then turned to look down at me. "I'm lucky to have you," he said quietly before leaning down and kissing me gently on the forehead. "Really lucky."
Chapter 9

For the rest of that week the scholarship plans took over any other concerns the three of us had. We ate, drank and breathed the requirement test and it didn't take hardly any time at all to see that it was having a positive effect on Jack.

On Tuesday he was restless and paced around the lounge room as he recited the answers to problems on angles and the different theories of building design. On Wednesday he didn't pace, but still shifted around a lot, but by Thursday, he was docile as a kitten and focused intently on the questions I shot at him.

We'd studied in the lounge room on Tuesday and Wednesday, but on Thursday Matt had one of his sports science friends round and they were going to do their tute questions in the main area. Jack and I relocated to his bedroom and I sat down on his computer chair while he made himself comfy on the bed.

"Alright then, let's start where we left off yesterday," I said, pulling out his huge first year fundamentals book.

We slipped into an easy rhythm, me asking a question, him answering, me correcting or congratulating. He got very few questions wrong, but when he did stuff up I saw that he got frustrated. I wanted to tell him that he was amazingly intelligent and that he didn't have to be word perfect, but I knew he would disagree. He was always pushing himself to do better, be better.

As he began giving a very long and detailed answer to a question I had posed, I took the time to study him. Dark hair and light eyes really are a killer combination, I mused. His hair was such a dark brown that in poor light, such as we were in at that moment, it looked almost black. He had probably gelled it into a proper style that morning, but bits of hair were curling out of place now and one piece was dangling over his forehead. He leant against the wall his legs up and his arms resting on his knees. He looked relaxed for once and I was glad.

He was still answering the question so I allowed my eyes to leave his unruly hair and startling eyes and wander down his slightly crooked and knobbly nose (broken three times on the footy field at last count) to his lips. And that's where the real jackpot lay. When he had kissed my forehead on the Monday night I had barely had time to register what he had done, but the sensation had become burnt into my memory. It had felt soft and warm, but there’d also been the slight scratch of stubble. He had gorgeous lips, I decided, perhaps some might find them a bit too full for a guy, but he could totally pull them off.

"Um, Tally. You still with me?"

I snapped my eyes up to his and immediately felt a blush shoot up my neck and blossom in my cheeks.
"Sorry, um…no I think I got a bit lost there for a moment," I stammered, flipping uselessly through the text book trying to find what he had been talking about. "Wait a minute, I'll find it in a sec."

He watched me for a while then got off the bed, crouched down beside me and laid his hands over mine effectively cutting off my frantic search.

"I think you were already on the right page," he said, clearly trying to hold back a grin.

I sighed and let myself relax. "Go ahead, laugh it out," I said wearily. "You caught me checking you out, fairs fair."

"Why would I want to laugh?" Jack asked, his words eclipsed by a smile tugging the edges of the lips I had been so enamoured of moments before.

I looked at him then, one of the very few times I had ever been in the position on looking down at him rather than up. His face was a lot closer than I had realised and I wanted to turn away, but I just couldn't make myself do it. "You don't want to laugh?" I asked, trying to keep focussed on the conversation.

"Oh no," he said, his voice slowly losing the amusement it’d previously been laced with, "laughing is the last thing on my mind."

"I'll see if they've got one," said Matt's voice from just on the other side of the door and, in a flash, Jack had straightened and moved away and my gaze was back down on the book.

The door opened and Matt stuck his head in. "Sorry for interrupting," he said cheerily, "but you guys don't have any white-out do you?"

There was a tub of the stuff sitting on the desk right in front of me and I chucked it at my brother and quickly returned my gaze to the book in case he noticed how red and flustered I was.

"Cheers," he grinned, "carry on." And the door shut behind him.

There was a pause and then, just as it seemed Jack was going to say something, I hitched the book higher and said, in my most business-like voice, "So I missed that last thing you were saying, let's have it again please, Mr Whitby."

Jack shot me a look which told me that he knew I was trying to avoid discussing what had happened a moment before, but he obediently began reciting the answer to me and, that time, I refused to allow myself to get distracted.

It was way too dangerous.

~*~
I was looking forward to going to the cinema with Adam. We'd had four lectures together during the week and I'd discovered he was in two of my tutorials as well. It was so fun to have someone to be stupid with during the long tedious hours and we amused ourselves by making fun of the lecturers and our obnoxious fellow students.

At home on Friday night I dug around in my wardrobe until I found my pretty, red, Chinese silk top, one of my favourite items of clothing. Considering I was going to a Chinese movie marathon I thought it quite appropriate. Still, considering I was technically only going to the pictures, I dressed it down with a pair of jeans and my black flip flops. I know it was only a few days into spring so my footwear wasn't entirely appropriate, but I liked to wear thongs to the cinema because it was easy to slip them off and tuck your feet onto the chair.

I was just doing my hair in the mirror near Matt's door when Jack walked in.

"You look nice," he commented, throwing his keys and wallet down onto the table. "I take it I'm studying on my own tonight. Are you going anywhere good?"

I whirled to face him, my hair half up, pins falling from my hands. "Oh damn, didn't I tell you?" I asked in disbelief. "I should have told you, I'm going to the pictures. I said I'd go before the whole scholarship thing came up. Do you think you'll be alright revising without me?"

He chuckled and rolled his eyes. "I think I'll manage," he said dryly. "And you've got to promise me that you won't turn down something you want to go to just because of this scholarship thing."

"I won't," I said while, behind my back, I crossed my fingers.

Jack's eyes lit up with laughter. "Tally," he said, his voice shaking with repressed mirth, "you do realise you're standing in front of a mirror, right? I can see your crossed fingers in the reflection."

"Whoops." I shrugged, then joined in his laughter. He seemed to be smiling and laughing a lot more these days and I flattered myself to think it had something to do with me.

There was a loud knock at the door and I started in surprise. "Oh man, you're kidding me." I turned back to the mirror and attempted to finish the elaborate knotty thing in my hair which I'd started before Jack came in. "He's early! Who comes early? Could you let him in, Jack?" I began yanking the pins out and my hair unravelled and fell to its usual height of just below my shoulders.

I watched in the mirror as Jack shot me an indecipherable look then yanked open the door. Adam looked slightly surprised at the force with which the door had been flung open and I could tell that he hadn't expected Jack to be answering his knock.

As I twisted my hair up into a bun I saw him and Jack doing the guy sizing up thing which included the narrowed eyes, the straightened shoulders and the handshake which looked more like a battle of wills than a simple greeting.
"Hey," Adam said coolly to Jack.

"Hey," Jack replied, just as unenthusiastically.

At that moment Matt emerged out of his room, "Talia have you seen my-" he caught sight of Adam and stopped short. "Hey," he said coldly.

"Hey," Adam replied.

"Oh for God’s sake," I laughed. "Enough already!" I grabbed the two short black chopsticks I’d had ready and jammed them through my bun to keep it in place. Some bits fell out, but the majority held so I was satisfied. "Let's go."

I grabbed my bag and headed over to where Adam was standing. As I sailed past Jack I whispered, "It's not a date," and I could tell by the lessening of the rigidity of his stature that he'd heard me and understood. "Bye guys," I called out cheerily before I shut the door firmly behind me.

"Wow, I bet the pair of them are really good fun for your dates to meet," Adam said as we made our way down the stairs. "Regular laugh a minute, those two."

"Yeah, there are plans for them to take their two man puffing peacock show on the road. You should count yourself lucky, you're not my date and yet you got treated to a free performance," I said with a wry smile.

"Oh, I’m fully sensible to the honour I’ve been bestowed," he laughed, opening the passenger side door on his car for me. "Don't you worry about that."

I returned home a bit after 5 staggering slightly after having watched hour upon hour of kicking and wheeling and fancy moves involving any convenient object lying around. It had been a great audience and participation was encouraged with laughing, booing and re-enactments all common occurrences.

Adam and I were fast becoming firm friends, he had entered the hallowed halls of those who had made me laugh so hard my tummy hurt. I felt great, revitalised even, as I put the key in the lock and entered the flat.

I had expected it to be all dark, but the light was on in the kitchen and, as I looked across, I saw that Jack was at the table his books spread out all around him. When I moved closer, however, I saw that he wasn't getting much studying done as he was fast asleep, his head resting on his folded arms.

I felt my heart give a little skip at the sight of him looking so vulnerable. He was so often clammed up during the day that it was fascinating to see his face when it was at rest. His dark eyelashes fluttered slightly on his cheek as he dreamed and I was loathe to wake him up, but he'd probably already given himself a permanent back crick sleeping like that and I didn't want it to get worse so I touched his shoulder lightly.

"Jack," I said quietly, trying not to startle him. "Jack, wake up."
He grunted and slowly opened his eyes. When he saw me sitting beside him he smiled sleepily. "Did you have a good time?" he asked and I rolled my eyes.

"Jack Morgan Whitby, it's basically morning. Did you wait up all night for me? You did, didn't you?" I accused him.

He yawned and then unfolded himself from the table and stretched. "Of course I didn't," he said, without much conviction. "I was just trying to cram as much studying in as I could."

"Sure," I said disbelievingly, "and I'm a flamingo."

He looked at me for a long moment, almost as if he was checking to see if I actually had turned into a pink bird, and then said, "What are you doing tomorrow night? Actually," he glanced at the window where the first rays of dawn were turning the clouds a light orange, "make that what are you doing tonight?"

I thought for a second and then shrugged, "Nothing."

"So how about you come out with me?" he said and, unlike the Friday before, I knew he did mean it as a date.

I smiled brilliantly at him and nodded. "I'd like that."

Jack smiled just as widely and then stood up. "Good," he said simply. "See you in the morning."

"You already have," I called after him and I heard his chuckle before he closed his door.

And that, I thought as I made my way over to my own room, was a very satisfactory end to a very good night.

~*~

Matt and Jack had footy training all of the next day and I used the time to add the finishing touches to an assignment I had due on Wednesday. With the essay finished, I moved on to the next week's readings and, when they were done, I was a week ahead with my law work. That meant that I would be able to devote my evenings to helping Jack without my work suffering. Feeling pretty damn proud of myself, I took a long bath complete with rose scented bubble bath and emerged at peace with the world.

I pulled on a pair of track pants and my old pink tank top and, with my hair still wrapped in a towel turban, settled myself down on the couch with a novel, relishing in some reading that wasn’t law-related for a change. I'd barely had five minutes of peace, though, when I heard five sets of football boot clad feet thundering up the stairs and, a moment later, the door banged open.
I sighed and set aside my book. The boys were always at their most aggravating after footy training. The adrenaline and testosterone pumping around their bodies seemed to override the small amount of their brains that they used for normal thought processes.

"We're the Grovers and the Rovers, we'll leave you our leftovers. With one big shout, we'll knock you out. We are the Grovers Rovers!"

Whoever had made up their team song needed serious help. Then again, those who would choose to chant it couldn't exactly be in the right frame of mind either.

The boys howled as they finished their song and slapped each other on the backs. The flat suddenly seemed unbearably small, in fact I suddenly felt unbearably small. From my position on the couch they were like overexcited, sweaty giants.

"Ugh, what's that smell?" Micky shouted when he'd finished wrestling with Matt.

"That would be your armpits," I said, reaching up to take the towel off my head.

The five of them suddenly noticed me, as if I had been hiding before, and all but Micky yelled noisy greetings as if I was at the other end of the football pitch as opposed to about three metres to their left.

"No, it's like a girly shit smell," Micky insisted.
They all started sniffing and Tommo worked his way over to me and smelt my hair.
"It's her," he announced.

"Figures, this flat only started to smell when she moved in here," Micky snapped.

It was rare that he was overtly rude to me in front of all the boys and, as I shot him a "rack off" look, I wondered what I'd done recently to piss him off particularly. Probably just continued to exist.

Jack and Matt, who had gone to the kitchen to crack out some beers, looked round angrily.

"Watch it," Matt said as Jack glared.

Sam took the route that I most appreciated, however, smacking his twin round the back of the head and instructing him not to be, "Such a dick!"

Tommo settled down on the couch beside me and smiled, his teeth incredibly white against his dark skin. "I think you smell nice," he said and I laughed.

"Thank you for that," I said primly. "Unfortunately I can't say the same for you."

He sniffed under his arms and made a face. "It's not great, is it?" he agreed before hauling himself off the couch. "I'm going home for a shower, but we're meeting at O'Reilly's tonight, yeah?" he said looking round at his friends. "About 8 'o' clock?"

Sam, Michael and Matt nodded, but Jack hesitated and I knew he was thinking about our date that night. Luckily Matt seemed to notice his indecision and said understandingly, "Are you and Talia doing more scholarship stuff tonight?"
Jack and I looked at each other quickly then looked away and said, "Yeah," at the same time.

As soon as I said it I felt guilt grip my guts, it wasn't a pleasant feeling.

One by one, Samsa, Micky and Tommo trooped out the door and Matt went off to have a shower. As I heard the hiss of the water start I looked across at Jack, my face crumpling.

"I didn't like that," I said quietly.

"Lying to Matt? No neither did I." Jack sighed and sat down beside me on the couch.

"It's the first time we've had to do that and let's try and make it the last, okay?"

I nodded my agreement, but, secretly, I was wondering how we were going to be able to pull it off. He seemed to notice my uncertainty and he slung his arm around my shoulders and gave them a squeeze. I leant into him, letting him comfort me and he rested his head atop mine. "Tommo was right," he said after a moment, "you do smell nice."

A completely different feeling clenched my stomach this time and I felt a silly grin stretch my mouth. "You're so nice to me," I said happily and I felt him kiss my hair before chuckling lightly.

"Well, that's lesson four. Be nice to the person you're trying to get into bed."

I snorted and smacked him in the face with a couch cushion. He laughed and got up.

"I'm going to get some studying done, but it's stuff I can do on my own so give yourself some time off." He turned to go into his room, but I called after him,

"What do I wear tonight?"

Jack didn't turn around, just called back, "Your dancing shoes."
Several hours later I stood before my wardrobe and eyed my clothes disparagingly.
My dancing shoes?
Dancing was a very broad requirement, I mean if it was going to be line dancing it
would require a very different outfit from if we were going, say, ballroom dancing.
I shook my head at my melodramatic streak, what were the odds that we were going
either line dancing or ballroom dancing? Very low.
I stopped fussing and decided on a knee length, floaty, layered red skirt and a tight
black top with a very wide neck. The top was good because it could be quite respectable, but,
if the situation demanded, it could also be sexy as one side could slip off the shoulder leaving
some skin exposed. I finished the outfit off with a pair of black, strappy high heels. OK so
they weren't exactly dancing shoes and I knew my feet would be killing me by the end of the
evening, but, damn, they looked good!
Getting dressed in my room I heard Matt thumping about in the lounge room and
knew that he too was getting ready to go out. I was proved correct when, a moment later, he
shouted out, "I'm off you guys. See you tomorrow."
"Bye," I called back and heard Jack do the same.
We were alone.
Feeling butterflies begin their, by now, very familiar dance in my stomach I lashed a
deep red lipstick onto my lips and added heavy mascara to my eyelashes before giving my
hair, which I had curled slightly and mussed up into a Marilyn Monroe look, one final fluff
before deciding I was ready. Grabbing a small, red, beaded bag I exited my room at the exact
same moment that Jack came out of his room.
For a moment we simply stared at each other. He wore black trousers and another of
his blue button down shirts with the sleeves rolled up. His hair looked as messy as usual and
his eyes, if it was possible, even bluer than before. He was, in short, looking good enough to
eat and I gulped, feeling like a grade 7 girl meeting the hottest guy in the school for the first
time.
To stop myself simply gawking at him I posed with my hip cocked. "Well?" I asked,
pouting slightly. "What do you think?"
I was gratified to see that he also gulped. Stepping forward he took one of my hands
and span me around, making the hem of my skirt flare up. "Natalia Jane Davenport," he said
copying my habit of calling him by his full name, "you look too hot to be legal."
Now that's the kind of thing a girl wants to hear on a Saturday night!
I laughed and danced away from him. "Good! So let's go!"
We drove for over half an hour to a club I'd never heard of. I guessed Jack had picked it because it was unlikely we'd meet anyone from uni there, or at least, not any of our crowd. There wasn't much of a line so it wasn't long before we were inside.

It was dark and the music was pumping so loudly the walls were vibrating. I could tell that it was the sort of place that, on a different night, I would hate. I was of the opinion that if you couldn't talk because the music was so loud and you couldn't see anyone because the lights were so dim it kind of made the only two reasons to go out kind of pointless. The two reasons being, of course, to hang out with friends or to check guys out.

Still tonight, as I stood to the side of the dance floor with Jack at my side, I began to see a third reason: to go out with your date and not have to talk or see anyone else!

The music playing was the sort that thumps in your chest and reverberates all through your body making you feel a part of it rather than just an audience. Even the most dance-challenged can move to that kind of music as your body moves of its own accord, with swaying of the hips and bobbing of the head. And, with a communication method like dancing, who needs conversation?

People were having to push past us to get to the dance floor and, seeming to realise at the same moment that I did that our choice of location wasn't spectacular, Jack shouted in my ear, "Shall we?" and gestured towards the mass of gyrating bodies in front of us.

I took a deep breath then nodded. He took my hand gently and led me over to a spot near the wall where we wouldn't be quite so crushed.

Stupid as it sounds, as soon as we got on to the floor, I got a feeling in the pit of my stomach somehow akin to fear. It was much more intense down there with the other dancers than up watching it. I tried to focus on Jack, but there were too many other people pushing and crowding around me. The crush of bodies and the sights and smells of other people seemed so primal as to be almost frightening to me. It was as if my body was being assaulted by senses and it had overloaded. It was something akin to claustrophobia and my dancing faltered as it gripped me.

I was just about to ask Jack if we could take a breather when strong hands gripped me from behind and dragged me against an unfamiliar body. Before either Jack or I had time to react the hands slid lower until they were pressing against my pelvis and the person behind me started to grind against me. And I truly mean grind as in, but for the grace of clothes, I could well have become pregnant. Icy drips of horror cascaded down my spine and all my insecurities at being touched flew into my chest with a force hard enough for me to be unable to take a breath.
My ordeal lasted less than a few seconds, though, as Jack started forward and pushed the grinder away as I struggled to get out of the guy’s arms.

"Hey chill out," the random dancer laughed. "I was just showing her some moves."

I still wasn't totally free from the stranger and I felt Jack give him another push which caused the guy's arms to fully release me and I fell forward. Jack caught me deftly whilst growling, "Yeah, well, show her again and I'll show you my moves."

If I'd been feeling more myself I would have laughed at his corny one liner, but as it was I simply allowed Jack to led me over to a stool by the bar and, as I sank onto it in relief, get me a bottle of water.

"Here, drink this," he murmured, removing the cap for me, almost as if I was a child. I was grateful, though, my hands were shaking so badly I don't think I could have unscrewed the cap myself.

As I sat sipping the water, I felt my panic subside and instead began to feel extremely embarrassed. Why did I have to flip out like that all the time? One step out of my comfort zone and, bam, instant freeze up. It was so annoying!

When the water bottle was almost half empty I finally looked up. Jack was standing silently beside me, almost as if he was on guard and I felt a sudden rush of affection for him as well as anger at myself for ruining a good night.

"Jack, I'm so sorry," I said miserably. "I don't know what happened."

"You don't have to apologise," he responded fiercely. "I shouldn't have brought you here, touching is kind of the order of the day at clubs and I should have thought that through. I'm sorry."

I knew then that if I didn't do something we would end up in one of those endless rigmaroles where we each tried to convince the other that we had been in the wrong. Unable to express what I meant in words, my gratitude, shame and guilt, I stood up and threw my arms around his neck.

For a moment he rocked back in shock, then his arms came around me, strong and firm. I buried my face into his neck and breathed in his familiar scent which reminded me of home and comfort, but also of spice and tingles in the belly. We stayed that way a long time, not moving, but simply tightly clutching each other until, eventually, Jack pulled back a little to look at my face.

"Alright?" he asked and I nodded because, then, it was.

He released me, I took a step back and, for a second, it felt as if every inch of my body cried out to regain contact with him. It passed, but the intensity of my reaction left me feeling like I'd been slapped in the face with a cold fish. My expression obviously showed a bit of this as well as Jack laughed and held out his hand.
"Come here," he said and, when I took his hand he spun me into him. We froze for a moment with him still holding one of my hands and my chin tilted up to see his face and then he smiled, his teeth bright in the flashing lights.

"Dance with me?" he asked and I smiled too and nodded.

We made our way back over to the edge of the dancers and then he released my hand and rested his hands on my hips. I hesitantly rested my palms against his chest and looked up into his eyes as we swayed together. We weren't dancing nearly as close as other people around us, but there are different kinds of close and we didn't need to grind to achieve ours.

After a while I grew daring, and turned around so that my back was resting against his chest. A moment later his arms snaked around me and wrapped me into his embrace.

I could see that the club and the dancing weren't actually frightening at all now. It was private, deep and personal.

I could feel Jack's heart thumping against me and I focused on that until it became like the music we were swaying to. I closed my eyes and melted against him wrapping my arms around his. The song was a fairly mellow one, but slowly it sped up and I found myself moving against Jack in response. Lost in the beat, I lifted my arms up and twined them around his head whilst twisting slightly so that one of his legs was between mine. I refuse to admit that I was grinding, but it couldn't have been that far off.

Once I realised what I was doing, I gasped and felt my face heat up. "Sorry," I said, dropping my arms and lifting myself as far away from his body as his encircling arms would allow. "I didn't realise what I was doing, I'll stop."

I attempted to move even further away, but his arms tightened. "Don't you dare," he said in a voice that I almost didn't recognise. It was so deep and gruff. It sent shivers down my spine and into my legs so it was lucky he was basically supporting me as I could quite easily have slithered to the floor in that moment.

"Lesson five," he said, brushing some of my hair to the side so he could speak directly into my ear. "If you trust me...him...the guy you're with, it can be okay to relax and let yourself go. Physical contact doesn't always have to be scary and it doesn't always have to lead somewhere."

I smiled as he accidentally included himself in the lesson, but the humour lessened as I took in what he'd really been saying. In a roundabout way he'd been asking if I trusted him enough to fully let myself go. And I knew in the next instant that I did.

I let the music take over me again and, this time, felt him moving back against me. It wasn't like with the guy from earlier, it wasn't rough or pervy, but rather as if we were in perfect sync with each other, almost as if we could predict what the other was about to do. After a while it no longer seemed as if there were two of us, but that we had become one entity, corny and cheesy as that sounds.
I fully understood, for perhaps the first time, how music is a very primitive instinct. When we were dressed in nothing but loincloths we would take the time to stamp out a beat around the campfire. Music is necessary and, if you let yourself, can allow you to enter a different sphere where nothing matters, but the rhythm.

Time slipped away and I reckon we could have danced all night, as the song goes, but we were rudely brought out of our own little world by a voice calling out, "Jack!"

Jack released me and I staggered to one side in my painful heels feeling that fuzzy, tired feeling you get when you stumble, blinking, out of the cinemas after a long film.

A girl was elbowing her way through the crowd over to us and my heart sank as I realised who it was. Kristin Bayers. Wonderful. Jack's ex-girlfriend, just who I needed to see at that moment. Kristin was extremely curvaceous and loved to show it to everyone by wearing the skimpiest things she could find. Her hair was long and bouncy and clearly not the colour she was born with and she had a smile which was so big and toothy you felt she could snap you up with one gulp if she felt so inclined.

"I thought it was you," she shrieked, finally having made it to us. She threw her arms around Jack and, to my extreme annoyance, he returned the hug.

"How are you, Kris?" he asked, his deep, calm voice at total odds with her high pitched exclamations.

"All the better for seeing you, we haven't hung out for ages. Why haven't we met up? Where have you been? What have you been doing?"

"Steady," Jack laughed good-humouredly, and I shifted slightly beside him, making Kristin's gaze suddenly fall on me.

"Natalie, I didn't see you there," she said with what I took for entirely insincere sweetness. "Are you here with your brother?"

Bitch!

I felt like saying, 'no actually I'm here with your ex and we were having a damn fine time before you showed your ugly mug. And, contrary to what many people believe, I do hang out with more people than just my brother!'

Still, I limited myself to saying. "No, Kristy, I'm not here with Matt."

"Kristin," she corrected me and I gave her a chilling smile.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I said, my voice dripping with artificiality. "I know how annoying it can be when people get your name wrong."

There was a pause and then, as Kristin turned to wave at somebody else she knew, Jack murmured, "Down girl." And I bared my teeth at him in imitation of a vicious dog.

As Kristin faced us once more, I pasted a brilliant and oh so fake smile on my face and gestured towards the toilets.
"I'm just going to the loo, you guys catch up and I'll meet you by the bar in a few minutes."

Kristin, judging by her reaction, thought this was the best idea she'd ever heard and latched onto Jack's arm immediately. Just before they disappeared into the crowd Jack turned his head and rolled his eyes in Kristin's direction before winking at me. All the butterflies that had been so cruelly driven off by Kristin's arrival on the scene came back in force and flapped their little wings for all they were worth. A real smile spreading across my lips, I made my way, unsteadily due to my heels, over to the toilet line.

It took a long time for me to enter an empty stall, but, on the plus side, I became very good friends with my queue partners. They were extremely sociable although that may have been supplemented by some artificial means, if you know what I mean.

As I entered back into the main club area I was feeling pretty good. My freak out was completely forgotten and I moved to the music and weaved through the crowd without any hesitation. I had just caught sight of Jack and raised my hand to wave at him when I heard some guy shout, "Get your hands off my girlfriend!"

Uh-oh, testosterone explosion in 3, 2, 1…

Bam! A fist in the face. Not particularly original, but obviously effective and, considering my history with the man getting hit, a very good move all round.

And off they went.

Have you ever noticed that fights aren't at all like they are in the movies? Hardly anyone ever gets a punch in except for at the very beginning, after that it just becomes a mess of pushing and shoving, their hands tightly holding on to the front of their opponents shirts. I've seen more intense fights between women in a shoe store after the same size.

Still, it was perhaps not the best idea to loiter in the locality of so much raw aggression and I began sidling round some spectators to join Jack and Kristin. I was just thinking I was out of the danger zone when suddenly the crowd parted beside me and, before I had time to stagger out of the way, six feet of wheeling drunk man smacked into me. My balance not being that good at the best of times in those stupid shoes, I felt my ankle roll and the next moment I went down, the guy crashing on top of me.

All the breath was knocked out of me in one big whoosh, but being winded was the least of my troubles; my ankle was trapped beneath the both of us at an awkward angle and was sending messages of extreme pain to my brain.

"Get off me, you big brute," I wheezed, but, considering all the noise around me, I doubt anyone heard me.
I don't think there was anybody in a ten kilometre radius, however, who didn't hear the roar that followed a moment later.

"Get off her!"

The heavy weight on top of me abruptly lifted and I was able to see Jack, the muscles in his arms straining, hauling the guy off me. The movement jarred my ankle and I gave a little yelp of pain, my eyes watering. Despite the noise of the club Jack seemed to have heard me and he threw the guy to one side before crouching down anxiously beside me.

"Tally, you alright?"

I pushed myself up into a sitting position, being careful not to move my sore ankle. "Well," I sighed, "much as I hate to sound like a pathetic girl in an action film, I've hurt my ankle."

I allowed Jack to gently help me up and I leant heavily on him to avoid putting weight on my right leg.

"You, get her some ice from the bar," Jack instructed the guy who had fallen on me and, with surprisingly little complaint, he scurried off to do his bidding.

Kristin, showing surprising concern, shooed a girl off a nearby chair and Jack basically carried me over to it. The ordered bag of ice appeared a moment later and Jack knelt in front of me, as if he was about to propose, and lifted my right leg up so that my injured ankle was cradled in his strong hands. Slowly, and with great care, he removed my silly heels and wrapped the ice around my ankle, the cold making me start.

"Your dancing shoes, I said." Jack eyed the heel he had removed with scorn. "You can't tell me those are your dancing shoes."

"Well sandshoes don't really go with this outfit," I pouted, putting on my best 'snob' voice, which sounded eerily like Haley's.

"They're great shoes," Kristin added, clearly wanting in on the conversation. "Worth the pain, I'd say."

Jack looked at her as if she had gone insane, then looked at me that way too as I shrugged as if to say, 'yeah pretty much.'

"You girls are mental," he murmured before looking at me squarely in the eyes. "And before you suffer any more mishaps I'm taking you home." Looking back up at Kristin he nodded. "It was good to see you again."

"Yeah, you too. Say hi to Matt for me." She smiled, showing all her huge glossy white teeth.

Ooh predator look.

Still, it was me Jack was going home with so suck on that Kristin! Okay, true, we do live together, but I'd take any victory I could over a bombshell like her.
We staggered out of the club and to the car which, thankfully, wasn't parked too far away. Jack helped me into the passenger seat and propped my leg up on the dash with the ice firmly packed around it before making his way round to the drivers’ side.

"Well that was eventful," I said as we pulled out of the parking space and began the drive home. "And seeing Kristin was a bit of a surprise. Should we be worried that she'll tell people that she saw us together?"

Jack shook his head. "Nah, I made out like we were just hanging out and, besides, compared to some of the dancing other people were doing ours was relatively tame."

Little spikes of hurt erupted in my chest at these words. I'd been soaring through the galaxy on a wave of feelings and desires and he'd thought our dancing was tame?

I was so wrapped up in my wounded pride that I almost missed him mutter quietly, "Outwardly at least."

I grinned shyly and looked out the window, satisfied that he too had been affected by our close contact earlier.

We fell silent then and I gazed out the window at the lights flashing by feeling, despite my throbbing ankle, happy and content.

"Why did you date Kristin?" I asked suddenly, after a few minutes had passed. I'd been thinking about this question in the toilet stall and hadn’t been able to come up with an answer. I didn’t think she was his type, she was much more the sort of girl Matt would be interested in, loud, brassy and not afraid to flaunt her, um, womanly attributes.

He didn't answer for a long time and I looked round to see why not. He was looking intently out the windscreen, his jaw was clenched.

"Jack?" I asked in confusion.

He glanced at me briefly and shook his head. "You're not going to like my answer and I'm not much proud of it either." He took a deep breath and rubbed a hand through his short hair. "To put it simply, I was with Kristin because the sex was good." I made a noise of disgust and he shrugged slightly. "I told you that you wouldn't like it."

"You could've lied!" I exclaimed. "Now I've got really bad mental images." I shook my head as if to clear them then looked at him with interest. "You know, I would never have picked you as someone who chose a girlfriend based on her sexual prowess. Matt, yes. You, no."

"Matt isn't as shallow as all that," he defended my brother. "And Kristin has a bit more to her than the average sex kitten, she understood the arrangement just fine. The last couple of years she was there for me when I needed to take my mind off things. She was never really my girlfriend, we didn't ever date in the sense of going out…"

"Yes, thank you," I interrupted quickly. "I think I get the general idea of what your meetings entailed." I rearranged the ice on my ankle then, somewhat more hesitantly, I
continued, "And, by needing to take your mind off things, I'm guessing you mean your hook ups take place on the 19th of September?"

Jack's hands tightened on the steering wheel and then he went very still apart from a nerve which I could see ticking near his jaw. I wished I could take back my thoughtless words. The 20th of September was the day that his mother had crashed the car containing her and the twins, Paul and Lizzie, and every year on the day before Jack and Matt disappear for the whole day and night. I don't know exactly what happens, but, safe to say, I think a lot of drinking and debauchery takes place as Jack attempts to plunge himself into oblivion where he can't be plagued by bad memories.

Seeing that he wasn't relaxing, I gently put my hand on his arm and looked up at him sadly. "I'm sorry, Jack," I said miserably. "I shouldn't have-"

"No," he said flatly, seeming to come back to himself although his grip on the wheel didn't lessen any, "don't apologise. It's not a big deal."

It clearly was a big deal and, although I usually tiptoed around his issues, I suddenly didn't want to let it go.

"Won't you talk to me about it?" I asked. "Getting stinking drunk and sleeping with people like Kristin can't help really, can it?"

"Look, just drop it." He spoke quietly; Jack had never really raised his voice at me, but I would've taken shouting over the weird intensity which laced his words and belied the volume they were spoken at.

I really considered continuing to push the issue, but I flinched away from saying something which would, at least, cause him to speak in that intense, flat voice again or, at most, upset the weird sort of relationship we had going.

Cross at my cowardice, I removed my hand from him and faced out the window again.

Neither of us spoke for the rest of the journey home and when we pulled into the car park I opened my door and attempted to make a dignified exit without his help. Unfortunately this proved to be impossible and, before I could disentangle myself from the seatbelt and get my leg off the dashboard, Jack had exited his side and come round to mine.

One look at him made me stop my fussing, but, as if scared I'd try to make a run, or rather a hobble, for it, he put his hands on my shoulders, pushing me back into the seat.

"Listen to me," he said and I could hear deep frustration in his voice. "I'm screwed up, I know I am, but getting drunk on the 19th and having sex with women like Kristin is the way I've found to deal with it. I know that you don't get it, but, if I don't want to talk, it's not about you, okay? If I did want to talk then you or Matt or your parents would be the ones I would go to. But at the moment I just…" he faltered and I put my hands on top of his and held them tight.
"It's okay," I said, wanting him to stop as it was obviously hurting him to speak like that.

Tension seemed to flow out of his shoulder and he released me and stood back. "No, it's not, but now's not the time to get into it." He reached past me and unhooked my seatbelt before helping me out of the ute.

With my arm around him, I was able to hop across the asphalt, although anyone who has tried to hop in high heels would understand that it was no mean feat! The stairs were the most difficult thing and seemed to take forever, like my very own Everest. When we reached our door I collapsed against it, puffing heavily, before shooting Jack a wry smile.

"Well, that was certainly the most interesting date I've ever been on," I said, looking up at him through my eyelashes. "All the highs and lows of a rollercoaster."

Jack shot me a small smile and stood back from me as if he was scared to get too close. "It wasn't exactly as I'd planned it, no,"

I blew some hair out of my face and shrugged. "When is anything?" I pointed out. "I can honestly say, despite everything, that I had a great time." I stepped forward hesitantly and, putting my hands on his shoulders, I reached up and kissed him lightly on his jaw-line. Leaning my cheek against his briefly I added, "In fact Lesson five might just be my favourite so far."

I moved back and we looked at each other for a long moment. Then, coughing awkwardly, Jack gestured towards our flat. "Right, back to business," he said gruffly. "That leg should be elevated." And, without further ado, he opened the door and ushered me inside.
Chapter 11

I woke up late the next morning and would’ve slept longer if it hadn't been for the throbbing in my ankle. Apparently all the drama and hi-jinks of the Saturday night had completely exhausted me.

Well, that and the fact that I'd dreamt of Jack again during the night and let's just say my dreams weren't exactly G-rated. Perhaps more annoying than feeling tired was that they left me feeling unfulfilled and dissatisfied and, to be honest, scared me a little in how much they affected me. I've never been a big believer in the theory that dreams were particularly significant, but if I chose to listen to my subconscious this time it wouldn't be long before I jumped Jack and tore all his clothes from his body!

Throughout the day flashes of the dreams came to the front of my mind meaning that I would become suddenly flustered and embarrassed. The boys must have thought I was going through extremely early menopause the way I kept blushing and saying weird things to cover my awkwardness.

To explain the fact that I was hobbling and that Jack had needed to put an ankle support on me as soon as I emerged from my room, I told Matt I had rolled my ankle and then landed on it awkwardly as I fell. It wasn't technically a lie, but I'm one of those people who count lying by omission as just plain lying so that didn't really help with my guilt.

Still, my darling, oblivious brother didn't seem at all suspicious and, in fact, was surprisingly sweet all day, keeping up a steady stream of refreshments and the odd painkiller when I needed it and making sure I stayed off my ankle as much as possible.

By the end of the day the pain had dulled to the point where I could apply a little pressure on my right leg and I knew that after another night's rest it would be almost as good as new. Jack's quick actions, applying ice and elevating my leg had kept the swelling to an absolute minimum.

To thank my two caring companions I made tea that night, lasagne and salad nothing too fancy, but it was one of their favourite meals. We were just mopping up the remains of the lasagne with some garlic bread when the phone rang. Matt answered and I could tell by his immediate eye roll that it was our mother. Jack and I cleared the dishes while Matt huffed and sighed his way through a conversation with her, always a very one sided affair. Then Matt tossed me the phone and I settled down on the couch to listen to the mother monologue. She prattled on for about fifteen minutes then suddenly said, "So, are you coming up next weekend?"

Beware mother's guerrilla attacks at all times. The second you relax is the second she strikes. Do not let her lull you into a false sense of security!
"Oh…uh…" I said, flustered. "I'll ask the guys."

There was a long pause, which did not bode well.

"Did I raise a daughter who needs to check with men before making a decision?" she asked in a dangerous voice and I smacked my head back against the couch armrest as I realised my tactical error.

"No," I groaned.

"So do I suppose then that you don't want to come and see your parents by yourself? That you are, in fact, scared to come home without a boy buffer?"

"No," I said again, half frustrated, half amused at her fake hurt voice.

"Well then," my mum said, all brisk business now, "we'll see you on Friday then."

I stared at the phone in annoyance, but also, I must admit, with a little bit of admiration. How had she managed to do that? One minute I was happily planning another weekend in our flat, hopefully spending more time with Jack and the next I'm committed to the eight hour return trip home. She's evil, pure evil!

"Fine, nice to talk to you too, Mum," I said sarcastically, "Pass the phone to Dad."

Once I heard my dad take the phone I whined, "Daddy, she trapped me!"

I heard his deep laugh and, as always, felt compelled to join in. "You've got to constantly watch yourself and not give her anything to work with, you know that," he lectured me. There was a pause and then he added, "Once you work out how to do that be sure to let me know, yeah?"

We talked for a while until Mum wrestled their phone away from him and I chucked ours over to Jack.

Matt came over and flopped down beside me looking extremely glum. "I had plans for this weekend," he sighed. "Good plans."

"But she got you too," I commiserated and he nodded.

"Not just us, though. Apparently she ran into Tommo's mum and they had a conversation about how they so rarely get to see us now we're at uni."

"Uh oh," I said and Matt smiled sadly.

"Yep, that's right, now I have to tell Tommo that he's expected to report to the mothership this weekend as well."

"Misery loves company," I laughed. "I guess we'll make a road trip out of it."

Matt's shoulders slumped. "So goodbye hook up with a random hot chick, hello long tedious weekend in the mother zone."

Jack hung up the phone and threw himself onto an armchair rolling his eyes at Matt’s and my despondent attitude.

"Ah, dry your eyes princesses," he said. "Your mum's not that bad."
Matt exchanged an exasperated look with me and then we both turned incredulous eyes to Jack.

"What?" he asked.

"You just don't get it. Mum thinks the sun shines out of your arse. You can do no wrong," Matt said patiently as if he was explaining it to a child who was a bit slow.

"You're so full of it," Jack scoffed, but I could tell he was kind of pleased. He knew he was the most precious thing in Mum's eyes, but I think he always liked to hear it said.

Matt sighed loudly then got up. "Right, I'm off to the pub, you guys coming?"

"Nah." Jack shook his head. "Talia and I are only hours away from finishing all the stuff from first year."

"I hope this scholarship thing is worth it because you've become a boring bastard," Matt joked.

"Oh yeah?" Jack kicked out a leg as Matt came past and my brother fell straight over the outstretched limb. He promptly yanked on the leg he had tripped over pulling Jack down onto the floor with him. The next moment the two of them were rolling about on the carpet laughing as they grappled with each other.

I heaved a huge exaggerated sigh and shook my head. "It's been said before and it'll be said again- boys!"

I got to my feet and went to step over them, but I should've known better. I barely heard Matt ask, "Where do you think you're going?" Before he grabbed my legs and pulled me down on top of him and Jack. I shrieked as I fell and then some more as Matt began tickling me.

"Jack! Save me!" I yelled through my laughter, whilst trying to protect my ticklish spots and my sore ankle.

"I don't know," he said slowly. "Maybe I'll let you suffer."

"No!" I screamed, tears of laughter welling up in my eyes. "Please help me!"

"Well, since you asked so nicely." Jack reached round me and started attacking Matt in my defence. The three of us were laughing so hard that we didn't hear the door open.

"Don't mind us, we'll just wait until you're done."

At the sound of Sam's voice the three of us looked up from our tangled position on the floor.

"Uh, hi," Matt said. "Just wait a minute while my lump of a sister and best mate get off me and then I'll be ready to go."

"A sentence you don't hear too often," Tommo remarked offering me a hand to help me to my feet.
Not too long ago holding Tommo's hand would have sent me either into a girly tizz or a panic attack, but now I simply smiled easily and thanked him without giving it another thought.

Once Matt had grabbed his wallet and jacket all the boys, bar Jack, trooped out of the flat and I grabbed the massive first year text. I settled myself down on an armchair and spread the book open across my knees before bending my head down to it.

~*~

Three hours later I slammed the heavy tome shut and wilted back against the back of the chair.

"I'm spent," I groaned. "Can we take a break before starting in on second year?" My eyes, tired from reading the small print, closed in exhaustion. "I don't think I can take anymore tonight."

"I'm in total agreement," Jack sighed stretching himself out on the couch.

We relaxed in silence for a few minutes, enjoying the feeling of getting through the first year curriculum with Jack making hardly any mistakes. Then he sat up and patted the cushion next to him inviting me to go over and sit with him on the couch. Without hesitation, I hauled myself off my chair and plonked myself down beside him.

"Time to blur out," Jack announced clicking the TV on. A random movie was starting and, because I was so weary, I found myself becoming totally engrossed in it despite its somewhat lacklustre plot. During the course of the film I edged closer to Jack until, by the time the credits were rolling, I was leaning back against him, my head resting against his arm which was draped along the back of the couch.

While we watched the words appear on the screen, caught up in the lull at the end of the film, Jack began absentmindedly stroking my hair and I smiled at the feeling.

"Hey, do you mind if I ask you a question?" he said drowsily, clicking off the TV with his free hand.

"Skipping over the fact that you already have, I'll say yes" I replied cheekily.

I felt his chest expand beside me as he took a deep breath and his hand paused its stroking movement. "Why do you think you get so nervous about being touched?"

I froze and my heart started to beat a little faster. "Oh.....um," I stuttered, unable to formulate a better response due to the suddenness of the question. Jack wasn't usually one to cut straight to the point, it left me reeling in confusion.

"You don't have to answer if you don't want to," Jack said quickly, obviously realising how much his question had thrown me.
"No, it’s okay," I said, scooting away from him and wedging myself into the far corner between the back of the couch and the armrest. "Just give me a minute."

He nodded and waited patiently as I gathered together the thoughts that I’d had over the years as to the impetus of my phobia.

"I think it was sort of a gradual thing," I began hesitantly. "It’s not like one day I woke up and thought 'if one more guy touches me I'm going to freak!' To start off with I guess I wasn't interested in boys at all until well after my fourteenth birthday. All the other girls were going nuts over this boy or another and I would go home to you and Matt burping and fighting and generally being idiotic and would think 'they want that?'

Jack smiled at the last bit, but didn't say anything, which encouraged me to keep going.

"I didn't ever feel I needed one either, a boyfriend that is. Then suddenly everybody started asking why I didn't have a boyfriend, like, what was wrong with me? Thinking back on it, it was so stupid. I mean hardly anyone in high school actually had a boyfriend so why did people get on my case about it? It was so stupid!" Realising that I sounded like I was whining exactly like the grade 9 kid I'd been, I adjusted my tone.

"So then there was this guy in grade 10, Rhys, who everybody said liked me and so I let myself get bulldozed by my supposed friends into going out with him. Of course then it turned out that he was only going out with me so he could meet you and Matt and..."

"Get on the football team," Jack finished for me and I nodded the truth of it.

"Yep, his agenda became pretty clear after a while, date me, meet you, get on the team, sleep with me, dump me. Nice, huh?" Despite my flippant tone the memory still hurt.

"Good footballer, though," Jack said thoughtfully and, choking with indignation, I smacked his shoulder. "Joking," he said quickly, holding up his hands in surrender. "Hell, despite how good he was Matt and I kicked him off the team as soon as we found out what he was up to, didn't we?"

"And I should think so too! Still, it was me who dated him for most of grade 9, can you believe it?"

It'd been a rhetorical question, but Jack answered it before I had time to continue."No. Couldn't believe it then, still doesn't make sense now. He was a total dickhead."

"Well, I don't remember you saying that back then," I accused him, taken aback by his vehemence on the subject.

He shrugged. "Of course I didn't say anything. You were going through a stage where you would do exactly the opposite of whatever Matt or I advised you to do just to show that you could. We thought if we said anything bad about him you'd stay with him longer just to spite us so we decided to just wait for you to get over it."
I gaped at him. How condescending! I felt a little burble of anger in my stomach at the idea of Matt and Jack discussing my pathetic little teenage rebellion and deciding I would grow out of it. OK, it was true that at about that age I was keen on showing how independent I was and, determined to get out from under Matt's wing, had begun deliberately doing the opposite of what he suggested, but, still…! I thought hard before phrasing my reply.

"Although that's almost too patronising for words I accept that you were probably right in not saying anything."

"How diplomatic of you." Jack grinned and I stuck my tongue out at him before realising that that action pretty much undid the maturity of my previous sentence.

"I remember explaining what'd happened between Rhys and me to Mum and, after she gave me a hug, she held me at arm’s length and said, 'Well, really, darling, what did you expect from somebody with no vowels in their name?'"

Jack burst out laughing.

"One of her finest moments that." I joined in his laughter. "Anyway, then it was grade 10 and people started on at me to forget Rhys and, basically, try again which is where Stuart came in." I smiled fondly at the memory. "Ah, good old Stuart. He was the best boyfriend I've ever had."

"He was gay," Jack pointed out.

"I know, I helped him come out, remember? Pretty magnanimous of me considering that meant losing my shield against my friends trying to set me up," I joked, but Jack was back to looking at me seriously.

"He was your favourite?" he prompted and I nodded.

"Well, yeah. He never bragged about having rooted me to his mates or groped me or got off with any of my girlfriends."

"Well maybe that was because he was gay," Jack said in exasperation and I narrowed my eyes at him.

"You say that like it's a bad thing," I snapped.

"In terms of him being your boyfriend that is a bad thing and I don't think anyone is going to accuse me of being homophobic for saying so."

He was right as he, infuriatingly, always seemed to be.

"Okay, whatever. He wasn't technically a brilliant candidate for my boyfriend, but he was, nevertheless, one of the kindest, loveliest blokes I've ever met," I said, before continuing blithely, "So after that I developed a serious crush on Tommo which saw me through the rest of grade 10." As soon as the words left my mouth I froze and Jack made a funny choking sound.
"Developed a serious crush on who, excuse me?" he said loudly, and my chest did a funny clenching thing at his tone. "Tommo? As in our Tommo?" He clarified, looking so horrified that I couldn't help a tiny smile spreading across my lips.

"What's so wrong with that? He's always been such a sweetheart to me and those tattoos of his are...well I've always thought they're pretty sexy."

Jack's blood pressure seemed to be rising with each word I said, but, at the last, he smiled slightly and raised his eyebrows questioningly. "You think tattoos are sexy?" he asked and I nodded a little shyly. Goodness, but I was unburdening all my secrets onto him at once today!

"Well, that's good to know," he said quietly, but, before I could ask why that was, he moved on. "So you got a crush on Tommo, then what?"

"In terms of the Tommo thing then nothing," I said focusing back on my story. "I spent grade 10 going bright red and falling over myself whenever he entered a room and nobody except Simone noticed. Tommo certainly didn't anyway. Then that summer you and Matt moved away, Simone get her first serious boyfriend and Rhys threw a party and didn't invite me because I was a 'frigid bitch'."

I pulled a face remembering how much I'd hated that time. I'd been desperately lonely those holidays because, although Simone always invited me when her and Dean had gone out, I'd had no desire to be the third wheel on their dates. Then Rhys had pretty much started a campaign to make me an outcast and something inside me had snapped.

"So, feeling like things had to change, I decided that I could force myself to like being with guys and became a party girl. Drinking helped a lot and I had a very successful strategy of getting hammered then pashing the closest guy available." I tried to make it sound like a joke, but it wasn't funny and neither Jack nor I were laughing. "I admit that it wasn't the best of plans and, although some of them weren't so bad, most of those guys made my skin crawl when they touched me."

Knowing that I was coming up to the worst bit of the story I paused and started playing with the tassel on a cushion. "Then it all came to a head with that guy who decided I was a tease who 'needed to be taught a lesson';" I said in a small voice, not managing to say those words, almost exactly the ones spoken to me at a friend's birthday party almost two years ago, without shuddering.

Jack was looking like he either wanted to hug me or break something and, as either occurrences might have led to me chickening out before I had finished my story, I rushed on. "He used his strength against me and pinned me to a wall before I even realised what he was going to do. He didn't manage to get more than a few gropes of my breasts before I managed to get away, but..." my voice cracked and my eyes filled with tears. Jack seemed to sense that
I needed to pull myself together without his help and sat like a statue while I wiped my eyes and evened out my breathing.

When I looked up, his face was like stone and I knew he was using all his self control not to leap off the couch and hunt down the guy who had done me wrong so long ago.

"So," I continued, my voice only wobbling a little bit, "after that, needless to say, I went back to avoiding guys for a while. And I began to feel like I was in control again, but it turned out I was only in denial. I began not only trying to avoid dating guys, but also to avoid having them get anywhere near me full stop. I pushed all thoughts of boyfriends and dates and romance to the back of my mind and concentrated on finishing high school and getting the hell out of that town." Feeling like I was making the whole thing sound a bit too dramatic I shrugged. "Everybody has their insecurities right?" I asked. "Well that was just mine. Then I met Brad and, well, you know the rest."

There was silence for a moment after I finished my account then Jack cleared his throat and said, "Was?"

"Sorry?" I asked, not understanding.

"You said 'everybody has their insecurities and that was mine.'"

I stared at him in shock. He was right! I'd referred to my phobia in the past tense. It had been a slip of the tongue, I hadn't consciously said it, but, as I thought about it, I realised that I truly did believe that I was getting over it. Not just that, I believed I would fully master my fears and be done with it.

"You're going to do it. We're going to do it! Oh my god, Jack, this is going to work!" I squealed in excitement before throwing myself at him and flinging my arms around his neck. Jack's chest rumbled beneath me as he chuckled and then his arms were tightly wrapped around me and I felt a new batch of tears spring into my eyes.

"You're incredible," I murmured into his ear, delighting in the feel of my cheek against his, despite the slight rasp of stubble.

"I'm nothing special," he said gruffly and I leant back, straddling him, and looked him squarely in the eyes.

"Yes you are," I insisted, punctuating each word with a light slap to his chest. "And it's about time you admitted it."

"Oh, I don't know," Jack said with a sly smile. "I think I’m okay with having you tell me just how perfect I am."

I raised one eyebrow coquettishly at him and realised with a start that I was engaged in bona fide flirting. Oh well, if I was already doing it I might as well go the whole hog…

I daringly leant forward until, from the waist to the neck, our bodies were completely flattened against one another and our faces were so close he had to tilt his head slightly so our noses wouldn't collide.
"Who said anything about perfect?" I purred, making my voice deliberately low and sexy. I heard his breath hitch in his throat and noted, with some satisfaction, that I was having an effect on something else of his also. I didn't feel embarrassed as I thought I would, instead, the fact that he was obviously aroused, gave me a great sense of power.

It was pretty intoxicating actually.

We were so close I could feel his breath on my lips. If either one of us so much as moved a muscle we would be kissing, but we were frozen a hair’s breadth from each other.

_Don't be so chicken shit!_ A voice in my head screamed, _just kiss him already!_ And I knew that I would, I was just enjoying this moment beforehand when we each had the understanding of what was about to happen and we were savouring that knowledge. My eyes had just fluttered closed in anticipation of his lips on mine when there was a loud knocking at the door.

"Hello? Is anyone home?" Haley's voice called through from out in the corridor.

I was sorely tempted to shout out 'No, so piss off!' but I did the mature thing, simply sitting up and sticking my middle finger up at the closed door in that time honoured gesture of irritation.

"Just a minute, Haley," Jack called out and I looked at him sharply. A minute? A minute before what?

"Come on, Tally, let's just see what she wants," he whispered as he gently manoeuvred himself out from underneath me.

I sat, completely stunned, as he made his way over to the door and opened it. There was Haley in all her scantily clad glory, hair and makeup immaculate as only she would have during a Sunday night at home.

"I'm so sorry to barge in like this," she said in that breathless little voice of hers.

_Yeah I just bet you are_, I thought sarcastically.

"But my aunt's car won't start and she really wants to go to bingo. You couldn't come and check it out, could you? I mean if you're busy then…"

"No, that's fine," Jack interrupted. "It's probably just a flat battery like last time."

Fine? It most certainly was NOT fine! As Jack went towards the table to grab his car keys, I stood up and grabbed him by the front of his jumper.

"Could I have a word?" I growled, dragging him over to the corner where the fridge blocked Haley's view of us. "What do you think you're doing?" I hissed angrily.

"Come on, Tally," he said calmly. "Her aunt wants to go to bingo."

"Then she can take the f-ing bus," I snapped, forgetting to whisper and Jack shot me a pained look.

"I won't be long," he said, before gently removing my hand from his jumper and exiting the flat with Haley.
I couldn't believe it! He'd chosen Haley over me! Flying into a complete rage I gave a shriek of frustration and marched into my room, slamming the door behind me.

Her aunt wants to go to bingo, indeed! I could just see Haley deliberately leaving the car light on so that the battery would run flat and she could come running to Matt or Jack to save her.

I heaved my bookcase in front of the door and then flopped down onto my bed and screamed into my pillows.

I was still lying prone on my bed, my face buried in my pillows, when, about half an hour later, Jack returned to the flat. I heard him drop his keys onto the table and go into the bathroom to wash his hands. Then, finally, his footsteps came towards my door and he knocked gently upon it. I sat up and hugged a pillow to my chest, but didn't say anything.

"Tally, can I come in?" he asked. I said nothing. He went to open the door and came upon the resistance the bookcase offered. "You do realise I'm strong enough to just push the door open, bookshelf and all," he sighed.

"Yeah, but you won't," I thought.

"But I won't," he said after a moment. "Look, she needed a hand. That's what neighbours are for and I'm not going to stop helping her out just because you've decided you don't like her."

I kept my lips tightly pressed together.

"Fine, sulk if you want," Jack said sharply after the silence had stretched out for almost a minute. "But move that bookcase away from the door, if there's a fire I don't want you to die because of your immaturity."

And he stomped away again.
Chapter 12

As if determined to prove that Jack had been right when he called me immature, I spent the next two days stomping around the flat with a face like thunder. I nearly took Matt's head off when, after I slammed down a glass so hard most of the liquid inside flew out, he mouthed 'PMT' at Jack.

Of course I couldn't explain to him that, in actual fact, it wasn't the onset of menstruation that was causing me to act like a complete feral, but rather the fact that the bitch downstairs had stopped me pashing his best mate. Wouldn't that have wiped the smirk right off his face?

It wasn't just at the flat that I was in a dark mood, either. The cloud followed me to uni where I barely took in a word in tutes or lectures. Even Adam couldn't seem to jolly me out of my foul mood, although he did his absolute best; his antics would have had me rolling in the aisles only the week before.

Simone, having known me for so long, knew that it was just best to keep out of my way when I was sulking and I barely saw her. We talked a couple of times on the phone and I think that was quite enough contact for her, wise girl that she is.

Jack, in his totally oblivious way, didn't seem to understand what he'd done to annoy me so much and I was too angry to explain it to him. I knew I was behaving like a child, a bratty, nasty, rude child and was ashamed of it. I knew I was totally overreacting but I couldn't seem to help myself.

Lucky I didn't see Haley on Monday or Tuesday, I probably would’ve pushed her down the nearest available flight of stairs.

~*~

The whole thing came to a head, as things usually do, on Wednesday. It was exactly two weeks after I’d found Brad cheating on me and, after finishing work, I was walking back to my car. My feet were aching and my head throbbed from listening to the constant 'beep, beep, beep' of the cash register.

Rounding the corner to the car park, I froze as I saw the silhouette of a guy leaning against my car. It wasn't that late, but the rest of the area was completely deserted and the buildings surrounding the asphalt were all dark. The streetlights offered some light, but it was that eerie orange kind that seems to sap all the colour out of everything making even quite ordinary objects seem really creepy.
I fished my mobile out of my bag and held it at the ready as I began to walk purposely towards my car. Any funny business and I was going to be onto the police quick as a flash.

The guy caught sight of me as I moved closer to him and pushed himself off the car before beginning to walk towards me. My heart gave a huge leap of alarm and then, as I realised who it was, sank down into my shoes.

"Hello, Brad," I said, unenthusiastically.

"Hi, Talia." His voice was subdued and, with his hands thrust deep into his pockets and his head bent, he looked and sounded for all the world like a guilty school boy in the principal's office.

Brushing past him, I unlocked my car and threw my stuff onto the backseat, giving myself time to collect my thoughts and get over the fright he'd given me, before facing him once more.

"So, is there any particular reason you're skulking around my car in the dark scaring the living daylights out of me?" I asked, putting my hands on my hips and making sure I looked as uncompromising as a rock. It wasn't hard to pull off, I'd spent the last two days coming down on people like a tonne of bricks and I so wasn't in the mood to deal with Brad.

"We need to talk," he said, looking pretty stony himself.

"Oh my god, you're pregnant," I said with a fake gasp, putting a hand over my mouth then lowering it and shooting him a contemptuous look.

"Can't you give it a rest for a second?" he snapped and I folded my arms mutinously, but pointedly closed my mouth. "Do you want to go for a drink? The uni bar is still open." He gestured down the street as if I didn't know where it was.

Seeing that a reply was actually allowed now I looked at him scathingly and shook my head. "Go in there with you? I can't think of anything I'd hate more."

"Why do you have to be so bloody single-minded?" I swear to god it sounded like he was whining. "You can't see through one little screw up? That has to ruin the really good arrangement we had going before? We were good together, you know we were. We got each other, we kept things light. I meant what I said when I called you, things were good when everyone got along."

"Then you should have thought a bit more carefully before you buggered the whole thing up, shouldn't you?" I pointed out, thoroughly fed up with him. I wasn't going to stand around in the cold listening to his drivel any more. I moved round the car to the drivers' side, fully prepared to get in and drive off, but Brad grabbed my arm before I got very far.

I looked at him in astonishment then down to where his hand was gripping me just above the elbow. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" I asked incredulously. "Let go of me."
"See, now, that was the biggest problem with us, Talia," Brad said angrily, still not letting go of my arm. "You didn't ever let me get near you."

"And, considering what a tool you turned out to be, thank god," I snapped. "Now let go." I yanked my arm and he released me.

"But don't you think I deserved a bit more?" he asked and I stopped dead at his words. I must have looked pretty mad when I whirled to face him because I could swear I saw him swallow nervously.

"Deserved?" I spat. "We're not in the Elizabethan era, Brad, you can't demand conjugal rights or whatever. You deserve nothing, not from me and not from any other self-respecting girl." I was whipping myself up to present a full on monologue but he held up a hand and butted in.

"I'm trying to get back together with you, why won't you listen?"

"Why are you trying to get back together with me?" I countered. Then, suddenly, I remembered the phone conversation I'd had with Simone two weeks ago. Brad had been telling his friends...oh that was right, it all made sense now! "This isn't about how sorry you are at all, is it?" I asked, noticing, with some pride, that my voice sounded almost as dangerous as my mother's had on Sunday. "This is about how you've told your friends that even though we've broken up you're still going to - how did Simone put it? - bed me before the end of the year."

I could see by his face that I had hit the jackpot.

"You're disgusting," I hissed.

"Talia-" he tried, but I talked over him.

"Look, I'll make this simple for you. It's over, that's really all there is to it, don't try to talk to me again."

I wrenched open my car door, but, much against my will, found myself pausing as he released a torrent of words at me.

"Over? Well sure, okay. Good luck finding any other guy who won't go running for the hills the second he meets your mother or your brother. Sorry, I meant brothers. Fuckin' insane, the lot of them." He was so petty and mean he seemed to drip poison as he talked, his face so twisted by anger that he looked nothing like the guy I'd first met.

I saw red.

"Don't you dare talk about my family like that." I obviously prefer verbal assaults as I'm not exactly able to produce particularly convincing physical ones, but at that moment I was prepared to rip him limb from limb and my intent must have shown because he took a couple of steps back. "Every single member of my family is worth ten of you."
"Oh, gee, now I feel bad," he said sarcastically. "Natalia Davenport doesn't think I'm as good as her family, well what a big bloody surprise! Sorry if I don't go straight home and kill myself because of my unworthiness."

I know I've said it before, but what the hell did I ever see in this guy?

"So what happens now?" He was still speaking in that weird, angry voice. "You go home and tell on me and Jack comes and smacks my head into a wall again?"

"It'd be no more than you deserve," I snapped. "If I had his upper body strength I'd smack your head into a wall!"

Although, wait a minute, *again*? Wasn't it supposed to be Matt who had thrown him against the wall?

I hesitated for a moment and then said, my voice slightly calmer, "And, just to clarify, when did Jack smack your head into a wall the first time?"

But even before he answered I knew what he was going to say.

"Don't act all innocent, Talia. Despite your frigidity it doesn't suit you. You know that Jack threw me against a wall the day after we broke up. Everyone knows that."

And I guess, in a way, I did kind of know that it'd been Jack. He'd been acting so suspicious that evening and he's always been an awful liar. Great, the person who told Simone must have got their wires crossed and thought it was Matt. Then Matt hadn't found out about our break up overhearing Brad, he'd found out overhearing me! My mind was so busy concentrating on the conversations I'd had two weeks ago that I barely registered the fact that Brad was talking again. I tuned back in pretty quickly, though, once I realised what he was talking about.

"He's made it quite a routine you know, Jack the hero. He threw Jeremy Symons against a wall last year for trying it on with that girl that lives below you, whatsername..."

I felt like smacking my head into a wall myself. "Haley," I ground out between clenched teeth.

"Yeah, that's the one," Brad looked at me shrewdly. "You don't like her do you?"

"Haley?" I asked in pretend surprise. "I don't care one way or the other about her."

"Yes you do," he pressed. "You really hate her." He smiled, almost gleefully. "Well, that must suck for you considering how obvious it is that your precious Jack’s so massively into her."

"He’s not massively into her," I said quickly. Too quickly.

“Careful, you’re sounding a bit jealous there...” Brad said in a sing-song voice that made my flesh crawl.

I had to disengage from this whole stupid thing; anything else I said would give Brad further ammunition and, besides, I had to get home. I had to find Jack, talk to him, and then kill him.
"Well, this has been nice," I said sarcastically. "What a good little catch up we've had. Now, just to recap, you're the lowest scum ever to take up valuable oxygen on this planet and I never want you to speak to, or about, me ever again. Is that clear?"

But before he could answer and trap me into another spat, I got into the car. I slammed the door and turned the ignition on, fully prepared to get the hell out of that car park even if it meant skittling Brad over the bonnet on the way.

~*~

I made it to the flat in record time by driving almost as erratically as I had the night I had found Brad in bed with Allison. Slewing my car into my usual parking spot, I noted that Jack's ute was parked in another spot a little further down. Thundering up the stairs, I struggled for a few moments getting my flat key into the lock, but eventually, burst into the main room and looked wildly about.

The place looked pretty deserted, but I shouted Jack's name a couple of times and stuck my head into each of the rooms just to be sure that was the case. Jack’s jacket and bag were sitting on the bed in his room, and his keys were on the kitchen table so he had to be somewhere nearby.

Where was he? I forced myself to stop staring around like an idiot, as if expecting Jack to pop out from behind the fridge, and think sensibly. Once I'd done that the answer came to me immediately.

I ran out of the flat and pelted up the next two flights of stairs until I came to the big heavy metal door with 'Roof Access' spray painted on it in a fluoro yellow. I pushed it open and immediately felt the cool night air lift the pieces of hair that had fallen out of my ponytail over the course of the day, and whip them crazily around my head.

Peering through the blonde strands, I saw Jack leaning against safety rails at the far end of the roof staring out at the view. Not able to wait even the few seconds it would take to reach his side I shouted, "Jack!" And, although the wind tried to whip the word away, he heard me. Lifting his hand in greeting he began to walk towards me and, pushing the hair out of my face, I met him halfway.

"Hi," he smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling warmly. "Have you had a good-?"

"So," I cut across him, my tone vicious enough to make him rock a step back from me in surprise, "apparently it’s totally obvious that you’re into Haley."

"What?"

"And, having seen how keen you were to rush to her rescue on Sunday night, well hell, any night of the week actually, I guess I see why everyone thinks that." I tilted my chin up so I could meet his troubled gaze defiantly.
"Wait. Someone told you I’m into Haley?" he asked slowly and then, when I nodded curtly, he added, "Okay, and? People say crap all the time, why are you so upset?"

"I'm upset because it seems that, no matter how much I try to not think about her, every time I bloody turn around Haley's there," I almost howled. "And I don't even mean physically, someone's talking about her or I hear her voice through a sodding door for example." And, to put the feather in my 'I'm being an obnoxious child' cap, I gave my foot a little stamp.

Jack looked down at my foot then back up at me, his eyebrows raised as if to say 'what was that?' But what he actually said was, "So this is about Sunday then. Look, I told you before, she needed help with her car, that's all."

"But that's not all!" I objected. "There's always something else, something she needs to borrow or shelf she needs putting up, and, on top of that, you and Matt invite her out with us all the time even though you know that I—"

"Now we're getting to it," Jack interrupted. "This isn't about Haley at all, it's about you. So, please, just for one moment, stop ranting about Haley and tell me what's up with you. And don't tell me nothing because, as oblivious as you claim both Matt and I are, even we've noticed you've been a total nutter the last couple of days." His expression softened as I stared at him, my hard expression slipping as he dealt out some reality. "Come on now, the truth."

The wind had picked up, pulling at my loosely tied pony tail until the hair tie slid out and my thick hair danced gleefully around my face, seemingly revelling in its freedom. I didn't care, though, I was too busy trying to think how I could explain what was going on with me in a way that would make even a tiny bit of sense.

"Sunday night," I muttered, eventually.

"What?"

"Sunday night," I repeated, this time a bit louder. "You're right, this is about Sunday night. When we were on the couch together I felt…" No that was going a bit too far, I revised my sentence. "…well, anyway, I thought that something was going to happen. I was flying pretty high on that something and it turns out that you weren't feeling anything." I was blushing so hard by this point that I could feel my cheeks throbbing.

"Hey, what makes you think I didn't feel anything?" Jack said gently and the fact that he was trying to be nice and not hurt my feelings made my face burn even more.

"Oh, I don't know," I said scathingly, resorting to my tried and true method of going on the attack when what I really wanted to do was flee, "maybe the fact that the second there was the slightest interruption you dumped me off you and practically bolted out the door?"

"That's what you think I did?" he said wonderingly, pushing a hand through his hair and making it stick up even more.
"No, that's what I know you did," I said pointedly. "I was there, Jack, and you beat a pretty hasty retreat, you've got to admit." That he was trying to deny what happened was just making me angrier, did he think that I would have just forgotten?

"I wasn't running from you!" he exclaimed. "I was trying to do the decent thing, and not just for Haley, but for you too."

*What?* I gaped at him for a moment and then gestured for him to explain what he meant.

"We'd just had this big serious talk about why you're uncomfortable around guys and you'd told me more about that jerk at the party and, well, you'd done the whole crying thing..." He looked a bit uncomfortable at this point and I grimaced. Why was it that guys got so weird over a girl crying? It's not like we do it on purpose...well most of the time anyway.

"I was trying to give you a bit of space so you didn't think that I was all 'that's terrible, but never mind, sweetheart, that's in the past now so give us a kiss'," he continued. "But mostly I was trying to show you that I'm not like those guys who've messed you around before, I'm really not." His voice, so sincere and sweet, damn near broke my heart and I wanted to scream 'But I know you're not, I already know!' But somehow my mouth construed that as,

"So to show that you're not like the guys who've messed me around and ultimately gone off with other girls you messed me around and went off with another girl? Your logic is truly astounding." A piece of hair whipped me in the eye as I finished speaking as if to say 'shut up, idiot!'

"I didn't go off with another girl!" Jack exploded, his voice rising as I had so rarely heard it do. "For god’s sake, stop bringing Haley into this, it’s not her I was thinking about, it was you." His voice dropped suddenly and, as if he couldn't help himself, his hands came up and cupped my face gently. "It was you," he repeated and his expression was so intense I felt my breathing become ragged.

We stared at each other for a moment and, although I desperately wanted to just wrap my arms around him and tell him that I believed him, some little insecurity in the back of my mind prompted me to whisper, "Prove it."

"What?" Jack's hands pushed my tangled hair away from my face so he could look at my expression searchingly. "What do you mean?"

"You say that it’s not Haley, it’s me and I want you to prove it." My mouth was on complete auto-pilot now, saying whatever it wanted, it seemed, without any consultation with my brain.

"How?"

I took a deep breath and looked straight into his blue, blue eyes.

"Kiss me."
I spoke so softly I half hoped that he wouldn't have heard me, but I could tell by the widening of those gorgeous eyes that he had.

I have no idea where I got the courage to do what I did next.

As if in slow motion, I reached up, pulling his hands away from my face and placing my lips ever so gently against his. It wasn't a proper kiss by any stretch of the imagination, it was an invitation and it was up to Jack whether he accepted it or not.

For a moment the pair of us seemed to be frozen in time, I held my breath as if scared that any move I might make would scare him off. My lips were tingling and the butterflies in my stomach, as if delighted to be released from their cage, had sprung to life and launched themselves up through my chest and into my throat.

*Kiss me, I willed with all my might,* please just kiss me.

But, in the next second, Jack had pulled away from me and muttered one Earth shattering word.

"No."

My eyes filled with tears hot with humiliation and I released my held breath in a constricted choke of surprise.

No. So that was it. Well he'd pretty much spelt it out for me with that one.

"Fine." I meant it to come out as defiant, but to be honest, it sounded much more like a sob. Scared I was about to burst into full on bawling, and I've already explained how unpleasant *that* looks on me, I turned from Jack and made a dash for the door. I wanted the hell off that roof!

"Wait!" I heard Jack shout, but there was no friggin' way I was going to wait.

I reached the door, grasped the cold metal handle and pulled at it. It didn't budge. For one awful moment I thought that somehow it’d locked and that we were going to be stuck up there until someone realised we were missing and, considering we lived with Matt who probably wouldn't notice if a piano landed on his head, who knew how long that could be.

Then, of course, I realised that Jack had caught up with me and had one hand on the door, keeping it closed.

"Let me out!" I blinked quickly to keep my tears from sliding down my cheeks.

"You've had your say, I get it, and I've got some tute work to prepare for tomorrow so let me out." I pulled at the handle with both hands, but the door didn't even move a millimetre. Frustrated by my weakness I slapped the hard, metal surface of the door and then leant my forehead against it, unable to understand why Jack wanted to humble me like this.

"Tally." I felt his free hand land on my shoulder, but I shrugged him off.

"Leave me alone," I said miserably.

"No, I won't leave you alone." He put his hand on my shoulder again and managed to gently turn me around this time. "You clearly didn't get it."
"How ambiguous can a flat out 'no' be?" I asked in a pathetic imitation of my usual scornful tone.

"I don't want to kiss you-" he began and I lifted my red eyes to him angrily.

"See? That is what you meant-"

"You didn't let me finish," he said, a little smile playing at the corners of his mouth in a way that made me want to smack it right off him. Seeing that dangerous look in my eyes, no doubt, he continued quickly, "I don't want to kiss you to prove something to you that you should already know."

He gave me a moment to let his words get through my barrier of anger and hurt then continued, "Kissing you for that reason seems wrong and tacky. But, god, Tally," he dipped his head so that we were so close I could feel his breath on my lips, "give me another reason, any other reason, and hell and high water wouldn't be able to keep me from kissing you."

How could two sentences so completely alter your world? For a moment there I think I actually felt the planet tilt to adjust to this new, thrilling revelation.

The look in his eyes as I met them made me want to cry more than ever and, in fact, a couple of tears did finally make a break for freedom and slip down my cheeks. Using his thumbs he gently wiped them away and smiled down at me. "Well, go on then," he said, continuing to gently brush my cheeks with his thumbs even though all traces of my tears had been obliterated, "give me a reason. I bet if you think really hard you could even come up with two."

And, finally, I felt myself smile in response, although it must be said it was a fairly weak one.

"Well," I said shakily, "how about because I want you to...and because I think you want to, too."

"Now see those," he said softly, as my eyelids fluttered closed, "are two very good reasons."

And then he kissed me.
All my thoughts on what it would be like to kiss Jack, and, believe me, I'd had plenty, were dodgy little home video versions compared to the proper, blockbuster reality.

Jack's lips, at first cold due to their exposure to the whipping wind, warmed quickly against mine. That warmth seemed contagious and I felt my lips tingle and plump up as blood rushed to the area as if worried it might miss all the excitement.

But, to clarify, just because I likened the kiss to a blockbuster movie don't think that it was all tongues and R-rated groping right off the bat. At the outset he simply bestowed soft, gentle kisses, breaking away every other second or so. Just when I thought I had properly captured his lips they moved away again. I wanted more and, I'd bet my life on it, he wanted more too, so why was he holding back?

Still, as the seconds passed I found myself enjoying the gentle touches of his lips and the light hold he had of my hips and stopped trying to strive for more. I hadn't consciously realised that the dregs of anger, confusion and hurt of the few moments ago were still swirling about my body until I surrendered myself to Jack's light touches and felt them drain away.

Then, and only then, did Jack move forwards and gather me into him. He wrapped one arm securely around my waist and gently cupped the back of my head with the hand of the other. My hands found their way to his shoulders and I held on to him tightly as little shots of desire zipped and zinged through my body.

As well as drawing me into his embrace Jack began to let his lips linger longer over my mouth. God, but that boy could kiss! I didn't think there were that many different things you could do with a kiss, especially the relatively chaste, closed mouth one were we having, but with varying degrees of pressure and angle, he proved me wrong.

Still, no matter how inventive you are with your lips together, there comes a time when the situation demands more…no scrap that, when I demand more. So, ever so slightly, I parted my lips and, a moment later, I felt him follow suit. That small open link between us released a rush of heat not only into my mouth, but also throughout my whole body. It was as if someone had just turned a massive heater on me.

I was just congratulating myself on having control of the situation, i.e. not melting into a puddle at the feel of his warm breath mingling with my own, when I felt his tongue gently run along my bottom lip.

Hmm, what is this thing you call control…?

I made a weird little sound somewhere between a gasp and a moan and felt Jack smile against me even as he continued to trace my mouth with his tongue. I unconsciously tipped
my head up higher to press myself harder against him, and, in response, Jack's arms tightened further still and lifted me up so I was balancing on my tip-toes. I think you would have been hard pressed to manage to even slide a piece of paper between our bodies we were so melded together…although why you would want to I'm not sure.

As wrapped up as we were in each other, however, we still both heard the familiar choking, grinding sound of Matt's car as it hiccupped up the street, and our surroundings suddenly came rushing back into focus.

Jack broke the kiss, pulling his mouth away but seemingly unable to make the rest of his body follow suit as we stayed entwined. He leant his forehead against mine, breathing heavily, and gazed into my, somewhat dazed, eyes.

"Your brother," he gasped, "has the worst timing in the world."

Or the best, I thought, which is what Matt would think if he saw the two of us up here. Down below, Matt's car choked into the car park, prompting Jack to reluctantly release me, and I staggered back feeling the cold air hitting my face and body like a literal interpretation of reality.

Jack turned away quickly and held the heavy door open for me. Trying to gather my wits and thinking that anyone with half a brain would take one look at me and diagnose me with a classic case of 'interrupted making out-itis' I pulled my jacket tighter around myself and walked through the door onto the landing inside.

Following me, Jack let the metal door close behind us with a clang that made me jump and look up at him, marvelling, as I did so, that his mussed up hair, shining eyes and swollen lips were all down to me.

"Hey, Tally?" he said quietly.

"Yeah?" I asked, thinking for one heart stopping second that he was going to kiss me again.

Instead he grabbed my waist, hauling me back behind him and said, with a cheeky grin, "Last one back to the flat is a rotten egg," before disappearing round the stairwell, taking the steps three or four at a time.

"Cheat!" I shouted, thundering down after him, but only able to jump two steps at a time to avoid breaking my neck.

Having covered the distance between the roof and the third floor in about 10 seconds flat, and panting heavily as a result, I jumped down the last couple of steps and came face to face with Jack who was leaning casually in the doorway to our flat. Not the slightest bit out of breath, damn him!

"What took you so long?" he asked with an innocent smile as I glared at him. "I've been here for ages."
I laughed sarcastically. "Oh, you are so-" I was aiming to say 'funny' but the word got swallowed up as Jack lowered his head and kissed me fiercely. I clung to him for a second, loving the spontaneity and the different feel to the kiss, but then I came to my senses and pulled away.

"Cut it out," I laughed, giving Jack a shove so he basically fell into the flat. "Are you mad?"

"I think I just might be," Jack replied, heading towards his bedroom. "Why else would I kiss a rotten egg?"

I rolled my eyes, then, as I heard the distinct noise of Matt galumphing up the stairwell, I hightailed it into my bedroom and closed the door. Throwing myself onto my bed I grabbed my book from my bedside table so when Matt threw my door open a moment later I was the picture of innocence.

"What's up with you?" I asked as he collapsed onto my bed with a groan.

"I hate Wednesdays," he whined.

"Yeah," I agreed, but silently I added, 'But not this one. No, not this one at all.'

~*~

"Matthew Seamus Davenport," I snapped that Friday afternoon. "If you say so much as another word I am going to bite you!"

Tempers were frazzled as the five of us, Jack, Matt, Simone, Tommo and I, were running late for our trip back to our hometown. The fact that Matt had been complaining non-stop for the last hour was not helping matters.

Matt looked at me with an expression that said, 'I'd like to see you try,' and, in the nick of time, Simone grabbed my arm and steered me out of lunging distance from my brother.

"Deep breaths now," she murmured calmingly. "We've got a long car ride ahead of us and if you kill him now he might begin to smell by the end of the journey."

"That's assuming we take his dismembered body along with us," I grumbled. "I was thinking of chucking him out the window on the highway."

"Well, it wouldn't technically be littering," Tommo said, hearing the end of our conversation as he put the last bag into the tray of Jack's ute. "I mean he'd be biodegradable."

"The bones hang around for quite a while, though," Simone pointed out. "And, besides, I think a littering fine would be the least of our worries if we were pulled over by the police for throwing a body out of a moving vehicle."

"A dismembered body," I reminded her.

"Sorry, a dismembered body," she corrected herself.
"Don't humour her," Matt called over, slamming shut the boot of his car. "If she's encouraged she'll never shut up."

"Hark who's talking," I bit back and Simone and Tommo exchanged amused glances. "So I think it's fairly safe to say the two of them won't be going up in the same car then," Tommo laughed, fastening the edges of the tarp covering the tray. "So what do you think? Her and Jack in the ute, you, me and Matt in the car?"

"Sounds like the safest plan, all things considered," Simone agreed, her curls bouncing prettily as she nodded.

I had to restrain myself from leaping into the air and shouting, 'Yes!' at their suggestion as that might have given the game away…just a little bit.

Because the truth was I’d barely had a few seconds alone with Jack since Wednesday night, let alone a solid four hours. Thursday we’d both had lectures and tutes, then he’d worked late that night and I’d taken the opportunity to stay at Simone's, catching up and indulging in some girl talk. I'd gone straight to my lecture from hers and only returned to the flat an hour or so before we were due to leave.

I say due, that time was nothing but a distant memory now as the light faded and the street lights flickered on. At the rate we were going we wouldn't reach Bridunna until well past 11 that night. At least we were finally all packed and ready to go, we were just waiting on Jack who was still in the flat on the phone discussing some finer point of the scholarship requirements with someone in the know.

"How about you guys go ahead and we'll catch you up?" I suggested when we'd lounged against the cars for a good ten minutes. "Then maybe mum will have used up all her disapproval at our tardiness on you guys."

"Our mum use up her disapproval?" Matt snorted. "Chance would be a fine thing." Still, he wrestled open the back door for Simone (it always got jammed) and made his way over to the drivers’ side.

"See you there then." Simone waved and slid into the backseat, bracing herself as Tommo closed the door after her with a great bang before he too got into the car.

"Drive safe!" I called out to Matt as his car roared into life.

"I always do!" he yelled back before, with a great squealing of tyres, they disappeared off into the gathering gloom.

Why is it that boys get words like 'always' and 'never' confused?

I contemplated waiting down with the ute for Jack, but before long the air got beyond nippy so I wandered back into the building. As I entered our flat I heard Jack say, "In terms of animation of space surely the most conclusive method is the sun?"

Smiling fondly (I loved it when he talked smart!) I threw myself down onto the couch and half listened to the intense conversation he was having with whoever was on the other
end of the line. This was Jack at his most pure: sensible, serious to a fault and incredibly single-minded. I knew he would keep the other person on the phone until he had all the facts firmly arranged in his mind so there would be no room for error. He liked to know he'd done all he could to make sure things worked out and if they didn't he needed to know where things had gone wrong.

For all we'd basically adopted him, this boy was no Davenport, that's for sure. As a family we're more of a happy go lucky bunch although, of course, none of us had ever had our lives go as wrong as Jack's in quite such a spectacular fashion.

Speaking of which, I glanced over at the calendar and saw that it was the 10th of September and, therefore, 10 days until the six year anniversary of the accident that had so decisively destroyed his family.

I wondered what would happen this year. Matt had always thoroughly shielded my parents and me from Jack's antics on the night of the 19th, but I knew this year was going to be different. How would I react to Jack bringing home some girl like Kristin, maybe even Kristin herself, to help block out the pain? I had no idea. I wasn't naïve enough to think that it might be different this year because of our arrangement. After all, the rule was no dating and I was sure the debauchery which took place on the 19th could in no way be construed as that.

Well, I told myself sternly, I would just have to wait and see what happened and, if he needed to bring a girl back to the flat and...well...go for it hell for leather, then that would be what would happen. I would just have to be mature about it and understand that it was something that Jack found necessary to do to escape from the hurt.

I dragged my mind away from thoughts of the night of the 19th then, because, after all, I'd never been particularly good at being mature about things. I thought, instead, about how good it would be to go home and do nothing for a couple of days. I know I complained about the loss of my weekend, but as Dorothy so elegantly put it, there's no place like home.

I heard Jack wrap up the phone conversation and I rolled over onto my stomach, grinning lazily at him over the armrest of the couch.

"All sorted?" I asked as he chuckled the phone down onto the kitchen counter and gave a little shrug.

"I got my questions answered, yeah," he said in the repressed tone which indicated he was mulling over something. I stayed quiet and watched him as he put his thoughts into all the little boxes he obviously thought they needed to go into.

Eventually he looked up and smiled. "Sorry I kept you guys waiting. Are the others still out in the car park?"

"God, no!" I exclaimed. "They would've died of hypothermia by now if that was the case. No, I sent them on to try and dispel some of mum's wrath."

"Chance would be a fine thing," Jack snorted and I laughed.
"You and Matt spend way too much time together."

Jack shrugged again as if to say, 'yeah, so what?' and then there was a pause.

It was fine at first, Jack is pretty succinct with his conversation most of the time and so pauses are kind of the norm. However, this pause stretched on and soon I realised that I had no idea what to say to him. This was somewhat disturbing as talking shit is a particular skill of mine. To cover my awkwardness I sat up and fussed around with my shirt, twisting it around, trying to make the neckline sit better.

"Tally?"

I looked up, the hem of my top clutched tightly in my hands. Jack was leaning against the dining table, his eyebrows raised in question at my strange behaviour.

"I…uh…I don't think this top is hanging right," I said, pretty pathetically.

"Okay," Jack said slowly, his tone making it clear he thought I was nuts.

I sighed and released my top. "And I don't really know what to say," I admitted. "I mean, we kissed, so what happens now?"

Jack straightened and, walking over the couch, he crouched before me. "What do you want to happen now?" he asked seriously.

Completely unbidden, an image suddenly popped up in the front of my brain. An image from my dreams. An image with a decided amount of entwined naked limbs in it. I immediately went bright red, bit down on my lip and hid my eyes behind my eyelashes. When I looked up again it was to see Jack smirking at me, clearly with a pretty good idea what I'd been thinking.

"Well that settles that then," he chuckled before standing up, and offering me a hand. When I took it he hauled me up off the couch and straight up against his warm chest, releasing my hand only to wrap both his arms around me.

"Smooth move," I laughed, putting my arms loosely around his neck and looking up at him.

"Sweetheart, you ain't seen nuttin' yet," he growled in an appalling American accent that would've made me laugh even more if my mouth hadn't been put to use moving against his in the next moment.

I would have been quite happy to stay as we were for the rest of eternity (I mean that's why we have noses right? So we can breathe whilst engaging in a good old pash?), but after only about five minutes or so, Jack pulled his mouth from mine and gave a hoarse little laugh.

"We'd better stop there or we might not make it to your parents’ tonight at all."

I felt a little shiver of excitement at the idea and tucked my head into the crook of his neck before replying, "Would that be such a bad thing?"
Jack shook his head. "No, you're absolutely right, let's just stay here," he said, reaching past me and grabbing his phone. "So why don't you just go ahead and call your mum and explain to her why we won't be coming?"

The very idea sent another shiver through me but it wasn't such a good feeling this time.

"Point taken," I said pulling away and pouting exaggeratedly. "But I'm starving, I can't do the four hour drive without having tea first."

Jack reached up a finger and gently pushed my protruding bottom lip back into my mouth. "We'll stop for something on the way," he promised me. "And, if you're a very good girl, we might even get you a child's meal that comes with a toy."

~*~

It was coming on to half eleven as the ute’s tyres crunched across the gravel of my family home's driveway. The headlights illuminated the large metal shed (my dad's pride and joy and favourite refuge from my mum) surrounded by three large gum trees, before sweeping round and lighting up the federation style white weatherboard house encircled by a large veranda.

The large, French doors were flung open as Jack cut the engine and warm, orange light spilled down the steps and lit up the path of worn stones which led to the edge of the driveway.

"Doesn't take her long," I remarked with a tired smile as my mum hurtled down the path to the ute and, opening the drivers’ side door, practically yanked Jack out and into her embrace.

"And what time do you call this?" she asked, pulling back and holding Jack at arm's length so she could scrutinise him in the poor light. "You look tired," she decided, pursing her lips.

"I don't feel tired," Jack protested mildly.

"Which just goes to show that I know you better than you know yourself," Mum clucked, pulling him in for another tight hug.

"Oh, don't mind me," I grumbled hopping out of the cab of the ute and stretching expansively, accompanying the movement with a loud yawn. Seeing another figure coming down the steps, however, I immediately forgot my tiredness and raced round the side of the ute and straight into my dad's open arms.

"Hi, Dad," I said happily, squeezing him tightly and revelling in the feeling of coming home that hugging my dad always gave me.

"Hello, pet," he said fondly, ruffling my hair.
Matt appeared in the open doorway and surveyed the scene with a look of disgust. "I'll just get the bags shall I?" he said as he stomped down the steps between the two hugging pairs. "Seeing as how I'm clearly the least favourite child."

"Darling, you had your hugs earlier. Don't be greedy." Mum finally released Jack, presumably finally allowing him to get some air. "Come here, Talia, I'm ready to swap now."

After the greetings were concluded, the boys grabbed the luggage (well it's nice for them to be useful at something, isn't it?) and we all trooped inside.

Without any discussion, we all gravitated towards the kitchen, otherwise known as the heart and soul of the house. Matt, Jack and I threw ourselves into three of the chairs surrounding the large, scarred, scorched and scored table which had dealt the brunt of the Davenport family lifestyle for as long as I could remember. Dad settled himself into his armchair which was situated in the corner, exactly, and we know this because Matt and Jack measured it once, equal distance between the fridge and the TV, and Mum bustled around making hot chocolate for everyone.

It seemed like everyone was talking at once and as loudly as possible. There was definitely more noise than it seemed possible five people could make, what with Mum squawking about her adult education course, Dad explaining his new plans for the garden, Jack trying to listen and reply to both of them at once, and Matt and I warbling away about our lives at uni.

Not usually the best of cooks, it must be said that my mother's hot chocolate is to die for. It also seems to contain sedatives as, by the time we were slurping up the dregs, I could barely keep my eyes open.

"Well," Matt said with a huge yawn, "I'm bushed, time to hit the swag, I reckon."

This statement was greeted with more yawns and nods from the rest of us and we began the laborious task of pulling ourselves away from the warmth of the kitchen to our beds upstairs.

The house has two bathrooms, one downstairs, which has always been known as the parents’ bathroom, and one upstairs which Matt, Jack and I use. Through losing out to both of them in games of rock, paper, scissors, I was the last to get to brush my teeth and do all the other bedtime toiletry necessities and so, by the time I left the bathroom, everyone else was in bed. Sticking my head round my parents' door I bade them good night and then padded my way across the landing to do the same to Matt and Jack. I paused, however, with my hand on the doorknob of Matt's door, as I heard Jack's voice rise angrily. That was weird, Jack hardly ever shouted, especially at his best mate.

"I've said no, Matt, drop it alright?"

Man, he sounded really pissed off.
"You're going to have to see him sometime," Matt replied insistently, seemingly unperturbed by Jack's unusual behaviour. "Have you even told him about the scholarship yet?"

"What's the point?" Jack snapped. "He'll just tell me there's no chance in hell of me getting it and he's probably right."

I heard Matt sigh and I knew that he was making a face at Jack. "So you're going to have come all this way and not even go and see him for a moment? It's a small town, Hammer, your dad's gonna know that you're here."

"Yeah, so why doesn't he pull his bloody finger out and come and see me? Why do I always have to go to him?" Jack still sounded angry but there was something of a small wounded boy in his voice that time.

"You're going to have to see him sooner or later," Matt said after a long pause, "Why don't you just get it over with now?"

"Because," Jack replied, reverting to a hard, flat voice, "when it comes to my father later is always better than sooner."

There was an extended silence and then Matt sighed again. "Night then, you stubborn bastard." And then, slightly more loudly, he added, "And good night to you too, Natalia, you little sneak."

I jumped guiltily and fled to my room.
Chapter 14

Safe in the room I grew up in, I snuggled down under my doona and tried to reclaim the sleepy feeling I'd had before I'd eavesdropped outside Matt's room. Alas, it wasn't to be, even though what had been said hadn't been for my ears, I couldn't stop thinking over the implications of the short, semi-argument I'd overheard.

So Jack was avoiding his dad? It was news to me, but not exactly surprising. I remember when Matt and Jack used to hide in my dad's shed or under the house when Mr Whitby came to fetch Jack home in the afternoons. Sometimes my parents would convince him to let Jack stay the night, but more often than not, the boys would be called out of their hiding spot and Jack was sent home. Still, he was always back first thing in the morning, with the twins, to collect Matt and me for the walk to school. Sometimes it seemed that he only ever went home to put the twins to bed and to sleep himself.

The twins had pretty much been his responsibility as his mother had never been the particularly maternal type. In fact, when Jack was ten and the twins only three she had disappeared for an entire month, reappearing after that time and refusing to tell anyone where she'd been or what she'd done. Not long after that her drinking had become less of a family secret, and more like common knowledge. Not that Jack's dad would ever admit it, and he angrily turned away any offers of help from my parents or anyone else in the community.

I'd always hated Jack's dad and I don't think he was particularly keen on me either. He's the strictest man I've ever met and seems to think that Jack has turned out as a bad kid, constantly remarking how he'll amount to nothing and he'd do better to stay at home and help train horses rather than go off to some poncy university.

Staring up at the familiar ceiling, which I'd plastered with glow in the dark stickers as a kid, I thought angrily of how many opportunities Jack's dad had held him back from. After everything Jack has been through, how dare his dad be so hard on him?

From what I can tell, Mr Whitby simply clammed up about his wife and children's deaths, never talking about it to Jack, never offering any support to help him through his grief. I do understand that, as Matt said, he had a hard time of it as well, but surely he must have realised that doing nothing but criticising his one surviving child was not the best way to cope with his loss?

As I tried to force these thoughts out of my head so I could finally get some sleep, I heard a door being stealthily opened and closed and then the sounds of someone moving very quietly along the landing. Glancing over to where my door was opened a crack I saw someone move past my room and then their silhouette steal down the stairs. A moment later
the screen door creaked and, getting out of bed and crossing to the window, I saw, through a
gap in the curtains, Jack's form cross the lawn and disappear into the shed.

Clearly I hadn't been the only one unable to sleep.

I got back into bed, determined to quash my curiosity for once and let Jack have the
time to himself that he so obviously craved. Squeezing my eyes tightly shut, I began counting
backwards from 100 in that time honoured sleep bringing tactic. I had just got into the 50's,
and was still feeling wide awake, when I heard a very soft thump thumping noise start up
from out in the shed. I knew what it was immediately, Jack had got the boxing gloves out.

The month after the accident, when we’d all been so worried that Jack would sink so
far into his misery we would never be able to get him out again, my dad had bought a pair of
boxing gloves and a red leather punching bag which he’d hung up in the shed. Without
saying a word he’d handed Jack the gloves and walked off.

Apparently when all else fails, give a boy something to beat the crap out of and leave
him to it.

It had worked, too, Jack had begun taking all his frustration out on the stuffed piece of
leather, developing a brutal pounding routine which he could keep up for hours on end.
Sometimes Matt would go in with him, but more often than not, it would be Jack alone
striding towards the shed, gloves in hand and I soon became used to the thump, thump noise
of his fists hitting the punching bag.

Listening to it now, after so many years without it, I felt tears spring to my eyes. I'd
become so accustomed to thinking of ‘strong, capable Jack’ that I'd almost forgotten about
the ‘angry, confused adolescent Jack’ who’d always looked like a tightly coiled spring about
to release. Over the years, that scared, lost look had retreated from his eyes, but the familiar
beat of fists on leather reminded me that he hadn't stopped grieving for his family, but rather,
pushed it down and learnt to control it.

It was no use, the image of Jack out in the cold shed trying to punch out his demons
drove me out of the warm sanctuary of my bed and towards the door. I realised, however, that
I couldn't go outside wearing only my thin blue pyjama pants and a white tank top, I'd freeze
to death. I grabbed my sandshoes and the thin jacket I'd been wearing earlier and made my
way out onto the landing and down the stairs. At the back door I slipped my feet into the
shoes and shrugged on my jacket before opening the door slowly to reduce the creaking noise
and stepping out onto the veranda. I wished immediately that I’d brought my warmer
pyjamas with me or grabbed a thicker jacket as dew had already started to form on the grass
and my breath showed up as a little white cloud in front of me.

Trying to ignore the cold, I set off across the lawn towards the shed where I could see
thin slivers of light showing in the gaps between the corrugated iron. The door to the shed
was slightly ajar and, through the crack, I could see Jack, with his back to me, the muscles in
his arms and back, obvious in his thin T-shirt, tightly bunched. He wore only loose track
pants and the T-shirt, no jacket and his feet were bare. I shivered just seeing them exposed to
the cold air and even colder concrete floor. The fluorescent light of the shed gave the scene
an almost unearthly look and tinged Jack’s skin an unhealthy grey colour.

"You should go back to bed," Jack said suddenly, his voice echoing in the large shed
and making me start.

How had he known I was there? I was sure I hadn't made a sound. Still, I suppose we
all know when we're being watched and, if you know someone well enough, you can
sometimes know who it is without actually seeing them.

"So should you," I replied, entering the shed. "Why are you out here?"

He hadn't altered his punching rhythm at all at my entrance; he was still tattooing a
quick one, two motion out on the bag, his punches perfectly timed and coming as regularly as
if he was a machine. In fact, in the weird light, that's kind of what he looked like, hardly
human at all.

"I couldn't sleep," he answered me tersely.

"And so, naturally, you left your lovely warm bed and came out to the freezing,
spidery shed in hopes that you'd have a better chance of getting to sleep out here?" I asked
sarcastically.

He didn't reply and I moved round the punching bag until I was facing him. As I
cought sight of his face I almost wished I'd stayed where I was. His face was taut and
expressionless, his eyes red-rimmed and sunken showing hardly any of their beautiful blue
colour. His mouth was drawn in a thin line and his brow was creased with the concentration
of maintaining his intensely fast pace.

"You look like crap," I told him frankly.

"Thanks," he bit back, his eyes remaining fixed on the swinging punching bag before
him.

"Seriously, though," I added, moving closer, although still out of range of the jerking
bag, "is this because of your fight with Matt?"

He completely ignored me. It was as if I hadn't spoken, as if I didn't exist even.

With a sigh I walked over to the side of the shed and took a seat on one of the old
trunks my parents store camping equipment in. Pulling my thin jacket closer around me and
crossing my arms I proceeded to stare at Jack.

As I had hoped, this seemed to unnerve him, and I saw his eyes slide over to me.

"Go back to bed, Natalia," he repeated, his voice hoarse and cracked, his one two
rhythm finally faltering.

"Only when you do, James," I replied cattily. Honestly, there was nothing I hated
more than people using my full name to patronise me. Okay, maybe I hate one or two things
more than that: racists, homophobes, terminal illnesses, that kind of thing, but it's certainly high up on the list.

There was silence between us again as Jack picked up speed on the bag once more. When the cold really started to bother me I chafed my hands together, stamped my feet and distracted myself by enquiring, "So this helps, does it?" I crossed my arms and tuck my hands in against my body. "Getting up in the middle of the night, coming out to a freezing shed and beating the crap out of an inanimate object?"

"As opposed to what?" he asked almost immediately, showing that he'd been waiting for me to break the silence. "Getting up in the middle of the night, coming out to a freezing shed and beating the crap out of an animate object?"

"You saying you want to hit me, Jack?" I countered quickly and was perversely satisfied to see him hesitate in his punch.

"It's getting to be an increasingly attractive prospect," he muttered, though I could tell I had thrown him with the suggestion that he would strike me. Still, he didn't let up his punching, in fact I think he started to get more furious. He was like one of those Vikings that used to do that berserk thing where they were out of control. It was scary as hell.

Restraining myself through great force of will from getting up and touching him as, in his state, I doubt he would even have noticed, I searched through my brain for some way of getting him to calm down. I know usually you're just supposed to let people get things out, but he looked like he was going to do himself some serious damage unless I did something. Suddenly I realised what it was I needed to do.

"Jack," I called out to him in a clear, commanding voice. "Jack, calm down, please just take a breath and calm down." Like before, I don't think he could hear me. Time to bring in the cavalry or, as we liked to call them, sheep. My voice rising, and allowing some of the fear I felt to creep into it, I tried again. "I'm calling in rule 5, do you hear me? I'm not comfortable, I don't want you doing this anymore. I'm serious, that's enough. Sheep, godammit, sheep!"

And finally - finally! - he seemed to hear me.

With a great 'whoosh' of released air, he collapsed against the punching bag, his forehead and fists pressed hard against the leather. The muscles in his arms, legs and back visibly unclenched, and he froze so that the only sign of movement was from the little rivulets of sweat which ran down his forehead and neck.

I waited until it was clear he wasn't about to start up again and then said, in a small voice, "Come and sit with me."

He stayed frozen for a moment longer, but then let out a long, controlled breath and began stripping off his gloves. Throwing them to the side he ran his fingers through his hair, spiked with sweat, and then made his way over to me, throwing himself down on the trunk.
Tipping his head back against the wall, he closed his eyes. As his breathing calmed, I reached out and entwined my hand through his. His fingers tightened around mine and I felt him release the last of his tension through that connection.

For a long while we listened to the sounds of the night filtering through the gaps in the shed, the croaking of the frogs, the rustlings of the possums and the thumpings as wallabies and kangaroos jumped about feasting on my dad's lawn.

"So you lied to me, you know," I murmured when I felt it was safe to talk again.
"I did?" Jack asked, his voice husky as if the punching bag had stolen even his voice.
"Yeah, you let me think it was Matt who attacked Brad, but it was you."
Jack shrugged, his head still tilted back, his eyes still closed. "I didn't lie then, I just let you continue believing something that wasn't true."
"Same difference."

He opened his eyes then and looked down at me just as a gust of wind blew outside making the shed door swing shut with a bang and sending a draft whipping past our legs. I shivered slightly and pressed myself closer against Jack's side to protect myself from any other cold gusts. The next moment, however, Jack had released my hand and with a soft, "Come here," he tugged me up onto his lap. He was slightly sweaty from the boxing, but also decidedly warm, and I snuggled up against his chest happily.

"I should have just kept walking," Jack said, after a couple of seconds. "Letting Brad rile me up like that was stupid. It was just that the things he was saying-" He tightened his arms around me as if trying to protect me from the awful things Brad had presumably said.
"Well he's lucky I didn't break his bloody neck, that's all."

I tilted my head and looked at him for a long moment before reaching up and gently cupping his face. "You can be a little scary sometimes Jack, you know that right?" He looked surprised at that, but I continued, "I mean you can be so intense and you're so strong, I think sometimes you don't know what you're capable of."

His expression darkened and he pulled his cheek away from my hand. "And you think I'm going to hurt somebody one day?" he asked, his tone incredulous and a little bit hurt. "You think I'm going to lose it and, what? Put somebody in hospital or something? Listen, I can't think of many guys who would have been able to just walk away from Brad if he'd been talking about their…friend like that. I only gave him a scare."

I noted the hesitation before he said 'friend' and briefly wondered if he'd meant to say best friend's sister, but then thought better of it. Still, I had more important things to think about at that moment because Jack looked like he was considering dumping my arse on the cold concrete and storming off.

Wishing I hadn't said anything, but unable to back off once I'd started, I shook my head and tried to think of how I could explain my fears to him. "It's not that I think you're
going to hurt somebody else exactly," I said cautiously, "but rather that one day you're going to hurt yourself."

He narrowed his eyes at this but didn't interrupt so I continued, "For example, when I came into the shed just now you seemed like you were out of control and I was proper scared that you were going to…oh I don't know, injure yourself I guess. And that was scary, Jack, much scarier than I imagine you were with Brad. You're so much harder on yourself than you are on other people."

Sighing, he gave a little shrug. "I learnt a long time ago that you don't have control over other people, the only person you can direct to do the right thing is yourself. So, yeah, I am hard on myself, I reckon most people are."

Realising that it was too late at night and I was too exhausted for us to get into this discussion I nodded slightly. "Fine, just please don't be too hard on yourself, alright? Sometimes it's even harder to control yourself than it is to try and control other people."

He realised that I was relenting on him for the time being and I felt him relax again. "Okay," he murmured, kissing my temple and resting his head against mine briefly, "I'll try and remember."

There was another lull during which I tucked my head up under Jack's chin and nuzzled closer in against him to keep the crisp air at bay.

"You still cold?" he asked, his hand resting on the bare skin where my top had ridden up, and presumably feeling the goose bumps that had sprung up all over. I made a noncommittal 'mmm' noise because I didn't want him to try and send me back to bed again.

"Here, let me give this a try." Jack ran his hand down my right arm until his hand was holding my wrist.

"What are you doing?" I laughed as he rubbed his fingers over the skin on the inside of my wrist.

"You lose body heat through your hands, feet and nose primarily," he said conversationally. "However, you can best regain heat through places where the veins are close to the skin, pulse points. The best places are your wrists, your neck and your groin."

OK, I'll admit it, I did blush when he said groin. What am I? Ten years old? "Therefore…” Jack smirked at my red face and then brought my wrist up to his mouth. Before I had time to ask what he was doing he breathed gently over my wrist, the warm air tickling the sensitive skin.

Warm.

Immediately I felt a warm glow roll up my arm and spread across to settle in my chest, although how much of this was from the warming up technique, and how much came from the incredibly exciting feeling of his hot breath brushing against my skin, I couldn't say. He glanced sideways at me and smiled at my expression which, I would imagine, could only
be described as dazed. Still looking at me he bent his head to my wrist again, but this time placed a soft kiss on the skin.

Warmer.

My free hand clenched the front of his t-shirt convulsively as if I was falling and I bit my lip to keep myself from making some sort of embarrassing noise, I really didn't want him laughing at me at that moment. He lifted his head again as if to check how well he was doing. My look must have told him the answer was very well indeed because the look he sent me in return was one of mixed pleasure and smugness. Before I had time to recover he lowered his head a third time, but this time laid his open mouth over my wrist.

Hot!

I think I might actually have glowed in that moment. It couldn't just have been blood coursing through my veins, it had to have been lava. Yeah, lava with a good sprinkle of chilli. I closed my eyes and released a little "Oh," noise despite my determination not to make myself sound like an idiot. I don't know what it was about the feeling of his mouth on that little patch of skin that made me react so much, maybe because the wrist is so sensitive, maybe because it reacts so strongly to heat, or maybe just because it was the single most sensual thing I had ever experienced.

Jack lifted his head once more and this time full on grinned at me. "Better?" he asked, his eyes alight with a look I'd never seen before.

"Much," I said, wrapping my arms around his neck and pulling his lips down onto mine.

There was an urgency to this kiss that hadn't been present the other times. This one had both time and passion on its side. Neither of us, it seemed, were prepared to faff around with the slow or the gentle, we had already done the warm up...literally!

The position we were in, me sitting side saddle upon him, was restrictive in terms of getting really close to one another. So, not breaking the kiss for one moment, I twisted myself about until I was straddling him, my knees resting on the trunk on either side of his thighs. His hands gripped my hips and pulled me close in against him so I could feel every ridge of his chest through the thin fabric separating us.

Well, I certainly wasn't cold anymore!

We continued this way for a period of time, his hands hot against my hips, holding me tight and my arms locked around his neck. I felt as I had when we had danced at the club, as if there was little distinction between where he ended and I began. It seemed that Jack was also feeling like he had on a previous occasion with me, specifically the Sunday when I’d ended up lying on top of him. And, again, as on the Sunday, I found myself delighted with the intoxicating feeling arousing him gave me.
It was at about this time that rational thought obviously decided it was a bit too late at night for it to be functioning and sloped off to bed, leaving me in the not-so-capable hands of primal instinct. It was almost as if I could physically *feel* the change in my body as I went from perfectly happy to desperately wanting more.

Removing my arms from around Jack's neck I ran my hands down his chest until I reached the hem line of his t-shirt. And then, reluctantly breaking our kiss, I tugged the top over his head and threw it to one side. I caught his lips again almost immediately, feeling bereft for that one moment without them. I spread my palms flat over his chest and revelled in the feel of his bare skin. His chest was like Jack personified, hard yet soft, and incredibly, unbelievably hot.

Realising the inequality of our situation I shrugged off my jacket, but wasn't prepared to break the kiss again so soon to take my tank top off. Still Jack had, quite rightly, taken my bold moves as a signal that it was alright to touch me more intimately and his large, capable hands slide beneath my top.

For a while he simply ran his hands up and down the bare skin there, his thumbs moving in slow circles across my stomach, but then he drew his hands up until they rested just underneath my breasts. Tenderly he traced the undersides of the curves with his fingers and then took the full weight of them into his palms.

I was in a complete daze, focussed on nothing but desire and the pleasure I was receiving. So much so that when he brushed his fingers across my nipples I had to bite back a scream as some far off recess in my brain was still functioning enough to point out that that would be a bad idea.

Riding a wave of daring that had sprung up from God knows where, I let my hands trail down Jack's chiselled chest, over his hips and down to the tie on his tracksuit bottoms. Pulling the knot loose I was about to dip my hand down beneath the waistline when suddenly I felt Jack's hands leave my breasts and grab my hands.

"What?" I asked, surprised out of the fog of lust I’d sunk into. My face heated at once at the position of my hands and what I’d been about to do and I pulled them away.

"I don't have a condom," Jack said.

"You what?" I exclaimed. "I thought boys kept whole packets constantly handy in the unlikely event that some woman gives them the go ahead."

He smiled his sweet lopsided smile and shook his head. "Not when they go out in the middle of the night to box in a friend's shed they don't."

"So," I rested my hands on his bare shoulders, kissing him again lightly, "go get one."

"I don't think that's such a good idea," he said, taking my hands off his shoulders and holding them tightly in his. "But it's not because I don't want to be with you," he continued,
presumably seeing the ever darkening hue of my face. "Think about it seriously for a moment, perhaps it's a good thing that something stopped us."

"Yeah?" I asked, through swollen lips, trying to get to grips with the situation. "Why's that then?"

Jack was silent for a second and I could tell he was trying to think of the best way to put his next sentence. "OK, do you remember when I asked you back at the flat what you wanted to happen between us?"

I nodded.

"Well, what was it that you imagined that made you go about as red as you are now? What did you see?"

"You and me," I answered immediately, the picture conjured through the levels of my subconscious and exploding vividly in my mind's eye.

"Well that's a good start," he chuckled. "But where were we?" As I looked at him in confusion he continued, "I mean were we, for instance, in your father's grimy, cold shed sneaking around in the middle of the night?"

I shook my head no, the image expanding until I could see quite clearly where I had pictured us. "We were in your room at the flat," I answered him, "clean, warm, and nobody was around to interrupt us."

My embarrassment at sharing my fantasy was instantly made worthwhile by the look of appreciation on Jack's face at my words. He dropped my hands and grabbed me around the waist and, before I knew what was happening, he was kissing me again. I was a bit surprised at his reaction, but loved that I could almost taste his approval and joy at my answer.

"There you are then," he said, pulling away with a chuckle. "You deserve better than a cold shed, Natalia Jane Davenport."

"That's all very well, Jack Morgan Whitby," I smiled back fondly, "but considering our situation, a cold shed may be all I'm going to get."

"See, now that's where you're wrong." Jack tapped the side of his nose and sent me a corny wink. "It'll work out, Tally, I promise."

Raising my eyebrows at his odd behaviour, I pushed his chest lightly and asked, "Right, so, what do you know that I don't?"

"You'll find out soon enough," he said, infuriatingly vaguely.

I attempted a pout, but annoyingly, it turned into a wide yawn. Seeing this Jack reached over and grabbed my jacket, draping it over my shoulders and signifying the end of our night time escapade.

"Look, and I'm not being patronising here, you really should go back to bed," he said, "you're freezing and you're tired."
I nodded reluctantly and slid off his lap onto the floor. He stood up beside me and we both stretched. I slid my arms into the jacket sleeves while Jack retrieved his T-shirt and slipped it back on.

Yawning hugely again, I started for the shed door, but stopped when I realised that Jack wasn't following me. When I turned it was to see him collecting his boxing gloves and strapping them back on.

"Oh no, Jack," I groaned. "Haven't you done enough for tonight? Aren't you ready for bed now?"

Jack shook his head with a wry grin.

"Why not?" I demanded, crossing my arms and hoping that I wasn't going to have to calm him down again, I really was tired.

"Well, let me put it this way," he said, looking pretty uncomfortable, "as much as I logically know that you and me is not going to happen in this shed tonight my body is taking a little longer to come round to the idea, get my drift?"

I stared at him in incomprehension and shook my head no.

He sighed and gestured towards his nether regions, "I've got something to work off, Tally, you get me now?"

Yep, I got him then! I clapped a hand over my mouth to cover the giggles which had been surprised out of my throat.

"Right well, good luck with that then," I choked. "Night, Jack."

"Goodnight, Tally."
Chapter 15

I woke up late the next morning, I knew this because the sun filtering through the gap in the curtains was too strong for it to be earlier than about ten. I stretched blissfully, feeling the warmth of contentment spread from my chest all the way to the tips of my ears and the ends of my toes. Pulling the bedclothes tighter around myself, I revelled in the feeling of safe snugness that waking up in my childhood bed gave me. I contemplated turning over and going back to sleep, but then I heard a burst of laughter downstairs and changed my mind. I could lie in bed at the flat any Saturday morning that I liked, but it was getting increasingly rare that I could spend time with my parents, so I knew I should take advantage of my home visit.

Rolling out of my warm cocoon I let my feet hit the floor and, grabbing a hair tie off my old chest of drawers, pulled my hair up into a ponytail as I exited my bedroom and started down the stairs.

I could hear Jack and my mum's voices coming out of the kitchen and, outside, the rumble of the tractor which meant that Dad and Matt were playing farmers in the paddock. Isn't it strange when you're away from something for a while and when you come back you discover nothing has changed? This morning might as well have been any Saturday morning since I was about 10.

The smell of toast and fried egg tantalised my nose and pulled me out of my reverie and I covered the last couple of stairs and turned to enter the kitchen, looking forward to a nice big plate of breakfast and a bit of basking in the feeling of being home.

Now, there are a couple of things you expect to hit you as you enter the family kitchen. The smell of a good breakfast, the love and acceptance of your family, you know that kind of happy rosy stuff. What did I get that Saturday morning?

A wet tea towel, straight in the face.

I spluttered in surprise and grabbed at it, but before I had time to fully pull it off my face, a pair of hands grabbed my shoulders and hustled me backwards out of the kitchen archway.

When I finally managed to grab the wet material off my face I saw that Jack had pushed me into the little hollow between the stairs and the corridor wall.

"Well good morning to you too," I gasped, my eyebrows raised. "Any reason for that particularly…um…original greeting?"

"Have you looked at yourself in the mirror this morning?" Jack asked, looking as if he was trying, and failing, to hide a smile.
"What?" I asked, completely bemused, "I only just got up, Jack, of course I haven't bloody looked in a-

"Perhaps you should," he interrupted me. "And, maybe, I don't know, put some makeup on or something."

"You cheeky bastard," I snapped. "It's not like you wake up looking like a pretty picture yourself!"

Far from being offended, Jack rolled his eyes in an exasperated sort of way and, after checking to see if there was anyone around, he pulled me across the corridor and into the downstairs bathroom where he positioned me in front of the mirror.

"Oh!" I leant closer and examined my inflamed face at close range.

Pash rash at its very worst!

"Yeah, oh," Jack confirmed. "And considering there is a decided lack of candidates whose stubble could have scratched up your face like that in this house, I would've thought you would have liked to be warned before you ran into anybody."

I turned away from the reflection of my bright red chin and cheeks and started rummaging in the cupboard for the aloe vera cream and my mum's foundation (we were the roughly the same shade, thank god!). Finding it and turning back to the mirror I smeared the cream across my face, making me look for all the world like I was going to start shaving.

"So…uh…" Jack muttered from behind me and, looking at him in the reflection of the mirror, I raised my eyebrows in a 'yes?' kind of way. "Does it hurt?" he asked gruffly and it was my turn to roll my eyes.

"I hadn't realised I had it until you pointed it out to me, did I?" I rubbed the cream in then squirted some of the foundation out onto my hand. "Pash rash is more annoying and unattractive than it is painful." Smearing the foundation across my face and smoothing it out I turned and grinned at him. "Nevertheless, maybe the next lesson could take place straight after you've shaved."

"Ah yes, the lessons." Jack's lopsided smile made an appearance. "I meant to mention that last night's lesson was ‘location, location, location’, so I suppose lesson number 7 is that it’s best to be prepared and for me that means shaving."

"Aww," I sashayed towards him and put my arms around his neck, "you'd change your toiletry routine for me?"

His hands rose up and circled my waist, pulling me in closer to him. "Baby, I'd change the world for you if you asked me to." He was only joking, as denoted by his corny use of 'baby', but I couldn't help my wide grin at his words.

"Jack, Talia, breakfast's getting cold!" My mum's voice from the kitchen cut across the moment and made as jump apart from each other guiltily.
My conscience immediately started roundly abusing me for being so stupid. My mum, the biggest busybody known to man, was only a little way down the corridor and I’d been flirting outrageously with Jack, the person she is the most interested in? I was nuts! Jack must have been thinking along the same lines as me because he looked like he'd just been slapped across the face.

Unable to resist, I reached up and smoothed out the furrow in his brow with my fingers before jerking my head towards the door.

“Breakfast,” I announced firmly.

We entered the kitchen together and Mum, fussing around with setting the table, glanced up with a smile. "There you two are!" she exclaimed. "I thought I heard you coming down the stairs, Talia, but you never appeared and then I turn away for one second and Jack disappears as well, very odd."

I shrugged noncommittally because it is never a good idea to outright lie to my mother by trying to make up some excuse. Nor is it wise to try and look completely innocent, she never believes that one.

"Morning," is what I settled for instead.

"Morning dear, isn't it a little early for makeup?" She smirked at me then turned and threw open the window above the sink. "Boys, food's ready," she sang out while I inwardly groaned at her ability to notice even the smallest difference in my appearance.

Facing us once more, this time with loaded plates in her hands, Mum held one out to me, but instead of taking it, I shot a panicked look across at Jack.

"You cooked the eggs, right?" I asked and he nodded. "And the toast?" I clarified and he grinned and nodded again. "Good." I sighed in relief and then finally took the plate my mum offered.

While Mum tittered in pretend offence, Matt and Dad trooped in looking all fresh faced and happy.

Despite the fact that we are one of the few families in the town whose principal income doesn’t come from the land, we have approximately 10 acres, although it’s mostly bushland rather than grazing area. With a small flock of sheep and a thriving orchard, my dad keeps his hand in on the farming side although his day job is being the principal of the area's district school. My mum is an artsy fartsy and does the most beautiful landscapes although her 'real' job is being the art teacher at the school too.

Matt and Dad sat down and Matt pulled a plate piled high with toast and eggs towards himself. Picking up a fork he was about to dig in when he suddenly froze and looked at Jack in alarm. "You made this, right?" he asked and, when Jack confirmed he had, he relaxed and began shovelling the food into his mouth, tuning out Mum's indignant squawks.
We all ate appreciatively for several minutes then, cramming the last piece of toast into his mouth, my dad stood up and brushed the crumbs off his trousers.

"Right, boys, let's finish up with the tractor, then I want to move the sheep into the south paddock."

Jack and Matt both nodded, finished up their plates and stood to follow him. Matt, however, seemed to remember something and stopped in the kitchen doorway, looking back at me.

"Hey, Talia, you might want to call Simone and, um, check she's okay or whatever, alright?"

I looked up in surprise and swallowed my mouthful of food before asking, "Why?"

Matt shrugged uncomfortably. "Well I don't know, but last night on the drive up she got a couple of calls on her mobile and went all weird."

I laid down my fork and said slowly, "Okay, now Matt I need you to focus. I know you hate this girly, emotional stuff, but you're going to have to give me more than 'went all weird.'"

He shoved his hands in his pockets and glowered at me from underneath his shaggy hair. "Don't be patronising, I noticed something was wrong, didn't I? Look someone rang and it was like she didn't want to talk to them in front of me and Tommo so she said she couldn't talk and hung up, but then she got another call and the person on the other end talked for ages and then she said 'right, thank you for telling me.' and hung up. Then," he hung his head even further and blew the fringe out of his eyes, "well then she did the whole trying not to cry thing."

I was getting pretty alarmed by this stage. Cursing mildly, after all my parents were still in the room, I pushed my chair back from the table and barged past the boys in the doorway. Starting to jog up the stairs I called over my shoulder, "Did you at least ask her what was wrong?"

"Of course I did," Matt shouted indignantly as I reached the top of the stairs and entered my bedroom. "She said she was buggered and was just going to go straight to bed."

"Urgh," I groaned, stripping off my pjs and digging some underwear, a pair of jeans, a top and the thin little jacket I'd used the night before, out of my travelling bag. "Okay, so you didn't want to pry," I yelled so he would be able to hear me from downstairs, "but why didn't you tell me this last night?"

"I thought I'd give her a night to sort things out herself before I sent you charging in there," he replied, having the cheek to start sounding frustrated with me. "When I dropped her off she said she was buggered and was just going to go straight to bed."
"And you believed her?" Now fully dressed I clattered down the stairs again and shot my brother an incredulous look. He glared back at me and I was about to snap at him again when I realised I was just wasting time.

Slipping my sandshoes on I smiled briefly at my family, all gathered in the corridor looking anxious.

"Thanks for breakfast Jack, I'll see you all later," I said, exiting through the front door and just catching my mum calling after me,

"Give Simone our love."

I hurried down the drive and turned right on the road, treading the familiar bitumen which led to Simone's house. As it was a 15 minute walk from mine to hers, I had plenty of time to think and realise that, under my worry over Simone, I was beginning to feel a bit guilty. Clearly something was up with her and I, supposedly her best friend, hadn't noticed. Recently I'd been so wrapped up in the burgeoning...thing...between Jack and me, that everything else had been shoved to the back of my mind. God, that made me such a crappy friend!

I hoped Matt had exaggerated the situation and it would be nothing, but I couldn't really believe that. For a start Matt would usually be the one to try and minimise an emotional situation rather than amplify it. Also, Simone is such a nice, upbeat person that the news that she was hanging up on people and on the verge of tears was particularly disconcerting.

Finally, I turned up the driveway to the Coogan's house and knocked briefly on their front door before letting myself in. Hearing noises coming from the lounge room I stuck my head round the corner and saw 10 year old Holly, the youngest of Simone's three siblings, sitting on the floor half-heartedly dragging a piece of string across the carpet for her cat to chase.

"Hey there, how's things?" I asked with a smile. After all, I'm a younger sister myself and I know that if you want to know what's what in a household, the younger sister is the fount of all knowledge.

"Hello, Talia. Things are bad," Holly sighed. "Everybody's so cranky today."

"Why's that?" I asked and Holly sighed again, twitching the piece of string just out of the cat’s reach.

"Same as usual, Alex has done something bad."

"Ah." I nodded knowingly. Alex, Simone's 15 year old brother, is renowned in our small town for causing trouble. He'd been excluded from a knobby private school and was well on his way to being banished from a second. You know how some kids fall in with the bad crowd? Well Alex is that bad crowd.

It doesn't help that Mr and Mrs Coogan insist on basing their children's education on how much they have to fork out as opposed to how good the school actually is. Alex is the
sort of kid who considers it his duty to stick it up the group of stiffy, musty halls of private schools and the sooner his parents realise this and put him in a place where he'd be a small fish in a big pond, rather than the shark he is now, the better the whole family will sleep.

Still, Simone's parents are not home enough to understand what is going on with their children. While Jack's dad is emotionally distant Mr and Mrs Coogan are geographically distant, spending about as much time as us uni students in the city. This invariably means leaving Alex to look after the younger two children, although it was usually 12 year old Sean who looked after himself and Holly, Alex typically being out stirring shit.

"Is Simone up in her room?" I asked Holly, wanting more than ever to see Simone and make sure she was alright. She nodded and I made my way across the open plan living area to the staircase. I was about half way up when I met Sean who was on his way down.

"Hi, Talia," he said, smiling shyly.

"Hey Sean, how're you?" I asked and he ducked his head quickly, but not before I saw the troubled expression on his face.

"Oh, hey," I said gently, putting a consoling hand on his shoulder. "I'm sure whatever's going on it'll all work out."

He blushed a vivid red and I remembered belatedly that 12 year old boys don't handle a girl's touch very well. Quickly removing my hand, I settled for smiling sympathetically instead.

He shrugged in a movement reminiscent of Holly's moments before. "Yeah," he agreed sombrely, "I just wish Mum and Dad were here."

"They're not?" I exclaimed, completely astounded. Normally perky Holly was seriously morose, normally chatty Sean was virtually monotone and Simone, well, I hadn't found out how she was holding up, but I didn't think it was going to be good, and their parents hadn't bothered to cancel a couple of meetings and come home? "Oh well," I amended, not wanting to speak ill of Sean's parents to his face, "I'm sure they're on their way."

"Are you?" Sean asked darkly.

He clumped away down the stairs and I virtually pelted up the remaining distance to Simone's door. As I had downstairs, I knocked on her door then let myself in, coming face to face as I did so with the infamous Alex.

This boy was about as far removed from Simone's bouncy golden red curls and smiling, open face as it was possible to be. He'd dyed his own reddish hair a midnight black and hacked it short so it stuck up in short little spikes all over his head, and his eyes, technically the same bluey/grey as Simone's, were permanently narrowed in an angry expression. He'd grown into one scary looking boy.
"Hey, Alex," I said, trying to hide the fact that his sudden appearance in front of me had set my heart beating wildly in surprise. He was like a tiger, you should never show him any fear.

He looked me over disinterestedly, then, pushing aggressively past me, he grunted, "Whatever."

I watched him storm down the stairs out of the house, slamming the front door with a bang behind him, before turning to look at Simone who was standing, looking wan, by the window. Her eyes followed Alex as he marched down the drive and disappeared down the road.

"Gee," I said with raised eyebrows, "if that kid works hard enough he just might be as charming as Micky one day."

I had meant to lighten the mood, but at my words, Simone's face crumpled and, seeing that she was about to lose it, I covered the room in a couple of leaps and wrapped my arms around her. Feeling her shoulders shaking beneath my hands and my own shoulder becoming wet with her tears I desperately sought for a way to make her feel better.

"Oh sweetheart, I was only joking, he's nothing like Micky, I promise," I crooned, but if anything, this only seemed to make her shake harder with sobs so I decided to forgo actual, cohesive sentences and settled instead for mumbling nonsense to the vague tune of 'it's going to be alright.'

We stayed this way for what felt like hours, but was probably only 10 minutes or so, until Simone pulled away from me and reached for the box of tissues on her desk. Collapsing onto the bed she proceeded to mop up her face and I sat down gingerly beside her, waiting for her to explain what was going on.

"I'm sorry," she gasped at last, throwing her wadded tissues into the bin. "I shouldn't have freaked you out like that, things aren't that bad really."

"Uh huh," I said sceptically.

"No, honestly. I'm making a mountain out of a mole hill," she insisted, her pale, drawn face and lank hair completely at odds with the words coming out of her mouth.

"But, Simmy," I said gently, "we don't have moles here so, I hate to break it to you, but it's got to be a mountain."

She choked out a laugh then leant her head against my shoulder and sighed. "Alex is in trouble again."

"Yeah, I know," I said, putting an arm around her shoulder and resting my head atop hers, "Holly told me. What's he done this time?"

Simone sniffed and then said, in a very small voice, "To be fair, we don't know if he has done anything. There was a school dance last night and Alex apparently went along to stand around outside smoking and being generally too cool to actually enter and do any
dancing. About midway through the night a kid got thrown down the fire escape stairs and ended up in hospital with a couple of broken ribs and bad bruising."

I pulled away and looked at Simone in alarm. "Oh God! Alex didn't do it, did he?" I'd always known Alex as a bit of an angry, 'I'm so misunderstood' kid, but I never thought he was violent.

"Well, that's the thing," Simone said in frustration. "I don't think he did, but he was standing over the guy when the teachers found them and Alex refuses to say that he didn't do it."

"You mean he's saying he did?" I asked, confused by her wording.

"No, I mean he won't say that he didn't do it, but he won't say that he did do it either. Not to me, not to the teachers, not to Sean, not to Mum and Dad when he talked to them on the phone at the police station."

"Police station!" My eyes widened in surprise and horror. "He was arrested?"

"No, they just took him in for questioning." Simone sighed, looking as if she was thankful for small mercies. "They can't arrest him just yet because the kid who was pushed down the stairs won't say anything about it either and there were no other witnesses." She groaned and buried her face in her hands for a moment. "It's such a mess, Alex just keeps repeating that it's none of our business what happened and to back off and the boy in hospital is saying the exact same thing. I know the police think it's because Alex has intimidated him into not saying anything, but I can't believe it."

Having known Alex since he was 5, I had to agree with her. Alex may think he's a hard man, but really, he's all bravado and he certainly wouldn't be the sort to push someone down the stairs and then intimidate them into not ratting him out. Obviously something was going on that we didn't know about.

"Oh," Simone gave a little moan of anguish, "it's all going so badly wrong. I mean this Alex thing on top of everything else is too much."

"It's going to be alright, it really is," I said sympathetically, rubbing her back before I properly realised what she’d said. "On top of everything else?" I repeated after a moment, "What everything else?"

Simone looked panicked for a moment and shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I don't want to tell you," she said in a small voice and a cold chill settled over me. Simone and I told each other everything, if she was trying to keep something from me it must be really bad.

"Please tell me," I begged. "I won't judge or anything."

Far from agreeing, Simone let out a little choke of disbelieving laughter and I pulled away from her in surprise.

"What was that supposed to mean?" I asked, a little bit hurt by her reaction.
Simone grabbed another tissue and blew her nose before replying, "I'm sorry, Talia, you know I love you to death, but you are one of the most judgemental people I know."

"I am?" This was news to me.

"It's not a bad thing necessarily," she hurried to placate me. "It's just that you hold people up to pretty high standards. Every guy you meet has to be as funny and nice as Matt and Jack are, and every girl has to be as sure of herself as you are. Most people can't live up to that, I know I can't."

My head whirled and my mouth opened and closed like a fish's as I tried to think of what to say.

"I don't think you aren't as good as me," I eventually spluttered. "You're better! You're sweeter and nicer and kinder…"

"Which is your way of saying sometimes you think I'm a big wet blanket," Simone interrupted gently. "I wish I was as self-assured as you, but I'm not." She plucked at some loose threads on her bedspread and mumbled, "I'm not saying this to be mean, but just for now, I want to keep what's going on with me to myself."

"But..." I searched for something to say to convince her and settled, fairly lamely, on, "but we're best friends."

"Of course we are, but that doesn't mean I'm not entitled to some privacy."

And she didn't think she was self assured? She was certainly a good actor then. Admitting defeat and not wanting to push her away I nodded in what I hoped was an understanding way and then said quietly, "OK fine, I see what you're saying and I agree that you should have privacy. But just, could you tell me...you're okay, right? I mean you're not ill, or anything?"

Her face relaxed into a smile and she shook her head. "No, I'm fine."

"And everybody else? I mean none of our friends have got cancer or anything, have they?"

She shook her head again, her lank curls swaying as she did so. "No, as far as I'm aware, everybody is in perfect health."

"Good." I sighed in relief, after all don't they say that if you have your health you have everything? Pretty simplistic, but a nice principle nonetheless.

There was a silence for a moment, which was suddenly broken by the shrill ring of Simone's mobile. Since it was sitting on the bedside table right next to me I picked it up and went to hand it to Simone, not realising that she'd made a wild lunge for it as it had made its first peep. Seeing her about to snatch it from me I looked down at the phone in confusion and saw 'Sam's house' flashing on the caller ID. Before I had time to ask Simone what was going on, she had grabbed the phone out of my hands, clicked the off button, stopping the shrill ringing, and thrown the mobile into her bag.
"Why didn't you-" I began, but she sent me a quelling look and I stopped abruptly. "Right, you don't want me to know."

Well, as Alice said, curiourser and curiourser. Samsa obviously had something to do with this, what the hell was going on with the two of them?

Realising another silence was stretching between us, I pushed thoughts of Sam out of the forefront of my mind, I'd think it through later, and returned to the matter at hand.

"Okay, so where does it stand with the Alex thing?" I asked and Simone, seeming very happy to go along with my conversation change sat up straighter.

"He's been suspended from school until he tells them what happened and the police are looking for evidence so they can charge him without a formal complaint from the boy in hospital." Simone threw up her hands in disbelief. "I can't believe I'm saying stuff like this, it's so unreal!" She lowered her voice, glancing towards her door, as if expecting Sean and Holly to be listening on the other side, and added, "I asked Mum and Dad to come home, but they said they're needed in the city and if anything more happens I should tell them and they'll try to get away."

"How magnanimous of them," I said sarcastically before I could stop myself. "Sorry." I pulled an apologetic face, but Simone wasn't looking at me anymore. She had her head cocked to one side as if listening to something and then she jumped to her feet, went to the window and then looked back to me in puzzlement.

"What are Matt and Jack doing here?" she asked.

"Huh?" I joined her at the window and, looking down, saw that Jack's ute was pulling up outside the Coogan's house. Sitting in the cab was a very grim Jack and Matt and, between them, was a bloodied and dishevelled…

"Alex!" Simone pulled away from the window and tore out of her room and I hastily followed her.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs I watched Simone race through the lounge room without sparing even a glance at Sean and Holly who were sitting on the couch watching TV.

"What's going on?" Sean asked in alarm and I forced myself to stop and smile reassuringly at the two of them.

"Oh nothing important," I lied. "Just stay in here for a moment, Okay you two?" I looked specifically at Sean, trusting that his big brother instincts would kick in and he would stay inside at least to look after Holly.

I was right, he glanced longingly towards the front door, which Simone had left open in her mad rush to get to Alex, and then back at Holly who was looking between us with big eyes. "Yeah, fine, we'll stay here," he grunted and I smiled thankfully at him before following Simone outside.
Closing the front door behind me so that there was less chance of the kids hearing what was going on, I hurried across the gravel parking area to where Matt, Jack and Simone were gathered around the battered Alex.

"It's alright, Simone," I heard Jack say soothingly as I joined them. "I know it looks bad, but it's only a split lip and some swelling, nothing's broken."

"What happened?" I gasped. "Alex what's going on?"

He mumbled something through his split and bleeding lips that I didn't quite catch, but I would bet that it was something along the lines of 'whatever'. Obviously not going to get any information out of that source, I looked instead at Matt and Jack for an explanation.

"We went into town to get some oil for the tractor and on the way back we saw Alex walking along the road trying to hitchhike," Matt said, his expression solemn.

"I wasn't trying to hitchhike," Alex snarled, pausing to spit some blood out of his mouth before continuing, "I was hitchhiking. I'd just flagged down a lift when you two dickheads showed up and scared that guy off."

"Never mind that for now, I want to know who beat you up." Simone reached out tentatively towards Alex's face and he winced as she gently touched some of the swelling around his mouth.

"No-one, it doesn't matter," he muttered, looking as if he was about to bolt. Simone cut off his opportunity by grabbing onto his arm and looking up at him imploringly.

"Clearly it was someone and it does matter. Please tell me."

But he looked determinedly away from her and kept his bruised mouth firmly shut.

A thought drifted to the front of my mind and I cleared my throat before asking softly, "The family of the boy who, um, fell down the fire escape, they live locally, do they?"

I knew I was right when Alex looked at me quickly, his eyes wide with shock. Matt and Jack were also looking at me in surprise, but I gestured to them that I would explain later.

"You told her?" Alex asked Simone angrily, but she didn't flinch from his fury, rather looked at him sternly.

"Of course I did," she told him firmly. "And I take it Talia was right? You ran into some of that guy's family and they did this to you?" She gestured towards his puffy and inflamed face.

"It's only a punch in the mouth," Alex sighed, trying and failing to sound nonchalant. "Don't make a big deal out of it."

Simone looked like she wasn't far off from giving him another punch in the mouth herself, but she took a deep, calming breath and let it out again slowly. "Well, I think it is a big deal so here's what we're going to do. First off we're going inside to clean you up a bit, then we're getting Sean and Holly and going to the Davenport's."

"Why?" Alex demanded. "Why can't we just stay here?"
"Oh you want to stay here now, do you?" she snapped. "I was under the impression that you wanted out of here considering that the second I let you out of my sight you went to try and scam some lifts off strangers. Just get in the house, Alex," she rapped the last bit out with such authority that, with only minimal grumbling, Alex obeyed.

As soon as the door closed behind him Simone's shoulders slumped and her eyes filled with tears. "Thanks, guys," she said to Jack and Matt. "God knows where he was off to, if you hadn't seen him..." she trailed off as if unable to bear to finish the thought.

"But we did see him, so don't beat yourself up about it," Jack said kindly, giving her shoulder a quick pat. "Do you want us to head off so you can sort some things out with just your family?"

She looked at him thankfully and blinked back her tears. "Yeah, thanks."

"What are you going to do?" I couldn't resist asking.

"Oh," Simone smiled feebly, "I think that's pretty obvious, don't you? I've got to get Alex to Mum and Dad, they need to understand the seriousness of what's going on. Do you think it would be alright with your parents if I left Sean and Holly with them for a bit?"

"Of course it would," Matt said, before I had time to reply. "I reckon they'll go you one better too. I can't imagine Dad letting you take Alex up there by yourself so expect to have him joining you."

"And I'll come too," I said quickly. "I can't see myself being that useful, but I'll be there for whatever you need."

Simone nodded. "Thanks, that'd be good. I'll see you in a bit." She stiffened her spine again and began walking towards the house.

"Hey, Simone," Jack suddenly called and, when she turned, he threw the ute keys across to her. "It might be better if you have Alex strapped into a moving vehicle when you make your way over to the Davenport's," he explained. "We'll walk."

The three of us turned and began down the drive. As soon as we were on the road Jack and Matt both turned to me and demanded to know what was going on. With a sigh I explained all about the trouble Alex was in and, by the time I'd finished, they both looked in equal parts furious and worried.

"But they have no proof that he's done anything," Matt protested. "God, this town! The slightest thing happens and everybody blames Alex."

Jack and I nodded in agreement and we walked on, each of us deep in thought. Just before we turned up our driveway something else suddenly sprang to my mind and I stopped short.

"Hey, do you think I'm judgemental?" I asked and my heart sank as I saw them exchange looks.

"Well..." Jack began cautiously, but Matt interrupted him.
"Look at it this way," he said brusquely, "do you think it's a fluke that the degree you're doing may lead to you becoming a 'judge'? Think about it."
That night I returned alone to our flat in the city and made a direct beeline towards the couch where I flopped down in exhaustion. It had been such a long day, it seemed about a week ago that Matt had suggested I go and see Simone, but in reality, it was only about 11 hours.

The Coogan kids had turned up about half an hour after Matt, Jack and I got home, and, having already explained the situation to my parents, Alex, Simone, Dad and I were able to get on the road back to the city not long after they arrived. We got to the building in which Simone's parents worked at about 4 and I’d sat outside while Dad, Simone and Alex talked to Mr and Mrs Coogan, making them see that the problem was beyond a bit of normal teenage angst, which I think they had seen it as before.

After that, we’d all traipsed to the Coogan's city house where Simone lives during the semester and settled Alex in as it had been decided it was probably for the best if he stay out of Bridunna for a while. Dad and I stayed until Mr and Mrs Coogan returned home and then took our leave, Dad returning home, me going back to the flat.

I was tired and emotionally sore. Why is it that life likes to point out when things have been going too easy for you? Or, to put it another way, when you're sure a problem is going to come out of one specific area (people finding out about Jack and me), life has a habit of blindsiding you by throwing a problem in from a different quarter.

To be honest, I hadn't really been thinking much about Simone over the last couple of weeks, in fact I hadn't been thinking about anything or anyone else except Jack. I felt selfish. I'd always promised myself I wouldn't be one of those annoying people who develop a one track mind once they have a thing going on with someone. This had never been a problem for me in the past, obviously, but the last couple of weeks had been strange and different. And, as they say, the only person who likes change is a baby with a dirty nappy.

Well it was ending now, I was going to be there for Simone, no matter what.

With this in mind, I forced myself off the couch and dug my mobile out of my bag and checked to see that the home phone receiver was charging on its base. I wasn't going to go to bed, if Simone needed me she could get me on both phones and I would be all ready and fully dressed to go and help her. I'm not sure what I thought I would be able to do, or even what kind of crisis Simone would be in, but the weird day had put me in a weird frame of mind.

As determined as I was to stay on the alert in case there was a call to action, it wasn't long before the long, hard day caught up with me and I dozed off, still clutching my mobile tightly in my hands.
After what felt like only a couple of seconds, but was probably more like an hour or so, I felt myself being dragged up through the layers of sleep towards consciousness. I fought against the pull because I was really warm and comfortable, but my brain was mercilessly sending messages to get awake and, reluctantly, I surrendered.

Blinking, I saw nothing in my immediate eye line which would have hauled me so unceremoniously out of my slumber, but then I heard the low hum of Jack's voice from over in the kitchen. Still too sleepy to be bothered to get up I nevertheless tipped my head slightly so both my ears were unhindered and listened in to his conversation which went like this, "I just got in." Pause. "Yeah she's here, she's asleep on the couch." Pause, followed by a soft chuckle. "Something like that. Right, well, I'll see you Monday night then, mate." Another pause, slightly longer this time. "Nah, no sweat. Cheers, bye."

I heard the beep as he hung up then the sound of the fridge opening and Jack swigging some OJ straight from the carton.

For a moment I wrestled between lying still and trying to get back to sleep or satisfying my curiosity and asking what he was doing back in town. Not surprisingly, curiosity won out and I sat up and threw a cushion at Jack. He jerked in surprise as the square of padding hit the back of his head, and orange juice splashed up over his face. Pulling the carton away he wiped at the sticky mess on his face then turned to look at me, his eyebrows raised.

"You know normal people just say hello," he said, screwing the lid back on the juice and putting it back into the fridge.

"Hello." I smiled sheepishly, giving him my best cute, apologetic face. It seemed to work as he simply shook his head in a long suffering sort of way and gave his face a quick clean with some paper towel.

"Long day," he stated after a moment or so and I nodded in agreement.

There was another pause and then, rubbing sleep from my eyes and focusing, I asked, "What are you doing here?"

"I live here," he replied with a smile, but I looked at him seriously and he sighed and raised his hands in an 'alright, you win' kind of way. Moving out of the kitchen he crossed the room and joined me on the couch. Twisting his body slightly so he could look at me, he leant forwards slightly and said, "I saw your face before you left Bridunna, you looked so miserable and guilty I thought maybe you'd need some company back here."

"I'm fine," I said quickly, feeling a little snake of irritation rise up at Jack's insistent need to baby-sit me.

Jack looked down at the phone cradled in my lap then looked back up at me and raised his eyebrows a little. "Believe me, Tally, I know all the signs that indicate misery and
guilt and the refusing to go to bed/phone holding scenario is pretty obvious. So let me guess, you feel responsible for what is going on with Alex even though it is in no way your fault?"

"I know Alex's problems aren't anything to do with me!" I fired up at once at what I imagined was condescension in his tone. "But I'm responsible for Simone, or at least I think I am, and so…" I ptered off as much to my frustration I just couldn't find the words to express how I felt. Avoiding Jack's sympathetic gaze I folded my arms protectively across my chest. "Look, never mind, okay? I'm fine, I'm just a bit tired."

"Tally, you can't…" he tried to say, but I cut him off with a sharp, "I'm going to bed."

I didn't want to listen to any platitudes on how I shouldn't feel guilty, because the fact was that I did and being told I shouldn't be wasn't helpful.

Jack made no move to stop me as I jumped off the couch and marched towards my room, but I could feel his gaze following me and by the time I slammed my door and thrown myself on my bed I was already feeling bad about how I'd behaved.

Isn't it always the way that when you're out on the couch you feel really drowsy and can fall asleep at the drop of the hat, but as soon as you actually drag yourself into your bedroom, you feel wide awake?

True, this time, as I slid beneath my covers, it wasn't only the relocation which made me feel more alert. My conscience was giving me nudges and trying to point out that Jack had driven four hours to keep me company in the flat because he'd seen how bad I was feeling and I'd just dismissed him. I don't mean to be such a bitch, but so often it seems to turn out that way. Maybe because in comparison to Jack my selfish, childish behaviour appears tenfold. Damn him!

I heard Jack moving around for a while and then the door to his room close and I pictured him stripping down to the pair of tracky dacks he wears to bed. Oh yes, that was very conducive to sleep, not! I blew out a sigh and turned over, trying to summon up the sleepy feeling I'd had not so long ago. It simply would not come.

The minutes ticked by and still I felt completely unable to sleep. The sheets were cold and they just wouldn't warm up no matter how long I lay there. The sliver of moon coming through a gap in the curtains seemed too bright, but the effort it would take to close the gap was too great as well. I seemed to be checking my clock every other minute or so and despairing when I saw that more time hadn't passed.

This whole thing was very strange for me as I'm usually a very good sleeper, I never really suffer from insomnia, but this seemed like a bona fide case of it.

Eventually I pinpointed my lack of comfort on how alone I felt in my room, I felt isolated and bored. Before I knew what I was doing I was hopping out of bed and entering the
large front room. Marching across it I got to Jack's door and knocked lightly upon the wood. Turning the knob I pushed the door open and stuck my head through the gap.

"Jack?" I whispered and saw his form stir on the bed in response.
"Tally?" he asked groggily. "What's wrong?"
"Nothing," I said hastily. "Nothing's wrong." Feeling my nerve draining away I turned away. "Never mind, sorry for waking you." I closed his door and started walking back towards my bedroom, but then abruptly whirled around and threw open his door again.

Jack had turned the lamp on and propped himself up on his elbows and looked at me questioningly through eyes blinking from the assault of the light and being woken up so suddenly.

"Could we…" I swallowed nervously. "Would it be alright if we…without doing anything you know, just…I don't know, I couldn't sleep and I just thought…but you probably wouldn't want to…but if you wouldn't mind I thought it might help if…"

Jack rubbed a hand across his face and smiled sleepily at me. "I don't mean to rush you, but is there any chance of this sentence finishing any time soon?"

"Can I sleep with you?" I asked all in a rush and then felt that damned blush shooting up my neck and flooding my face. Thankfully Jack seemed to get what I was on about because he pulled back the covers for me and said,

"With an emphasis on sleep, right? Yeah, come on then."

I didn't need telling twice, swiftly padding across the room I slipped in beside him and turned the lamp off.

I wondered for a moment whether Jack was going to pick up where he'd left off earlier and continue to try and convince me not to feel guilty, but I needn't have worried as the next second he rolled over with a, "Goodnight."

Actually feeling a little cheated at the lack of, for want of a better expression, pillow talk, I mumbled a quick, "Goodnight," too and then lay on my back staring up at the ceiling.

So, apparently, I couldn't sleep here either. What was my problem?

I was holding myself very still to make sure I didn't accidentally bump Jack who, by the sound of his calm breathing, was not feeling at all uncomfortable.

Letting out a long sigh I looked over at Jack's digital clock and saw that it read 2:12 a.m. I watched the red lines change every minute, hoping I would get so bored I would go to sleep just for something to do. However, as plans go, it wasn't a brilliant one and, soon after the red numbers turned to 2:23 am, I felt my muscles actually beginning to ache at being held tense for so long.

"Hey, Tally, do you think you could relax a bit?" Jack's voice floated over in the darkness, as if he had read my mind. "It's like lying next to a rock."
"Sorry," I murmured. I shook my legs out in an attempt to release the tension there and ended up banging against Jack's shin in the process.

"And now you've kicked me," he laughed. "You're not really endearing yourself as a bedfellow, you know."

Before I could stop myself I heard my voice snapping, "Well gee, where have I heard that before?"

There was a long, tense silence and then Jack said quietly, "That wasn't what I meant."

"I know," I sighed deeply. "There's something wrong with me tonight I'm so… twitchy!"

Jack turned over so I could vaguely see his pale face in the little bit of moonlight filtering through the curtains. He looked at me for a while and then said, "I know you don't want to talk about what happened today, but if you want to hear it, I do have some advice that might make you feel a little bit less twitchy."

I opened my mouth to tell him that he could keep it to himself, but then I thought better of it. This was a man who has made feeling guilty about something he couldn't control into an art form, maybe he did have something that could relax me enough so I could sleep.

"Go on then," I said, somewhat churlishly.

"So I was only introduced to this concept recently myself," he began seriously, "but as far as I can tell, it goes along the lines of: don't be too hard on yourself because, as hard as it is to control other people, sometimes it's even harder to control yourself."

Realising immediately that I was hearing my own words being bounced back at me I strained in the darkness to see his expression as I desperately needed to know whether or not he was taking the piss.

"Throwing my own words back in my face?" I asked when I was frustrated in my efforts to see his facial expression.

"No," his voice was soft and calm in the darkness. "Just advising you to practice what you preach. What you told me was good and, if you'd believe it yourself, it might help. That it didn't occur to you to check on your best friend every two seconds to see how she was is not your fault. You haven't maliciously ignored Simone and you couldn't possibly have pre-empted the stuff that has happened with Alex."

"I feel patronised," I grumbled after a moment spent considering the advice which had originally been mine.

He let out a deep chuckle that I could feel rumble through the mattress. "Of course you do," he exclaimed. "Good advice always comes out as patronising, that's how you know it's good."
I lay still for a little while processing my thoughts then, suddenly, such a massive epiphany hit me that, I actually jerked with the force of it. Turning to face Jack I leant over and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek.

"What was that for?" he asked, the smile evident in his voice.

"For driving four hours to see that I was okay. For giving me advice that I need even though you knew I would probably get all defensive. For putting up with my moods and my immaturity. For calming me down when I was hysterical. For helping me out and being the best teacher a girl could have. Take your pick. I know it sometimes seems that I'm an ungrateful bitch, but I really do appreciate everything you do for me. Thanks, Jack."

And finally - finally! - I knew I would be able to get to sleep.

~*~

As I opened my eyes the next morning it took me a second to figure out whether I was still dreaming or not, as the scene was all too reminiscent of some of the night time imaginings I'd been experiencing in recent weeks. The room was not my sun-shiny yellow, but that gorgeous deep, deep blue of Jack's room which was offset by the white ceiling and light wood floors. Also, and more importantly, I could feel the warm presence of Jack in the bed beside me. We were not quite touching, but were so close that the heat from his body was pulsing against my back.

A contented smile crept across my lips and I gave a little wriggle of pleasure. I could feel the little black dot which was Simone's unhappiness throbbing at the back of my brain, but for the moment, the joy of being close to Jack was keeping it well at bay.

I lay there, basking in the general loveliness of the whole thing, for several minutes and almost dozed off again, lulled by the feeling of warm security I was experiencing. It was like when I had woken up in my bed at home and yet so much better!

Thinking of home, however, jerked me right out of my daze as certain realities started crashing through my thin shield of contentment. My thought process went something along the lines of: home, family, Matt, crap!

My brother was supposed to be coming home today, what if he had taken off early from Bridunna? It was past 10 in the morning now, what if he walked in on this scene? Jack and I hadn't technically done anything, but it certainly wasn't going to look that way to Matt!

And so, even though every particle of my body seemed to be screaming against it, I forced myself to sit up and swing my legs over the edge of the bed. Just as I was about to stand up, however, Jack's arm snaked around my waist and pulled me back into the bed. I fell with a little surprised shriek and found myself pressed against Jack's warm, bare chest.
Tipping my head back I found my face centimetres from his and his eyes looking into mine, although still half closed with sleep, made my stomach give a little flip.

"You know normal people just say good morning," I smirked, after all he wasn't the only one who could throw words back in people's faces.

"Good morning," he replied with a sweet smile and I couldn't help grinning in reply.

"And just where did you think you were going?" he asked, after we'd smiled inanely at each other for a couple of seconds, and I immediately wished he hadn't said anything. Because now I had to point out that Matt was coming home and I wouldn't be able to do what I really wanted which was to stay in the exact position I was in for the rest of my life. Presumably seeing my face fall his arm around me loosened and he looked at me questioningly.

"I have to go to my own room," I explained. "I can't be here if Matt comes home."

Instead of immediately releasing me as I thought he would have done at the first mention of Matt's name, Jack went very still then said cautiously, "That was Matt I was talking to last night before you threw a cushion at my head."

"Was it?" I said, not really getting the significance.

"Yeah," he confirmed.

There was silence for a moment and, just before I was about to ask exactly why he felt it was important to mention the phone conversation, something from last night floated to the front of my mind. Hadn't Jack said to the person on the other end 'I'll see you Monday night then'?

It's interesting to note here that the human body reacts much faster than the human mind. Before I had cognitively realised the implications of Matt not coming home until the next evening, my body felt as if an electric shock had just passed through it. All my internal organs stopped what they were doing for a moment and gave a massive leap, and every inch of my skin started prickling in a really weird way.

Finally my mind put two and two together and came up with: Jack and I alone in the flat together all night, and, before I could stop myself, I let out a gasped "Oh!" of understanding.

"Hey." Jack placed light fingers under my chin and looked at me steadily. "It doesn't have to mean anything, okay?"

Beyond my embarrassing, girly, 'Oh' I didn't really think I was ready to speak just yet and Jack must have taken my silence as confusion as he felt he had to clarify his statement.

"I knew before all this Alex stuff came up that Matt was going to stay longer in Bridunna and that was what I was talking about Friday night in the shed, but one word from you and it means nothing." He sounded so desperate to make me realise I was under no obligation that I couldn't help smiling a little bit. "What?" he asked, seeing my expression.
"Nothing," I murmured. "It's just that, if it wasn't for the fact that I haven't brushed my teeth yet, I'd kiss you."

"You would?" Jack tipped his head to one side as if he was thinking then gave a little shrug. "I think you should anyway, I reckon I could take it."

"Cos you're a big tough man?" I said cheekily and he nodded.

"Damn straight."

The next few minutes were somewhat limited in conversation as our mouths were much too busy doing more interesting things than constructing sentences. It didn't, however, get too heavy as, almost as if we had pre-arranged a cut off point, we both pulled away after a while and grinned at each other.

"I think every day should start like that," I said, breathing heavily and resting my head against his shoulder.

"It certainly would beat the average alarm clock," he replied before giving me a gentle poke. "Come on, we should get up, I have a lot of studying to do today."

~*~

And he wasn't kidding. After we'd both had breakfast and showers, we worked through his text books all day, only stopping briefly for a quick lunch. By the time we were finished it was beginning to get dark outside and I had a headache from reading all the fine print.

Still, we'd made great progress and, despite our fatigue, were feeling pretty good about ourselves as we bustled about in the kitchen making tea. We hadn't spoken much throughout the day and we certainly hadn't acknowledged the sexual tension which, at times, had seemed so thick I wondered whether at any second we would throw the text books behind us and maul each other. We had, surprisingly, kept our composure, but now the studying was acknowledged to be over little tingles were making themselves known in my belly.

We ate tea sitting across from each other, occasionally making eye contact and then looking away as if we were kids in high school with crushes. Even after we'd finished our plates, neither one of us seemed prepared to make the first move and we sat in silence, pretty much staring at each other, willing the other to acknowledge that something huge was about to happen.

Finally, when I felt that I simply couldn't take it anymore I banged the table and said, "I could kill for some chocolate!"

Okay, so I know you're thinking 'why bring up chocolate? Why not simply tell Jack that his presence is required in the bedchamber?' But remember that we're talking about my
first time here and I was feeling pretty much excited and nervous in equal parts. And what do women do when they are feeling excited or nervous? Why they demand chocolate of course!

Anyway, after my announcement Jack tapped his finger against his thigh thoughtfully then a slow smile spread across his face and he jumped out of his chair to start rummaging through the top kitchen cupboard, the one I can't even reach the handle of. I twisted round in my chair and watched with interest as random odds and ends tumbled out of the messy cupboard then raised one eyebrow enquiringly when he gave an exclamation of triumph and re-emerged with…a light bulb box.

"Here." He chucked the box across to me and, mystified, I opened it.

"Oooh!" I squealed, as, from between a couple of spare light bulbs, I pulled out a crumbled packet of milk chocolate buttons. Popping a button into my mouth I groaned appreciatively as it started to melt chocolatey goodness onto my tongue. "Good work," I congratulated him, "next I want to see you pull some rabbits out of a hat." When he looked at me questioningly I nodded towards the light bulb box. "Since when do we keep chocolate in there?"

"Well," Jack shrugged, "when we were making Haley's birthday cake in June, Matt kept eating all the decorations that were supposed to go on top so I hid them in there and completely forgot about them until just now."

I was fascinated to discover that the mention of Haley's name only raised minor irritation within me and it was so fleeting I only just had time to identify it. Could this mean I was maturing? Nah, it was probably just that I was distracted by the yumminess of the chocolate.

"Here." I reached inside the packet and threw a chocolate button at Jack who tilted his head and caught it expertly in his mouth.

"Another excellent catch by the Jack Hammer," he crowed just as I dropped a couple more pieces of chocolate into my own mouth.

"Excuse me!" I mumbled past the melting pieces in my mouth. "I think you'll find that it was actually another excellent throw by me."

"Sure, whatever," he scoffed and in reply I stuck my chocolate covered tongue at him. "Don't you waggle that tongue at me young lady!" He laughed. "I don't know where it's been."

"Oh really?" I asked coyly. "I think you'd have a better idea than most."

And, just like that, the sexual tension went from oozing quietly in the background to a full on flood which seemed to physically knock Jack towards me and pull me up out of my seat.

We met halfway across the kitchen and Jack wrapped both arms around me possessively, clutching me so tightly that in any other situation I would have worried about
getting air into my lungs. Luckily mundane things like getting an oxygen supply were driven completely out of my mind as Jack and I moved against each other, already seeming to know exactly what to do to please the other.

There was no dilly dallying about, we’d been doing too much of that during the day and, now the dam had broken, we were just letting our instincts lead us. And, apparently, our instincts enjoyed fierce, passionate kisses. The chocolate present in both our mouths literally sweetened our meeting, making it seem like all my Christmases and, coincidently, birthdays, had come at once.

Gradually our kisses slowed a little and I began to realise that I was feeling his stubble scratching across my cheeks. Smiling against his lips I pulled away and took one of his hands in mine. Without a word, I led him across the flat to the bathroom and pulled him inside.

"What are you…?" he began to ask as I opened the bathroom cabinet and began rummaging inside. He didn't need to finish his sentence as the next second I turned and presented him with a can of shaving cream and a razor.
Chapter 17

I sat on the edge of our combined bath and shower and watched as Jack filled the sink with warm water and lathered up his face with shaving cream. When he was ready, I passed him his razor and watched as he pulled his skin taut and gently ran the razor down his cheek. As he repeated this action again and again I noted that he shaved as he did everything else; in a careful, measured way, his large hands holding the razor capably and firmly. I know it might sound ridiculous, but watching him going about this routine was surprisingly sexy. So much so, in fact, that, by the time he was washing the excess cream off his face, I was biting my lip and feeling a deliciously tight sensation in my chest.

As Jack finished up by rubbing some after-shave balm on and turned to look at me, I tried to compose myself, but I was simply too far gone by that stage. He took one look at my flushed face and dazed expression and a slow smirk appeared on his lips.

"You're all red," he said, not even attempting to hide his glee at seeing me so discomfited. "Surely it's not possible? I haven't turned you on simply by shaving, have I?"

"It looks like you just might have," I said honestly. "But don't you dare laugh."

"Would I ever?" he asked offering me a hand and, when I took it, pulling me off the edge of the bath to stand in front of him.

"Frankly, yes," I said. "But never mind that now. I want to give that freshly shaven face of yours a test drive." And, so saying, I stepped forward onto my tip-toes and leant up to kiss him gently on the lips. His smooth skin smelt like his mild aftershave balm and, after the scratchy kisses I was used to (wonderful as they had been), pure heaven on my skin.

"So what's the verdict?" Jack asked with a smile as I pulled away.

"Pretty damn good," I replied.

There was silence for a moment as we gazed at each other and then Jack said slowly, "So… want to try out my smooth face again?"

"God, yes!" I exclaimed, basically leaping at him. Luckily Jack used his footy reflexes and his lovely strong arms to catch me and stop us from crashing backwards into the bathroom cabinet.

With my arms around his neck I kissed him hungrily. It didn't matter how many times I felt his lips against mine, I don't think I could ever get bored of it. In fact, his kisses seemed to leave me wanting more and more after each time. Maybe he has some addictive substance on his lips, I wouldn't be surprised.

His large hands settled on my hips and lifted me slightly, making it easier for me to kiss him, and his firm grip made me feel all squirmy inside. My hips unconsciously started rocking against him as I opened my mouth and felt my tongue meet his.
After not too long I became aware of a hard bulge bumping against me as I moved against Jack. Breaking my mouth away from Jack's I looked down and then grinned.

"Doesn't take guys long does it?" I gasped, running a hand up and down his chest as I got my breath back.

"Not when someone rubs up against us like that, no," Jack replied sounding just as out of breath as me.

I looked at the lump near the fly of his jeans and then, hesitantly, reached out a hand and touched it gently. It twitched against my palm and I pulled away hastily.

"It kicked!" I exclaimed with a nervous giggle and Jack let out a snort of laughter. "You make it sound like it's a baby in the womb."

"Well, it's pretty much at the same level of 'what the hell is that all about?' for me as a baby in the womb," I explained. "I can't believe it moves like that. That's so freaky. Us girls are pretty much in control of all our bits and pieces; if anything moves on its own we consult a doctor."

"While we consult a doctor if our bits don't move." Jack's voice shook with laughter. "I think it's fair to say that us guys consider our penises more as friends than body parts."

My eyes still fixed avidly downwards I murmured, "Boys are so weird." Then, as a sudden thought occurred to me I jerked my eyes up to his and asked, "It isn't named, is it?"

By the red creeping up his neck and his sudden interest in the pattern on the shower curtain I knew the answer immediately.

"It is! You've named your penis! Oh my god!" I smacked my head against his shoulder and shook with laughter. "Come on then," I said after a few moments when my hysterical laughter had quieted to the occasional giggle and I was able to catch my breath, "what's it called?"

Jack, who'd wrapped an arm across my back as I laughed against him, released me and crossed his arms in mock annoyance. "No, why should I tell you? You laughed at him."

"Aww." I bent at the waist and addressed his crotch politely. "I'm sorry, little guy, I didn't mean to offend you. Please won't you tell me your name?"

Jack burst out laughing and pulled me back up to a standing position. "Alright, I'll tell you, but you have to promise never to refer to him as 'little' again."

"Deal," I said, rolling my eyes. Honestly, what is it with guys and size? "I don't have anything to judge it against anyway," I pointed out.

"Not really the answer I was going for, but okay," he said with a sigh before beckoning me closer and, cupping his hands around my ear, whispering the answer to me.

"The hammer?" I exclaimed as soon as he'd finished speaking. "Your penis is the hammer in Jack Hammer?"
"Yes, and if you start laughing again the hammer is going away and you'll have to play with him another day," he said mock sternly.

"Is that your penis rhyme?" I asked, taking deep breaths as I tried desperately not to laugh. "Whatever, I think it's cute you named your penis."

"Cute?" Jack asked in horror. "Oh for god’s sake, I'll give you cute!" And the next second I found myself crushed against him and my mouth covered in fierce kisses which made my knees buckle and my hands grab at his shoulders so I wouldn't fall. Each kiss was so short I wouldn’t have previously thought that it could be intimate, but it was by far our most passionate kiss yet. Something about pulling away for a millisecond seemed to enhance the moment we joined again. I know the expression 'eating each other’s faces' is used in a derogatory sense, but in this moment, it honestly seemed like we were trying to consume as much of each other as possible and that nothing was ever going to be enough.

The way Jack was lifting me up our pelvises sort of slotted together and 'the hammer', with which I had just become acquainted, fitted neatly between us. I found myself unconsciously raising one leg to create a tighter fit and the next thing I knew Jack had caught up both my legs so that he held me straddled against him.

I locked my legs together around his back which enabled him to use one hand to open the door and carry me out in the main living area. Still kissing me furiously, he managed to manoeuvre his way round an armchair and a bean bag before toppling us onto the couch. Such were his reflexes that he was able to get his arms out to avoid crushing me in the second or so it took us to fall.

The jolt as we hit the couch was not sufficient enough to break apart out lips so I wasn't able to tell him how much I approved of our relocation, but I think, by the way that my lips smiled against his, and my feet began sliding up and down his calves, that he knew anyway.

And so we made out on the couch as I’d been so sure we were going to do on that Sunday, and it was better than I could ever have imagined. Lying down and kissing is great fun, not better than standing up kissing necessarily, but it does leave your legs as well as your arms free to roam over the other person which, judging by the hammer's continued presence, Jack was quite enjoying.

And so we continued for some time more. I could feel my lips getting bruised, but there was no way in hell I would call a stop to proceedings. Naturally, by the lips bruising stage, I’d realised that I desperately wanted more. What can I say? When it comes to Jack I'm greedy. It's hard to describe that moment when (shockingly for me) I realised contact at the lips just wasn't enough.

It's like when you’re a kid and it’s a really, really hot summers day. Trudging home through the sweltering heat your one thought is to throw off your boiling uniform, put on
your bathers and jump into the pool. As you finally enter the cool house you pour yourself an icy cold glass of water and that's good, very, very good actually and yet it doesn't quite hit the spot. You know that the only thing that’s going to work is if you’re completely engulfed in cold water, drinking it is just not enough. So you finish your glass and unzip your school dress, yank on the bathers, and hop across the uncomfortably hot brick to the gate on the pool fence. You pull at the safety latch, which should release the gate and allow you to take a couple of short strides and dive head first into the delectably freezing water lapping at the pool's edge. But then you discover, after everything you've been through, after a long, hard day at school and dealing with the obnoxious boys on the bus, before the long walk down the road and up the driveway, after all that you discover that…someone's only gone and double locked the gate!

Do you see what I mean? I’d been waiting a long, long time (well really only a couple of weeks, but it seemed longer) for Jack in his entirety and although I was getting some relief, I needed to be fully immersed before true and total satisfaction would be obtained.

Oh and the double locked gate? Yeah that was the layers of clothes that divided us. However, just as my hands drifted to the hem of his t-shirt to begin solving this problem, a strange buzzing began in his jeans pocket. Breaking my lips away from his with a great wrench, I gasped, "I get that your penis can do some interesting things, but is that normal?"

And when he looked at me in complete incomprehension I grabbed his hand and placed it over his vibrating pocket.

"It's my mobile," he said, sitting up over me and fishing it out his jeans. "I didn't even feel it."

"Don't you dare answer it," I warned him and he sent me an incredulous look as he took a quick look at the caller ID then hung up on them.

"As if I would," he exclaimed, slipping his phone back in his pocket, but not descending on me again.

"Right then, enough of this," I said, disentangling my legs from Jack's and wriggling off the couch. "I've things to see and people to do, namely you. Give me your mobile."

He looked confused, but obedient boy that he is, he took it out of his pocket again and handed it over without complaint. I took no time in turning it off. Dropping the now harmless object onto the coffee table I hurried over to the flat door which I locked securely before digging my own mobile out of my bag and switching that off as well. Completing my mission I crossed to the home phone and turned it on so that anyone trying to call would get the busy signal.

"The perimeter is secure," I announced with pleasure, turning back to face Jack in triumph. He’d got up off the couch and was standing with his hands in his pockets watching
me. As soon as I saw him my face fell. "Oh no, Jack, not the serious face. Anything but the serious face," I implored, but his lips didn't even twitch and I knew that, during the time it had taken me to put us incommunicado, the reality of our situation had crashed down on him.

"Doesn't it seem wrong to you that you had to do that?" he asked sombrely, and I marvelled at how quickly he'd retreated back into his role of serious, sensible Jack.

"Probably not as wrong as it would seem if someone interrupted us," I said, trying to reclaim the previous jokey mood, but Jack shook his head and I knew that I wouldn't be able to jolly him out of talking to me seriously.

"Can we just talk about this properly for a sec?" he asked and I nodded, gesturing for him to say whatever it was that he wanted to say. "Okay, so this creeping around we're doing, doesn't it make you think that maybe we shouldn't be doing this?" He pulled one hand out of his pocket and rubbed it agitatedly through his short hair, "Is this really the way you want your first time to be?"

I moved slowly towards him with my hands outstretched, like you do with a frightened animal to show that you're friendly. "Should we be doing this?" I turned his question round as I walked towards him. "Probably not," I answered, thinking of Matt and how horrified he'd be at the idea of us together. "Okay, so this creeping around we're doing, doesn't it make you think that maybe we shouldn't be doing this?" He pulled one hand out of his pocket and rubbed it agitatedly through his short hair, "Is this really the way you want your first time to be?"

"This is it, Jack," I murmured. "This is how I want it to be. With someone I trust and in this flat where I feel secure. Remember my fantasy? In your room in the flat, clean and warm with nobody to interrupt us, that's what I want and the fulfilment to that fantasy lies a simple hop, skip and a jump into that room there," I pointed with my left hand at Jack's door.

"But..." Jack struggled for a moment, clearly having difficulty figuring out how to verbalise his thoughts. "We haven't really talked out this thing between you and me. The whole thing just seems so..."

"Weird," I finished for him. "Yeah, I know, but so what? Throw caution to the wind for once, Jack, and have fun. According to several reputable sources sex is supposed to be fun you know."

"Yeah, I know."

I could feel the tension in his body beginning to subside and I pressed my advantage. "And it's been fun so far, hasn't it?" I wheedled and I felt his chuckle reverberate against me.

"Parts of it," he admitted.

"Well then," I tipped my head back so I could look him in the face, "I'm game if you are."
He looked at me for a long moment then said in a low, extremely sexy voice, "Natalia Jane Davenport, are you daring me to have sex with you?"

I tipped my head to the side and pretended to think about it for a moment then replied, "Why yes, Jack Morgan Whitby, I do believe I am."

He grinned then and I knew that I’d won. The deal was sealed by a searing kiss and a bunch of fireworks went off in my chest as I realised this was it, this was really going to happen.

As we kissed, for what felt like the millionth time that day, Jack started walking backwards, leading us (somewhat haphazardly it has to be admitted) towards his bedroom. With only minor injuries we made it across the room and, after a moment’s wait while Jack fumbled around for the door handle, we stumbled into his room.

It was very dark, but just as Jack reached for the light switch, I grabbed his hand. "No, leave it off," I said, getting my mouth free for a second. "It's better if it's dark."

"And...why...is...that?" Jack asked between kisses, refusing to lower his arm even as I pulled at it.

"Because," I gasped, putting the hand that wasn't on his arm against his chest to stop him from kissing me for a moment, "I have fairly big breasts."

There was a beat when he simply looked at me in astonishment, then he nodded.

"Yes," he agreed, "fairly big breasts that I would very much like to see, which is why the light should be on." He said it so matter-of-factly that I wondered fleetingly whether 'so I can see breasts in the dark' was Thomas Edison's reasoning for inventing the light-bulb.

"No, you didn't get what I meant," I sighed. Boys are so dense.

I thought for a moment how best to put what I needed to say then took a deep breath and said, "Everything in life is give and take, right? Skills in one thing often equal deficiencies in others, that's just the way things are. It's often not fair, but we just have to deal with it and take steps towards disguising our negatives and enhancing our positives."

Jack was looking at me and, even in the dark room, I could tell that he was incredulous. "You're not seriously starting a philosophical discussion with me now are you? Because I have to tell you, Tally, your timing leaves something to be desired."

"You idiot!" I smacked his chest in annoyance, "What I'm trying to say is that I'm no tiny Haley or Simone. I have fairly big breasts, that's the positive, the negative is that I have the obligatory paunch which often goes with fairly big breasts. So I think the light should stay off, it's to your advantage, I promise." I was doubly glad of the dark then because my face was flaming with embarrassment.

The breast versus paunch issue had been discussed at length at various times with Simone. Each time she insisted she would rather have breasts and I told her that I would give mine to her willingly in exchange for her completely flat stomach and miniscule thighs. But
as the swap isn't actually possible without, I suppose, some Frankenstein type surgery, I had what I had and, although I'm not that self-conscious about the fact that I have curves, I didn't want Jack's bright, harsh light showing my flaws in all their non-glory.

I knew the exact moment comprehension dawned on Jack because he gave a disgusted snort and exclaimed, "Right, that's it," before brushing aside my restraining arm and flicking the light switch on. As I blinked in the sudden brightness Jack grabbed at the hem of my T-shirt and yanked it upwards, surprising me so much I meekly raised my arms before I really realised what he was doing.

"This," he said forcefully, throwing my T-shirt to the side and grabbing me about the waist, "is gorgeous. That," he pointed towards a pin up of a gorgeous girl in a very uncomfortable position on a beach he had on his wall, "is frankly a bit scary."

"So why have you got a picture of that," I said, pointing disgustedly at the picture I'd always hated, "on your wall? Rather than a picture of this? I asked, gesturing down at the stomach exposed beneath my plain white T-shirt bra.

"Because Matt might have noticed if I had a picture of you with your tits out on my wall," Jack laughed, but then, seeing that I didn't look impressed, he stopped and leant his forehead against mine, staring into my eyes. "Tally, believe me," he implored, "there could not possibly be a single thing about you that I wouldn't think is beautiful."

"Oh please!" It was my turn to snort in disgust. "You can lay off the sappy stuff, Jack, I've already said I'll sleep with you."

Rather than firing up as I would've expected, he seemed to simply ignore my words, choosing instead to begin kissing his way down my neck to my shoulder. Once there he ran his finger underneath one of my bra straps and pushed it slowly to one side. He kissed the spot he'd uncovered then did the same on the other side, sending little shivers down my body.

"I'm going to turn the main light off, but I'm turning the lamp on so I can see every little bit of you," he stated, his hands warm on my waist. "No arguments."

And so saying, he crossed the room and switched his lamp on, sending a warm glow over his bed, before returning and, as promised, turning the main light off. I didn't complain, the way he'd said 'no arguments' convinced me it would be pretty useless to object.

"So where was I?" he asked, his eyes warm and intense.

"Um, just about here, I think," I replied pointing to the spot where he'd left off.

A small smile lifting up the corners of his mouth, he bent his head and gently kissed the place I'd indicated. Over the next few minutes he covered my neck, shoulders and upper chest with feathery light kisses before falling to his knees and providing the same treatment to my stomach. While his hands rested on my hips, my hands found their way into his hair and I rhythmically ran my fingers through the slightly curly, short strands, releasing intermittent sighs of pleasure at the feel of his lips on my skin.
I was so involved in the seductive feelings rolling over me in waves that, when Jack's hands left my hips and began travelling up my back, I didn't notice. It was only when his fingers found the clasp of my bra that I focused back on proceedings and felt a little thrill of both fear and excitement flare in my stomach.

Jack's hands were frozen where they were and, as I looked down at him, I saw that he was wordlessly asking for my consent. I nodded jerkily in reply and the next moment he’d expertly undone the clasp and the bra slid forward. He reached up and, as I removed my arms from the loose straps, pulled it away.

I fought against the urge to immediately cover myself up, I mean my breasts were practically poking Jack in the eye so he was definitely getting a good look at them, what if he didn't like them? Still, as I shifted uneasily Jack unglued his eyes from my front and looked up at me.

"Alright?" he asked, his voice sounding just that little bit hoarse.
"You tell me," I said quickly in return.
"Well," he took a deep breath and blew it out, his warm breath tickling my stomach and the undersides of my breasts, "I think I can honestly say that I have never seen anything so gorgeous in my entire life."

"They're not gorgeous!" I laughed in relief that he wasn't disappointed. "They're not perfect like hers." I gestured in contempt towards the pin up again, but he shook his head at my words.

"Believe me," he said throatily, "she's got nothing on you."

I was just thinking that I’d probably have had more chance of believing him if he'd stopped at 'on' when Jack continued, "And just because I have that picture up, doesn't mean I'm not into equality for women and I'm going to prove it." And, so saying, he stood up and tugged his T-shirt over his head leaving him just as bare-chested as me.

"Somehow I don't think you've quite got the gist of the feminist movement," I laughed, eying the hard ridges on his chest just as approvingly as he'd looked at me.

Feeling suddenly brave, I stepped forward and pressed myself against him so that my breasts flattened against him and little zings of pleasure shot through me as my nipples were rubbed by the hairs on his chest. Tilting my head up I began placing little kisses along his jaw and was pleased to feel him suck in a sharp breath as a result of my ministrations.

As much fun as it was to run butterfly kisses around his jaw and throat, I soon realised that it was time for another proper kiss and so I lifted myself higher and caught up his lips with mine again. I kissed him so hard, and I think he was so caught up in enjoying my attentions, that he lost his balance and the pair of us toppled backwards onto his bed.

And so I found myself propped over Jack, my hair falling on either side of his face and enclosing us in a honey coloured cocoon that smelt like my shampoo. Jack's feet were
still on the floor, but I had pulled my legs up so that I was straddling him, my knees on either side of his thighs and the hammer making its presence well and truly known.

As we kissed, Jack's hands slid up my sides and then moved in to cup my breasts. The heat from his palms was searing and I almost jerked away, but the intense pleasure his slightly rough hands were imparting completely overrode any instincts I had to move and, in fact, I found myself pressing my breasts harder into his hands. He moved his fingers to the outer sides of my breasts leaving his two thumbs to circle my areoles. The skin there puckered into a pattern of ridges at this contact and, when he finally let his thumbs brush over my nipples, I released a strange little breathy sound of bliss into his mouth.

From here on in things started moving pretty fast. As he pinched my nipples between his thumbs and forefingers and began gently rolling them, I sat up slightly and reached down to undo his belt. Next my fingers fumbled with the button and fly of his jeans, but the awkward angle combined with the intense feelings I was receiving from his hands on my breasts made it extraordinarily difficult to undo them. Finally I did manage to have all the fastenings undone and I could see the silky material of his boxer shorts but I couldn't do any more while sitting on top of him.

Jack didn't seem to really care about my problem and ignored my futile tugs on his jeans. Instead he lifted his head slightly and kissed the nipple of my left breast. I stopped fussing with his trousers immediately and gripped the sides of his chest to steady myself. He moved his head to my right breast and repeated the action before breathing lightly over my skin causing my nipples to tighten almost painfully. Capturing one nipple back into his mouth and moving his hand back up to the other he busied himself with the serious business of making me bite my lips and rake my nails down the sides of his chest in pleasure.

Just when I felt something seriously big building inside of me he pulled away and his hands slid down the fastenings on my own pair of jeans. He smiled when he saw my expression of complete encouragement of this action and it widened when his fingers reached the buttons.

"Button up jeans, my favourite," he murmured, "Get the right angle and…" He demonstrated his technique by popping all of the buttons out of their fastenings in one swift movement. "Now do you want to lean forward a little bit?"

I did and he was able to push my jeans pretty far down my legs. Sitting up again I worked the denim the rest of the way off and threw the jeans off the side of the bed. So there I sat in nothing but my little white knickers with red love hearts prancing around on them.

Jack released a strangled noise which could have been "Oh my god!" and ran his hands lightly over the fabric of my undies, the warmth from his hands seeping through and caressing the sensitive skin beneath. Next he let a finger gently run down the middle revealing dampness and making me bite my lip to stop from crying out. His gaze firmly
locked with mine, he rubbed his finger in the same place before pushing the material to one side and letting his finger move against me, unimpeded by the fabric.

I would’ve thought I would’ve been embarrassed at this stage, but the truth was that we’d moved beyond embarrassment by then. His finger moved amongst my folds stirring hitherto unknown feelings within me and, on impulse, I leant down again to kiss him. This other anchor to him heightened the feelings even more and I was glad of a way to nonverbally express my ecstasy when seconds later I felt his finger slip inside me.

The delicious tension which had truly begun in the bathroom, built to almost unbearable levels and, as he moved another finger in to join the first and his thumb brushed against my nub, it reached a crescendo.

Someone had once told me that sneezing six times in a row is the equivalent to an orgasm and let me say right now that whichever scientist had proposed that theory clearly wasn't getting any. I have sneezed six times in a row before and it has nothing on what I was feeling then, for a start my nose wasn't running, nor were my eyes streaming uncontrollably. I was, however, trembling all over and a very thin sheen of sweat seemed to have sprung up in the hollow of my neck and between my breasts. I broke my lips from Jack's as I was too exhausted to hold myself up and laid my head against his chest, panting slightly as if I had just been jogging.

He kissed my temple a couple of times and smoothed down my hair with one hand, the other still moving, but more slowly now, against me down below.

After a minute or so, when I had got my breath back and was feeling the bubble of desire rising once more within my chest, I raised my head and looked him right in the eye. "Why have you still got your jeans on?" I asked, my voice still somewhat breathy.

"I don't know," he replied, smiling slightly. "Wait a sec." And, grabbing my waist, he performed a quick little roll so that our positions were reversed and he was lying on top of me. With his legs now free he was able to work his jeans down and then kick them off.

"Better?" he asked.

"Much," I replied, reaching out and brushing my fingers back and forth against the silky material of his boxers stretched over the bulge in his crotch. Looking up to see Jack's reaction I saw that he was holding himself very still, his face tight with pleasure.

"Can I…?" I gestured towards his nether regions and he gave a sort of strangled noise of assent. I ran my fingers along the elasticised hem, slipping them beneath the dip and feeling the tickle of the hairs there. Then, taking a deep breath, I pulled the material down to his knees where Jack took over, taking them completely off and flinging them behind him before settling himself back down on his knees, my legs spread on either side of him.

Funnily enough it wasn't the hammer and friends which immediately caught my attention, but rather what looked like black writing which ran across the top of his thigh.
Looking closely I saw that it was a tattoo in midnight black ink which read: 20/09/1999 (P.W., E.W., M.W.).

"When did you get this?" I asked, tracing the letters and numbers with my fingers and marvelling at the fact that I could know Jack so well and yet know nothing.

"19th of September 2000," he replied quietly. "I was pissed so it seemed like a good idea at the time." Suddenly smiling he added, "Matt got a football tattooed on his arse and couldn't sit down for a week."

Quickly doing the maths I wrinkled my brow in bemusement, "But you must have only been 15, how did two drunk 15 year old boys from Bridunna manage to get a tattoo? I can't even think where the nearest tattoo parlour would be," I exclaimed.

"You'd be surprised the places you end up when you're young and off your head," he replied vaguely.

And I wondered, not for the first time, exactly what mischief Jack and Matt had got up to over the years.

I looked again at the tattoo. P.W., E.W. and M.W., Paul Whitby, Elizabeth Whitby and Marie Whitby (Jack's mum). Quite unbidden I felt a little bit of wetness spring to my eyes and, moving forward, I placed a gentle kiss over the tattoo. Then I propped myself on my elbows and lifted my head to kiss him softly on the lips, trying to convey how truly sorry I was that such a terrible thing had happened to him.

"Enough of that," he said gruffly, pulling away. "Things to see and people to do, remember?"

"Right, poor hammer has been desperately trying to get my attention for the last hour so I suppose I should get back to him," I said, pushing away melancholy thoughts and focusing on the matter at hand…literally.

Lowering my gaze I took in the sight of Jack's good friend properly for the first time. Of course as kids Matt, Jack and I had run around naked together plenty and I had seen it but that is hardly the same thing to seeing a man's fully erect penis, straining towards the belly button, for the first time.

And I think all the girls out there would agree with me when I say penises are so weird looking!

I eyed the length and width of it with some trepidation, it seemed awfully big but for all I knew it was moderate size. Feeling a bit like an anxious kid going to pet a strange animal for the first time, I reached out and ran my index finger along one side, catching it on the ridges and veins but being surprised by how soft the skin felt although it was hard at its core. Having taken the first step I felt brave enough to wrap a hand around its length and, as I gently squeezed, I could feel his blood pulsing through it.
For several minutes I ran my hands all over his shaft, beginning to enjoy the little chokes of sound I could elicit from Jack as I did so. But eventually his hands closed around mine, holding them still where they were for a moment and then pulling my hands away.

"I think that's enough of that for now," he said, his voice strained, and I grinned at the effect I'd had on him.

"Well then, I guess that just leaves …" I said, trailing kisses down his throat.

Jack leant past me, opened the drawer in his bedside cabinet and pulled a condom out of the box he had tucked inside. He ripped open the wrapper with practiced ease but just before he rolled it on, I reached out and plucked the flat piece of latex out of his hands. Pinching the top as we had been taught to do in those innumerable sex-ed classes, I rolled the condom down over him and then took a moment to admire my handiwork.

"Safe and secure," I pronounced.

"Good," he replied, before beginning to shuffle backwards on the bed and putting his hands on the top hem of my knickers. He paused there for a moment, as if waiting for me to object, but when I didn't, he gently pulled the fabric down my legs and discarded my knickers to the side.

I thought Jack would immediately move on top of me but instead he bent his head and I only had time to state "Oh my God!" as I realised what he was going to do before I was reduced to simply grabbing the bedclothes and gasping occasionally.

Just as Jack had driven me to the stage where I thought I would explode he raised himself on top of me once more, leaving me as quivering and boneless as jelly.

Propped above me his blue eyes bored into mine as he said seriously, "Tally, are you sure?"

"Yes!" I hissed, still trying to recover. "For god’s sake yes!"

"Alright then," he said with a small smile. "Now I know I said I'd never hurt you but this might."

I nodded to show that I understood and I did of course. I'm turning 19 in a few months, it’s not like I’m totally clueless in these matters.

Jack, as if there was ever any doubt, was extremely careful with me, holding himself still inside me until I encouraged him to go on.

In those first few moments I think I truly understood the meaning of the word 'intimate' for the first time. No wonder sex is a bigger deal for women, it's a huge thing to allow someone not only to be close to you but also within you, almost a part of you. It’s along the same vein as allowing someone into your home, you hope they’ll be respectful and not trash the place, but on a much grander scale! And, without getting too gross, let me just say that Jack is a very good houseguest.
I think, despite all the new and interesting things I was experiencing, the moment which surprised me the most was the split second of understanding which passed between Jack and I just before we reached our peak. If there was anything which remotely scared me that night it was that moment. But, obviously, I didn't have much time to analyse my uneasiness over that zinging spark as there was much back arching and skin raking to occupy myself with.

When we were spent we curled around each other on the bed, our legs still entwined, my head resting against his chest listening to the pounding of his heartbeat gradually slowing. We didn't talk for a long time but eventually Jack stirred and, brushing some of my hair off my face so he could see me clearly, asked, "All good?"

"All good," I confirmed with a satisfied smile, feeling like the Cheshire cat. I walked my fingers up and down his chest for a moment and then added, "I guess now I'm just waiting to hear the lesson I learnt today.

Something in his attitude subtly changed as I said those words. Not being able to see his face I wasn't sure what'd happened, but his body had certainly tensed and then he released a heavy sigh which sounded almost…disappointed? I was about to ask him what was wrong when he said slowly, "Sometimes you need to learn your own lessons and I reckon this is one of those times."

There was a moment when I considered brushing aside his words and asking him instead what he'd meant by the sigh and the sudden rigidity, but then what he had said sank in and I focused on that instead.

The more I thought about it the more sense this new lesson made to me. He was right, he couldn't tell me what to take away from the experience and I decided that, once I'd stopped feeling like someone had shot me with a tranquiliser dart, I'd figure out exactly what I'd learnt.

"You're smart," I murmured, then, as the enormity of what we had done sank in, I began to giggle weakly against him.

"What?" he asked, beginning to rub my back in rhythmic strokes.

"I just did it," I sniggered, sounding like a grade 7 student in her first class of sex education.

Jack chuckled and kissed the top of my head fondly. The feeling of his arms around me, warm and protecting, was lulling me into drowsiness and I began to have to fight to stay awake. As if he knew exactly what I was doing Jack reached over and turned off the lamp. Resting his cheek against the top of my head he murmured quietly in the darkness, "It's alright, Tally, go to sleep if you want to, I've got you."
And, although this may seem to others to be a strange thing to say, to me it made perfect sense. Immense changes were in the air but the knowledge that Jack was looking out for me gave me the reassurance I needed to close my eyes and drift off to sleep.
Chapter 18

According to all movies everywhere, the next morning was supposed to be a haze of golden light and naked limbs, but apparently Jack hadn't read the script because when I woke up the next morning I was alone in the bed.

But don't feel too bad for me, I got at least one movie moment the night before. See, during the night I’d woken up and, without even saying anything, Jack and I turned towards each other. We’d stared at each other for a long while and then Jack had gently kissed me and gathered me against him. How movie-like is *that*?

I think I enjoyed this second time with Jack even more than the first as the whole thing was so soft and silent. I was floating in a strange world where I felt both asleep and yet wide awake. It was the asleep part which had me moving slowly and languorously against him, without any need for conversation (something very rare for me!) simply enjoying the quite murmurs of pleasure from us both. Which means, I suppose, that it was the awake part which made me first turn to him, wrap my legs around him and, oh yeah, remembered to grab a condom out of the drawer.

It's funny how much difference one night can make, isn't it? I mean yesterday my having sex with Jack was still hypothetical and now…well now I'd done it twice!

It’d been different from how I had imagined it, isn't everything? But when I'd thought about how my first time would be Jack had seemed like a shadow, almost as if he wasn't really there. In reality, however, he had been so *present*, so completely there in a way that he never used to be.

Having said that, you will remember that as much as Jack had been present during the night he certainly wasn't there the next morning.

I lay still for a moment, wrapped tightly in his doona, allowing a whole range of emotions that I couldn't identify to flow through me. I felt almost serene, as if allowing the emotions to simply race past without trying to catch and inspect them had allowed me to be at peace with them. I'm sure that doesn't make sense so, in layman's terms, suffice it to say that I was feeling pretty good about myself and my decision the night before, oh alright I was smug!

Eventually stretching and turning my head, I saw a folded piece of paper propped against Jack's lamp. Feeling my heart skip a beat I reached out and plucked it off the cabinet. Opening it I read: *Had a lecture at 9 and didn't want to wake you. Call me if you need anything. Jack.*

I read the note three times over and eventually a slow grin spread across my face. It was just so Jack!
Realising that he wasn't the only one who had a lecture to get to I dragged myself out of Jack's bed and then froze as muscles I didn't even know I had pointed out that they'd had a hard night and would much prefer to just rest up for a while. Being the stoic little bunny that I am, I ignored these muscles and proceeded to wince my way through my morning toiletry routine and even managed to get to my lecture on time.

I had a great day as even the aches and pains turned out to be a blessing in disguise, providing me with a constant reminder of the activities of the night before. Perhaps it wasn't really the best thing to be thinking about during my lectures and tutes but it ensured that they weren't nearly as boring as they usually were!

I was obviously looking so pleased with myself that, as we walked out of the last lecture of the day, Adam asked me what my secret smiles were all about.

"I guess I'm just happy," I replied vaguely.
"Really?" he asked. "Because I'm feeling vaguely suicidal after that lecture."
"Poor, Adam," I said, patting his arm sympathetically, "Never mind it's the mid-semester break next week so you'll have some time to recover."
"Yeah," he agreed, holding a door open for me as we exited the Law building and started walking up towards the centre of campus, "what're you going to do on your week off?"

Thinking about how the first Monday of that week would be the 20th of September the smile fell from my lips. "Probably just go home and hang out with the folks," I said, realising that Matt, Jack and I hadn't really discussed what we were planning. Still, it was obvious that, at least on Monday, we would have to go back up to Bridunna.

"That's probably what I'll end up doing too," Adam said easily, obviously not having noticed my subtle change in mood. He suddenly laughed and nudged me, "Hey, what kind of uni students are we? On our week off we just want to go home and see our parents. How sad is that?"

"Pretty sad," I laughed with him.

And we were both still chuckling and thinking up ideas about how much sadder we could make ourselves (including turning down a Rory party for a cheese and wine gathering, and Adam dropping out of the band so he could use that time to learn to knit) when we rounded a corner and smacked straight into a couple approaching us from the other side.

Grabbing onto Adam to steady myself I didn't realise who we'd run into until a horribly familiar voice asked, "Talia?"

"Brad?" I said, jerked my head up so quickly I think I may have got whiplash, and there he was, standing there looking just as shocked as I felt, with his arm around a girl I'd never seen before.

"How are you?" Brad asked, and he actually sounded discomfited.
"Good," I answered shortly, although I wasn't trying to be rude, I was just so surprised to see him. I'd completely forgotten about Brad over the last week or so.

He looked at me closely and I squirmed uncomfortably, feeling as if he actually knew what I'd done the night before. "Yeah, you look good," he said quietly before seeming to realise what he was saying and pulling himself together. "This is Chloë by the way," he said, squeezing the girl next to him tighter against his side.

"Hi," I said, forcing a smile upon my face and hoping that it didn't look too fake.

There was a pause and then Adam cleared his throat and I blushed a deep red, realising I still basically had my arms around him from when I'd lost my balance. Straightening up and stepping slightly away from him I gabbled, "Oh sorry! This is Adam."

"Hey." Adam's voice sounded like Matt and Jack's had on the night he came to pick me up for the Kung Fu marathon and, when I looked up at his face, I saw that he was virtually scowling at Brad. A quick look at Brad confirmed to me that the negative feelings were entirely mutual and I barely managed to repress an exasperated sigh, honestly sometimes you wouldn't think men had evolved past the caveman stage.

"I didn't know you'd got a boyfriend," Brad said, hostility fairly radiating out of him. I stared at him for a long time, trying to figure out what his problem was and, also, whether he was picking up on some vibe that I had going. You know, an 'I slept with someone last night' vibe that made him say what he had. Deciding to play it cool I said slowly, "Well I suppose that makes two of us."

There was a pause as Brad looked at me in complete bemusement and then Adam piped up.

"I think he's talking about me," he said, and I laughed loudly in surprise and relief.

"Adam's a mate of mine," I said, still chuckling.

"Oh." Brad looked annoyed at himself and then said, in an unnecessarily loud voice, "Well Chloë is my girlfriend."

The poor girl looked extremely embarrassed at this and I felt a bit sorry for her. All this angst wasn't really anything to do with her, so I took pity on her and smiled amicably.

"Yeah, I guessed as much, you two make a cute couple."

Before Brad could make some idiotic comment Chloë smiled prettily and said, "Thanks, well we've got to go now so…"

Picking up on her lead I nodded, "Yeah, us too. It was nice meeting you Chloë, bye Brad." Before grabbing onto Adam's arm and hustling him away.

When we'd rounded the next corner and were well out of earshot I released Adam's arm and smiled at him apologetically.

"Sorry about that," I said with a grimace, "Apparently there isn't enough room on the planet to avoid an awkward meeting with an ex-boyfriend."
He smiled his gorgeous wide smile and shrugged. "No problem," he said easily, his tone in stark contrast to the one he had used with Brad. "So I take it that was the guy you'd broken up with on the Wednesday before my gig?"

"Yep," I replied shortly, before adding, "And if you're thinking 'why the hell would she go out with that wanker?' then the answer is 'I have no idea.'"

We continued walking for a little bit longer until we came to the fork in the path where we always parted ways; me going along the pavement which led towards the apartment, he going down to the rooms where the band practiced.

It was strange but the meeting with Brad, far from making me annoyed had, in fact, raised my spirits to the highest they'd been all day and, as I have already said, they'd been pretty high beforehand. You see the most wonderfully momentous thing had occurred to me as we'd walked away from Brad and his new girlfriend. And this wonderfully momentous thing was that I didn't care. I couldn't give a damn about his new girlfriend or him come to that. I'd once heard someone say that you know a relationship is truly over when you feel nothing for the other person, no love and no anger, and that was exactly how I felt about Brad.

Which has truly fantastic implications for what had happened the night before. When I'd first asked Jack to enter into the arrangement with me he'd been worried that I was doing it to get back at or with Brad. I'd been sure that it wasn't the case and now I had proof! I wasn't doing anything because of Brad, my motives were entirely pure. I could have sung!

~*~

This happiness continued that night when Matt returned home, bringing pizzas and a wide smile. Apparently he and Tommo had had a great couple of days back home, despite their initial misgivings, and Matt was in a stellar mood.

When he marched in Jack and I were sitting on the couch, textbooks littering the floor around us, as innocent as innocent could be. Jack had tried to talk to me when he'd returned that afternoon, but I was having none of it. I knew he would just want to be serious and I didn't want to think of the consequences of the night before just yet. So I had distracted him with the alluring prospect of yet more studying and, although he gave me a look which said 'I know exactly what you're doing', he didn't push the issue.

"God!" Matt exclaimed as he caught sight of us. "Do you two ever do anything else but study?"

I let out a short peal of laughter at this and both Matt and Jack looked at me strangely, although for two very different reasons. I covered up the moment by reaching for the pizza boxes and beginning to stuff my face.
And the rest of the evening passed uneventfully. I can't really describe the strange, inner contentment that that evening gave me. It was a subdued happiness, (and I know that sounds totally contradictory) one that hummed away just beneath my skin.

I couldn't believe that, despite the momentous stuff which had happened, the three of us still worked so well together. Jack and Matt were still able to concoct a disgusting mixture of pizza and ice cream and agree it was their best invention yet. I was still able to throw my crust at Matt when he got in the way of the TV. And, perhaps the best sign, I was able to doze off late in the evening listening to Matt and Jack talking quietly about football with no hint of weirdness between them whatsoever.

The next couple of days passed fairly uneventfully. I remembered to ask Matt and Jack about our plans for the mid-semester break and we decided that we would go home for the week. Strangely, even though Jack had agreed without hassle to take the trip back up to Bridunna, he exchanged a weird look with Matt at the end of the conversation which seemed to hold meaning simply for the two of them. Matt had sighed and said, somewhat cryptically I thought, "We'll see." And nothing more was said about it.

Anyway, apart from doing some more studying, Jack and I had no real interaction over the Tuesday and Wednesday. Matt always seemed to be around and so no opportunity arose where I could put my new found confidence in my body and in his to use. Basically I experienced my first real case of sexual frustration and let me tell you, it isn't pretty! I would find myself looking over at Jack constantly and feeling almost predatory. Each second spent in his company meant I had to make an extreme effort not to jump him.

By Thursday, I was at breaking point and I knew that something had to give. Luckily, on Thursday there was a two hour window where Jack and I finished our uni classes before Matt, and Jack and I both had a night off from our respective works. Jackpot!

And so it was that on Thursday afternoon Jack barely made it through the flat door before I flew at him and flattened myself against him. Stepping up onto my tip-toes I kissed him ferociously, gripping his shoulders tightly and rejoicing in the feel of him after what felt like an eon without it.

Judging by the way he buried one hand into my hair and wrapped the arm of the other tightly around my waist I'm guessing that Jack had missed physical contact with me as well. Which, all things considered, was very gratifying.

After some of my immediate need for Jack had been sated, but my long term need had been heightened, I pulled away and grabbed onto his arm, drawing him towards his bedroom.

"Tally…" he tried to say but I whirled around and put a finger over his lips.

"Nuh-uh," I said sternly, "No, I'm not ready to talk yet and, besides, we don't have time. So shut up and keep moving!" He grinned at this and I took this as agreement to my plan.
Once in his bedroom, we tumbled straight onto the bed and, in between urgent, toe
curling kisses, divested ourselves of most of our clothing. There was minimum foreplay as
neither of us was willing to waste the precious time we had on build up, we pretty much cut
to the main event.

Hugging each other tightly, we rocked together, Jack covering one side of my neck
and shoulders with kisses, me simply tucking my head underneath his jaw and closing my
eyes as I let a beautiful wave of desire, contentment and bliss all rolled into one wash over
me.

Time, I discovered, kind of melts away while you're joined with another person. The
only measure of time passing is the different levels of intimacy, desire and satisfaction. By
the time we were reaching our peak we could have been together for hours or just a few
minutes, I really couldn't tell.

Our pace picked up, the feeling of frenzy increased and I lifted my head free from
against Jack's neck, worried that in my ecstasy I would jerk up and break his jaw. At the very
moment of release I found myself biting hard into Jack's shoulder so that my howl of pleasure
wouldn't float downstairs and be heard by nosy Haley and her bingo-obsessed aunt. Jack's
reaction was to squeeze me as tightly as possible against him and go very still. We stayed like
this, frozen in the moment, for a little while and then eventually we both relaxed and I looked
in horror at the damage I had done to his shoulder.

"I'm so sorry," I panted, eying the red patch with clear imprints of my teeth.

Tipping his head down to look at it Jack simply smiled and said, "That'll be one hell
of a hickey come tomorrow morning." Then kissing me lightly on the mouth he got off the
bed and held out a hand to me. "Come on then," he said, "we both need a shower."

And, although, it was still light outside and Jack was able to see me completely, I took
his hand and followed him out into the bathroom without any qualms. I think I was too
content for qualms.

We took turns having showers because, romantic as showering together would no
doubt have been, our shower simply wasn't big enough for the both of us, and then returned
to our separate rooms to get dressed and, in Jack's case, put bedclothes into the wash.

As we both settled down on the couch to begin yet more studying there was the sound
of three cars entering the car park down below in quick succession. One was quite obviously
Matt's and the other two were familiar as well so it was no surprise when, a few minutes later,
there was a great trudging noise coming from the stairwell outside the flat door and the next
moment Matt, Tommo, Samsa, Micky, Haley and Simone entered.

Matt stopped dead in his tracks when he saw that I had a textbook open on my lap and
then threw his arms out to stop the others coming any further into the room.
"Hold it!" he called out. "They're studying so we're going to have to go somewhere else."

Micky let out a loud groan at this and Jack shook his head. "Nah, come on in," he said
easily, "I've still got two and a half weeks before the test and, the way things are going, I
should be alright."

"You sure?" Matt asked, still not lowering his arms.
Jack nodded and our friends pushed past Matt to go and throw themselves on the
various pieces of furniture littered around our lounge room.
I scooted over so that Simone could come and sit next to me and Haley sat down next
to her and Jack so that the couch was squashed with the four of us. Jack and I were on either
ends and for once I was grateful that Haley was between us because I wasn't tempted to look
over as much as I would have otherwise. In fact I turned my head resolutely away and talked
to Simone, knowing that with all our friends present someone was bound to notice if I spent
all evening staring at Jack with my tongue hanging out.
Simone didn't seem to be totally her bouncy self, but she was certainly improved from
the Sunday and I'd seen her plenty of times during the week to reaffirm that she was still my
best friend regardless of the fact that she was clearly keeping something from me.
As had happened numerous times before, the TV was soon switched on, the fridge
was raided and the battle over chair possession soon began. However, unlike other gatherings
of the eight of us, there was a strange undercurrent running through the conversation. My
blood ran cold as I realised that something was very wrong in the way we were all interacting
with one another. I couldn't pinpoint what it was exactly, but there was a certain weirdness
flowing between us. I caught Jack's eye and knew that he was feeling it too and was as
surprised and alarmed as I was.

'How could they know?' I asked myself over and over again and the answer I kept
coming up with was, 'They don't.' And my subconscious was right, the weirdness wasn't
centred around Jack and I, it originated from Simone, Micky and Samsa.
They weren't looking at each other and when they had to speak to one another it was
in clipped, hard tones which, at least for Sam and Simone, were really out of character. Even
Matt and Tom who can usually be counted on to be supremely oblivious looked at me
throughout the evening, eyebrows raised and I could only give an imperceptible little shrug
back in return as I was as much in the dark as they were.
As the evening wore on and the conversation became more and more strained, I knew
the likelihood that we would be able to get away from this gathering without a blow up was
extremely slim, there was too much emotion flying around for everybody to get out
unscathed. I didn't, however, realise that I would be the catalyst for the explosion. I thought
that when I turned to Tommo and asked, in a way that I'd done countless times before, if he
would look at my car sometime when he had a free moment because I could hear a strange rattling when I was driving, that I was on a safe subject.

But barely had the words left my mouth when Micky suddenly spoke up, "Don't bother Tommo," he snarled, "the stupid bitch has probably just dropped a packet of tic-tacs under the seat or something."

There was a moment of stunned silence.

Then Tommo, the first to recover, looked over at Micky in disgust. "Watch your mouth," he said before looking at me and nodding, "No problem, how's tomorrow afternoon?"

"That's great, I'll bring it over at about 1? Is that-?" I said as I tried to follow Tommo's lead and steer the conversation back on track after Micky's odd interjection. It seemed that Micky was not to be deterred, however, as he spoke up again, over the top of my reply to Tommo, his tone fairly dripping with poisonous hatred of me.

"Sure, check her car and fix the rattling noise, but do use all a favour mate and let out the brake fluid while you're there. Lord knows the world can only improve if she's not in it."

The aftershock from this statement reverberated around the room leaving in its wake a row of faces frozen in disbelief. Sure Micky didn't like me, we all knew that, but to go so far as to say, even as a joke, that he wished me dead? And in front of my brother, his friends and my best friend? Well, that was just plain suicidal!

I sat still on the couch hating Micky with every fibre of my being for messing up our friendship group. Because, without a doubt, that was what he was doing. The irony of being cross at him for changing the dynamics between my friends was, naturally, lost on me at the time because I was too busy being self-righteous. Ah the joys of being obliviously hypocritical!

It was only a matter of time before someone exploded and my money was on Jack. I braced myself for the fury and inevitable violence which was going to ensue and was just beginning to argue with myself whether I would try and stop Jack and the other boys pummelling Micky into pancake or just let them go for it when Simone suddenly leapt off the couch.

Before anyone could stop her she had strode over to Micky's chair and slapped him so hard his head snapped to the side and her ring left a nasty graze down the side of his cheek.

"You bastard!" she hissed, sounding nothing like the sweet, caring Simone I knew and loved. "You absolute bastard. I hate you! Everybody hates you. You know it's not Talia's fault, you know it, but you just can't stop yourself, can you? You misogynistic, egotistical prick!"

I looked to see how Micky was taking this barrage, but he wasn't even looking at Simone, he was glaring to the side as if he could pretend that she wasn't there. But I knew he
 wasn't succeeding in blocking her out, his chest rose and fell irregularly and his cheek must have been smarting like nothing else.

"Well that's it, I'm through with even being in the same room as you. Go to hell!" And with this last screech of fury Simone whirled around and ran from the flat, slamming the door loudly behind her.

There was a moment when we were all frozen in tableau, then Micky slowly stood up and stalked across the room, his back and shoulders stiff, his gait restrained as if he was trying to stop himself running hysterically out like Simone had. Reaching the door he turned back as if he was going to say something and, for the briefest moment I thought he looked almost apologetically at me. Then he turned away and exited the flat.

As the door closed behind him I got to my feet and looked round at my shocked friends. "Uh," I said uncertainly, "I guess I'd better go and fulfil my best friend duties." Moving round one of the armchairs I grabbed my jacket off the table and headed for the door, hoping that I wouldn't meet Micky outside as I would probably do a lot more than just slap him.

"No!" Sam's voice was a shout as he jumped up from his chair and grabbed my arm. I jerked round in surprise and was alarmed by the look of urgency on his face. He was pale beneath his spiked hair and I wondered if he was ill. Obviously realising I was startled by his shout he lowered his voice and reiterated, "No, I'll go," in a slightly quieter tone.

I shook my head and tried to pull my arm free from his tight hold. "No, I'll go," I insisted. "She's my best friend and she's obviously upset, I have to go and find her."

"I said no." Sam spoke sternly as if he was a parent lecturing a child and my mouth dropped open in shock. Sam had always been the joker of the group, I'd only heard him use that serious voice on the footy oval and I certainly wasn't one of his players. Before I could protest further, however, he spoke again in that hard voice. "You stay here, it's better if I go, trust me." And, so saying he released my arm with a little push which had me fighting to keep my balance, crossed the room and was out the door before I could voice another objection.

Feeling as if the world as I had known it had just come crashing down on my head I looked back round at Matt, Tommo, Jack and Haley and saw that the four of them were just as perplexed as I was about what had just happened. Dithering for a moment over whether I should ignore Sam's commands and go and find Simone anyway I saw Jack shake his head slightly and knew that he was right. Clearly this had something to do with whatever it was that Simone didn't want me to know and, for now, I was going to respect her wishes. If things got worse however…well I wasn't making any promises.

Rejoining Haley and Jack on the couch I grabbed a cushion and, hugging it tightly against myself, murmured, "Geez, do you think there's something they're not telling us?"
And in the next second a voice, so quiet for a moment I wasn't even sure I had heard it, said, "Pot calling kettle."

I jerked my head up and wondered for a moment if my subconscious had got so cocky it was going freelance outside my brain, before I saw Haley's expression and knew she was the one who had said it.

Okay, so I'd been wrong earlier. At least one our friends (if you could call her that) did know about Jack and me. Or at least that's the only thing I could imagine she was talking about with her pot and kettle nonsense. Looking around quickly I saw that none of the boys had heard her so I looked at Haley hard, waiting for her to play her hand. She pretended she didn't notice me staring at her, but I was extremely determined and, after a time, she relented and looked at me. As our eyes met she blushed a deep scarlet in a way I had never seen her do before and then suddenly stood up.

"I'm not feeling well," she said in a high-pitched voice, "so I think I'll go home. Thanks for inviting me up, Matt."

My brother was involved in a detailed conversation with Tommo over whether Sam and Michael's obvious crack-up was going to affect the game on Saturday and so simply waved to acknowledge her thanks. Jack, however, was looking between Haley and me and, when Haley skedaddled out of the flat without so much as saying goodbye, he looked at me and frowned.

Oh come on! I thought angrily, I didn't say anything rude to her, I was just wanting to see whether she was going to clarify her statement at all. I honestly hadn't intended to scare her off, I can't help that she's as weak as water when it comes to me. I couldn't say all that to Jack with Matt and Tom in the room, however, so I satisfied myself with shooting him a dirty look and starting to pull apart one of the tassels on the cushion I was holding.

"Well," Matt said, stopping talking to Tommo and looking round at Jack and me as we all heard Haley's door close downstairs, "that was fun. Anybody got any ideas what that was all about?"

We all shook our heads and when Matt looked at me sceptically I shook my head even harder.

"Honestly, I haven't even seen Micky over the last couple of weeks, let alone done something to make him wish me dead," I said honestly. "And maybe Haley really was feeling ill." OK so that last bit wasn't quite so honest but there was really nothing else I could say.

Oh God, I thought, it's starting already. The lying and the having to build a bigger web of lies to contain the initial lies. My head buzzed with all the uncomfortable strangeness of the evening which had started out so well and I just wanted to escape. "I'm not really in the mood to hang out." I said abruptly, standing up again. "I think I'll just go to bed."

"You alright?" Jack asked, his expression worried but I smiled and nodded.
"Yeah fine, just tired. Night guys."

And I crossed over to my room and shut the door firmly behind me. I knew that sometime soon I would have to do some serious thinking but, for now, I just wanted to ignore it and go to sleep.
Chapter 19

I was determined not to think.

Yes, I put a total embargo on all brain activity because to think was to come to some realisations and to come to those realisations was something that I knew I didn’t want to do. By the end of a long Thursday night spent tossing and turning, I was wishing that I didn't have a brain at all…or at least a conscience within it.

Still, when my brain caught me weakening my resolve not to think (meaning just as I was about to drift off to sleep) it would send one short, urgent message: Haley knows!

I was so unbelievably screwed and I couldn't for the life of me figure a way out of the mess I was in. What with whatever was going on with Simone, Micky and Sam, it felt as if all control of the situation had completely left my hands. And so I baulked at taking any drastic action and determined to wait until I could talk the Haley situation out with Jack. Maybe he could talk to her…or maybe he knew a good hitman.

It seemed even the weather was feeling angsty on the Friday. Obviously drawing inspiration from the stress radiating among my friends it was extremely wet and windy, verging on cyclone material.

I had one of those crappy days which seem to stretch on forever. I’d started the day with a double lecture, which was so boring I almost slid into a catatonic state, and when poor Adam tried in vain to get a laugh out of me he ended up being asked by the lecturer to shut up or leave.

I dropped my car off at Tommo's place as planned so he could look for the cause of the rattling noise and then proceeded to do all my little jobs (grocery shopping, etc) on foot in the pouring rain. Staggering home with my shopping I realised that, at the rate I was going, I wasn't going to make it to work on time. I didn't even have time for a shower so I just pulled on dry clothes, gave my hair a quick blow dry and ran for the bus which, of course, pulled away from the stop as soon as I approached it. So then I had to wait for the second bus and was, in fact, late. After being told off by my boss I set to work piling books which, by the time the end of my shift rolled around, had my arms aching.

As I stepped outside I found that the lashing rain and whipping wind had increased rather than decreased in ferocity and I was drenched through in about two seconds. Naturally I had to wait over half an hour for the bus home, still getting soaked by the rain as the bus shelter could do little against horizontal droplets. And, when the bus finally did arrive, it was so full I had to wedge myself against two high school boys who spent the entire trip leering at my breasts which were showing through quite clearly as the rain made it look like I’d entered a wet T-shirt competition.
It’d been a momentously hideous day and the final straw occurred when, as I was making my painful way up the stairwell to my flat, the fluorescent lights above me flickered and then died, leaving me in complete and utter darkness.

"Oh for god’s sake!" I shrieked in frustration. "You can't be serious!"

Not many people know this about me, but I'm not overly fond of the dark. I don't mean I need a nightlight or anything, in fact when I'm trying to sleep the darker the better, but when I'm still walking around doing stuff it freaks me out a little. I always imagine someone is there in the dark about to pounce. Stupid I know, but I can't help my overactive imagination, in fact the more I try to make my brain think about something else the more it invents scary things hidden in the dark. My brain is so disobedient!

It’s one of my theories that people with no imagination can't be scared of the dark. I mean if you can't create some scary serial killer with a whole back story and the deep rooted psychological reasons for his disturbed behaviour what is there really to be scared of?

Anyway, serial killers aside, the dark presented a very real danger for me at that moment as I had to make my way up the stairs in complete darkness. Not even a smidgeon of light made its way into the stairwell so I gripped the handrail and slowly, painstakingly slowly, began creeping up the stairs, placing both feet securely on a stair before moving on.

I congratulated myself when I reached the landing safely and then began the next difficult task of the day which was trying to find the keyhole. After gouging holes in the wood with my key everywhere, it seemed, but the actual lock part I finally struck gold and opened the door, letting myself into the flat.

I’d had some vague notion in my mind that the flat wouldn't be as dark as the stairwell, as if it would be a very localised power cut, but I was proved wrong immediately I stepped in the door. With rain clouds covering the moon and stars, the streetlamps out and not even the flicker of the microwaves display screen to light my way it was going to be a very dark evening. And cold, I soon realised, because the heating was off too.

"Alright," I said quietly to myself, my eyes still straining futilely in the dark to pick up any outline at all, "there is absolutely nothing to be scared of in the dark."

Taking off my sodden shoes and socks so I wouldn't walk mud and all sorts into the carpet, I began to creep slowly forward, my arms outstretched, feeling like I was playing blind man’s bluff, but all the more freaked out because I wasn't blindfolded. This strategy seemed to work and I estimated I'd shuffled about half way across the room when suddenly I felt an extreme pain in my toe and realised I'd stubbed it hard against a chair leg.

Letting out a little howl of pain I grabbed at the source of the pain and hopped ungracefully on the spot as I tried to rub away the sting.

"Yeah," I said through gritted teeth, "there's nothing to be scared of in the dark except for the f-ing furniture!"
"Tally?"

That'd been Jack's voice, he was here? I immediately stopped hopping and grumbling and looked towards where the voice had come from, expecting to see Jack standing in the doorway to his room.

"I didn't realise you'd be home," I said in surprise, feeling a weird swoop in my belly as it lifted at the knowledge that Jack was near and then sank again as I remembered the conversation I had to have with him about Haley.

"The front window at work was smashed by a branch so we knocked off early," Jack replied, "Matt and I went to the bar for a bit then I thought I'd come home and get some more study in," there was a pause and then he chuckled, "but I guess that idea's defunct now."

So Jack was home and Matt wasn't. Great, now I couldn't even use the presence of my brother as an excuse to put off having 'the talk' with Jack. I sighed quietly in the darkness wishing that I could rewind the clock and go back to the Thursday afternoon when things had seemed so good.

I heard Jack begin to move and then his footsteps stopped and he said, with another rueful laugh, "Where do I think I'm going? I don't know where you are. Marco!"

I forced a laugh too and replied, "Polo."

His footsteps started up again, moving slowly and cautiously towards me. "Marco?" He said again and then there was a loud crash, "Oh damn, that hurt!" he exclaimed.

"Polo. Are you alright?" I asked, unable to stop a genuine smile lifting my lips then. Maybe the dark wasn't so bad after all, perhaps instead it was an opportunity for me to duck out of my responsibility to be serious like I had so many times in the past. After all, I couldn't have a serious conversation with Jack stumbling about performing, by the sounds of it, various slapstick routines, could I?

"I'll live," Jack grumbled. "But don't think the dark hides the fact that you smiled when I walked into the wardrobe. Marco."

"Oh, is that what you walked into?" I asked cheekily, "Great, now I have a proper visual, thanks. Polo."

Eventually, after much more 'Marco' and 'Polo'-ing, Jack found me and, without even thinking (which seemed to be my usual approach recently), I threw my arms around him and gave him a great bit hug. Jack seemed surprised by my behaviour, but didn't comment on my sudden need to crush his ribs, simply resting his head atop mine and gently stroking my back.

During this moment every instinct inside me screamed that what I was doing was crazy. Surely I'd seen enough films to know that sod’s law would dictate that the lights would come back on just as Matt walked in the door and he would see Jack and I as we were? Haley already knew, why was I risking further discovery? But I pushed this feeling aside
because, honestly, what are instincts anyway? Just pieces of the psyche that weren't deemed important enough to be proper cognitive thought, that's what!

"You're soaked through," Jack murmured into my wet hair after a little while and, as I pulled away from the hug, I realised he was right. I bet I had even made wet patches on his clothes, but I hadn't thought and he didn't complain.

Of course, as soon as Jack had pointed out that I was practically dripping, I got a bad case of the shivers and wrapped my arms around myself against the cold. The next moment I felt rather than saw Jack move away over in the direction of the kitchen and heard him say, "I'm going to have a quick look round for a torch or some candles, you should get dry and change."

I nodded, but then realised he couldn't see me and said aloud, "Right you are, boss," trying to sound jolly and upbeat but failing miserably.

I carefully made my way over to the bathroom and then, with the towel that I collected there, I inched across the room again and to my bedroom. Once inside I peeled off my sodden clothes and rubbed the towel across my damp, goosebump-ly skin before wrapping my wet hair up into a towel turban and hurriedly getting dressed into my fluffy pjs.

For the briefest of moments, I wondered whether I should close the door and climb into bed, delaying my talk with Jack about Haley until another day, but then I gave myself a mental slap and squared my shoulders. It had to be done and the longer I delayed, the more trouble Jack and I could end up in.

I could hear Jack fumbling about in the drawers out in the kitchen and didn't envy him the job of sticking his hands blindly into our messy cupboards and drawers. He might need a tetanus shot by the time he was done.

Suddenly remembering something, I dropped to my knees and began searching underneath the bed for a box I had thrown down there in March. Finally finding the small white, cardboard box I opened it up and grabbed the hideous novelty candle which was nestled within. Going out into the main room I realised that Jack had continued his search for a light source in his room and I felt my way across to his door and knocked gently on it.

"Hey, did you find any matches on your search?" I asked moving gingerly inside his room and hoping I didn't fall over anything, I wouldn't have got two paces in Matt's room before tripping over something but Jack's floor was, thankfully, less messy.

To answer my question there was the scratch of a match being lit and the next second Jack's face was illuminted by a little flame. Moving forward I tipped the candle's wick towards the lit match and smiled as it caught and a little of the darkness ebbed away.

Jack blew out the match and, for a moment, we looked at each other across the flame on the candle. His normally light eyes looked a navy blue in the shadowy room and I could see myself reflected in his pupils which were dilated against the dark.
So this was it. I knew it and he knew it. Let the serious talking begin.

I tore my eyes from his, feeling disorientated and more afraid of the unknown then I had been when it had been dark. Crossing the room to place the candle on the bedside table I paused for a second before taking a deep breath and turning around. Before I could say anything, however, Jack beat me to it.

"I know you don't want to talk, but I can't put it off anymore, I have something I need to tell you," he said, leaning back against his desk with his arms crossed. I usually would’ve assumed this was an aggressive pose, but in that moment it seemed more a position of defence rather than defiance.

I nodded, my head feeling weirdly heavy because of the towel turban, and then said, "Yeah, I've got to tell you something too," before sinking down onto the edge of his bed. There was a little pause in which I realised that Jack obviously intended me to go first. I stared unseeingly at the weird shadows being thrown up against the opposite wall by the wavering flame in front of me and then pulled myself together and gestured towards the candle.

"Haley gave me that," I said, still finding myself prevaricating despite knowing that it was time to cut to the nitty gritty. "It was an Easter present of all things." I suddenly felt a great swell of hatred towards the oddly shaped lump of wax. "I mean what the hell did she think I was going to do with a large demented looking chicken candle?" I said, my voice a lot louder than I had intended it to be.

"Use it for emergency lighting in a power cut," Jack suggested pointedly, his voice immediately going to the frustrated 'Talia is bitching about Haley again' tone I knew so well. Without even looking at him I knew he'd just run a hand through his hair in irritation.

"I barely knew her though," I ploughed on. "I'd only just met her the previous fortnight and then, lo and behold, she turns up with an Easter present for me. I mean talk about obvious! She wanted in with me so I wouldn't interfere with her plans for you and Matt."

"Oh yeah," Jack said, a bite of sarcasm entering his voice, "I just remembered that she gave Matt and me chocolate eggs for Easter, she was clearly trying to fatten us up so she could push us in the oven later and eat us."

"Oh, ha, ha" I grumbled, not at all amused at how quickly the annoyance on both our parts had risen in so short a period of time. "But that's another thing, how come you two got chocolate and I got that?" I pointed at the candle and wrinkled my nose up at the offending object.

"For god’s sake," Jack sighed, "you're determined to read an insult into everything Haley does. You know how I saw the whole candle-giving situation? I thought it was a nice gesture from a neighbour to someone new in the building."
I seethed at Jack's patronising attitude. Little did he know that Haley had revealed her true colours the night before. Well, I was going to be able to set him straight on that score once and for all.

"Maybe I'm determined to read an insult into everything she does, but you're determined to read good in everything she does," I snapped, getting up off the bed and glaring through the gloom at him. "You're not a girl so you don't see the games she's playing."

"Or maybe I see her for what she really is rather than imagining she's playing games with me," Jack said, his voice even and restrained.

"I'm not imagining!"

"I think you are." I hated that calm, soft voice of his when he used it against me, it was the voice he used with strangers or people who annoyed him. I guess, considering the years we had known each other, I was in the latter category.

"You're wrong!" I really needed to work on my arguing skills. Still, they do say that there is nothing like the direct approach and being direct was one thing that I had in spades.

"I don't think I am." This last flat out refusal from Jack to believe me broke through my flimsy intent to break the news of Haley's knowledge to him gently and I found myself shouting:

"She knows!"

There was a ringing silence after my explosion and then I said, more quietly this time, "Haley knows that there is something going on with us."

There. I'd told him and now he would have to change his attitude. I waited for him to be astonished and alarmed like I had been on the Thursday, or to apologise profusely to me and proclaim Haley an interfering bitch (unlikely considering his code of gentlemanly behaviour, but a girl could dream). Instead he simply looked at me steadily and said, "I know."

The self satisfied smirk died on my lips and there was a strange buzzing in my ears as I took in what he'd said. Copying his stance I folded my arms and searched for the words I needed to say.

"You know?" I finally managed to force out between my shocked lips. Then, as the initial stunned surprise wore off, I narrowed my eyes and demanded, "How long have you known she knows? No, more importantly, how do you know she knows?" I knew that I was saying 'know' way too many times but I was unable to stop myself, my ability to look for synonyms had been knocked right out of me.

Jack, seeming to realise that we were at a crucial point and that whatever he said from here on would be used against him at a later date, straightened up off the desk, his eyes
searching for mine. I, however, was wise to his game and pointedly looked away, waiting for his answer.

"Monday." He said it so quietly I wasn't sure for a moment whether I'd heard him right. "I ran into Haley at Uni on Monday and she pretty much asked me flat out if there was something going on between you and me."

He paused, but not long enough for my mind to stop whirring uselessly over the fact that he'd known that Haley was on to us from the beginning of the week and form a sentence, so he continued on without any input from me.

"She wasn't being accusing about it or anything, she simply said she'd noticed that we'd changed around each other and thought that maybe there was something going on. I said no but."

"But you've always been a rubbish liar and she saw straight through you," I muttered, regaining the power of speech and feeling my thoughts finally click into place. "So you've known since Monday?" I looked at him then and knew that, even in dim light, he could see how angry I was. "And you didn't think that maybe I should know? It didn't even cross your mind to do me the courtesy of telling me that my whole world was about to cave in on my head?"

Jack seemed to take exception to this and I watched with a degree of satisfaction as a little of his calm façade cracked. "Now that's not fair," he said coldly. "I tried to tell you, twice in fact, but you wouldn't let me talk."

That was what he'd been trying to tell me? I'd thought he wanted to talk through the consequences of sleeping together. If I'd known he had something that important to tell me I wouldn't have shushed him. Still, I didn't feel as if it was my fault and I told him so.

"You should have tried harder," I added and Jack gave a mirthless little laugh which really sent my hackles skyward.

"I don't know if you've ever noticed this, but you're not exactly the easiest person in the world to make listen to something you don't want to hear," he said cuttingly. "It's pretty damn hard to make you do anything you don't want to do, although you've sure as hell got the convincing people to do things they don't want to do down pat."

"Oh, real nice, Jack!" I snapped back, feeling indescribably hurt that he would use my convincing him to help me get over my phobia against me. "But we're not talking about me right at this second, it's Haley I'm worried about. For all we know she's told the whole uni by now!"

"That's pretty unlikely," Jack disagreed, his voice still sharp. "I think somebody would have mentioned it to us by now, don't you? Anyway, for all you think that Haley despises you, she likes me so I don't think she'll say anything."
"Oh yes we all know she likes you!" I sniped. "That's why I think she'll tell everybody, gets me conveniently out of the way so she can have you all to herself, doesn't it? And your attitude now shows that you wouldn't particularly mind that, would you?"

I know you're all thinking at this point 'my god she has truly lost it' and I can't say I disagree with you, Jack certainly didn't.

"What planet are you living on?" He looked as irritated and frustrated as Matt did when I ate the last of the cereal and forgot to buy more and, believe me, that is the most extreme example out there. "Haley is a friend of mine and a good deal saner than you which makes hanging out with her, by comparison, much easier. But that does not mean-" he continued as he saw me open my mouth to point out that he had just admitted that he liked Haley over me, "that I would trade in a second of the time I've spent with you to be with Haley." He paused to let that sink in and then repeated, "Not a second, do you understand?"

Seriously, this boy should work on a bomb squad, talk about diffusing an explosive situation! Whereas moments before I would have quite happily ripped his head off I now felt that life as a pile of mush in his hands wouldn't be all that bad.

I struggled for a moment or two to remember what my point had been and then, as some of the blood I was using to blush profusely made its way to my brain I stammered out, "So...so you don't think she'll tell anyone?"

"No," Jack said quietly and patiently, "I know she won't."

And then, because I'd had next to no sleep the night before worrying about the Haley issue and because I'd had a rotten day and was feeling tired and emotional, I sat down hard on his bed and began to fight very hard against a wall of tears which had risen up my throat.

Within seconds Jack was beside me on the bed and I was turning my face in against his chest and letting him rock me soothingly.

So I'm a coward, I admit it freely, but how could I have brought up in that moment that if Haley had guessed about us, surely other people would too? I couldn't bring myself to shatter the illusion we'd built up that we would get away with what we were doing, it was too sweet a dream.
Chapter 20

The next day was Saturday and, considering it was mid September, that meant only one thing, time to put aside the angst and the drama and unite for one glorious goal – Aussie Rules football!

At least, I hoped that was how things would play out. Matt and Jack were subdued at breakfast and I knew it was because they were worried about how the team was going to play with Sam and Michael clearly with other things on their minds. They left soon after breakfast to meet up with the other boys and do some pre-match training, and I finished some uni work.

It was peaceful in the flat, the weather had improved and the sun was shining in that superficial way it does in early spring which, although it doesn't provide much heat, does make things seem cheerier. Still, as peaceful as the environment seemed, a little bubble of unease bumped around in my stomach that would not ease up even when I finished the assignment. Throwing my books aside, I looked around for something else to do and my eyes fell on the sponge. Perfect! Determined to stay busy I gave the flat a thorough clean, preferring scrubbing at the stains on the kitchen counters then thinking about the fact that it was the 18th of September.

Yep, the next day was going to be the 19th and I still had no idea how the three of us within the flat were going to approach it. Would Matt and Jack simply disappear all day and night like they had done back in Bridunna? Would I be invited along? I supposed the latter question would depend upon whether Jack was intending to follow his usual course and pick up a random girl to forget his troubles with.

The very idea made my toes curl inside my socks and my hands squeeze the sponge so tightly I doubted there could be any moisture left within it. But, I told myself firmly as I had done before, that it wasn't about me it was about Jack and if sleeping with someone other than me was going to be the way he found solace, then I had no right to interfere.

Which is all very well for me to say but how did I really feel? Sick to my stomach at the idea of Jack with someone else. Which was so unbelievably selfish of me considering that my interactions with him were based on nothing but some stupid arrangement I’d bullied him into. Why did I let things get so complicated?

When I’d well and truly run out of things in the flat to take my cathartic cleaning routine out on, I had a quick shower and dressed in all my Grover supporting glory. I was a regular at their games, of course, and so my outfit was down pat, consisting of a pair of jeans, a Grover's Rovers jersey (which Simone had taken in for me so it didn't so much resemble a nightie) and a scarf which my mother had knitted out of blue and green wool to reflect the
team's colours. I drew the line at waving huge pom-poms, but I was still quite obviously a keen supporter.

I'd just thrown my lip balm, phone, wallet, keys, water bottle, and a plastic bag (for if the grass was wet from yesterday's rain, I'm a thinking girl!) into my shoulder bag when there was a brief knock on the door and Simone came in.

She was dressed fairly similarly to me although she had made her jersey more funky and feminine with a jagged neckline, shorter hemline, and even some sparkly rhinestones. She loved to spice up normal outfits and had offered to do the same to my jersey, but I was just happy with it looking a little less sack like. I was glad to see that, like every match day, her eyes immediately went to the long sleeves on my jersey, the cuffs of which drooped down over my hands. Every time she asked whether she could take them up a little bit, but every time I refused pointing out that I liked not having a need for gloves when I was wearing it.

I waited for her to begin her usual spiel, but obviously she wasn't feeling 100 percent herself as her eyes slid away from my cuffs and she didn't make any comment. Disappointed that she was obviously still severely hung up about something, I just managed to repress a long sigh and instead pasted a brilliant smile on my lips.

"Ready to go?" I asked, pretty inanely considering she was the one who'd come to pick me up. Still, conversation seemed to be a little beyond her so I picked up the slack.

We headed out of the flat and down the stairs together and I was on my way out into the car park when I realised Simone had stopped. Turning around I saw her knocking on Haley's door and my heart plummeted as I remembered that we usually took Haley with us to the games.

Haley appeared in her doorway a moment later and I couldn't help but notice that, although she had worn blue and green as a nod to the day's activities, there was not a jersey or supporter scarf to be seen. Well, I thought with some satisfaction, she wasn't going to win over any of the boys dressed like that!

Obviously noticing my scrutiny of her, Haley smiled awkwardly and gave a silly little wave, saying softly, "Hi, Natalia."

She was nervous about my reaction to her. Good and so she should be, I was one tiny piece of restraint away from slapping that perfectly made up face of hers. Grunting by way of greeting and sounding just like one of the boys, I turned and exited the building, heading for Simone's car. As I drew nearer, I saw that there was someone already sitting in it and, tipping my head so I could see better through the window, I realised it was Alex.

Momentarily forgetting that Alex was still going through the 'I hate everything' stage I asked him if he was looking forward to the game and got a very predictable, "Whatever." in return.
Rolling my eyes I opened up one of the back doors and threw myself into the backseat getting the feeling that, what with Simone down in the dumps, Alex in an adolescent sulk and Haley being her usual self, it was going to be a very long afternoon.

The oval at Grove University is situated right down the end of campus and, although there were no stands to sit in, the edges of the oval sloped upwards forming a natural seating area. We situated ourselves directly opposite the centre square, so that we were equal distance from the goals, and right up the front so we could clearly see the action.

As I'd expected, the grass was still wet from the rain from the day before, but as us girls had been going to the games for the last two years we’d all brought our plastic bags and Simone had even remembered to bring a spare one for Alex. Not that he was particularly grateful for it. The way he was going he was lucky if I didn't use his plastic bag to suffocate him by half time.

We were there about half an hour before the game was due to start and so we amused ourselves by talking to the people around us and glaring at the opposition as they lapped the oval in their warm-up.

Although from the outside it would have looked as if everything was normal between the four of us, there was a strange little undercurrent zinging about. Basically there was very little conversation but plenty of significant looks. Haley kept trying to catch my eye and when, through my lapse of concentration, she did she'd smile apologetically, clearly trying to garner my forgiveness. I, on the other hand, was trying to catch Simone's eye and make sure she was alright but she, as I was doing with Haley, was steadfastly avoiding my gaze and I kept catching Alex's eye instead. For some reason he seemed displeased with me as well. It was difficult to tell because he was displeased with everything, but I think he was reserving an extra special look of annoyance just for me. What a lucky girl I am!

All things considered, I was pretty glad when the umpire came forward to start the game. Jack took the clearance, Micky was in the opposition's 50, Tommo was positioned in the Grover goal square, and Matt and Samsa loitered around the sides of the centre circle with the rest of the team spread around them across the oval. The opposition were almost bottom of the ladder and there were no doubts as to who was going to win. The only thing up for dispute was how much the Grovers were going to shellac them by.

As the ground was still pretty water-logged, the umpire threw the ball up to start the game and Jack and his opposition leapt forward at the same moment. Jack's arms were longer and so he was able to smash the footy to Matt in the single fluid movement they’d perfected over years of playing together. Jack took off running and, without looking back, Matt handballed to him knowing that he’d be there. It was like their breakfast morning routine, all instinct, all trust in each other and it was really something to watch. As Matt shepherded the opposition to keep them from getting a tackle in, Jack flew down the centre corridor,
bouncing the footy twice before kicking it precisely to Tommo who took a sensational mark about 30 metres out from the goal posts.

I cheered loudly along with the other Grovers supporters knowing that, from such a short distance directly in front, Tommo was not going to miss. And sure enough he kicked the ball straight through the middle of the two taller posts. A goal in three possessions? The other team was screwed!

The first quarter continued pretty much along this same vein until moments before the quarter siren rang when some tricky midfield work by the opposition meant the ball was kicked into their forward 50 for the first time. The ball was headed for a one-on-one and shouldn't have been a real threat but Micky, the person assigned to the other side's best forward, didn't seem to be paying attention and the footy was suddenly intercepted and, in the blink of an eye, a goal was scored for the opposition.

This wasn't a total disaster considering the Rovers were 32 points up at quarter time, but it caused more than a few raised eyebrows as it was so unlike Micky to come off his assigned man. I knew everybody was thinking the same thing: 'Where was Micky's head at?'

The siren rang and the boys jogged across the oval to huddle together to discuss tactics for the second quarter and to receive instructions from Sam. I could see that Sam paid particular attention to Micky, talking at him steadily for several minutes while the others swigged from their water bottles.

Unfortunately, whatever Sam said to his twin didn't seem to have made an impact because it was only two minutes into the second quarter before the same guy that Micky was supposed to be preventing from scoring took an easy mark and went on to kick a goal seconds later.

And on it went, the Rovers were able for the most part to keep the flow of play going towards their forward, but every time the ball went the opposite way Micky's man would inevitably take advantage of it. The Rover's crowd was beside itself and I just about screamed myself hoarse telling Micky to pay attention.

After about 20 minutes of this I saw Sam take the opportunity of down time due to an injury incurred by the other team to jog towards his brother and knew that, for I think the first time I've ever seen, he was going to order Micky off the ground because of poor play rather than for the blood rule or a rest.

Micky came forward to meet Sam right in front of where we were sitting and I knew immediately that the shit was really going to hit the fan. I looked instinctively for Matt and Jack and saw that they'd positioned themselves nearby, but weren't going to act unless absolutely necessary. This was Sam's territory and when the game was on he was their captain above all other things.
As the twins came face to face and the tension rose several notches, Simone suddenly grabbed my hand and, when I looked at her, I saw that she was even whiter than usual. I looked around and saw that, although many in the crowd were looking excited at a bit of drama, Alex looked uneasy and had stood up as if, like Jack and Matt, he was getting ready to leap in if needed. Haley also looked uncomfortable and like she would rather have been anywhere else in the world at that moment.

"You're off," Sam said flatly, his voice carrying clearly over to us as we were not more than eight metres away.

"I'm what?" Micky said angrily, sticking his face right up close to his brother's. When Sam remained impassive he snorted in disgust and turned away, "No, rack off."

I knew that Sam wouldn't let him get away with that and, sure enough, he grabbed his twin's shoulder and yanked him back before he’d had the chance to go very far. "I'm your captain," Sam said, his face a mask of coldness, "and if I say you're off, then you're off."

Michael took a fistful of Sam's jersey and gave him a little shake as he replied, "I don't think you heard me, captain, I said no."

At this my brother took a short step forward. "Hey, come on, Micky-" Matt began, obviously upset by this outright admission of mutiny, but Micky shot him a death glare and snapped,

"And you can piss off and all, this isn't anything to do with you."

"Doesn't seem like it's anything to do with the game either," Jack interjected sharply, always on the alert to jump to Matt's defence.

"Yeah," Matt agreed, with a quick glance across at Jack, "and, considering we're in the middle of one, can't whatever the two of you have going on wait for a while?"

My brother, ladies and gentlemen, staunch protector of Aussie rules football regardless of the situation.

"I'm the captain," Sam repeated, his eyes boring into Micky's and not seeming to have even noticed that Jack and Matt had spoken, "and so when I tell you to stay on your man, you stay on your man. And, when you screw up and I tell you to get off my oval, you get off my bloody oval." He wrenched Micky's hand off his jersey and shoved him backwards. "Now," he said, his voice loaded with authority, "brother or not, if you're not on the bench in 10 seconds I'm dropping you from the team, not just for today, but for good."

For a moment Micky looked stunned and I knew that if anything would break the hearts of any of the five boys it would be not playing their beloved game, Sam had brought out the big guns with that threat. Everyone was frozen for a moment and then a strange expression stole across Micky's face and I felt the hairs rise along my arms as he stepped up to Sam again.
"Oh, I get it," he said and, out of the corner of my eye I saw Alex shake his head then jog across the boundary line to join up with Tommo in keeping back the others on the oval who’d run over to see what the holdup was. "This hasn't got anything to do with me coming off my mark," Micky continued, his voice low and dangerous, "this has got to do with you and your little secret. What, you think having me off the team will make it harder for me to tell everyone what's going on with you? Hell, I could tell them right now."

At this point Simone jumped up and shouted, "Micky, don't!"

He glanced over at her and, in that moment of inattention, Sam lunged at him. Jack, and Matt rushed forward, but it was too late as the twins were locked together in a tussle that no mere mortal could ever hope to separate.

I stood up as well and held Simone's hand tightly, watching the twins wrestle each other onto the ground and feeling overwhelmingly useless. I caught Jack's eye and mouthed, 'What's going on?' But, as with the other day, he had no answers for me.

"Can't they do something?" Simone gasped, her eyes focused intently on the warring twins.

I was just about to ask 'Like what exactly?' when Sam seemed to get the upper hand in the fight and flattened his brother against the grass, sitting on his chest and holding his arms while Micky continued to thrash wildly.

"You're my brother," Sam panted, his face red and his jersey torn. "Before all that other bull you're supposed to be my brother!"

"What about you?" Micky howled, still struggling furiously. "What about you being a brother to me? Why did you have to screw everything up? Why does everything always end up so shit?"

For the briefest of moments I felt a flash of sympathy for Micky, he sounded just like a confused little kid and I got the feeling that whatever was going on with Sam was just another in a long line of disappointments life had afforded him. His brother, however, seemed to harbour no such sympathetic feelings.

"Oh poor you," he exclaimed sarcastically. "Do you think perhaps some things end up the way they do because of you and your damn attitude? I can't help what's happened, but you and your constant bitching haven't helped any and I'm sick of it."

Micky looked up at him in some surprise and Samsa nodded emphatically. "Yeah, that's right, I'm fed up with you lashing out at everybody around you if things don't go exactly as you want them to. I mean what has Talia ever done to you? Really, when you think about it can you pinpoint a single moment when she has honestly, maliciously worked against you?"

Geez, Sam, I thought sarcastically, thanks for bringing me into this. People on the oval and on the grass around us were looking at me and I felt myself going red as Sam
continued, "The only reason you hate her so much is because she gives you back as good as
she gets and, frankly, I think it's about bloody time that somebody did."

I wondered for a moment whether it would be appropriate to do what they did in parliament and sing out: 'hear, hear!' at this point, but decided against it.

Stopping struggling against Sam for a moment Micky snarled, "You know you just
might be right, she's certainly looking pretty good now compared to you!"

"And knowing that I'm right just kills you, doesn't it?" Sam crowed. "Come to think
of it your biggest problem has really been caused by all the crap you've thrown at Talia this
year. Face it, brother, I'm not the one who's screwed things up for you, you are!"

There was a moment during which I struggled to comprehend how I'd caused Micky's
'biggest problem' and silence descended around me. During this moment everything seemed
to stop so I went ahead and jinxed the situation by thinking that maybe the fight between the
twins was over. The next second, however, Micky's face puffed up weirdly as if filled with
hot air and Simone and I both yelled, "Sam!" at the same time as Micky twisted his arm free
and, in one powerful swing smashed Sam's nose to the side. There was a sickening crunch,
audible even from where Simone and I were standing, and a cascade of blood gushed over
Micky's hand and down Sam's face.

For a moment I, and everyone else it seemed, watched in horrified fascination as the
crimson liquid gushed over the twins before a small whimper from Simone made me snap out
of my daze. I turned towards Simone to see if she was OK and was just in time to catch her as
she swayed and lost her balance. She looked awful and I knew that the sight of so much
blood on top of everything else had really got to her.

I hugged her tightly against my chest, letting her hide her face away from it all, acting
as the strong one but wishing with all my might that I was able to run down to Jack and let
him comfort me as I was comforting Simone.

Alex, who'd cast one quick look up to his sister as the blood had first burst forth,
rushed forward and helped Sam to one side, holding the older boy's head down so that the
blood would drip free rather than go down the back of his throat. Considering Alex's attitude
earlier on, he showed, I thought, remarkable maturity in his handling of Sam. Watching him
with interest I let myself wonder for a moment exactly what his story was, what had
happened that night on the fire escape? My moment of contemplation was short-lived,
however, as the next second Alex had glanced up, seen me staring at him and shouted, "What
the hell are you looking at me for? Get her out of here," gesturing towards Simone.

He was right, of course, it seemed as if Simone was having a nervous breakdown and
she really couldn't stay at the oval so I took hold of her shoulders and hauled my petite friend
off me and forced her into a standing position. With Haley on one side and me on the other
we managed to hustle Simone up the hill, past all the staring people, and out into the car park.
The air seemed to get fresher and lighter the further away we were from the oval and I wondered whether I'd been unconsciously taking shorter breaths during all the commotion.

Digging Simone's car keys out of her bag, I unlocked the passenger side of the car and Haley and I manoeuvred her in. As Simone slumped against the back of the car seat, Haley and I took a step back and then we all looked at each other for a moment in shell shocked silence. Simone's eyes were wet with tears, Haley was biting furiously at her fingernails, and I knew my face was still red as a beetroot.

Saturday football had never been so dramatic! Honestly, and they say girls are the ones who like all the drama.

"I suppose we should go," I said hesitantly once it seemed that neither of the others were going to say anything.

Simone nodded but then, as I went to get into the driver's side she called out and stopped me. "No, you have to go back," she said shakily.

"Huh?" I looked at her in bemusement and she gave a small smile.

"Come on, Talia, I've known you for forever I know that you're dying to go back and see what's going on. And you have to anyway because if you don't we'll never know what happened because the boys will close ranks like they always do."

"I'd like to know if Sam's OK," Haley said timidly and, for once, her shy attitude didn't annoy me.

"Fine then." I didn't need much persuading, Simone was right, I was desperate to know what was happening. I chucked the keys to Haley and instructed her to drive Simone home.

We said our goodbyes and then, as Haley backed Simone's car out of the parking spot, I took a deep breath and walked back towards the oval. I ignored the stares of the other people in the stands and marched straight down to the boundary line and took stock of the situation.

Micky was nowhere to be seen, Sam was sitting on the ground a little way to the left of where I was standing holding Jack's jersey against his nose and the now bare-chested Jack was crouched beside him talking earnestly. Matt and Tommo were surrounded by the umpires and doing a lot of shaking their heads which did not bode well for the results of the match. Realising someone other than Micky was missing I looked around for Alex and saw him wandering across the oval towards me with a cigarette in his mouth. I gestured to him impatiently but the little shit continued his unhurried saunter and it took him almost half a minute for him to reach me.

"Sorry if I've interrupted your little bad boy moment," I said sarcastically, "but where's Micky?"
Alex exhaled a long stream of grey smoke and then shrugged in a way that made me want to give him a smack around the head. Thankfully at that moment Tommo and Matt broke away from the umpires and, noticing me for the first time, Tommo jogged over while Matt headed towards Jack and Sam.

"Where's Micky?" I repeated when Tommo arrived next to Alex.

Infuriatingly Tommo also shrugged and I began to suspect that the boys were closing ranks just like Simone had said they would. However, Tommo clarified his answer slightly by adding, "He took off when you guys did. Simone okay?"

"Yeah," I answered him, but my attention was not fixed on him but rather on Jack and my brother. As Matt had reached Jack and Sam he’d shot Jack a cold look and began talking to Sam as if his best friend wasn't even there.

A little trickle of ice slid down the back of my neck and I choked out, "What's up with Matt?" Hoping I didn't look as freaked as I felt.

"Oh," Tommo's mouth twitched with a smile and I felt myself beginning to thaw as surely it couldn't be that serious if he was smirking, "can you see that massive hickey Jack's got on his shoulder? We all saw it when he took his jersey off to give to Sam but he won't tell us who he got it from and Matt's pissed." His smile widened, his teeth very white against his dark skin. "My money's on Kristin, just for the record." He chuckled, although he made sure he was looking neutral when Jack joined us a second later.

"We're going to have to take Sam to the emergency room," he sighed raising his eyebrows slightly at Alex's smoking but not saying anything. "He reckons his nose is broken. So what did the ump's say?" he asked, turning to Tom as if he hadn't just informed us that one of his best mates had a broken nose in the same breath.

"We've had to declare a forfeit." Tom shook his head in disgust and Jack echoed his sentiment.

"Damn, we could’ve taken them, too. Sam will be furious."

I glanced across at Matt and Sam who were beginning to walk over. One look at Sam's face told me that 'furious' was a bit of an understatement.

"I'b gon kilb hib," Sam snuffled when he reached the group of us.

"Which I think," said Matt as we all looked at him in confusion, "is bloody nose language for I'm going to kill him."

In any other situation, I would’ve found this funny, but my lips didn't even twitch.

As we walked out to the car park I looked around at the boys; Tommo was grim faced, Sam was hidden behind Jack's now very bloody jersey, Alex was moody, and there was a certain layer of frost in the way that Matt and Jack were acting towards each other. Basically everybody looked miserable and, unbidden, Micky's words echoed in my head: 'Why does everything always end up so shit?'
Chapter 21

I woke up the next morning with such a leaden stomach that I was surprised I hadn't sunk right through the mattress and to the floor. As the reality of what day it was hit me, I jack-knifed upright in bed and just about gave myself whiplash turning my head to see what time it was. I was terrified the boys would've slipped out early leaving me, as was the usual case, completely in the dark about what they were spending the 19th of September doing. I was relieved, then, to see that it was only 7 in the morning and even more relieved when my ears picked up Matt's snores coming from the room over.

Lying back and pulling the covers tightly around myself, I tried to get back to sleep but soon realised that it was going to be impossible. I couldn't trick my brain into thinking that this was just another Sunday morning, it wasn't possible.

Sighing, I pulled back the bedclothes and decided to hit the bathroom while the boys were still in bed. I took a risk of them disappearing on me, but at least I wouldn't have to fight for the bathroom or go in after one of them. I hate going into the bathroom after Matt or Jack have been in there. Somehow, and I'm really not sure how, they manage to completely soak the entire room. It always looks like someone has turned a sprinkler on in there; with water all up the walls, spattering the toilet seat, droplets sliding down the mirror and so on every time they go in there to have a shower. And don't even get me started on the towels! They're always sopping wet! It's like they start to towel off when they're still in the shower!

Anyway, the bathroom was mercifully dry and I took no time in stripping off my pjs and stepping into the shower. I played with the temperature until I got it one step away from painfully scalding and tipped my head down into the spray, letting the water sluice down my neck and back. I stayed this way for several minutes, trying to release the tension in my shoulders, before reaching for my shampoo.

A while later, as I was just rinsing the conditioner out of my hair, I heard the bathroom door open. We do have a lock on our bathroom door and I did lock it, but it's used more as a way of letting people know someone is inside rather than actually to keep people out. By the use of a knife or just a fingernail it was more than easy to simply unlock the door and walk in. I myself had done it to Matt and Jack many a time if they were just doing stupid things with their hair and I needed to brush my teeth or something.

Still, it was a little disconcerting to hear the door open when I was in the shower so I called out, "Hey I'm in here!"

Only to hear Matt's sarcastic reply, "Oh so that's where the sound of running water is coming from."
I opened my mouth to tell him to 'sod off' but before I could he spoke again, his voice loud so I could hear him over the hiss of the water.

"Come out, I want to talk to you."

Thrown by his serious tone, but I suppose not all that surprised that he wanted to talk to me, I shut off the water and started to wring out of my hair.

"Do I have to do this talk naked?" I asked after a moment when the beads of water on my skin began to cool.

In reply, Matt stuck his hand around the shower curtain and held my towel out to me. I took it and wrapped myself up before pulling back the curtain and stepping out of the tub.

My brother was leaning back against the sink, his arms folded and his face serious beneath the fuzz of beard which was the result of him slacking off from shaving for a couple of days.

"Are you sure this couldn't wait until I've gotten dressed?" I grumbled, feeling the shock of cold air on my damp skin even more keenly when not kept in a cocoon of mist by the shower curtain.

Matt gave me a look which clearly told me that there would be no cutesy time wasting that morning. "I'm your brother," he said flatly, "it's not like I'm looking."

There wasn't really anything to say in response to that so I shelved my concern over the chill and sat down on the toilet set, using the edges of my towel to begin to dry myself off.

"So? You wanted to talk to me?" I asked, wanting to get the ball rolling and interested, although a little apprehensive, to know what he had to say.

"Yeah." Matt's voice had that husky, early morning, edge to it. "You need to leave."

So there was really going to be no dillydallying around then! I froze, my hands stilling.

"Excuse me?" For one terrifying moment I thought he meant he was kicking me out of the flat for good, images flew through my brain, times my brother could have seen Jack and me together. I was just beginning to berate myself for letting Jack put his arm around me at the uni bar (I mean seriously, anyone could have seen that!) when I caught his eye and realised that, although he was certainly serious, Matt wasn't furiously angry or hurt like he would have been if he knew what was really going on behind his back. Feeling some of the terrified stupor I was in slipping away I asked cautiously, "How do you mean?"

"Don't pretend you don't know what today is," Matt scoffed, seeming not to have noticed my momentary freak out and instead fiddling distractedly with his facial hair. "Look," he abruptly turned away from me and began filling the sink with water, "today has nothing to do with you so just go to Simone's or something, okay?"
I blinked in surprise, my forehead wrinkling with confusion. I could see Matt's face reflected in the mirror above the sink, he still looked dreadfully solemn and yet I didn't believe what he'd just said. There was no way he really thought that I was just going to walk away from the flat, from Jack, on today of all days. I sat in dumbstruck silence watching as Matt splashed water over his face and reached for the shaving cream. As he lathered his face I was reminded uncomfortably about the last time I’d watched someone shaving and I tore my eyes away from the mirror and looked determinedly at the floor instead.

"Go on then," Matt said as he pulled the razor down his cheek leaving clean, shiny pink skin in its wake. "I'll call you tomorrow and let you know when you can come back if you're worried we're going to go up to Bridunna without you."

This snapped me out of my astonished silence and I jerked my head back up to face him, feeling my wet hair slap against my neck as I did so.

"You think that's what I'm worried about?" I snapped unbelievingly. "God you are so stupid! I'm worried about Jack!" I heard my voice reach the outer edges of the realm of shrillness and took a deep breath to keep the hysterical note at bay. "Of course I know what day it is, but I'm not just going to leave," I continued more quietly but with definite purpose. "I live here too and Jack is a huge part of my life," much bigger than you know, I added silently, "and there is no way I'm going to let you shut me out."

Matt had been speed shaving as I spoke and at the last he pulled away and a drop of crimson blood appeared on his neck where he had nicked himself with the razor. He swore under his breath and wiped at the blood, smearing it across his skin, before meeting my eyes in the reflection of the mirror.

"I can't believe you're throwing a hissy fit about being left out," he said angrily. "For god’s sake, Talia, for once in your life think about somebody else, would you? This isn't about us shuttling you out, this is about this day being none of your business!"

He attacked his bristles with the razor once more as I gaped at him in disbelief, stung by his harsh words. Matt's colour was high from his anger and I knew that I would have two spots of colour on my cheeks too, as if I had been slapped physically instead of just figuratively. The family resemblance at that moment would have been very obvious.

As I felt my disbelief morph slowly into anger I stood up off the toilet seat and threw my brother a defiant look. "Forget it, Matt," I said, summing up all the cold authority I could muster. "The answer is no, I'm not leaving."

I made to march out of the bathroom, but my fingers had barely brushed the doorknob when I felt Matt's hand close around my elbow and pull me back around to face him. More blood from his cut had beaded out and dripped down his neck adding to the rather scary look he was giving me.
"You make it sound like I'm asking you," he said steadily and my mouth closed with such a snap that my teeth clacked together painfully.

My Matt, my jokey, irreverent, larrikin Matt was nowhere to be seen and instead a strange, stern stranger stood before me. Presumably seeing my alarmed look he released my arm gently but his expression did not soften any. Reigning in my childish impulse to hit him and tell him he was mean, I wrapped my towel tighter about myself and exited the bathroom, my head held high.

Turning the corner to go to my bedroom I came face to face with Jack. Obviously looking like a total stranger was going to be a running theme for the day because he looked really weird. His mouth was stretched into a taut, painful looking grin and he held himself so tightly I thought that at any second he was going to go 'boing!' and jump around the room like a released spring. Basically he looked like a maniac and, despite what had just happened in the bathroom, I turned to Matt, who’d followed me into the main room, for explanation and comfort.

He touched my shoulder briefly in reassurance and said to me, in a pathetic imitation of his real relaxed tone, "Ready to go then?"

I was about to try an appeal to Jack to let me stay when I noticed Matt's eyes flicker over my head to Jack and then quickly come back to rest on me and I suddenly realised what was going on. Turning back to look at Jack I said accusingly, "You asked him to tell me to leave, didn't you?"

Jack froze, his eyes glazed over with that funny, faraway look I thought I'd cured him off, and all the fight went out of me. "Fine, I get it," I said softly, finding that at least I was relieved that the coldness between Jack and Matt had dissolved. "I'll get dressed and go to Simone's."

Still, as I skirted round Jack and disappeared inside my bedroom, I couldn't help noticing that my heart was pounding heavily with disappointment and worry as it made its, by now familiar, descent down into my feet.

~*~

The next day I woke with a start and realised that my mobile was shrilly ringing somewhere nearby. Struggling to get my bearings, I raised my head and realised that I was in Simone's room and that my best friend was fast asleep in the bed beside me. Knowing that she wouldn't be able to sleep through too much more of my phone's high pitched song, I looked around the room for my mobile and finally spotted it buzzing and jittering on top of her chest of drawers. I launched myself at it, unfortunately forgetting that I was still under the bedclothes, and managed to bind myself tightly in Simone's sheets as I did so.
I landed with a heavy thud on the floor, the jolt from my fall knocking my mobile off the chest of drawers and causing it to fall into my lap. Picking it up and hoping that after all my effort it wouldn't just ring out I flipped it open and pressed it against my ear.

"Hello?" I gasped and was relieved to hear Matt's voice on the other end say, " Took you long enough."

I leant back against the chest of drawers and caught my breath. "I didn't realise when you said you'd call me in the morning that you meant at the crack of sodding dawn," I said with feigned grumpiness, after all he is my brother and the non-niceties have to be observed. "How's Jack?"

I heard Matt give a big sigh and then he said quietly, "Not great," in such an understated way that I felt my heart squeeze with a little clutch of pain.

"I'm on my way," I said quickly, flipping shut my phone before I even heard Matt's reply.

It was as I was struggling to stand up that I realised that my ever so graceful fall had pulled all the blankets off Simone as well and that she was propped up on her elbows blinking sleepily at me.

"Sorry," I said guiltily, pulling at the sheets and managing to free myself from the cocoon. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"It's cool," she yawned, "I would've been more cross if you'd snuck out and not told me how Jack is."

I pulled a face to show that the answer wasn't a good one and she nodded understandingly.

Simone was such a sweetie, she hadn't even asked any questions when I'd shown up the day before and asked if I could stay the night, she'd simply given me a hug and let me in. She'd then proceeded to spend all of her Sunday thinking of ways to distract me from what Jack and Matt were doing and had been so ingenious in her plans that she'd partly succeeded.

I gave her back her covers and then proceeded to get dressed in double quick time. Simone walked with me to her front door and I was just about to say goodbye when the door suddenly opened and Alex appeared in the doorway, framed by early morning light. I looked at Simone in surprise and saw that she, like me, was hoping that this didn't mean Alex had been out all night doing goodness knows what.

He didn't look surprised to see us, indeed it seemed he had been counting on us being there as he thrust his hand out towards me and said, "Here." In his cupped hand I saw two gumnuts nestled in his palm and I looked at him questioningly as I scooped them out.

"What-?" I began to ask but he brushed past me without saying anything else and moments later the door to the guest room slammed shut as he went inside.
I looked to Simone for an explanation and was surprised to see that her grey eyes were becoming wet with tears. "He wants you to put them on the graves," she said miserably, gesturing towards the gumnuts in my hand.

For a moment I was thrown but then I released a soft, "Oh," of understanding as a memory of a 9 year old Alex marching around with the 7 year old twins trotting along in his wake floated to the forefront of my brain. I felt a little lump rise in my throat as I remembered how inseparable the three of them had been ever since they had met when Alex, at age 6, had moved with his family to Bridunna and declared himself the leader of their little gang.

"Don't you remember how they used to cut up our gumboots to make slingshots?" Simone asked with a tremulous smile. "We never had any footwear for wet weather and every time we went outside we had to be wary of being hit by gumnuts. Alex taught the twins to be such good shots."

The corners of my mouth lifted up into a small, sad smile as I thought about those days.

"I saw him put gumnuts on their graves that first year," Simone continued. "He must have kept doing it, although I've never seen him after that first time."

We both blinked back tears at the image of bad boy Alex sneaking annually to the gravesides of his two childhood friends to secretly mourn them.

I couldn't spend too much time ruminating on Alex's sadness as Matt and Jack's were still too much at the forefront of my mind to allow room for the fifteen year old's as well, but as I slipped the gumnuts into my pocket, I knew that I would think about him later. Grabbing my bag, I gave Simone a quick hug and promised to call her the next day to let her know how things had gone before hurrying down the steps and across the street to my car.

As frantic as I was to get back to my boys, I drove from Simone's to the flat as safely as I knew how, well beneath the speed limit and with extra special care on the corners; the knowledge that a car crash had led us all to where we were niggling at the back of my mind.

As I pulled into the car park I saw Matt walk out of the building and head towards his car with a big bag. I parked crookedly but didn't bother to correct it, instead throwing open the door and hurrying over to my brother.

"Jack says he isn't coming back to Bridunna," Matt said without preamble as I reached his side.

"What?" I asked, sure I couldn't have heard him right. "He doesn't want to visit the graves, or his father, or anything?"

"Nope." Matt shrugged. "He's been like this ever since we came to uni, I've had to basically drag him into the car the last couple of years, but this year he's really determined not to go." He turned and slammed shut the boot of his car before adding, "So, your turn."

"My turn?" I asked. "What do you mean?"
"I mean," he said with a sigh, "that I’ve seen you two become closer this year and so maybe you have a chance convincing him, hell, I've never seen him refuse you anything."

How right you are! I thought to myself grimly, my mouth drying up at the realisation that Matt had noticed something though perhaps not as much as he should have. Strangely enough, however, my mind almost immediately moved on, I didn't really care at that moment if Matt was close to the truth about me and Jack, I just wanted to make sure that Jack was okay.

"Fine, I'll give it a shot," I said, glancing up at our flat's windows and starting to make a move towards the building before being stopped by Matt's voice gently saying, "Hey."

I turned back and Matt gave me a quick one armed hug, pulling me in against his side and holding me for a moment. It was over as quickly as it had begun, Matt pulled away without another word and gave me a little shove towards our building, but I knew what he’d meant by the hug. It was an apology for the day before, a reassurance that whatever else was going on he was always there for me and an expression of other cheesy things that he’d never, ever put into words.

I flew up the steps to the third floor and let myself into the flat, immediately wrinkling up my nose at the stale stench of alcohol, cigarette smoke and other grotty 'wild night' smells that I was glad I couldn't identify. Picking my way through the furniture, and noting that one of the beanbags had somehow ended up on top of the wardrobe, I made my way over to the kitchen and poured a huge glass of water (adding a splash of orange juice to aid Jack's hydration) and grabbed the paracetamol pack, thinking as I did so of the many times I’d done this for Matt.

Thus armed with my hangover artillery, I went to Jack's door and knocked softly upon it. There was no reply so, after a moment, I turned the knob and entered the room. The curtains were drawn and all was in darkness although I could just make out the lump on the bed that was Jack. I put the water and paracetamol down on the bedside table and went over to open the curtains just a crack, the little bit of light revealing the utter disarray his room was in. It looked as if Jack had stumbled into the room, knocked over the lamp on his desk (consequently breaking the glass shade and light bulb) before staggering into the bookshelf and knocking a wave of books down onto the floor. In amongst this mess were his clothes from yesterday, all of which looked stained and rumpled.

All in all it was a pigsty and it smelt pretty gross too.

"Oh Jack," I sighed, picking my way over to the bed and sitting down on the edge. "What did you do to yourself last night?"

There was no reply from the mound so I reached for the water and rattled the paracetamol packet above where I supposed his head was. I was rewarded by a groan and
then his face, crinkled and red, emerged from under the covers. He looked at me blearily through watery and bloodshot eyes and then shook his head a fraction.

"No," he said flatly.

"No?" I repeated in astonishment. "What, you fancy being a martyr to the hangover? Don't be a moron, drink up."

He pushed my hand holding the water away and heaved himself up into a sitting position, the covers falling away and revealing that his chest was bare. I saw the hickey I’d given him, faded but still definitely there, on his shoulder and then, I felt my chest tighten in dismay, my eyes fell on the other scratches upon his shoulders. Scratches that I’d definitely not put there, scratches which he could only have obtained last night…

I tore my eyes away from his chest and looked again at his face from which the red was fading leaving him a grey/green colour, almost a khaki. He looked a real mess, but he was my Jack and my heart went out to him at the sight of him looking so despondent and ill. I was about to reach out and wrap my arms around him when he ruined the moment somewhat by running a hand through his somewhat greasy hair and saying crossly, "I know Matt’s sent you in here to convince me to get up and go with you to Bridunna, but I've told him and now I'm telling you, it isn't going to happen. So just forget it."

Deciding to fight that particular battle later I refrained from answering and instead proffered the water and paracetamol again. He looked at me steadily, letting me know that he wasn't going to drop the subject, but he did take two tablets and swallowed the water in three gulps. When he’d finished, I stood up and held my hand out for the glass, preparing to go and get him some more but he took hold of my wrist and pulled me back down onto the bed.

"Look," he croaked, "Matt’ll be waiting down in the car park so let's get this over with now. I'm not going to Bridunna today and the sooner the two of you realise and accept it, the sooner you can start the trip."

I rolled my eyes and shook my head in annoyance. "Oh get real, Jack," I said in exasperation. "You know as well as I do that there’s no way that Matt and I are going home without you."

He shrugged, then winced as if that movement had jerked his head a little too much in the fragile condition he was in. "You have to," he said simply, his voice strengthening, "your parents will want to see you."

"Yeah and it's not as if Mum would kill us or anything if we turned up without you," I said sarcastically. "This trip isn't for me and Matt, Jack, it's for you, we want to help you." As soon as the last words were out of my mouth I wanted to shove them back in as I knew immediately that I’d used the wrong tactic.

His expression darkened with anger and he snapped, "Well save your help for those who need it."
Damn him for his pigheaded independence!

I thought for a moment of retreating and using a soft approach, but since I never really had practice using that strategy, I decided to go with my tried and true method of direct attack.

"You do need it; in fact I can't think of anyone else right now who needs to go to Bridunna quite as much as you do," I said matter-of-factly. "What about your family? Don't you want to, I don't know, pay your respects or whatever?"

"They're dead," he stated flatly and I found myself clutching at his hand in response to the sadness in his voice he was trying so desperately to hide, "so I doubt they'll notice whether I'm respecting them or not."

"Fine," I said more soothingly, "maybe it won't make much difference to the twins or your mum, but what about you…and" I suddenly remembered that he did actually have a living relation, "what about your father? I'm sure that he….well he must…" I trailed off not able to say with any surety whether his father would give two hoots whether Jack was there or not. I continued to struggle with finding words which wouldn't sound too hollow and Jack gave a wry smile.

"Don't strain yourself trying to think of something nice to say about my father, you could be here for a long time and there is no guarantee there even is anything." He looked past me to his jumbled bookcase and stared at it so intently that I wondered whether he was attempting to set it on fire with the power of his mind.

"I'm sorry that you're trying to pretend that going home doesn't matter to you," I said quietly after a moment, "because I know that it does." I saw him open his mouth to object and ploughed on, "And just think for a moment, if you get this scholarship today will be the last 20th September you'll be able to have at home for a few years."

"I appreciate how much effort you're putting into this, Tally," he said gently, pulling his hand away from mine, "but the answer is still no."

I tugged in frustration on my ponytail and then gave him a poke in the chest (still avoiding thinking about the appearance of the scratches). "Look, big guns now," I said frankly, "I honestly think that if you don't go you'll regret it later on."

Jack sighed and turned his face away from me, depriving me even of the ability to read his expression. "Let me worry about my regrets, it's not your job," he said coldly. "I'm a big boy I can make my own decisions and deal with the consequences myself."

"Of course you can!" I howled in exasperation, getting up onto my knees and tugging at his shoulder, trying to make him turn back to me. "But don't you understand that Matt and I aren't just going to stand by as you make what we see as a huge mistake? You would do whatever you could to help the two of us, wouldn't you? Well, why won't you let us help you? You are so frustrating!"
"You know I would do whatever I could to help any of the Davenports but this is different," he insisted.

I released him and sat back, the wind taken out of me. "No it isn't," I said flatly, "so don't pretend it is."

There was a very long, very weighted, pause during which a scrap of electric blue lace in amongst Jack's clothes caught my eye and, on further inspection, I realised that it was a bra. I felt as if I had been hit in the stomach by a wrecking ball, but after a couple of deep gulps of air, I bravely pushed the feeling aside. I'd promised myself that I wouldn't get upset at evidence that Jack had slept with someone else on the 19th and I was determined to stick to my resolve.

Still, the discovery did aid my next move as I stood up off the bed and turned to look down at him, feeling at once very sad and very angry. "I hate that you don't trust us to help you," I said, calling all the emotions I was feeling up into my voice and giving him the full brunt of it, "but I'm not going to make you do something you don't want to do." I walked to the door, but then looked back, "Oh and I meant it when I said that we're not going to Bridunna without you so just bear in mind that you will be the one to explain to mum why we didn't turn up this weekend."

With that final, threatening sentence hanging in the air, I left his room, closing the door firmly. Once outside in the dishevelled main room I leant back against the door and paused for a moment, listening intently.

A couple of seconds passed and then I heard the rustle of bedclothes as Jack got out of bed and then the sound of drawers opening and closing as he began to pack what he needed for Bridunna. With a satisfied and relieved smile I turned towards my bedroom to do the same.
Chapter 22

The three of us, Matt, Jack and me, stood on the veranda of the Whitby family house and looked apprehensively at the solid front door.

It was very still around us, no breeze rattled the leaves on the trees or bushes and all the birds seem to have taken up residence on somebody else's property that afternoon. The midday sun shone down onto the ground, slowly gathering strength as it climbed higher in the sky, although its heat couldn't penetrate the bubble of gloom cocooning me and the boys.

The garden was filled with scraggly, mostly dead, plants but the fences around the paddocks looked sturdy and well maintained as did the horses grazing within the fenced off areas. I'd always thought that Mr Whitby had taken better care of his horses than anything else, including his own family.

As I looked at the brown brick house before me I thought how strange it was that I knew Jack so intimately and yet his childhood home was so foreign to me. I'd only been inside the formidable house a handful of times, none of the visits being either particularly pleasant or long lasting. The general vibe of the place didn't encourage hanging around.

"Well, let's get it over with then," Jack said suddenly, making me jump. He strode forward and knocked smartly on the door and I waited, hardly daring to breathe, for the appearance of the most hated man in Bridunna (taking into account that Alex could hardly be considered a man yet).

After a couple of seconds there came the sound of heavy footsteps on the other side of the door and all three of us tensed up, Jack squaring his shoulders as if he was about to go into battle. I suppose, in a way, he was.

The door opened and Mr Whitby stood in the shadowy entrance way glaring fiercely at us. His expression didn't even flicker as he saw who was standing on his doorstep but then I suppose he was expecting our visit. He was a tall man, pretty much the same height as his son, with watery blue eyes and short hair that, although once as dark brown as Jack's, was now a silver grey.

As I silently scrutinised him he looked steadily at Jack before saying coldly, "Must be that time of year again."

To most observers it would seem that Jack had not reacted as his father spoke, but I was watching him so closely that I'd seen him give the tiniest of flinches and I shifted uneasily, wishing Matt didn't stand between us.

Jack didn't seem to need my support, however, as he said, in a tone even icier than that of his father's, "You don't need a visit from me to remind you of the date, Dad."
I was glad to see that Mr Whitby didn't seem to have anything to say to that, but not so thrilled to see his eyes leaving Jack and falling onto me, the weight of his gaze making me feel as if he was physically pushing me down.

"Needed to bring a girl to protect you this year did you?" he said distastefully, continuing to stare at me as if I was something nasty someone had left on his doorstep and I suppose, depending on who you were, you might argue that that was what I was.

"Who do you think I need protecting from? You?" Jack laughed harshly. "Not likely."

There was an extremely awkward silence as Jack and his father sized each other up and I began to wonder if perhaps Jack did need protecting. Goodness knows that I would jump right in if he needed me but in terms of physical fighting I wouldn't exactly be much help. Maybe I would just shove Matt in there.

"Talia, didn't you say that you wanted to see the horses?" Matt said suddenly and loudly as if he'd heard my thoughts and didn't think much of them.

I craned my head up to look at him incredulously. "Um, no," I said honestly, wondering what he thought he was doing.

"I'm sure you did earlier, come on I'll show you." He took my elbow and began tugging at it, but I stood my ground.

"I've seen horses before," I said through gritted teeth, looking between him and Jack and wondering why my brother wanted to abandon his best friend at this pivotal moment.

"Yeah, but everyone knows that Whitby horses are something else," Matt said stolidly.

Trying to release his hand from me I said, with forced calmness, "Sure, but I've seen Whitby horses before as well."

"Talia, come with me now," Matt abandoned all pretence and pulled at me so insistently that I had no choice but to follow him, looking longingly over my shoulder at Jack.

"Don't spook the horses," Mr Whitby shouted after us and Matt had to tighten his grip on me to stop me turning, marching back, and giving him what for.

When Matt and I were a good distance away from the house and in front of a paddock full of well bred horses, he released me and I glared at him reproachfully before rubbing pointedly at the place he'd grabbed me.

"Why did you do that?" I demanded looking back at the house and seeing that Jack and his father had gone inside. "Now Jack is alone with that prick and I promised we'd be there for him."

"That prick is his dad," Matt reminded me, hitching himself up onto the fence and looking down at me critically.
"I don't care," I snapped leaning against the wooden slats of the fence and looking through the gaps at the horses, "I hate him. And you hate him too so don't get all sanctimonious on me."

"Easy tiger," Matt chuckled darkly. "I'm not pretending that Mr Whitby is my most favourite person in the world, I'm just saying that he has his reasons for his attitude."

Not this excuses bull again, I thought crossly. "Yeah, and the major reason is because he's a complete and utter bas-" I began but Matt cut me off by saying,

"Look, do you know what happened on the day of the crash?"

This made me rock back and look up at him in surprise because the events of that day had always been very murky to me and I attributed some of the murkiness to deliberate blocking of information by Matt.

I remembered clearly what I'd been doing that day. It'd been term holidays and Simone and I had gone to the creek reserve which stretched down the entire length of Bridunna. It had been an unusually warm day for the season and we'd stretched out along the bank with some friends and gossiped to our little 12 year olds hearts’ content. We’d been there a couple of hours when suddenly a police car and the community ambulance and fire engine had raced past, sirens blaring. Simone and I had looked at each other in alarm, knowing that in the direction the cavalcade was heading there were only three properties – my family’s, the Smith’s, and the Whitby's. We’d scrambled up the bank and started pelting down the road after the emergency vehicles and I remember thinking over and over again 'Please don't let it be mine, please don't let it be mine, please don't let it be mine…' I hadn't been able to form a coherent sentence, even in my brain, but I knew what I’d meant.

Simone and I had run about half a kilometre when I’d seen my dad's ute driving up the road towards us. I’d almost cried at seeing him so obviously unhurt, but when he'd jumped out and pulled Simone and me into a big hug, I knew that something had to be very wrong. My dad had bundled us into the truck and driven us home, refusing to answer any of our questions and taking the back way, which told me that whatever had happened had taken place on the main road linking the properties to the rest of the town.

At home, Mum was on the telephone, tears dripping down her face and this had scared me more than anything as you don't get much tougher than my mum. Simone and I had huddled together on the couch as my parents bustled about making more calls and talking in hushed voices, but eventually, I hadn't been able to take any more and I’d shouted at them to tell me what was going on. It was then that my parents had sat down and told us that there had been an accident and that Jack's mum and brother had been killed. Lizzie was in a critical condition but still alive and had been airlifted to the city.
Mr Whitby had gone in the aero-ambulance with his daughter, but Jack, who’d been the first to discover the accident, had gone with Matt to the police station to wait there. That was where the majority of phone calls were coming from.

After that, Mum, Dad, Simone and I had sat silently on the couch waiting. Occasionally Mum made a cup of tea, but she didn't drink it and, by late afternoon when news finally came through, there was a line up of mugs with tea in various stages of tepid sitting on the table in front of us.

The news wasn't good. Lizzie hadn't made it and, on receiving this news, Matt and Jack had run off and no-one knew where they’d disappeared to. This was extremely worrying as, in our small community, everybody always knew everybody else's business and for two of the town's golden boys to be missing without any clues to their whereabouts was extraordinary.

As dusk had fallen, Simone had gone home and so only Mum, Dad and I were there when, at about 7:30, Matt and Jack had staggered into the house covered in dust and smears of blood and with their clothes torn.

Remembering this I looked up at Matt with a furrowed brow.

"You went missing," I said slowly, "and when you came back you looked like you'd been fighting."

Matt nodded, his sandy hair falling across his face. "Yeah, it was the only way I could get him to come home with me. But what I meant was, did you know what happened that day before the accident?"

I shook my head, hauling myself up onto the fence beside my brother.

"There was a big delivery of hay for the horses that day and Jack and I were hauling bales from the truck into the shed," Matt said, his face turned from me as he toyed with a twig. "We hadn't been at it for very long when we heard Jack's parents screaming at each other." He grimaced. "Not exactly unusual considering the two of them, but Lizzie and Paul were firing gumnuts with Alex at a target they'd set up down the driveway and we didn't want them to hear so-" Matt threw the twig aside and stared unseeingly at the Whitby house, a pained smile twisting the corners of his mouth, "- we started singing random songs at the top of our lungs. Probably traumatised the poor kids more than hearing their parents…"

He trailed off and I felt a little lump rise in my throat at the image of a 14 year old Jack pushing aside his own pain and trying to save his brother and sister from it. Matt seemed to understand what I was feeling as he nodded again.

"Yeah, it was pretty much like that. Anyway, about half an hour later we were just taking a break and Mrs Whitby stormed out of the house with a suitcase. She was screaming like a nutter and we could tell that she was drunk again. Mr Whitby came out onto the veranda and shouted some pretty bad things at her, I remember he spat at her and I got so
angry at him." Matt's smile turned almost rueful. "I thought then that the day couldn't get much worse, talk about jinxing it."

I stared at the house, filled with hatred for the man who was inside probably at this very moment cutting down Jack like he'd cut down his wife.

"The twins had come running up as she'd come out of the house and we went over too," Matt continued in a low, steady voice. "Mrs Whitby grabbed Paul and Lizzie and shoved them into the car and then told Jack at to get in as well. He said no, that she was drunk and shouldn't be driving and she went nuts at him too, saying that he was just like his father and that if he was going to be like that then she didn't want him as a son anyway, stuff like that."

I sucked in an astonished breath and stared at my brother unbelievingly. "She said that?" I asked, amazed and then choked with anger as he nodded. "Why would anyone say that to their kid?"

"She was pretty out of it," Matt said before holding up his hands as if in surrender when I rounded on him angrily. "I'm not saying what she did wasn't completely off, but by then I reckon she was so angry and drunk she would have lashed out at anybody, Jack just happened to be there."

I shifted slightly on the fence fully aware of how easy it was to unload on Jack, having done so myself, although never as badly as that. I saw that Matt was gearing himself up to continue and I thought fleetingly that this conversation was probably the most I'd ever heard him say on any subject other than footy.

"Anyway, while Jack was distracting his mum, I was trying to get the twins out of the car. I don't know what was wrong with them, they were too scared or stunned or something and they wouldn't budge so I had to reach into the backseat and try to get them out myself. I'd just managed to unbuckle Paul when Jack's mum saw what I was doing and went feral at me too. Before I could get either of the kids out Mrs Whitby drove off, Paul was basically hanging out the door and Jack and I were shouting at him to jump but he wouldn't leave Lizzie."

He stopped and I realised that he hadn't chosen to fall silent but rather he was too choked up to continue. I sat stunned for a moment processing what he'd told me and reeling at my own inadequacies in comforting my brother. There seemed to be nothing to say and I just blurted out, "Oh Matt!"

"Don't 'Oh Matt' me," he said gruffly, as always acting as if he was allergic to emotion. "I didn't tell you about all this before because I didn't want you to get stupid about it. It's not like I sit around every day thinking about what happened, it's just every once in a while that I stop and think how different things could've been if I'd just managed to get the
twins out." Pushing the hair out of his face he shrugged grimly at me, "Oldest cliché in the book, right? 'If only' and all that."

"Clichés are clichés for reasons," I answered, wondering how I'd managed to live with the two guys for years and not pick up that there was more to the story than the accident. It was like every time I felt that I was getting to know what Jack was all about I discovered there was something else which kept him separate from me, something that I just could never understand. I was beginning to realise as well that maybe he’d been right all along in shielding me from his grief, maybe I wasn't prepared to face it.

It wasn't the best time to have an epiphany so I shoved my thoughts aside to concentrate once more on Matt who’d managed to push past the lump in his throat and keep talking.

"So she drove off, nearly skittling Alex who was still on the driveway, and I was shouting at Jack that we had to tell his dad that she’d taken the twins, but he ignored me and set off down the driveway after them."

"On foot?" I asked in astonishment.

"On foot," he confirmed. "He wasn't thinking straight," he added as if I hadn't gathered that from what he'd told me. "So I went inside and told his dad and the next thing I know we're barrelling down the road in his ute and he's swearing non-stop under his breath. Seriously, I was a 14 year old boy and he said things that day that I'd never heard before, pretty out there stuff."

"We could've only gone, what, a couple of hundred metres or so, when we saw huge gouges in the gravel on Devil’s Elbow and I knew immediately that the car had skidded off the road and down into the creek. I mean, Devil’s Elbow is bad enough to drive sober, but drunk?" Matt shook his head at the thought then sighed. "Jack was already there, down in the creek bed pulling at one of the backdoors. After that it's kind of muddled, I remember that there was no water in the creek but that the mud was like quicksand, that we were all shouting at each other and that I called an ambulance but that's it."

He stopped again and I became aware of a wetness on my cheeks. It was a shock to realise I was crying as I'd suffered none of the usual side-effects such as a swollen face or chest tearing sobs that I usually got. Maybe it was like when you hurt yourself really badly but really quickly and, instead of crying, your eyes simply fill with tears at the shock of it all. I was sure that the proper crying would come later.

Thinking about where we were in the day's events, I supplied, "And then you were taken to wait at the police station." I knew at least this part of the story.

"Yeah," Matt agreed, "we were there until we found out Lizzie hadn't made it and Jack bolted."
I wiped at my face, knowing but not caring that I was smearing dirt from the fence across my cheeks. "What did you do?"

Matt shrugged once more. "Chased him, caught him, fought him, what else was I supposed to do?"

We fell silent then and simply stared at the house waiting for Jack to come out again, after all there didn't seem to be a hell of a lot left to say.

In the end we didn't have to wait too long. It was only a few minutes after Matt had stopped talking that the door that led onto the veranda banged loudly and Jack stormed across the yard and took off across one of the paddocks.

I jumped off the fence, brushed myself down and went to follow him, but Matt called me back sharply.

"Where do you think you're going?" he said, not having moved a centimetre as Jack had emerged.

"We've got to go and see if he's alright!" I exclaimed, gesturing towards Jack's rapidly diminishing figure.

"Not yet we don't," Matt said firmly and, when I looked at him mutinously he shook his head firmly, "I've been doing this for longer than you, trust me, we wait."

I sighed but came back to the fence and leant against it, bowing to his superior knowledge on the touchy subject of the 20th of September.

We waited what I think must have been about 15 minutes before Matt landed beside me on the ground and jerked his head to indicate that we should follow Jack. He was, of course, nowhere to be seen by this time, but Matt seemed to know exactly where we were going and marched off confidently, with me trotting in his wake.

We cut through three paddocks and then jumped a final fence to emerge out on the road directly opposite Devil’s Elbow. I suppose, in hindsight, I should've realised where we were headed but I hadn't really been thinking.

I didn't see Jack at first as my eyes were immediately drawn to the reinforced safety barrier which had been erected after the accident to try and prevent anyone else crashing down into the creek below. It was usually a dull, grey colour, but today it was festooned with what must have been hundreds of flowers and cards placed there presumably by the town members. I saw Matt's mouth curl in disgust at this display and then he said quietly, "This town loves a tragedy," before vaulting over the safety barrier and making his way down the creek bank to where, I finally saw, Jack was sitting on a fallen tree trunk. I slid down after my brother and then stood for a moment looking at the pair of them.

Matt had put a strong hand on Jack's shoulder and Jack had reached up and gripped it tightly, his knuckles turning white in stark relief against his tanned skin. My gaze travelled higher and I saw then why we had waited back at the property. Jack, my strong, brave Jack,
had obviously been crying, his eyes were red and watery, and I knew that there was no way he would have wanted either of us to be there to see it.

Watching Matt and Jack frozen together in a tableau of grief, I felt a chill pass over and me and wished for a moment that I hadn't come, I felt like I didn't belong. The next moment, however, Jack looked past my brother to me and what I saw in that look convinced me that there was nowhere else in the world I should have been.

Instinctively, I staggered forward across the uneven ground and climbed over the log to sit down next to Jack, on the other side of Matt so we were flanking him like Davenport protectors. I reached for Jack's hand and linked my fingers through his, leaning against his side and resting my head against his shoulder. Matt sat down as well, his shoulder almost but not quite touching Jack's, providing support but maintaining his own and Jack's manly ego at the same time.

I could feel Jack almost vibrating with pent up emotion and, as we sat there in a weighted silence, I prepared myself for an outburst. After all, surely even Jack at his most repressed couldn't keep all the feelings brought up that day under control for long.

The minutes ticked by as we listened to the frogs humming away in the tiny pools of sludgy water and I focused intently on not crying. Finally, after a long, long time I felt Jack give a huge sigh and then begin to pull away slightly. I released his hand reluctantly and then sat back waiting to see what he was going to do.

He looked up towards the safety barrier as if noticing it for the first time and the same expression that Matt had had when he'd seen the tributes people had left twisted his face. "They do that every year, I was hoping that as time went on they'd get over their enthusiasm, but it hasn't happened yet," he said, his voice slightly scratchy presumably from disuse and the tears he'd cried earlier.

"It's the favourite time of year for florists within a 100 kilometre radius from here," Matt remarked with dark humour.

"Glad to hear someone benefits from this fucking mess," Jack growled, surprising me a little with his use of language. He twisted his hands restlessly together and then suddenly got to his feet and walked forward a couple of paces to stare unseeingly down into the virtually parched creek. I watched him warily, a little nervous at being in the presence of so much raw feeling, sensing a hard little ball of tension developing in the pit of my stomach.

As it turned out, I needn't have braced myself for a blast of emotion as, when Jack spoke again, it was quietly. "Why didn't either of you tell me?"

After a beat of surprise, Matt and I looked at each other and, seeing that he was just as clueless as I was, I gave a little shrug. My brother shifted slightly on the log, cleared his throat awkwardly and asked, "Tell you what?"
Jack shoved his hands inside his pockets, addressing us and yet looking over the creek and into the distance. "That all this had gone on too long." His voice was soft and sad, but not as tense as before. "It's been six years and I'm still reacting like I did when I was 14, it's enough." He turned back to face us and I was surprised to see that his expression was remarkably clear and open looking. Even on normal days he didn't usually look like that. "Running from the whole thing made sense at first, but so much stuff has happened since then and I've got to grow up some time."

He gave his old lopsided smile a wry twist. "It's unbelievable that it's taken me this long to figure it out. There I was, sitting there listening to Dad go on and on about what a failure I am and I suddenly realised that I'm done waiting for him to say it's okay, to validate everything I've done in my life since the accident." His voice suddenly gaining in strength he said, "I've got stuff to do and I could waste my life hanging around hoping for him to get his shit together." Shrugging his shoulders slightly he added, "Who knows, maybe I could even do it first to show him how."

There was a pause and then Matt said suddenly, "The scholarship." I jumped at his voice beside me and looked at him in confusion.

Jack, however, seemed to know exactly what Matt meant. "Yeah, I've been thinking about this for a while and I reckon that's my way out." He swung around away from us again. "I've got to leave, get away from all…this!" He swept his arms encompassing the flowers on the bridge, the empty creek and, I realised with a sick feeling, me.

"You'll do it mate," Matt said, jumping to his feet and slapping Jack around the back. "No worries."

I recognised my cue and nodded sincerely, although I could feel tears welling up as I thought properly for the first time of what it would mean if Jack moved to the other side of the world. "After all the time I've spent helping you, you'd better bloody well get it!" I joked (or was it choked?), getting to my feet and smiling bravely at the two of them.

We fell silent then, all wrapped up in our own thoughts. We stayed this way for a moment or so, staring off into different directions, until there was a whoosh of wings and two magpies suddenly took off from a branch nearby and flew between the three of us.

"One for sorrow, two for joy," I quoted absentmindedly. "That's a good omen, right?"

Matt looked up to the branch where the birds had flown from and laughed. "Yeah? So what does seven mean?" He said, gesturing towards the tree and making Jack and I turn to look also.

There were seven magpies sitting in orderly fashion along the branch and I opened my mouth to reply before shutting it quickly as I remembered exactly what seven meant in the nursery rhyme. Jack looked round at me and I knew he had known what I was about to say: 'Seven for a secret, never to be told.'
So much for omens.

"I've got to go to the graveyard," I said suddenly to fill the silence I realised had gone on too long while Jack and I looked at each other.

Just a hint, if you ever want a sentence to destroy a mood and totally distract people from your earlier conversation you can't go past 'I've got to go to the graveyard.'

Matt looked quickly at Jack to see his reaction before glaring at me and demanding, "Why?"

I knew why he was so cross, it just seemed like Jack had moved past the maudlin stuff of the day and my comment wouldn't have helped. Feeling a little flash of guilt at my carelessness, I wondered whether I would ever learn to think before I spoke and thought to myself that I would begin to make a concerted effort. Jack, however, didn't seem to be perturbed by my comment, he just looked interested in my answer.

I dug around in my jacket pocket and retrieved the gumnuts Alex had given me. I opened my palm to let the boys see what I was holding and they both leant in to look.

"Oh, right." Matt nodded when he saw what I was holding. "I was wondering how Alex was going to get them there this year."

"I'll come with you," Jack said and, again, Matt and I looked at him in surprise. It was a well known fact that Jack hated the graveyard and never went there so we were both a little thrown by his sudden interest.

"Okay," I said slowly, "if you're sure."

Jack nodded and Matt shrugged. "Righto," he said, beginning to clamber up the bank back towards the road. "I'll see you guys back at the house then."

And so it was that a few minutes later Jack and I were walking down the unsealed road towards the graveyard. It was one such as you find in all small towns; abandoned church, overgrown and unkempt graves, rusted gates, the whole shebang. Every now and again someone from Bridunna was buried there, but the religious people usually went to the regional centre, where there were significantly more people and, therefore better places of worship and graveyards, and those who weren't usually opted for cremation.

Mr Whitby had insisted that the twins and his wife should be buried there despite Jack's objections. The family wasn't religious at all, but all of Mr Whitby's family for generations had been buried in the Bridunna graveyard and he wouldn't brook any arguments.

The wind picked up as we walked between the graves, sending the dust we threw up with our shoes whirling away in little eddies which disappeared off the road and into the bush. I couldn't help feeling like that was what was going to happen to Jack. He was going to be uprooted and flung away into parts unknown. What was he going to do without us? Or more pertinently, what the hell were we going to do without him?
I'd lowered my eyelashes to protect my eyes from the dust and so I almost walked straight past the little row of three graves even though they stood out from the others around them as they were relatively new. Staring at the three stones, which were each simply inscribed with a name and date of birth and death, I suddenly had an overwhelming repulsion to the idea of being buried. Away from the sun and air and...well everything. I also clearly knew why Jack never went there, just like it didn't seem right to me, it wasn't right for him.

I deliberately didn't look at Jack as we stood looking at the grave stones, tears were welling up again and I didn't want them to spill over. He'd had enough to deal with that day, I didn't want to add crying female to that list. Taking a couple of deep breaths to make sure I was back in control, I stooped down and laid the two gumnuts I'd carried around with me all day on Paul and Lizzie's graves.

"Hey guys," I said quietly, searching for something to say. "Um, Alex says hi," I said quickly, "So do Simone, Matt and I."

Feeling like I was turning into my brother with all my unease over the emotion, and having a sudden insight into why Matt hadn't volunteered to come with us, I stood up again and took a step back. I braced myself then to look up at Jack and was surprised to see him not looking at the graves, as I would have expected, but rather at me. I smiled a little feebly and he wordlessly wrapped an arm around my shoulders and pulled me in against him.

"You alright?" he asked and I felt one of the unshed tears I'd had lurking behind my eyes finally make a break for it and slide down my cheek at his concern for me when his pain was beyond all reason.

"If you are," I replied honestly because therein lay the crux of the issue. I was, of course, saddened by the deaths of Paul, Lizzie and Jack's mum but the truly distressing part of the situation was how badly Jack had been messed up. It can really hurt to be so close to someone, I was realising, and I felt something akin to ice drop into my belly as I realised that it was only going to get worse if Jack left.

"I'm getting there," he said slowly as I desperately tried to convince myself that I was happy that he had the chance to go away and break his destructive mourning pattern. Lying to yourself isn't really all that easy, however, the reality folder that we humans have stupidly put deep down in our gut always knows the true answer and delights in reminding us of its cleverness.

"It's just..." Jack suddenly burst out and I slammed the 'clever gut folder' closed once more and tilted my head up to show I was listening.

"Just what?" I prompted when he seemed to be having trouble formulating what he wanted to say.

"It's just that I'm about 99 percent sure that I'm right about leaving, but that last 1 percent wants to know that she wasn't right." He gestured towards his mother's grave
sounding like he was having to force the words to come out and I understood. Jack hated talking about this stuff, hated portraying himself as weak because that was what his dad always told him he was. "Because running away is just what my dad's been doing all these years and isn't that what I'm hoping to do? After all my big words about never being my father, am I just going to turn out like him anyway?" His voice held a note of panic at the end.

"No!" The word was out of my mouth without regard for the fact that only a little while ago I'd promised myself I would think before I spoke. It came from such a primal, instinctive feeling, though, that I couldn't really blame it for ignoring my earlier instructions. "No," I repeated more gently, "you're not running away, Jack, you're getting away and that’s the vital difference."

"Is it really that different?" Jack wondered out loud and I pushed away from him with a derisive snort.

"Of course it is!" I exploded. "If you're in a really dangerous situation and you manage to escape no-one says, 'oh you ran away, you big coward' they say, 'well done for getting away from that awful situation.' Do you see the distinction?" I asked desperately. "Please believe me, Jack, you're not weak, you're not pathetic, you're just not. You're strong and smart and the absolute best person I know, you're just going to have to trust me on that."

Something weird happened to his posture as I talked, he kind of straightened and lifted his head up and, when I’d finished speaking, he took a huge shuddering breath as if trying to breathe my words in. I was about to ask him whether he was okay when he took a couple of short steps to cover the distance between us and, without saying a word, lowered his head and caught my lips with his. His hands clutched at my clothes, lifting me up against him and holding me tight as if scared to let me go.

As for me? I felt like I'd been hit with a sledgehammer. The way he was holding me, the way he was kissing me was technically no different from how he’d done so before and yet so very, very different. Suddenly I realised what was making my heart thump so unpleasantly it was giving me a headache, he was coming to me for comfort! He was trusting me and caring for me and… I was scared shitless!

I couldn't do it, I wasn't strong or good enough to hold his trust like that. I'd let him down or disappoint him and I couldn't bear the thought of that. I put my hands up onto his chest and pushed until he broke away and looked at me somewhat dazedly.

"What was that?" I demanded, realising that my eyelashes were spiky with tears.

"I don't know," Jack admitted, obviously having felt something different too.

We stared at each other uncertainly, breathing heavily scant centimetres away from one another. Finally Jack didn't seem to be able to take the silence anymore as he reached out to me imploringly saying, "Tally, please-"
"We should get back," I said quickly, cutting him off. Whatever it was that he wanted to say I couldn't hear it, I was too damn scared to hear it.

Cruelly forcing myself to think of the scratches on his chest and the blue bra in his bedroom I turned quickly and began marching down the path between the graves.

Jack was ridiculously loyal and I knew that if he felt he owed something to me or that we owed something to each other it would make it that much more difficult for him to leave if he got the scholarship. Maybe he even wouldn't go and he had to, he'd said so himself. So whatever stupidness I'd forced him into, whatever it was that was making my head spin and my chest hurt it had to stop, I was going to stop it.

It was over.
Chapter 23

Over.

Easy to verbalise, not easy to believe or to enact. In fact it’s unbelievably hard, especially when you're staying in the same house as the person things are over with and, oh yeah, he just happens to be the most beautiful, wonderful person ever.

The whole thing sucked, and that was a major understatement.

I had one saviour in my endeavour to avoid Jack during the mid-semester break we spent at home and that was study. I used Jack's text books as both weapons and shields knowing that once we got off angles and theories I was treading in very dangerous water.

When we weren't studying, I went for long walks across our property or glued myself to the side of one of my parents so that Jack would never catch me alone. Also, I memorised the family schedule and did my best to see that we all stuck to them. In the morning I stayed up in my room until I heard my dad's ute head out, the boys had taken to going out in the morning to work on the property and only returning for lunch, then I would get up and go for walks or just loiter about. After lunch I would help Jack study until teatime after which I disappeared back up to my room to make phone calls or work on my assignments and my mum took over the study with Jack.

Still, it wasn't as if my plan or the schedule were anywhere near infallible and I was constantly on edge, prepared to flee from a room if Jack walked in with that 'we need to talk' face on. How stupidly optimistic was I that I thought I could avoid Jack for a whole week? Still, I did quite well, I made it all the way to Friday 25th before the proverbial hit the fan.

Oh I thought I was oh so clever watching from the window as the ute left and then sauntering down the stairs to the sunny kitchen to get some breakfast. Yep, I was mightily pleased with myself for avoiding Jack for so long and was merrily humming a triumphant ditty to myself as I popped two pieces of bread into the toaster. My song faltered, however, when I heard someone enter the kitchen behind me.

I whirled around, hoping it was my mum, and gave a little shriek as I saw Jack leaning against the doorframe watching me. I eyed the space on either side of him and wondered ever so briefly whether I would be able to dart past. No such luck, he pretty much filled up the doorway and was looking at me in a stony way which seemed to indicate that he was one heartbeat away from saying 'go ahead, make my day.'

"Yes?" I asked, trying to sound nonchalant, but missing the mark by several high pitches. To try and look unconcerned I made to retrieve my toast from the toaster but misjudged the distance and pressed my fingers against the burning hot metal part of the
toaster. Yelping, I yanked my hand away and waved it around trying to reduce the horrible stinging, tingling feeling of the burn.

Jack swore under his breath, left the doorframe, grabbed me by the wrist, dragged me over to the sink, flicked the tap on, and stuck my burnt fingers beneath the stream of cold water.

"Jesus, Tally," he said, sounding incredibly frustrated and, for about the millionth time since that first fateful day I’d run to Jack, I had to quash the wormy feeling of guilt which twisted my gut. To cover my remorse I turned my face away from him and said irritably,

"God, Jack, stop it! You don't always have to baby me."

He removed his hand immediately and took a step away from me. "Hey, I wasn't-" he began in confused tones, but I cut him off cruelly.

"Yes you were and, thank you, but it's not necessary." I really was perfecting this bitchy tone, shame I couldn't really take any pride in it. "I'm perfectly capable of putting my own hand under cold water."

"I didn't say you weren't," he protested.

There was a long, awkward pause which I ended by snapping, "Shouldn't you be out with Matt and Dad?"

He leant back against the counter next to the sink and looked at me sardonically, "Why? Upset that I messed up your avoidance schedule?"

Annoyed, although not really surprised, that he'd noticed how I managed to never be in the same room as him for too long I decided to brazen it out. Not exactly an odd choice for me after all.

"Look, with things like they are and you trying for the scholarship and everything I just think it'd be best if we left each other alone for a while, you know what I mean?" Note to self, try to reduce pleading note in voice when trying to be brazen.

He looked away from me then, leaving me to look at his strong jawed profile. "No, not really," he answered shortly and I realised that I didn't know what I meant either.

Neither of us said anything after that for a long time. I felt inside like my burnt fingers under the tap did, hot yet cold, tingling and painful yet numb.

Finally Jack gave a little groan of frustration and ran a hand through his hair, that familiar gesture making my breathing hitch for a moment. "Do you-" He stopped short then started again, "Do you regret that we-?"

This time I cut him off, "No," I spoke quietly, but intensely, "No Jack, I don't regret anything."

He let out another sigh, this time of relief I think. "So what does that mean? What are we going to-"
"Morning my chicks!" My mum's bright, cheery voice made both Jack and me start violently and I smacked my burnt fingers against the tap making my eyes water, or had they already been wet…?

"Mum!" I exclaimed breathlessly, turning off the tap and turning to see her bustling into the kitchen "Don't sneak up on us like that, you nearly gave me a heart attack."

"It's my house, darling, I don't need to sneak," my mother sang, taking the now cold toast out of the toaster and putting two fresh pieces of bread in.

Have you ever had that feeling with your mum that her tone of voice doesn't quite match her words? I had that feeling in spades at that moment. Was it just paranoia or was she saying that while she didn't need to sneak I did?

Jack was obviously feeling as freaked out as I was and, after he bade my mum a good morning, he made a hasty exit from the kitchen. Coward!

I attempted to escape as he had, but my mother's voice rang out, stopping me before I'd taken more than a couple of steps. "One minute, Talia," she said, her tone still chirpy, but with that hint of a threat that indicated that if I took even one more step my life would stop being worth living.

I turned back and looked at her, raising an eyebrow enquiringly. "What?" I asked a moment later after she'd just stared at me for a few seconds.

"Oh my darling girl," she sighed deeply. "It's just that I don't know if the game you're playing is going to do either of you any good in the long run." She moved past me to the fridge as she talked, removed the butter and then began to spread it on the freshly popped toast. In fact her movements were so mundane I almost missed the significance of what she was saying.

I mean what the hell? You can't just say something like that and then start buttering your toast!

As what she'd said sunk in I wished like nothing else that I'd made a bolt for it when I had the chance. How dare Jack leave me to fight this battle on my own?

"Could you be any more cryptic?" I asked crossly, hoping against hope that she was just fishing and didn't really have any real knowledge about what was going on. This hope was shattered as she took a bite of toast, swallowed and said calmly,

"Well, you are having sex with Jack, aren't you?"

I nearly swallowed my tongue in shock and despair. How did she know? How come she always knows?

"Mum!" It came out as a choked, agonised, shriek.

"What? You told me to stop being cryptic, if you want plain language then there it is."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said.
"Don't be ridiculous, exactly how stupid do you think your father and I are?" My mother said in a way that very definitely meant that her question was rhetorical. "Things have been different between the two of you for about a month now. Now, I'm not saying that you should stop whatever it is that's going on, I'm just advising you to be careful. I understand that you might think that what you're doing is none of anyone else's business, but I doubt Matt will see it that way." She took another couple of bites of toast, using the pause as she did so to let her words sink in. "Boys are strange about these things. Your uncle hated every single one of my boyfriends saying it was because he didn't know them, but the moment I even looked at one of his friends he would bite my head off and refuse to talk to the friend for weeks at a time!"

She finished off the toast and patted my cheek fondly. "Face it darling, if you have a brother you can't win", she shrugged, "...or at least date. I advise you to tell Matt now before things go any further or before he finds out from someone else, damage minimisation is the name of the game."

She wasn't telling me anything that I didn't already know, but it was still harsh to hear it said aloud like that. Especially from my mum who had the unnerving power of seeing straight into my mind, reading what it was that I really did not want to be said, and saying it. "Mum, seriously," I sighed, rolling my eyes, "Nothing is going on between Jack and me. You're just stirring up trouble."

She looked at me for a long moment with that scary patented 'mum stare', that I tried to take unflinchingly, then said archly, "You know there I was worrying about my little girl growing up, seems I needn't have worried."

Oh ouch!

"Never mind, you know where I am if you need to talk." She gave me a quick kiss on the cheek, another knowing look and left the kitchen leaving me with nothing but cold toast and a lot of things to mull over.

~*~

On the long drive home on Sunday I sat in the back seat of Matt's wreck of a car and contemplated where the events of the week left Jack and me. We hadn't talked about our situation since the Friday morning and, although I was trying to convince myself that it was for the best, I couldn't help but miss the time we spent together. After the talk with my mum...well, that is, after being talked **at** by my mum, I truly did consider whether I should tell Matt about what I had blackmailed his best friend into. But, since I really couldn't even begin to stomach the idea of how he would react I foolishly hoped that, since I was hell-bent
on this avoiding thing, there was a chance that Matt would never find out what had happened between Jack and me.

When we pulled up outside our building we all sat in silence for a couple of moments. The week off had started emotionally, but it had still been a time of escapism. Now we were back we had to go back into the fray with the whole Simone, Micky, Sam thing and Jack had to face the interview and aptitude test on Wednesday and the requirement test for the scholarship on the Thursday. It had been such a long time coming that it seemed strange that Jack’s moment had almost arrived.

Eventually Matt broke the silence, saying he had to go and meet up with some of his sports science mates and Jack said that he was going to cram in some more studying. Feeling at a bit of a loose end, I helped unload the car and then called Adam to see if he'd come back from his folk's place yet. He had and was up for hanging out with me and catching up on the past week.

I noticed Jack's sour face when I told them where I was going, but I didn't comment on it. Jack needed to concentrate and I needed to stay far away from him, especially since with Matt out it would be just Jack in the flat. Adam was a good laugh and I knew he would distract me from the prospect of the possibility of time alone with Jack.

I spent the rest of the day and well into the night at Adam's flat watching Kung Fu films with him. Although I had fun, I was a little distracted as I couldn't stop my thoughts drifting to Jack all alone in our flat studying for his chance to win his chance to go far, far away from me.

It wasn't fair, it really wasn't.

Adam seemed to notice that something was up with me, but he didn't pry and instead did his best to keep me amused and occupied. I appreciated his efforts more than I could say and decided, as I sat there sipping a vodka and coke, that I would spend a lot more time with him. Not only did I enjoy his company, but being with him would also give me somewhere to escape to when all the madness amongst my small group of friends got too much.

I returned back to the flat reluctantly, hoping that Matt would have returned home before me. No such luck. As I walked in through the door Jack looked up from the kitchen table where he had sheafs of paper and numerous textbooks scattered about and smiled tiredly.

"You've been out late," he remarked innocently and I bristled immediately.

"So?" I snapped. "It's not like it makes any difference to you." And, with my daily bitchiness quota fulfilled, I stomped past him into my room.

And that was how the next week passed. I spent an inordinate amount of time at Adam's place and, if anyone remarked on it, I told them it was so Jack could study in peace.
When I was at the flat I was irritable and rude, the strain from keeping my distance from Jack something akin to having knitting needles stuck repetitively in my back.

This feeling eased briefly on the mornings of Wednesday and Thursday as I broke my Jack-fast to give him quick, awkward hugs to wish him well with the scholarship tests. Matt was present at both these times and I held myself so stiffly the moment felt even worse than before Jack had desensitised me somewhat to physical contact. I felt a little thrill of panic at the idea that, after everything, it would have been a total waste of time because I’d relapsed.

Matt and I stood in the car park waving Jack off on the Thursday morning, feeling like parents waving goodbye to their child on their first day of school. Neither of us could settle to anything for the rest of the day, we just mooched around waiting for Jack to come back and tell us how he had gone.

When we heard his ute pull into the car park late in the afternoon, Matt and I jumped to attention and pretty much ambushed Jack as he came through the door. He was an unhealthy grey colour, but his eyes were bright and he seemed to crackle with energy. At the sight of him I felt my heart attempt to rip in two with some of it wanting to sink in disappointment and the other half leap in celebration.

"So, how'd it go?" Matt asked, somewhat unnecessarily I thought considering the answer was written all over Jack's face.

Jack shrugged and grinned, "It was tough but I'm pretty sure I did alright."

"You blitzed it!" Matt threw himself at Jack and they did a manly hug followed by much pushing and thumping of backs.

"We'll see," Jack said modestly but Matt and I knew better. 'I'm pretty sure I did alright' from the normally excessively modest Jack was akin to anyone else swinging from the rafters shouting: 'I'm a genius!' And, on top of the aptitude test and interview he'd had yesterday during which the head of the scholarship program had told him that he was exactly the kind of candidate they were looking for, it seemed that Jack was a shoo-in and Cambridge bound.

~*~

The scholarship hopefuls were due to be notified by phone on the Monday whether they’d been successful, so the three of us ploughed through an uneasy and tense weekend during which we all prowled around the flat feeling generally mentally untidy.

On the Monday we all made the decision to blow off our classes and stay home to hear the results and then either celebrate or commiserate. With the home phone sitting on the middle of the kitchen table, Matt, Jack and I seated ourselves around it and proceeded to stare at it all morning.
We said very little and, although we each had course work in front of us, we pretty much did nothing but stare at the phone willing it to ring with good news. At about half 11, right about when I was considering gnawing off my own left leg to help ease the tedium, the phone emitted a shrill ring. We all jumped then stared apprehensively first at the phone then at each other. When the phone had rung three times more and Jack hadn't moved a muscle, I snapped out of my stupor and snatched up the phone.

"Hello?" I said, rather breathlessly.

"Yes, hello," an officious voice said from the other end. "I was looking for a Jack Whitby."

I couldn't help thinking 'a Jack Whitby?' So it doesn't have to be a specific one, just someone with that name? People who add extra, totally unnecessary words just to sound knobby annoy me! Still, it was perhaps the worst time in the world to debate a grammar point so I ignored my annoyance. "He's just here, I'll pass you over," I said in my best receptionist voice.

"Thank you."

I put my hand over the receiver and thrust the phone at Jack. "I think this is it," I hissed. "For god’s sake, take the damn phone!"

Jack reached out a trembling hand and took the phone off me as if it were a bomb about to go off or, considering he's a boy and boys like those kinds of things, perhaps a squalling baby, yeah, *that* would terrify him. Still, when he spoke, his voice was firm and controlled. "This is Jack Whitby."

There was a pause while the person on the other end said something that Matt and I couldn't hear, despite the fact that we were pretty much pressing ourselves up against the other side of the phone.

The conversation seemed to go on for an inordinately long period of time with Jack making occasional "Hmm" noises as if he was agreeing with everything the person was saying. I desperately tried to deduce whether they were good 'hmmms' or bad ones, but there really was no telling.

Eventually, after several minutes, masquerading as hours, had passed Jack broke into a wide grin and said, his voice trembling with emotion, "Thank you, I will. Thank you so much. Goodbye."

He pressed the off button on the phone and laid it carefully down on the table in front of him. For one long second he simply stared at the table top and then he lifted his head and let out a scream of triumph, and I mean a *scream!* Matt and I both jumped and then twin grins of sheer amazement split our faces as we looked at each other and realised that Jack was letting off the pressure he’d carried around since he first applied for the scholarship. It was such a bizarre thing to see Jack making a huge noise and drawing attention to himself, but it
seemed the healthiest thing in the world to do at that moment and so the next second saw Matt and I leaping out of our chairs and joining him.

The three of us danced around the flat screaming various unintelligible things at each other and grinning like loons.

Eventually we ran out of breath and stopped jumping and screaming to stare at each other, each of us red-faced and breathing hard.

"So," Jack said, breaking the loud silence, "I got it."

"No, really?" I said sarcastically just as Matt said, mock innocently, "Got what?"

There was another pause and, slowly, the grins slipped from our faces to be replaced with odd expressions akin to sadness but just a little off. Maybe they were just serious, yeah, that's how I felt, totally sombre.

The seconds ticked by, the scene apparently having been put on mute by someone, until Matt gave a little cough and then stepped forward to grab Jack into a tight hug.

There was none of the usual quick slaps and then release stuff the two of them usually did, it was a bona fide hug and they clung to each other fiercely as if they never wanted to let go. I felt tears spring to my eyes and looked away, not only because it was a private moment between the two of them, but also because I knew it was the beginning of the goodbyes.

They broke away reluctantly and I could tell that Matt was horrified by the little emotional scene he’d just enacted by the way he squared his shoulders and said, in a voice a little deeper than his normal tone, "I'm going to call the others and we're going to drink the pub dry." As he picked up the phone he turned back to Jack and grinned. "This time it's my turn to get raving drunk, strip naked and run through a hedge!"

Jack went a little red at this, but chuckled ruefully as Matt began to dial the numbers of the guys. Jack and I stood awkwardly looking at each other as Matt barked down the phone, "Jack got it. Pub now." To each of his friends. When he’d finished he looked round at us both and frowned. "Don't you want to congratulate Jack?" he asked me pointedly and I shook myself out of the daze I'd been put in by Jack's eyes and smiled tightly.

"Yes, congratulations Jack." I hadn't realised what I'd done until both Jack and Matt's eyes moved down and widened incredulously. Following their line of vision I saw that I'd stuck my hand out as if to shake Jack's hand. The formal gesture was patently ridiculous and it was clear the boys thought so too. Still, I decided backing out would look even weirder to Matt so I looked at Jack determinedly and the next second he grasped my hand tightly in his own.

Big mistake!

Although I’d clearly thought a handshake would allow us to keep our distance I hadn't thought about the meaning a simple handshake held for us. It was the beginning of whatever
it was that was going on between Jack and me, the first time I got tingles, the first time connection with a guy made me feel giddy and out of control in a good way.

As I felt the power in his hand, the warmth of his palm against mine and the faintest feeling of his pulse beating against my skin a whole raft of memories whooshed through my mind. The lessons: the simplest touch can sometimes be the most effective, sometimes no touching is necessary at all, make sure he's in your head before he's in your pants, be nice to the person you're trying to get into bed, if you trust the guy you're with it can be okay to relax and let yourself go, pick your location wisely, be prepared, and, finally, that sometimes I needed to learn my own lessons. They each whirled through my head making more and more sense. The last one was the most poignant and I comforted myself in the fact that by backing off and releasing Jack from his obligation from me I was learning a lesson. That it was bloody hard!

The tears that had welled up before increased tenfold and I gave a little choke and pulled my hand away from Jack's just as the tears began to pour down my cheeks. Staggering over to one of the dining chairs, I tucked my legs up against me and wiped at my face with my sleeves, trying to stop the waterworks.

"Well that was weird," Matt remarked, then as he fully took in my crumpled and blotched face he added, "Aw come on now! This is a good thing remember, a very good thing. Don't ruin it for him."

Not able to speak I simply shook my head and attempted a smile to show that I wasn't trying to ruin the moment for Jack. Matt made a noise of disgust at my pathetic girly show and grabbed Jack by the shoulder. "Right, we'd better leave her to mop up, we're expected at the pub."

"You go on," Jack said, his gaze never wavering from me. "I'm going to call your parents and tell them I got the scholarship, I wouldn't have done it without them. Or you," He added, his words indicating that he meant Matt and me both but his eyes telling me that at that moment his thanks were for me alone. This did not, however, make me feel any better.

"Sure thing," Matt said easily. "See you down there."

And he grabbed his jacket and left, leaving the door open behind him as he so often did when he knew that someone would be going through it soon after him. When I used to take him up on this he would explain that it was an energy saving approach.

Jack and I listened to Matt's footsteps echo through the building's stairwell and then the heavy door on the ground floor slam in the wind after his exit. I was still trying to get my floods of tears under control and turned my face away from Jack as seeing him looking so perfect just made me want to cry more. The next second, however, a box of tissues floated into my line of sight and I looked up to see Jack holding it out to me, apology written all over his face. I sighed and grabbed some tissues to clean myself up, mumbling past the soft sheets,
"Don't look like that, Jack, the worst thing you could do for both me and you right now is apologise for winning the scholarship. We both worked too hard for it to be sorry it happened."

There, that was a suitably mature speech I thought. My calm words transferred some of their power to my internal weakness and, within a couple of seconds, I had pulled myself together sufficiently to take the wad of tissues away from my face and give Jack a tremulous smile.

"I'm really happy for you."

Jack snorted and gestured towards the wet lump of my discarded tissues. "So I see," he said in a gently sarcastic tone.

"Don't, Jack," I said quietly and firmly, straightening up and dropping my legs back down off the chair. "You know how glad I am that you proved yourself to your dad and yourself and I know that it's important to you to get away."

Jack looked at me steadily for a long moment then grabbed another chair and dragged it over in front of me so that when he sat down on it his legs touched mine. He laid his hands gently on my thighs and leant forward so there was no missing his intensity or integrity as he said, "My going isn't about leaving you."

"No, it's just a handy by-product," I said sharply, hating myself the minute I let the words out.

Jack flinched slightly, but didn't pull away as I'd hoped. "Why do you always have to do that?" he asked, but his tone wasn't accusatory, it was more disappointed and sad but not for himself, I realised, but for me.

"I don't know," I answered honestly and miserably. I thought then that he wouldn't be able to make me feel much worse, but his next words blew that totally out of the water, creating surely the same, if not greater, amount of pain that open heart surgery without an anaesthetic would.

"If there was anything that would make me stay it would be you." He interlinked his hands with mine as he spoke, squeezing my fingers so tightly I'm sure if I hadn't already been focused on the fact that I was dying inside it would have hurt.

There it was. Proof that his misguided sense of chivalry and obligation to me was holding him back from his life, from something that he wanted more than anything in the world.

"Don't say that!" I said shrilly, my heart pounding and my eyes returning to that damn watery state. "Promise me that you won't say that again, or even think it," I clarified. "You've got to go," I said more calmly after I'd let my words sink in.

"I know," he replied with a frustrated sigh. "And I will, but I'm not going to pretend it's not going to be bloody hard."
"Of course it will be, but wherever you are I'm-" Whoa, too personal, retreat! "We're here for you," I said, my voice shaking a little with emotion. "It doesn't matter how far away you are, if you need us, we're there. I'll bloody learn astral projection if I have to!"

Jack smiled his lopsided smile that I knew I was going to miss like anything. "Or you could just take a plane," he suggested.

"Yeah," I admitted, "but it's more expensive and not as cool."

We smiled at each other and then the next thing I knew, although I knew I shouldn't and had promised myself I wouldn't, we were kissing.

His lips were soft against mine and so gentle. He disentangled one of his hands from mine and cupped my face, his fingers disappearing into my hair and playing with a few strands. I unconsciously leant in, wanting more, needing to be closer to him at that moment. Obviously reassured by my eagerness Jack let his lips press a little harder against mine, I responded in kind and soon found myself parting my lips slightly to invite even closer contact.

The awkward angle we were having to sit at frustrated me as we couldn't get properly close and Jack must have been thinking the same thing because the next moment he gave a little growling sound deep in his throat and stood up, pulling me up with him. He kicked backwards at the chair he’d been sitting on, sending it spinning across the room where it crashed into the wall with a significant bang, neither of us caring whether it left a dent in the plaster, getting bond money back seemed so petty at that moment.

Still tightly locked at the mouth and now with my hands tightly grasping his shoulders and his hands on my hips, we moved as one, our bodies pressed together as if we were trying to morph into one person.

At some stage Jack broke his lips from mine and began trailing kisses down my neck leaving me grasping and weak at the knees, an interesting phenomenon which I'd never believed to be a true affliction until the whole thing with Jack had started.

Wanting to feel his skin under my hands I ran my fingers down shirt until I reached the bottom fastening. He was wearing a shirt which was held together, not by buttons, but by metal poppers. I smiled and said breathlessly in imitation of his words about my button up jeans that first time, "I love these shirts, get the right angle and-" I pulled the fabric in different directions and the poppers popped open with a truly satisfying sound.

Pushing the shirt off his shoulder and down his arms I relished in his smooth tanned skin and the heat I could feel radiating off it. Running my hands all over his chest I didn't realise I was smiling like the Cheshire cat until I saw Jack's raised eyebrows and self satisfied expression.

"Like what you see?" he asked cheekily and I pretended to think his question over.

"I've seen better," I lied.
"Oh really?" Jack said disbelievingly.
"Yes," I said in mock earnestness, "but you're definitely in the top ten."
"I'm glad to hear it," he laughed, and the next moment he'd heaved me over his shoulder, fireman style and started walking towards the couch.
"Jack!" I squealed, laughing but giving him a few half-hearted thumps on the back to keep up appearances. "Put me down."
"As you wish," he said gallantly and I landed with a soft thump onto the cushions of the couch. The next moment Jack was balancing himself above me and I only had to lift my head slightly to catch his lips and start the madness off all over again. I wrapped my legs tightly around his hips and ran my hands up and down his toned shoulders and back thinking as I did so that there was no better feeling in the world.

A little while later I felt, with a surge of excitement, Jack's hands playing with the hem of my T-shirt. Lifting myself up off the couch slightly I gave him the go ahead to pull it off over my head and the next second he did so. The brush of cold air over my skin was quickly replaced by the feel of Jack's hands caressing me so gently and reverently that I didn't even think to be embarrassed over my not totally flat stomach.

I closed my eyes to enjoy the sensations his hands were summoning up and felt Jack suddenly grab me by the hips and pull me up so the next moment he was half sitting, half lying, leaning back against the couch armrest and I was straddling him.
"Relocation?" I asked, opening my eyes and smiling down at him, aware of hammer pressing against me.
"Better view," he replied, making me blush despite everything.
I felt like a priceless piece of art the more he looked at me. He ran his hands gently across my shoulders, stomach, neck and the fabric of the bra covering my chest, occasionally leaning up to kiss a patch of skin as if it particularly pleased him. There was no sense of urgency between us, no sense of danger which was, it turned out, my downfall.

I enjoyed his ministrations on my body but missed his lips on mine so I lowered my head and brushed my mouth against his teasingly, sucking his bottom lip briefly before pulling away. His dazed expression and hands tightening on my hips told me my actions had had a significant effect upon him and, enjoying the sense of power, and just about every other sense which had sprung into a happy dance at the kiss, I lowered myself down and did the same again.

As I was pulling away the second time, however, I froze as, out of the corner of my eye, I swore I saw a movement in the open doorway to the flat. My gaze snapped onto the hinge gap and I definitely saw someone go past and, as I listened intently, the next second I heard quiet footsteps going down the stairs.
Jack clearly hadn't seen or heard anything and when I looked back down at him he wore a quizzical expression. "Are you okay?" he asked, moving his hands up to gently rub my shoulders.

"No!" I snapped pushing his hands off me and scrambling backwards off him, looking around for my t-shirt and spotting it near the beanbag.

"Hey," Jack reached out and caught my hands tightly in his, holding me still, "what's wrong?"

"Let go of me!" I said fiercely, struggling against him. I had to run after the person who’d seen us, I had to know who it was, but Jack was showing no signs of letting go, obviously wanting to know what’d happened. With my brain in crisis mode and precious time slipping away, I blurted the only thing I knew would make Jack let go of me at once, without thinking of how much I was going to hurt him.

"Sheep," I said brutally. "I'm uncomfortable and scared and I want you to let me go."

It was almost like a magic spell. The instant the words were out of my mouth Jack dropped my hands and stared at me in absolute horror. "Tally, I-" he began, his tone suggesting he was ready to cut off his own hands for what he thought he'd done to me.

I didn't wait around to hear the end of what he had to say, jumping off the couch, scooping my t-shirt up off the floor and pelting out of the flat and down the stairs outside, pulling on my top as I went. As I flew down the second flight of stairs leading to the ground floor I hoped desperately that it wasn't Matt who’d seen us. I was fairly sure it wasn't as he wouldn't have sloped off like a coward, he would have come in, guns blazing (metaphorically of course…well I hoped anyway).

As I rounded the stairwell and began to descend the last flight of the stairs to the ground floor I began to suspect that I wouldn't catch up with the mystery voyeur because Jack had held me back.

Looking up to see if I might be able to see whoever it was going out the main door, I froze, one foot raised in the act of descending to another stair. Loathing and horror caused little goosebumps to rise up all over my body and my hand clenched the cold, metal banister so tightly that my knuckles rose up showing the white of the bone through the thin skin there.

Leaning against the grimy concrete wall next to the building exit, his arms folded arrogantly across his chest and clearly waiting for me was Micky. And the evil smile which had spread across his face as he’d seen me did not bode well.

Not well at all.
Chapter 24

"Micky!" My voice came out as a kind of strangled squeak and my obvious shock and fear seemed to amuse him as his grin spread even wider across his face. It was this evil smirk that made my spine snap straighter and I took a deep breath to swallow my fright before I continued my descent down the stairs until I stood directly in front of him.

We didn't say anything at first, Micky was presumably just taking pleasure in the moment and I had no idea where to start. Eventually, however, I realised that the longer we stood there the more likely it was that someone would come by so, crossing my arms protectively across my chest, I spoke up.

"So what are you going to do?"

"Aw come on Talia," he said silkily, his green eyes sparkling maliciously. "Give me a couple more minutes to enjoy this."

I struggled with the reactions that warred within me, not knowing whether I should slap or try and placate him. As it turned out, he began to talk again before I'd decided on which approach to take.

"So it seems," Micky smirked pushing himself off the wall and coming towards me, "that as well as being the world's biggest bitch, you're also the world's biggest hypocrite, after all your 'my family is perfect,' 'nobody should ever do anything to hurt Matt and Jack' bullshit."

"It isn't bullshit," I snapped, taking a step back from him and then fervently wishing I hadn't.

"No?" he said sarcastically. "Have you asked Matt that yet? 'Cos I reckon if he knew you were screwing his best friend he'd probably think all the stuff you say about doing them no wrong is bullshit." He paused, presumably for effect, then added, "He doesn't know, right?"

"You know he doesn't," I said through clenched teeth.

"And why would that be…?" he mused out loud, tapping his finger against his chin in a mockery of contemplation. "Oh that's right!" He clicked his fingers as if stumbling across a great discovery. "Because he would've killed Jack by now if he knew and, as I saw up there, he's very much alive."

"What's your point?" I asked desperately, hoping Micky would get over his little power trip and just tell me whether he was going to tell Matt or not.

"No point," he answered innocently. "Just making sure I've got the gist of what's been going on. So, you got close while doing all that studying?"

How is it that he managed to make a word like 'studying' sound so dirty?
In answer to his question I just muttered, "Yeah, something like that." Because there was no way in hell I was giving him the real reason.

"Wow, and there was Matt-Man constantly telling us to leave you two alone so you could *study*, he'd be furious if he knew wouldn't he? I mean there he is trusting you and Jack, protecting the pair of you, basically pretending that the sun shines out of your bloody arses and all that time his best mate is rooting his little sister. What happened to your Virgin Mary impersonation, by the way? Or was that a lie as well? Jesus, Talia, how do you keep track of all the crap you spin people?"

"I could ask you the same thing!" I exploded, knowing that he was deliberately trying to rile me up, but unable to stop myself rising to the bait. "How dare you go all holier-than-thou on me, you're not exactly Mr Sunshine and Light yourself. What the hell would you know about the truth? You've been lying since the first day I met you. Whatever it is that's going on with you, Sam and Simone obviously affects all of us including Matt, have *you* told him what's been going on yet? No, you haven't, so don't give me a sermon on lying, thanks very much."

The words flew out of my mouth and in the silence that followed I realised that I’d clearly hit a nerve with my little speech. Micky's face turned purple and he clenched his hands by his sides leading me to wonder for a second if he was going to hit me, but his abuse, when it came, was solely verbal.

"That's none of your business," he said furiously. "Although, despite that you've managed to screw it up anyway. From the moment you turned up and suddenly everybody had to jump to your bloody bidding things started to go wrong!"

"So you're suggesting I stole the manhoods of your friends?" I rolled my eyes, honestly could this complaint get any older? The whole 'women with their womanly wiles' thing has terrified men from time immemorial, isn't it about time they got over it? "It's called friendship, something you probably don't know a hell of a lot about. The guys do things for me, I do things for them, it's symbiotic." Sensing a way out of this stupid confrontation and hoping for a hint as to what was going on with my best friend I added, "And if you would just tell me what I'm doing that's making things so crap for you maybe I could stop doing it and you could get off my back!"

"Nice try," he snarled, "but it doesn't work like that."

Great, now he was talking in code. Exasperated beyond belief I asked, "What doesn't?"

"Nothing, forget it." Clearly Micky had talked himself into some kind of hole and I watched fascinated as he fell silent for a moment trying to find some way out of it. Finally he seemed to remember why we were standing there in the corridor in the first place and his
famous cocky expression slid back over his face like a mask. "Why am I still even talking to you?" he asked. "I've got to meet the others at the pub and celebrate the good news."

He made to walk off, but I made a wild lunge at him and managed to catch his arm. "Matt's your friend," I tried desperately, knowing that he could just push my arm off if he felt like it and wanting to get my point across before he did. "Why would you want to do that to him? I will tell him but not at the pub, not in front of everyone, that's not right."

"Not right?" he asked, raising his eyebrows at my choice of words and making me blush as I remembered that I honestly wasn't in a position to instruct him on right and wrong. "And, anyway, what makes you think I was talking about you and Jack? I was talking about celebrating Jack getting into Cambridge."

I flushed an even deeper red and removed my hand from his arm realising that I’d completely forgotten about that piece of life changing news.

"Yeah, of course you were," I said sarcastically. There was surely no way in hell that Micky was just going to sit on this, it was too good. "What do you want?" I asked desperately, not thinking I really had anything to offer him, but knowing I had to try anyway. Unfortunately Micky was shaking his head, that cruel smile back again.

"Do you really think I would blackmail you with what I know?"

"Yes," I answered instantly and his smile widened.

"Yeah, well, maybe I would," he conceded. "So I tell you what, you be a bit nicer to me, a bit more respectful maybe and I'll give you the opportunity to tell Matt yourself. You can't say fairer then that."

Yes I could, I thought mutinously, I could say a lot fairer then that. Be a bit more respectful? Was he out of his mind? I didn't respect him, I didn't even know if I could fake respecting him but I really was in no position to argue so I nodded reluctantly.

"There now," he said so patronisingly that I ground my teeth together. "It looks like we can get along after all. I'll just have to be careful that when I see Matt that your big news doesn't accidentally slip out..."

"Fuck you!" I snarled, showing some more of my renowned maturity. Not.

"What me as well?" Micky said with an unamused laugh. "Thanks but no thanks, we're not all so desperate that we'd try to prise open your legs. I'm surprised Jack managed it, Brad swore they were welded together."

I was speechless in the face of his crude remarks and was horrified to find that a lump was forming in my chest as if I was about to cry again. I searched around for something to snarl back at him but my thought process was interrupted by a thin, reedy voice saying, "Leave her alone!"

Micky and I both froze and then looked over slowly to see Haley standing in the corridor looking wan and scared.
Micky recovered faster than me, his eyes calculating as he looked her up and down. "Why the hell would you stick up for her?" he asked, sounding genuinely surprised. And why shouldn't he be? I was basically having a coronary at her appearance and decision to side with me.

"You're being a bully," said Haley, wringing her hands together nervously and protesting as if being a bully was an unusual state of affairs for Micky. "Natalia and Jack being together is none of your business."

I closed my eyes briefly in disbelief at her stupidity. Didn't she have the common sense to pretend she hadn't known what he was talking about? Apparently not.

"Jesus, she knows?" Micky asked me, apparently annoyed that he wasn't the only one with the knowledge, I suppose it did take a bit of the edge off his power over me. I nodded curtly in reply and he snorted in astonishment and then asked, "Anyone else?"

Not if you discount my mum I thought, but decided to leave her out of it and shook my head. I didn't really feel like talking anymore.

"Bloody hell," Micky whistled. "How long have you known?" he asked turning back to Haley and she paled still further as if she'd hoped he'd forgotten she was there. Honestly, if she didn't want to be involved why did she stick her nose in?

"Doesn't matter," she answered Micky, her voice so quiet it was almost a whisper. "You shouldn't say anything, you should leave them alone."

Micky looked at her for a long time, his expression calculating before he turned away saying dismissively, "One of these days someone's gonna knock that innocence right out of you."

Haley's face crumpled like a piece of aluminium foil being screwed up and strange protective feelings that I usually only get around family or close friends welled up inside of me. Without pausing to think of the hypocrisy of my words I said coldly, "Lay off her."

There was a moment there where I think we all tried to take in the strangeness of the notion of me sticking up for Haley. I reassured myself that it wasn't because I liked her or anything, but because she'd gone in to bat for me; tit for tat, right?

"For god’s sake!" Micky said, throwing his hands up in disbelief. "The world's gone mad! I'm off to the pub, alcohol makes everything simpler." He walked towards the door leading to outside, but just before he opened it I called after him.

"Remember that you said I could tell Matt."

Without turning he replied, "So play nice, Talia." And then he opened the door and walked out.

The heavy door slammed with a loud clang leaving just Haley and me standing there awkwardly. After a moment she said quietly, "Are you alright?"
All my slightly positive, protective feelings about her vanished in one big whoosh. "Oh sod off, Haley," I said crossly, "this is nothing to do with you." Haley looked absolutely crushed and all my instincts screamed for me to apologise, but fear, stubbornness and just plain habit continued their dictatorship over my actions and I muttered, "I've got to go," before throwing open the door and exiting the building.

Micky must have had his car with him because, as I stepped out into the car park, he was nowhere to be seen, not that I was disappointed, by then I'd seen enough of his ugly mug to see me through a lifetime. I stood for a moment on the bumpy grey asphalt and wondered what I should do. There was no way in hell I was going back up to the flat to face Jack, or go and meet up with the others at the pub, but I couldn't just stay where I was because surely Jack would come down soon.

Suddenly I realised what I needed to do. I needed a friend, I had to tell someone understanding. There was only one person I wanted to be with at that moment: Simone. I needed Simone to know the truth, maybe she could even suggest ways I could tell Matt. Simmy had more tact and compassion in her little finger than I did in my entire body, she'd know what to do!

Buoyed with relief at the thought of finally spilling the whole sordid story onto someone sympathetic I hastened towards her parent's city place wishing that I'd thought to grab my car keys as I'd run after Micky. Still, the walk was only going to take me 25 minutes or so and the fresh air was soothing on my red, flushed face and frazzled nerves.

~*~

Arriving outside the posh house in the nicer area around the university, I ran up the steps to Simone's door two at a time, more eager to see her than I can ever remember being. I knocked loudly on the door and waited for a moment for her to call out that I should come in. When I didn't hear anything after a few seconds I looked down into the car park and checked to make sure her car was there. It was, which upped the likelihood that she was home so I knocked again, no reply.

I was just about to open the door and call inside to see if she hadn't been able to hear me knocking, when the knob I was reaching for was suddenly turned violently and Alex appeared in the doorway. Stepping out onto the top step I was standing on, he quickly closed the door behind himself and folded his arms, scowling at me.

"Uh, hi, Alex," I said, somewhat taken aback and wondering why it was that most of our interactions seemed to begin with him opening a door suddenly and surprising me. Maybe it was his thing.
"Hey," he grunted, not seeming at all pleased to see me but not going down the steps or moving out of the way of the door either.

"How's it going?" I asked awkwardly after a couple of seconds of silence.

"Fine," he replied in his customary succinct way.

Another couple of seconds silence passed with Alex remaining firmly in front of the door, feet planted firmly. He looked for all the world like a bouncer and the glare he was giving me seemed to suggest that I was wearing inappropriate shoes.

"Alex," I sighed, "could you move please? I need to see Simone."

"Nuh."

Great, it was clearly one of those days.

Taking a deep sigh and putting on my most patient voice I asked sweetly, "Why 'nuh'?"

"She's not here," Alex said, his eyes suddenly becoming shifty and I raised my eyebrows disbelievingly.

"Are you lying?" I asked straight out, knowing that Alex was not one for playing word games. My suspicions were confirmed when he didn't answer me but rather continued to look more and more uncomfortable. Honestly, for a bad boy, he really was truly awful at lying!

I sighed again and rubbed a hand tiredly across my face before saying, with just a hint of impatience, "Really, Alex, I'm not in the mood for this today so could you please either tell me what's going on or get out of the way?"

He shook his head, his eyes boring into the distance, doing his best to pretend that he didn't even register my existence. "It's nothing to do with me," he said blandly.

"Oh rubbish!" I snapped, reaching the end of my, admittedly short, tether. "Simone has never refused to see me before. All this weirdness with her began when that stuff about you and the guy on, or should I say off, the fire escape came out. Can't you do us all a massive favour and just tell the police what happened? Simone is worried sick about you, the whole thing has gone on long enough."

Rapidly, Alex's demeanour changed. His eyes focused in on me and I had to hold back a gulp such was the level of suppressed anger that was shining there in the steely grey depths. "You," he hissed with an alarming level of intensity laced into that one word, "don't know anything about anything. You go on and on about how you're such good friends with my sister but you don't know what's been going on with her, I don't think you even care."

I opened my mouth to object to this because it was patently not true but he ploughed on before I could get a word in.

"And it's none of your business, but my stuff is pretty much fixed and has been for the last week so it's not me she's worried about."
That really did take me by surprise. The Alex thing was resolved and Simone hadn't told me? Then again, I hadn't noticed any change when we'd talked on the phone when I was Bridunna in fact, come to think of it, I hadn't even asked about the situation. Great, I really was a bad friend.

Alex seemed to notice my sudden discomfit as a smirk, not unlike the one I’d seen on Micky not so long ago, tweaked the corners of his lips. "So, not as knowledgeable as you think then," he said with the tiniest hint of a gloat.

"Doesn't change the fact that she went through hell worrying about you," I snapped, angry that he was right but angrier at myself for not thinking more about what Simone was going through.

"What goes on between us is nothing to do with you," Alex said, his tone changing so that he seemed to be almost pitying me. "You don't control everything, people will do what they want to do without waiting for permission from you first. Maybe Simone is doing something on her own for once without you. Actually, you know what would be great? If you would just butt out of other people's lives and concentrate on the screw ups in yours for once."

Wow, Alex had mastered the art of multiple sentences.

Still, the shock at hearing him say so much was somewhat surpassed by what it was he was saying. Where the hell was all this coming from? Seriously, I didn’t realise that so many people were walking around with pent up anger against me. Was I really as bad as all that? Or had it just escaped my notice that the Prime Minister had announced that it was 'say horrible things to Talia' day? Or should that be 'deliver home truths to Talia' day? It would depend who you were, I suppose.

"Fine!" I said sharply, pulling myself together for the moment as I did not want to look weak in front of Alex. "I'm not perfect, but just for the record, I never said I was and you want to know something? Neither are you buddy boy, far from it. So before you go spouting off at other people about how they should concentrate on the screw ups in their lives take a long, hard look at yourself. You think you're so cool with your bad boy act? Well it's getting really old. No-one gives a crap if you can beat up a bunch of private school ponces, I could beat up a gang of private school kids, it isn't exactly a major achievement! Take my advice: grow up."

Phew! I took a deep breath after my little tirade and then turned away, walking quickly down the steps, aiming to have the last word.

Alex obviously took a moment to pull himself together but just before I rounded the corner and disappeared from his sight he shouted, "Go to hell!"

"Yeah, yeah," I muttered to myself, my blood coursing excitedly through my veins and my adrenaline whizzing so fast I was itching for another fight, "same to you."
I was so riled up, so angry that I'd been cast as the bad guy by everyone that I marched back to the flat suddenly more than prepared to take Jack on, to explain what had happened and to sort the whole damn mess out once and for all.

I’d had enough!

As I stormed along the pavement, I imagined dragging Matt out of the pub and simply telling him the truth and leaving it up to him to deal with it. Maybe I could do a drive-by truth telling; screech up in my car, scream that I'd slept with Jack and then roar off before he could say anything.

I’d walked so quickly that I arrived back at the flat in about 15 minutes and thundered up the stairs before throwing open the door and shouting, "Jack, we've got to talk!"

It took a minute before I fully took in what I was looking at in the flat. It seemed that my arrival had frozen the two occupants where they stood. My eyes narrowed as I took in Jack and Haley, their arms wrapped tightly around each other and their eyes startled.

Jack recovered first, as was so often the way, releasing Haley from his embrace, but keeping one arm draped in a protective way around her shoulders. "Haley was just telling me about what happened downstairs between you and Micky," he said, his voice calm, his eyes instructing me coolly to listen to him and not to overreact. Boy, did he know me well.

"Really?" I asked, my voice coming out as a squeak with a slightly hysterical edge. "She can't have been giving a re-enactment because I don't remember there being much hugging."

Obviously choosing to ignore that, admittedly childish, remark, Jack asked, "Where did you go? You should have come back up and told me what was going on straight away."

Was he out of his mind? Firstly, I was not going to discuss it with Haley tucked comfortably into the crook of his arm; and secondly there was no way he could possibly think that I would’ve gone immediately back up to him after what had happened.

"In terms of the biggest 'should have' don't you think there are other things that might come before me freaking out and going to Simone's?" I asked rather cattily.

"Fine." Jack was talking to me as if I was a stranger, a heavily armed and possibly psychotic stranger. I realised then that I probably still had a bloodlust of sorts shining in my eyes and was displaying my agitation at my flight from Jack and my fights with Micky and Alex. Oh, and we mustn't forget that there was the whole hugging Haley issue, I certainly wasn't.

I made a big effort to pull myself together and look a little less nuts, relaxing my stance slightly and closing the door behind me so that the whole building didn't end up knowing about Jack and me before Matt did.
"We knew this was going to happen sooner or later," Jack was saying. "And maybe it's a good thing that Micky knows, it'll force us to do something about it now rather than letting things get out of control."

"Out of control?" I couldn't help myself, despite wanting to seem calm those words did come out as a bit of a shriek. "Jack we are so far beyond out of control, you must know that. Whatever happens we're screwed. I've ruined everything."

Truly at that moment I think was when the full implications of what was going on hit me. Matt would turn his back and me and Jack once he knew. We'd both lose him and for Jack that meant the only real family he had. There was no way Matt would be understanding about it, look how irrational and crazy I'd been and he was my brother for goodness sake, it was genetic!

I felt like I wanted to cry, but I'd clearly exhausted my supply earlier that morning and so my eyes were dry as I collapsed back against the door and hugged my arms around myself.

I heard Jack come towards me and waited to be pulled into his arms like Haley had obviously been not so long ago, but nothing happened. I looked up at him and saw that he was resolutely keeping his strong, beautiful arms by his sides and simply hovering near me making vaguely comforting noises. Initially confused about his reticence to comfort me properly I suddenly realised what it was that was holding him back.

I had stupidly (so, so stupidly) told him sheep and that I was uncomfortable being with him and he was scared to touch me. I groaned at this further revelation of the massive mess I had woven myself into.

"Is she alright?" I heard Haley ask Jack, her voice doing that annoying trembling thing she seemed to have down pat.

A girl when feeling crushed and defeated should not have to be in the presence of another girl with perfect make up and flimsy clothes which didn't even show up any imperfections. It surely had to be a law!

I closed my eyes briefly against the vision of Haley pouting prettily and moving towards Jack, but all I saw then was the image of the two of them wrapped around each other which was obviously not conducive to my mental health.

I snapped my eyes open again and stepping forward I said, a little bit of malice shining through even though I'd have thought I'd have exhausted my supply by then, "No Haley, she's not alright. She is tired and ashamed and cross and being in the same room as you is not helping any."

"Hey," said Jack warningly, but I ignored him. I'd reached the point of no return and considering I was so clearly, royally screwed I took momentary pleasure in the fact that, really, I had nothing to lose in finally voicing my feelings about Haley, to Haley.
"You're insincere, Haley. You're always being so sickeningly sweet that you're clearly taking the piss, and you've spent all the time I've known you sucking up to the boys in the vain hope that they'll look past your shallowness and be your friend because you're pretty. You flirt obviously and badly with all of my guy friends but ignore Simone and me if it’s just us girls, and you pretend you like football when you clearly have no idea what's going on." I searched for a moment for something else that annoyed me about Haley and ended up finishing with, "And your clothes are inappropriate for the weather conditions."

I’d gone too far, way, way too far and I felt like a total cow…again. I wanted to invent a time machine and go back and start this whole messy day again. I would give Jack a friendly hug to congratulate him on winning the scholarship so nothing would have happened between us, then Micky wouldn't have seen anything, I wouldn't have gone and had a blow up with Alex and, finally, I wouldn't have just completely ripped into someone who was basically an innocent in the whole mess.

"Ignore her, Haley," Jack instructed her steadily in a calm tone I knew he wasn't going to use when he turned his attentions to me. "No-one thinks those things about you."

"No, it's alright," Haley said, taking a deep breath and blinking back tears. "But I think I'll go home now if that's okay." And so saying, and with her head held high even as her bottom lip trembled, she skirted round Jack and me and left the flat.

Jack shook his head as the door closed, looking at me with eyes full of accusation and contempt. He went to follow her, but I put out an arm to stop him, knowing that it was my job to go and apologise to Haley, not his.

"Let go of me," Jack said, his voice low and dangerous and I felt the hairs along my arms rise up as goosebumps covered my skin. He wasn't going to let me get away with my rudeness this time, that much was obvious.

"I'll go," I said quietly, "I need to say sorry."

Jack pulled away and suddenly all his restraint seemed to shatter and fall away and the next second he was shouting at me like I'd never seen him shout before. "Damn right you need to say sorry! Just because you're having a bad day does not, do you hear me, does not mean that you can speak to people like that."

"I know," I said in a little, miserable voice, knowing that I deserved his fury but not liking it all the same. It seemed so unreal that not so long ago we’d been kissing passionately; things can change so quickly.

"Do you? Because it seems to me that recently you've done nothing but treat people as if they are pathetic nothings, as if your feelings reign supreme and everyone should just take what you deal out." Jack's voice tightened slightly as he added, "Come on now, it's not you Tally, at least it never used to be."
"I know," I said again. "I'm ashamed of myself and I'm going to try and be better." Jack gave me a look which quite clearly said: 'You better.' "I'll start by apologising to Haley." I put my hand on the doorknob to go and do just that but then turned, finding myself asking, "Should I take the bra down with me, kill two birds and all that?"

Okay, I know that I'd just said I would be better and here I was fishing to see whether the absolute worst thing had happened on the 19th and Jack had slept with Haley. But, in my gut, I didn't think he had, it was too profound a betrayal and even blind drunk I don't think Jack would be capable of hurting me that deeply. Still, his constant protectiveness of her and now that hug...I had to check otherwise I'd always wonder.

"What?" Jack asked in some frustration, obviously unable to follow my train of thought.

"I'm not trying to be a bitch about it," I said hastily, "I just, um, thought that if that blue, lacy bra is Haley's I could take it back down to her now."

Jack's face cleared of confusion momentarily and then clouded again, "Oh that!" he said, pulling a strange face. "When did you see that? Never mind, it's not Haley's, it's mine."

I looked at him for a long moment then shrugged saying, "Okay, I'm not even going to ask." I was trying to make a joke out of it but seriously, 'it's mine'? What kind of stupid excuse is that?

Jack was still looking at me weirdly and I could see the last flickers of anger still present in his startling eyes. "What do you think, Talia?" he asked slowly. "That I had sex with some girl and brought the bra home as a trophy? That I would leave it lying around deliberately to make you upset, is that what you think?"

"No," I protested, not liking the menacing expression he wore. "It was more like I thought that you'd had sex here and she'd left it by accident." Seeing his expression darken further I added hastily, "And you wouldn't use it to upset me deliberately it was just on the floor and you weren't really in the state to be able to do much tidying up," I finished, referring to his very hungover state on the morning of the 20th.

I was almost too afraid to look at Jack after I'd finished speaking because I could tell by the vibe in the room that he was furious again. As I finally raised my eyes to his he gave an odd little laugh, completely devoid of good humour and grabbed my hand covering the doorknob, pulling me away from the door.

"Right, that's it!" His voice was harsh and sharp as he pulled me close to him then released my hand almost disgustedly. "Lay it all out then, all the things you think I've done, all the lies you think I've told. Jesus! After everything that's happened, our childhood together as well as the stuff from the last couple of months, you still think that I'd bring a woman back here now? Well, thanks, thank you so much." His sarcasm bit deeply within me and my head throbbed with the force of his words and how badly I'd obviously hurt him.
"What was I supposed to think?" I managed to retaliate even though my throat seemed to be closing up. "In terms of evidence, a bra on the floor and scratches on your chest together with your reputation for mindless sex with a random girl on the 19th is pretty convincing you have to admit. It really didn't take a massive leap to arrive at that conclusion."

He stepped away from me then, turning his head as if he was too disgusted to even look at me. "Go and apologise to Haley," he said again, his voice flat as if I had squashed his emotions when I accused him directly.

In the face of his defeat I went on the attack, walking a few steps after him as he strode towards his room. "So you're not even going to try and convince me that nothing happened?" I asked. "You have nothing to say about it?"

"What's the point?" Jack shot back. "It seems that it doesn't matter what I do, you won't trust me. You run hot and cold on me so I never know where I am with you. Whatever, it doesn't matter, you're never going to trust me and I think I'm reaching the stage where I can't be bothered expending the energy trying to convince you anymore."

Ow, ow, ow. It all hurt too much. I wanted to tell him that he was wrong, that I did trust him but I really had no proof. All my actions indicated that I was using him in the worst way and was ever on the alert to catch him doing the same to me.

As Jack reached his room, however, I had to call out, "Jack."

"What?" he snapped, clearly entirely out of patience with me.

"You can't stay here, you have to go down to the pub, remember?" My voice was apologetic as I added, "And please let me be there when you tell Matt, we'll do it tomorrow, yeah?"

"Sure," Jack said heavily, grabbing a jacket and marching past me to the flat door, "wouldn't want anything to spoil the celebration."

I almost laughed at that. I wasn't going to stupidly tempt fate like some idiot in a film by saying 'Could this day get any worse?' Because I knew, from past experience and just generally how the day had been thus far, that the answer was yes. I'd hit rock bottom, but there was nothing to say that I wasn't going to just keep digging.
Chapter 25

I stood nervously outside the door leading to Haley's flat and told myself sternly that I’d been brought up to behave better than I had been. Quickly running a little montage of all my stroppy, pathetic moments that I'd had recently involving Haley, and cringing majorly at my conduct, I managed to gird my loins enough to reach up and knock decisively on the door.

"Who is it?" The cracked, hoarse voice of someone who’d clearly been smoking for a very long time sounded so loudly near me that I jumped.

"Um, it's Natalia from upstairs," I answered, surprising myself with the use of my full name, but feeling that that creepy voice demanded the formality. "I'm a friend of Haley's." Okay, so technically a lie but if it was in aid of apologising to her it couldn't be that wrong, right?

There was the sound of someone undoing deadlocks and, looking at the door closely, I saw that there were three as opposed to the one that our door had. The door opened a crack revealing a security chain and a pair of pale, rheumy eyes peering out at me.

I smiled reassuringly at the old lady looking through the gap at me. So I was finally meeting Haley's aunt, by the looks of her she must have been a great aunt, she appeared positively ancient.

"Hi, is it alright if I pop in and see Haley for a moment?" I asked in my most polite and friendly voice. You know the one, the tone you reserve for elderly people, and it's really hard to keep the patronising note out, isn't it?

The door was closed slightly as she removed the chain and then she opened it totally and appraised me frankly. It must be said that I did the same. She was tiny and frail looking, but I was willing to bet that she was a battleaxe. Her hands seemed like claws and were stained brown with nicotine and her mouth was surrounded by the purse lines long time smokers get. Of course it could just be that she pursed her lips with disapproval a lot as she was doing at that moment.

Fitting in with the theme of the day, she did not look at all impressed with me.

"She's crying in her room. That's your fault I suppose?"

I gulped, this woman could combat my mum in terms of disconcerting bluntness.

"Yes, probably," I admitted. "I'm here to apologise."

"Just as well," she grumbled, moving aside and allowing me in. "Haley's room is over there," she added, pointing towards a closed door with a gnarled finger.

"Thanks," I said, squaring my shoulders and picking my way around the various pieces of antique looking furniture in the main room which was so similar to my flat upstairs
and yet so different. You know how doilies seem to have disappeared from mainstream use? Well, I think I found out where they've gone. It was like Haley's aunt was running a rescue shelter for all things old and musty.

I knocked lightly on Haley's door, conscious of her aunt's gaze on me and hoping Haley would open up quickly so I could escape her disapproving glare.

"I'm fine thank you," Haley's weak voice filtered through the door and I felt a flash of sympathy for her having to continually use that 'old person' voice when at home.

"It's Talia," I called out. "Can I come in?"
Haley made strange noise somewhere between a squeak of surprise and a sob and then said hesitantly, "Sure."

I opened the door and then closed it quickly behind myself, wanting to put something solid between me and Haley's scary aunt.

It took me a minute for my eyes to adjust to the brightness of the room after the frankly dank main room. Haley's room was about as far removed from the heavy darkness of what was obviously the aunt's domain as it was possible to be. There was a lot of white, a white chest of drawers, a white cupboard, a white wicker chair, and a white bed with a white doona on top of it. The walls were painted a light green with little swirls of lighter colour through it making it seem as if it was rolling ocean, the whole effect was actually very pretty.

I focused back on task quickly as Haley let out a little sniffle. She was sitting cross legged on the bed, there was a box of tissues next to her and a dishevelled looking bit of tissue clutched in her hand. She looked so miserable I felt like the biggest type of rat there could possibly be.

"Is it alright if I sit down?" I asked, gesturing towards the bed and she nodded and shuffled back a bit so there was room for me to join her.

Once I was settled she threw her tissue into the bin and looked at me with a tiny little spark of defiance I'd never seen in her wide blue eyes before.

"I suppose Jack sent you," she sniffed, pushing a soft wave of her light brown hair behind one of her ears.

"No, he didn't," I said softly. "I mean, he wanted me to apologise of course, but I think he wanted to come down and make sure you were alright first."

She smiled slightly then sighed. "He's sweet. You're really lucky, you know?"

I nodded, I truly was despite all the nonsense I was wrapped up in at that moment.

"I am," I agreed. "And I know I don't appreciate it sometimes. Look, Haley, I've really got to apologise. I've been having a rotten time recently, but that's absolutely no excuse for going feral at you."

Haley nodded and then gave a little smile. "You know I'm actually kind of glad you yelled at me finally, I was getting kind of sick of the snide remarks."
Damn, she'd noticed those? Then again I suppose she would have had to be pretty obtuse to miss them. There was silence in the room as I struggled to stop myself falling into such a great pit of guilt that I’d be useless at apologising. Haley broke it by saying suddenly, "I just don't understand why you hate me so much! I've always gone out of my way to be really nice to you."

Gah, this was excruciating.

"You have always been really nice to me," I agreed apologetically, "and therein may lie the problem."

"I was too nice to you?"

Well may she look totally incredulous, it does seem pretty weird…even to me.

"Maybe not that exactly, but you treated me differently," I clarified. "When the guys are around you're really perky and giggly but when it's just us girls you clam up and refuse to speak to Simone and me, like you're too good for us or something."

"But that not it!" she protested. "I just don't know what to say to you. You and Simone are so cool and confident and I thought you'd rather I pretended I wasn't there when we were together."

Cool and confident? Boy was this girl bad at reading people!

"Well, maybe we've managed to get stuck at cross purposes then," I said slowly.

"Maybe," Haley said quietly, biting her bottom lip nervously and then saying quickly, "I never meant to make you think I was insincere or only after the guys, I really thought we could be friends, but you acted like I was the enemy from the get go and I didn't know how to change your mind."

I hated to admit it, but she was actually totally right. I'd decided pretty much the second I met her that she was the enemy. People seem to forget that guys aren't the only ones who get stupidly protective over their friends and family. I'm ludicrously close to both Matt and Jack and I must have somehow thought that she were trying to tear us apart…or maybe it wasn't even that, I miserably admitted to myself, maybe it was just that I didn't like another girl encroaching on my territory.

"Oh my god!" I suddenly exclaimed as I hit a massive realisation. "I'm like Micky. I've been your Micky."

She smiled slightly at that, but I wasn't trying to be funny. I really just had had the most awful epiphany.

"You weren't as bad as Micky," she tried to reassure me, but I was having none of it.

"I pre-judged you and gave you a whole lot of grief you didn't deserve, didn't I?" I asked. "So I am, I'm a bloody Micky and I'm really, truly sorry."
"That's okay." Haley looked a little uncomfortable at my obvious distress. "You were right with some things. I do pretend to like football although I have no idea what's going on and sometimes my clothes are inappropriate for the weather."

"Oh, so you do feel the cold then?" I asked before I could stop myself. She didn't seem offended, however, she just gave a little laugh and nodded. "Yeah sometimes I'm freezing!"

"So why do you wear what you do?"

"Because," she suddenly covered her face with her hands and mumbled through them, "I'm going to sound really pathetic, but it's because that's what everyone else wears." She peeped at me over the top of her fingers. "Awful, right?"

I shrugged, trying to be diplomatic, "Wear whatever you like. Nobody, especially a jeans addict like myself should pass judgement on what you want to wear. Please don't waste time thinking that any of my nasty opinions actually have any merit to them. You're so pretty, I'm sure you'd look just fine in a sack."

I couldn't stop my voice from sounding a little bit grudging, but when she blushed, I did manage to hold back a sigh at the way it made her seem sweet and innocent rather than like she was suffering from a bad case of sunburn like it did with me. After all, that really wasn't her fault.

Wow, looked like I was improving already!

"I'm not as pretty as you," Haley said after a moment and I snorted loudly at this obvious lie. "No, I'm serious," she protested. "You don't see the looks guys give you, you're so confident, you don't let anyone mess you about and they think it's hot." She flushed even deeper at this and I rolled my eyes.

"There's a difference between staring at someone because they've just marched in and made a total fool of themselves and staring at someone because they think they're attractive," I said forcefully. "You could have any guy you want, but you'll only flirt with the group of guys you hang out with. As soon as anybody else comes near you clam up. I've always thought that was because you only wanted Matt or one of the others, but that's not it, is it?"

She hugged a pillow to her chest and shook her head sadly. "I'm shy," she murmured. "And maybe it seemed like I was too clingy, always coming round and everything, but Matt and the others seemed to like me. I didn't even care that it was probably only because they felt sorry for me because other guys don't want anything to do with me."

Ergh! I wanted to grab her shoulders and shake her! How could she be so blind? I quickly felt my frustration subsiding, however, to be replaced with sympathy and a little bit of embarrassment that I could have read her so wrong.

"Oh, Haley," I sighed, "we're both of us useless at this guy thing, aren't we?"

"Not you, you've got Jack," she said encouragingly.
Something in my chest contracted cruelly at her words and I shook my head. "No I don't," I told her truthfully, "I never did, not really. It wasn't real, any of it, I kind of talked him into teaching me about being with a guy because I was so rubbish at it."

Her eyes widened and I could see she was trying to understand what I meant, after all it sounded pretty weird. I wasn't in the mood to properly explain my full pathetic exploits then, however, especially not to someone I had only just stopped hating.

I looked down at her bedspread in shame at what I'd done and so was surprised when she said softly, "I don't know the full details of how you and Jack came about, but you only have to look at him to see how much he cares about you."

"As his best friend's sister," I agreed, "but not anything more."

Wait a minute? More? Did I want Jack as more than a friend? The answer came back to me very quickly and it went something along the lines of: 'Of course you do you bloody idiot!' Cue the lightning bolt cracking the sky and waking me up!

I know it seems utterly preposterous, but honestly, it was only at that moment that I let my common sense collide with my emotions and I jumped as if electrocuted. It was so much more complicated than I had ever imagined!

I liked Jack, as in like liked! Maybe I even...no! I wasn't going to go that far, that really was dangerous territory to start treading in.

All the time we'd been together I'd tried to explain away the tingles as nothing more than a chemical reaction, excitement whatever, I'd made sure I never really connected it to Jack. I was such a total moron, all the signs had been there, I got jealous over Haley, I wanted to be with him all the time and I was prepared to risk my mental health and my relationship with my brother to be with him.

What if he knew? Oh my god, that would be too embarrassing for words, he would think I was totally pathetic!

Haley was watching me with some concern, I suppose I must have looked pretty odd as those thoughts ran through my head. "Are you alright?" she asked, "You look like you've just been slapped or something."


"Ah." She smiled knowingly. "You love him, right?"

"No!" I snapped quickly. "Nothing like that. That would be totally stupid."

"Why?"

"Because!" I struggled for a moment with the overwhelming swell of feelings I was experiencing. "He's like family, he's my brother's best mate, he's going away...ergh this really is horrible." I stood up off the bed and actually found myself wringing my hands. "Look, I'm really sorry, Haley, but I've got to go, I hope you'll forgive me for how I've behaved towards you in the past. I really think we could be friends."
"Yeah, I'd like that," she agreed, although I could tell she was a bit confused by my sudden desire to leave.

I was about to go but, on a sudden impulse, I asked, "Hey why do you always call me Natalia?"

"Oh when you first arrived here Micky told me…" she began to trail off and our eyes met in a mutual understanding of what a tool that boy was, "…he told me you prefer it with people you don't know very well," she finished, shaking her head. "He was having me on, right?"

"Oh yeah," I agreed before smiling at her once more and exiting her bedroom.

We weren't friends yet, far from it, but I did think that with a bit of time and an open mind on my part we could be at some stage. Preferably a stage when there wasn't so much drama going on.

I skirted through the main room of her flat, glad that I didn't run into her scary aunt again, and pelted up the stairs to my flat again. Once inside I ran into my room and rummaged through my bag until I found my mobile.

There was no way in hell I was going to stay in the flat that night and with Simone refusing to see me that really only left one person who wasn't first a friend of my brother's.

Flicking through the address book I selected Adam's number and then moved around the room packing a small overnight bag as it rang. I was worried for a moment that he wasn't going to answer, but eventually there was a click and Adam's warm voice said, "Hey, Talia."

I was so relieved I sank down upon my bed and smiled widely.

"Hi Adam, how's things?"

"They'd be better if you hadn't left me all alone today, you cow," he said jokingly. It took me a second to figure out what he was talking about and then it clicked. It was a uni day! I'd had a lecture that morning but taken it off to be with Jack when he found out about the scholarship. Thinking about Jack and the scholarship made my heart sink a little, but I rallied enough to say lightly, "Oh I'm sure you managed just fine without me." I took a deep breath and ploughed on, "Hey, I know this is totally out of the blue and everything, but would it be alright if I crashed at yours tonight?"

"Oh." Adam sounded surprised and so he should, we were great mates, but we weren't really at the stage where we had impromptu sleepovers. Still, he obviously heard some of the desperation in my voice as a second later he said jovially, "Yeah of course you can. Is something wrong?"

"No," I lied, "I'm just getting a bit of cabin fever being stuck in this flat all the time and thought it would be nice to hang out somewhere else for a change."
Rubbish excuse I know, but I really didn't have time to think of anything better. It was clear he wasn't convinced, but the sweetheart just agreed that he got that way sometimes too and said he was on his way to pick me up.

I approved of this plan as I really wasn't in the mood to drive, I'd probably drive on the wrong side of the road or something. I took the time it took for him to come over writing a quick note to the boys to let them know where I was and that I’d be back the next morning, and taking deep breaths to try and calm myself. I could handle this. Tonight I would hide at Adam's and tomorrow I would tell Matt about Jack and me, leaving out, of course, the realisation I'd had down at Haley's. I didn't bother trying to make plans for what would happen after that, there was no point, if Matt acted the way I thought he would, Jack or I or both of us would be dead which rather neatly solved the problem.

Yes, I was being a bit melodramatic, but it was better than actually thinking about what would happen when I told Matt.

When Adam turned up I was so glad to see someone not entangled in my mess that I flew into his arms and gave him a big hug, unashamedly hiding my face against his jacket. "Hey." I could hear the smile in his voice. "Bad day?"

"You have no idea," I mumbled against him before pulling away and forcing myself to smile reassuringly. "But nothing major," I lied. "Let's go."

And so Adam took my cue and didn’t pry about my sudden need to escape. Instead he took me to his place where we ordered pizza and made drinks (my vodka lemon consisting of considerably more vodka than lemon) and snuggled together on the couch. The TV was on in the background, but we weren't paying attention, rather we talked non-stop covering many topics and laughing a lot, although it must be said my good humour was a little forced.

The sun hid itself behind the mountains, the moon and stars came out as we chatted and after that it wasn't long before the day's extreme highs and lows began to catch up with me. I began yawning more and more often and my eyes drooped. During a lull in the conversation I must have drifted off completely, I was so warm and comfortable.

It seemed only seconds after my eyes had closed, however, that a noise woke me and I jerked awake, confused for a moment as to where I was. There was a pillow beneath my head and a doona over me which hadn't been there the night before, and bright, greyish light was streaming in through the curtain-less windows of Adam's somewhat dingy apartment. I struggled into a sitting position and saw Adam looking at me from over in the kitchen area wearing a crumpled T-shirt and a pair of satiny boxers.

"Sorry," he said with that cute grin of his. "I was trying not to wake you, but I dropped the coffee canister." He held it up for me to see and added, "Want some?"

I shook my head, still a little disorientated. Then it hit me. Tomorrow was today.
It was the day that I finally told Matt what I'd done to his best mate, although I knew it was what he thought of as his best mate doing to me that was going to cause the most issues. I groaned and threw the doona back over my head wanting to hide for just a few minutes longer. I heard Adam chuckling and then his voice saying, "Got a bit of a hangover have you?"

And yes, now he mentioned it, I realised I had. Still, the thumping inside my head was nothing compared to the odd thumping inside my chest; in fact it was quite nice to blame some of the misery I was feeling on an excess of alcohol the night before. Kicking back the duvet I saw that I was wearing the clothes I'd worn all yesterday, well of course! I'd fallen asleep on the couch and Adam was hardly going to get me into my pyjamas.

Man I must look as scungy as I felt!

Standing up and finding that I was swaying slightly and my bladder was full to bursting, I asked Adam whether I could have a shower and he nodded towards a closed door.

"Sorry about the mess," he apologised in advance and I laughed lightly as I picked up my bag which contained a fresh set of clothes.

"I live with two boys, Adam, it won't be anything I haven't seen before."

And it wasn't, stuff was scattered all across the small counter and the shower mat was a sodden mess, but for a guy who lived on his own, I thought it was relatively clean. I went to the loo and then stripped off my crumpled clothes and climbed into the shower.

The pressure was rubbish and the temperature didn't seem to get above luke-warm which made it seem to me that the shower was personifying how I was feeling. Sleeping on the couch had given me a sore neck to go with my pounding head and heart, I really must have looked a complete mess.

I scrubbed myself with the sliver of cracked soap I found in the shower caddy and used the shampoo and conditioner I'd remembered to bring with me to try and rub a bit of normalcy back into my body. It wasn't a totally successful plan, but I did feel quite a bit more human as I stepped out of the shower and grabbed an already slightly wet towel from the towel rail to dry myself off. I dressed quickly in a pair of beige cords and a black low scooped three quarter sleeved top and stepped out into the main room towelling dry my hair as I did so.

"Your shower sucks," I informed Adam and he nodded the truth of it as he sat in an arm chair drinking his coffee in jeans and a T-shirt, he'd obviously got changed whilst I'd been in the shower.

I brushed my hair and began twisting it back into two plaits on either side of my head asking casually as I did so, "What time is it?"
Adam looked at his massive over sized watch (why is it that men always have such massive watches? Are they not able to see the numbers on smaller watches or something?) and his eyes widened in surprise.

"Christ, it's just after 11."

"Seriously?" I fastened the second plait with a thin hair tie and gaped at him in astonishment. Despite everything, I’d slept for a very long time. Maybe my body had offered sleep to me as some form of escape. I wished momentarily that I could pull a Sleeping Beauty and conk out for a 100 years, that would solve things pretty conclusively.

Unfortunately, reality was knocking insistently on my already sore head so I said, "I'd better get back, Matt and Jack will be wondering where I am."

"Can you grab some breakfast at the uni-caf with me first?" Adam asked, getting to his feet immediately, putting his coffee cup into the sink and grabbing a jacket and his car keys off his table.

I thought about it for a moment as I pulled on my black boots. I really should have hurried back to the flat as quickly as possible, but my inner coward pushed to the front of my warring emotions and I found myself nodding. "But just quickly," I qualified as we headed out the door.

As it was about half 11 by the time we made it to the café, we ordered toasted cheese sandwiches as a kind of brunch and he had another coffee while I opted for orange juice, I was jittery enough as it was. I was barely able to keep the small bites of my sandwich down as my stomach was churning so hard, and I gazed unseeingly out of the large windows we sat in front of rehearsing various ways to tell Matt about Jack and me.

I was so wrapped up in my thoughts I almost forgot Adam was there and so jumped dramatically when he gave a little cough and began to speak.

"Talia, I was wondering something."

I looked at him a little dazed and then nodded, trying to look interested in what he was saying.

"When I first met you you'd just broken up with that Brad guy, right?" I nodded again, barely able to muster up the interest into where he was going with that line of inquiry. "And I got that you weren't interested in the whole dating thing then, but I was wondering whether that had changed at all, you know since we started being such good mates."

I froze, my orange juice half way to my lips. No, no, no, no, no! Not now! Not something else that I had to worry about!

I put my glass back down on the table with a thump and tried to ignore the fact that I'd just gone bright red.

"You mean me and you…?" I let the sentence trail off, but it was obvious where I’d been heading.
Adam nodded, his orangey hair flopping slightly as he did so. "If you feel like you're cool with it then, yeah, I'd really like to go out sometime."

"Oh." Well he couldn't really have put it much plainer then that. Crap! I'd already let him down gently once before, I wasn't sure I could do it a second time and keep him a friend, but I sure as hell didn't want to lose him. My brain whirred looking for something just right to say but it was too exhausted at having been squeezed for what to tell Matt. I was screwed.

I looked at Adam and all that sprang to mind was the truth, I could give him that at least, I was sick of lying anyway. "The thing is-" I began, but at that moment someone appeared next to the table, casting a shadow over our food.

Adam and I both looked up and I had to bit back a groan as I saw it was Micky.

"Hey, this happened before," said Adam, not seeming the least bit fazed by his band mate's sudden appearance. "I'm not late for a band meeting this time am I?"

"No." Micky actually seemed to send a genuine smile over at Adam and I thought fleetingly that he actually looked quite nice looking when he wasn't scowling or smirking. All even vaguely pleasant thoughts about him fled however as he turned his eyes on me and I remembered what I had promised to in order to be able to tell Matt myself. He had probably sought me out specifically so he could torture me with this 'respect him' business.

"Hi, Micky," I said, trying my utmost to sound polite. "That's…um…a really good shirt you're wearing. "That's…um…a really good shirt you're wearing." Out of the corner of my eye I saw Adam raise his eyebrows in surprise and had to fight back a sort of hysterical laugh as I added, "It really makes your eyes pop. And I mean that respectfully."

At this Adam burst out laughing, but Micky and I were totally solemn as we eyed each other. Micky opened his mouth, presumably to tell me that I obviously had trouble distinguishing between respect and taking the piss, but then his mobile rang. He snatched it out of his pocket and turned away from the table as he spoke to whomever was on the other end.

Adam, his eyes still twinkling with mirth, leant forward and asked, "What was that all about?"

I shook my head, indicating with my hands that Micky was still close by and that I didn't want to talk about it just yet. Adam looked surprised, but nodded. I picked up my now cold sandwich and took a massive bite hoping to forestall Adam from pursuing the conversation Micky had interrupted.

This turned out to be a bad idea as a second later, when I was still chewing on the mixture of bread and melted cheese, Micky swore loudly, slammed shut his mobile, returned to the table and grabbed me by the arm.

"Hey, what-" I choked as he dragged me to my feet.
"Micky what are you doing?" Adam half yelled also getting up and trying to push him away from me.

"Go home," Micky said intensely reaching down, grabbing my bag and shoving it at me. I clutched it automatically and found myself being propelled out of the café by Micky, Adam protesting and following in our wake. "Where's your car?" Micky demanded looking round the car park and obviously not seeing my little car there.

"I don't have it with me," I said, finally managing to swallow my mouthful and turning to glare at Micky. "Let go of me."

"Fine, you'll have to take her," Micky said, ignoring me and turning instead to Adam who was looking entirely bemused.

"Okay, but why-" He wasn't allowed to finish either as Micky looked at me again and said in a low, serious voice,

"You need to go home. Now." He released me roughly towards Adam who put his hands protectively on my shoulders and began to yell something at Micky about him being an arse. I didn't really notice the commotion as tiny icicles of fear were forming on my spine and I suddenly was finding it hard to breath.

"Let's go," I gasped, grabbing Adam by the arm and pulling him towards his car. I ran round to the passenger side and got in, hoping that Adam wouldn't waste time demanding answers. He thankfully seemed to have caught some of my panic and got into the car and put it in gear without any arguments. A second later we shot out of parking lot so fast that there was a squeal of rubber and we probably left a black mark on the asphalt.

"What's going on?" Adam asked as we drove quickly through the light traffic towards my building.

"We'll find out soon enough," I told him curtly, not really in the mood to hash over the details. "Just please get there as quickly as possible."

We didn't talk after that and, a few minutes later when we pulled up alongside my car, he didn't object when I shot out before he'd even brought the vehicle to a complete stop, he just followed me as I flew up the stairs to my floor.

I fumbled with my keys, so nervous that I was unable to find the right one and then when I finally did find it I couldn't get my hands to stop shaking enough to get it into the keyhole.

"Here," Adam took the key off me and put it cleanly into the lock before pushing the door open and standing back as I darted around him and ran into the main room.

The scene was as bad as I had feared. The place was an absolute tip, the dining room table had been overturned and the chairs were scattered around it as some dervish had whirled through our designated dining area. The other thing I noticed was a massive dent in the plaster near my door and the phone receiver lying in bits on the floor beneath the hole. It
didn't take a CSI specialist to figure out that someone had thrown the phone at the wall and I was willing to bet that person had been Matt.

It wasn't the surroundings that disturbed me so much that I felt like I’d suddenly fallen into a patch of quicksand and was sinking fast, however. It was the sight of Matt and Jack, the erstwhile brothers and comrades, their faces scant inches apart, my brother with a handful of Jack's shirt while it looked like Jack was trying to push him away, that broke me and I screamed, "No, Matt, leave him alone!" Before I could think through the repercussions that might have.

Matt and Jack both turned their heads to see me and Adam framed in the doorway and I felt my eyes smart with tears at the hollow look on both their faces. Matt's expression changed as he saw me, the mottled ruddiness already visible on his skin going even redder and a furious scowl twisting the mouth that was usually so ready to smile.

That grotesque look chilled me deeply and confirmed all the fears I’d had about how Matt would react when he found out about Jack and me. I opened my mouth to warn Jack, but I was too late. Turning away from me Matt suddenly yelled, “Bastard!"

He slammed his fist hard into Jack's stomach, throwing him back against the wall and not seeming to care that his best friend's head was smacked hard into the plaster.

"Matt-" Jack's voice was so agonised I wondered how Matt's heart wasn't wrenched in two like it felt mine had been.

"Don't talk to me!" Matt growled loudly and his fist flew out again, this time catching Jack with a powerful blow across his jaw.

"Bloody hell," I heard Adam mutter before he brushed past me and forced his way between the two boys. "Matt come on, mate," he said calmly, pulling at my brother and managing to get him to release Jack who slid down the wall to slump on the carpet.

As Adam propelled Matt towards the door and, therefore, me, I saw that his eyes, so like mine, were gazing at me with the most hurt expression I'd ever seen. Knowing that it really wasn't the time to break down, but having a hard time stopping myself regardless, I numbly told Adam to take Matt down to the car-park and moved further into the flat to gather up Matt's car keys and wallet. There was no way Matt could stay here, he would have to go somewhere to cool off.

Before I followed Adam outside I knelt down beside Jack and gently cupped his face on the side he'd not been hit.

"Jack?" I asked quietly. "Are you alright?"

He looked up at me, his expression incredulous, his eyes holding limitless, intense pain but I knew it wasn't from where he'd been hit. "It's going to be okay," I whispered, my voice cracking over the fact that I didn't know that for certain. "I'm going to make sure Matt's
alright and then I'm going to come back and we're going to sort this out. He didn't mean to hurt you, he's just angry but he'll get over it."

"Yeah," Jack agreed hoarsely, but we both knew that we were just trying to reassure the other. I bent my head and kissed him gently on the lips, conscious that he was hurt and being very careful not to make any of his injuries worse.

I wanted desperately to stay there with Jack and let him comfort me with empty words, but I forced myself to pull back and get to my feet. "I'll be back soon," I promised him, hurrying from the flat and down the stairs to the car park where I saw that Adam had released Matt and was simply standing next to him, looking grave. When he saw me exit the building he walked over and I smiled feebly at him.

"I'm so sorry about all this," I said fervently. "And thanks for diving in there, I probably wouldn't have been able to separate them."

"No problem," he said in his usual easy way although it was obvious he was a bit uncomfortable at getting caught in the middle of our little domestic. "I can see now why you were in such a hurry to get here. What did Jack do?"

I looked at him in confusion for a moment and then realised that, of course, he didn't know what had gotten into Matt up in the flat.

"I'll tell you later," I said awkwardly. "Right now I should probably…" I trailed off and gestured towards Matt who was now slumped against his car watching us.

"Right, of course. Be in touch, yeah?" Adam gave me a quick hug then went over to his car.

As he drove off I took a deep breath and started to walk slowly towards Matt. This was not going to be pretty.
Chapter 26

Matt watched me walking towards him, his body tense, his bruised fists clenched tightly by his sides. He didn’t look like someone anyone sane would want to approach. Luckily all the betrayals, intrigues and complications I'd caused over the last couple of months convinced me that I was far from in my right mind so I continued to make my way over to him.

Before he’d a chance to say anything that would either see me breaking down into floods of tears or turning into a whirling hell cat of fury, I looked straight into his eyes and said clearly, "Matt, I'm so, so sorry. It's all my fault."

Even through his rage I could see that I had taken him aback. After all, I wasn't usually known for apologising off the bat and saying that I was wrong before being backed into a corner and forced to realise it. Little did he know that I'd had a bit of experience apologising in recent times and, the way things were going, I was getting to the stage where I simply assumed whatever I did was going to be wrong.

Matt didn't say anything for a long time, it was as if we had frozen and it began to annoy me that cars were passing by and birds were flittering about and chirping merrily. It wasn't fair to rub in the fact that life was going on quite happily despite how much it felt like I was never going to be properly happy again. I would rather the sky wasn't as clear as it was, that the sun wasn't shining, that groups of uni students didn't occasionally walk past on the pavement laughing and generally rubbing my nose in the fact that they weren't about to be ripped emotionally to shreds by their most beloved brother.

"Do you have any idea how much you've screwed things up?" Matt said eventually, his voice harsh and intense.

"Yes," I answered miserably.

"Really?" he sounded sceptical. "But you went ahead and fucked him anyway?"

"Matt!" I said, protesting at his vulgarity, but knowing at once that it was a bad idea. He took a step towards me, his eyes flashing with fury. "Well didn't you?" He demanded. "Or didn't you like the language I used? What would you rather me say? Slept with? Made love? Screw that! I'm not cushioning this for you, you jumped into his bed now you have to bloody lie in it!"

"I know, I'm sorry-" I began, trying to mollify him, but he cut me off.

"But if you knew and if you are sorry then why did it happen? Why did I find out like I did? Why would you do it Talia? Are you really that selfish?"

My eyes filled with tears as I nodded and answered in a small voice, "Yes."
"That's not good enough!" Matt shouted, slamming his hand down on top of his car and releasing a little cloud of dust, testament to how rarely he cleaned it. "You're 18, you're an adult now, and a few tears and apologies aren't going to make things better anymore."

"Well let me explain then!" I said desperately. "I need to tell you why I did it, just listen to my side of it."

"Your side?" He sounded incredulous. "Your side consists of lying on your back with your legs-"

I slapped him.

I couldn't help myself. One minute I was desperate to placate him and the next I just wanted to hurt the bastard. If I was supposed to know better than to use tears and apologies to get out of things he should know better than not to say the sorts of things I'd expect to come out of Micky's mouth, not his.

My arm reverberated with the force of my palm striking his cheek and my hand started to tingle painfully, letting me know that I'd put all my strength into hitting him. I gave a weird sort of juddering gasp and stepped away in shock. I'd never hit anybody like that before, with the actual intent to hurt them rather than just play fighting, and I felt awful.

"I'm…I'm sorry," I stammered, my hands flying to my mouth and my eyes widening in disbelief at what I'd done. Who did I think I was? Bloody Scarlet O'Hara?

"So you keep saying," Matt said dryly, turning away from me, but not before I'd seen the contrition and raw rage warring in his eyes.

A few tense, weighted seconds passed in silence but then, when Matt still made no move to leave, I found myself pleading quietly, "Please let me tell you what happened."

This seemed to break the spell he'd momentarily fallen under and he whirled angrily back round to face me. "I don't want to hear it," he hissed. "Didn't I make that plain enough? Give me my bloody keys and sod off."

I put my hand holding his keys and wallet behind my back and persisted with, "But Jack and I, we-"

Hearing Jack's name seemed to spur my brother onto new levels of anger and he said, so menacingly I shivered, "Don't try and defend him. He knew about your problems with touching, he fucking knew, but he went ahead and did it, did you, anyway. Don't you dare try and pretend that this is somehow not his fault because I've had enough bloody lies thrown in my face today."

"But it wasn't-" My last desperate attempt to get him to listen to me failed as he grabbed me by the shoulder, pulled me forward and effortlessly plucked his keys and wallet from my hand.
"Enough." His tone brooked no argument. "Go back inside and tell Jack to pack up his things. I'm going to be away from here for a couple of days and when I come back I don't want there to be any sign of him in the flat, understand me?"

"You can't do that!" I protested, pulling at his arm as he turned away to unlock his car. He pulled his arm away from me effortlessly and climbed into the car before looking up at me. "He can take his rent money back, I don't care, just make sure he's gone."

"Are you going to Tommo's?" I asked before he slammed the car door, I wanted him to at least be somewhere I knew with someone I trusted to look after him. But he shook his head and when I asked him where he was going, he wouldn't tell me, he just pushed me out of the way of the door and shut it quickly before starting the engine and roaring off. I stood there for a moment in the cloud of exhaust fumes and wondered how I was ever going to make him see that the whole thing was my fault. *Mine!* I couldn't stand there long, however, Jack was still up in the flat and I had to make sure he was alright. Releasing a long sigh I turned and headed back for the building, thinking as I did so that with all the running up and down of those bloody steps the only consolation of this whole big mess was that I was probably getting fit.

~*~

Back up in the flat Jack was nowhere to be seen in the main room, but the door to his bedroom was open and I could see him moving about in there. Crossing over to his doorway my stomach dropped like a stone when I saw what he was doing.

"Jack, no," I groaned as he stuffed another shirt into an already bulging bag. Another full backpack sat ready for departure on his bed and for a moment I contemplated going over to it and emptying it onto the floor to delay him leaving, but I knew it was useless.

He looked up and tried to give me a reassuring smile, but it was tainted and didn’t make me feel better at all. My breath hitched as I saw the dark red mark, already leaning towards purple, across his jaw and I knew that the one on his stomach would be even worse.

"I've got to go, Tally," Jack was saying. "You get that, right?"

"No," I said, stubbornly refusing to believe that throwing Jack out of his life was going to make things any better for Matt. "I think you should stay and help me convince him that this whole thing is down to me."

Jack stopped what he was doing then and looked at me very seriously. "I can't do that. I'm done lying to him."

Why oh why wasn't anyone letting me talk about how this whole thing had started? Jack was there, he knew that it was my fault but he was still covering for me. It was infuriating.
"But it wouldn't be a lie, that's the point," I said forcefully. "I made you teach me and it all spiralled from there." I was momentarily tickled that 'spiralled' covered everything that had happened in the last couple of months, from losing my virginity to realising that I had properly deep romantic feelings for someone for the first time in my life.

"Come on, Talia, be serious." He returned to his packing, but I had the feeling that it wasn't just because he felt it needed to get done but rather because he didn't want to look at me. "You can't actually think that you didn't leave me with any other choice but to do as you asked."

"But I didn't." What was he on about? It wasn't as if he chose to help me out…did he? When there was no reply from Jack and as he continued to shovel his possessions into the bag, I left the doorway and went over to him, putting my hand hesitantly on his arm. "Jack?" I asked and he released a deep sigh and fastened the bag before he set it aside and looked at me seriously.

"It never even occurred to you that on that first night I could have just restrained you until you calmed down and then talked you out it? Or if I'd really wanted to sort it out I could have just told Matt, but I didn't, did I? It was my choice to do this thing with you and I'm just as much, if not more, to blame for how things have turned out."

Did Jack not realise that chivalry was dead?

I knew I wouldn't be able to convince him that the blame was mine alone so I abandoned that line of argument…for the moment. Instead I hung my head and muttered, "I hate that he's so angry." My voice wavered with emotion and I heard Jack sigh before he wrapped his arms securely around me.

"Me too," he said seriously as I rested my cheek against his shoulder, wrapping my arms loosely around his waist and breathing his scent deeply. Jack kissed the top of my head lightly then gave one of my pigtails a gentle tug. "You know, it's not you he's really angry at. Give him a couple of days and things will be as they were with you two."

I opened my mouth to protest, but when I thought about it, I realised he was right. Matt would forgive me because he'd never managed to stay mad at me for long and because he’d clearly decided that I was the victim in the circumstances. But as for forgiving Jack…

It made me kind of angry actually. What, because I'm a girl I'm not responsible for my actions? What century are we in again?

I looked up at him and frowned my displeasure. "I'll make him understand," I vowed. "I'll give him some time to rant and rave, but after that he's going to sit down and listen to me because we haven't done anything wrong, not really. On the scale of crimes in the world two consenting adults having sex and not telling someone is hardly up there with genocide, is it?"
Jack smiled slightly and then winced as it pulled at his bruised skin. "Well the Hague would probably not be that interested in us, no. But to Matt it was a pretty significant piece of information to exclude him from."

His arms tightened about me momentarily and then he pulled away, kind of reluctantly it seemed to me, and picked up his bags. "I should go, I don't want to piss him off anymore than I have already." He moved past me out of his room and I whirled and followed him feeling as I did so that it seemed like I didn't have to wait for the end of the year when he went to England to lose him, I was losing him now.

"Where are you going to stay?" I asked him as he pulled on his jacket.

"Tommo's. He'll let me crash at his until semester ends, it's only a few weeks away anyway."

I wondered then whether Matt had known that Jack would have needed to go to Tommo's and had deliberately not gone there so Jack would have somewhere to go. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more I realised that Matt was still probably looking out for Jack in his own way. Being the stubborn boy that he is he would never admit it of course.

Never? That word startled me and I tried to imagine life without Jack and Matt together. The images wouldn't come, after all I didn't have many reference points for life without them as they'd become inseparable when I was 6. How could I even begin to comprehend it?

My horror and confusion must have registered on my face because Jack looked pained and murmured, "Don't look like that."

I shook my head; I refused to pretend that this was okay with me. It hurt and I was so bloody sick of feeling this awful. I knew that at that moment Jack felt as if he had to choose between me and Matt and it seemed that he was choosing me because he thought he had a duty towards me.

Well bugger that!

I was not going to continue to ruin things for the two people I cared most about in the world. Jack was just going to have to change his allegiance back to Matt, where it had always been before I came along and forced him to switch.

"It's not fair that you and Matt should be screwed up like this just for some stupid thing between you and me," I said petulantly, feeling a little twinge in my chest as I forced myself to pretend that my time with Jack hadn't meant anything. "The lessons have been over for a while now and sure we've occasionally kissed or whatever." I reddened thinking about the day before, both at how good it had been to feel his lips on mine and how I'd ruined it by saying sheep, "but nothing significant. The main stuff is in the past, in fact, if you think about it, Matt really has nothing to be angry at you for now."
Jack folded his arms a strange look crossing his face. "You think so?" he asked, his voice a study in careful neutrality.

"Well yes," I barged on, feeling my palms beginning to get a little bit sweaty at the energy I was having to expend to keep an encouraging smile on my face when all I wanted to do was snivel pathetically that I didn't want him to go. "Like you said, he won't be cross at me for long and when he's cooled down I'll go to him and tell him that what happened with us was a mistake and that we both regret it and are very sorry. Then you can back me up and then...why are you shaking your head?" I asked crossly.

"It won't work," Jack informed me.

"Why?" I demanded. "Why won't it work?"

"Because-" he sighed deeply, "I believed you when you told me back at your parents’ place that you had no regrets."

"And what does that mean?" I moved forward, threading through the overturned chairs and table and leaning back against the counter. Something told me that when he answered it would be good to have something solid at my back.

"Right." Jack seemed to suddenly decide on something and the next second he slammed his hands down on the counter on either side of me, trapping me between his arms and leaving me squirming as I could feel the heat from his body pulsing against me. "Look at me, Tally."

His voice was so commanding I did, tilting my head and gazing obediently into the depths of his brilliant blue eyes.

"Somebody called Matt, I don't know who and at this moment I couldn't really give a damn. They told him that we’d slept together, whoever they were, and when he hung up Matt asked me straight out if it was true. Now I know that I told you I would wait and face him with you, but I had to tell him."

"I understand," I said quietly, and I honestly did. It seemed extraordinary to contemplate given the circumstances but if Jack had lied to him then, when he had asked him head on like that, things could have been a lot worse.

"I hoped you would." His demeanour softened for a moment, but hardened again when he continued speaking. "So anyway, he flipped and demanded to know what had been going on behind his back."

"And what did you tell him?" My voice was so small if he hadn't been so closely pressed up against me I doubt he would have heard my question.

There was a beat of silence during which my heart started beating so fast it felt like it was going to burst right through my chest. Somehow I knew that whatever Jack said next was going to be the last straw needed to completely shatter any sense of normalcy left in my life.

"I told him the truth," Jack's voice was suddenly calm, "I told him I love you."
Chapter 27

I blinked. Once. Twice. Three times.

No good, Jack was still there, still staring at me, still perfect in every way, and, yep, I do believe the fact still remained that he'd just told me, albeit in a roundabout way, that he loved me.

Shit. Now what?

"Love me?" I repeated once feeling began to gradually come back to my face. My tongue felt heavy and I was having difficulty getting enough oxygen into my lungs, my breaths coming in short sharp pants. I had a crisis on my hands and I desperately had to try and find some way to avert it, avert him! "But I'm horrible," was the first thing that came into my mind and I spoke it with such a sense of sincerity that I saw Jack smile slightly.

This was not, however, the time for him to be indulgent of me. Not to mention too many more of those beautiful lopsided smiles that I so adored and my already pretty pissy courage might fail me altogether.

"I'm not joking or fishing for compliments or anything," I rushed on, "you more than anyone should know how selfish and irrational I am, Jack! Are you sure there isn't someone else, someone nicer, for you to fall in love with?"

His faint smile was still there but I could see the understanding dawn in his eyes that this conversation wasn't going to be the fairytale version he'd perhaps imagined. "Apparently not," he said dryly.

My chest started to ache as I tried to make sense of my emotions. Of course a flash of happiness such as I had never experienced before had erupted inside me at his confession but it had been immediately followed by a crushing sense of sadness as I realised I could never act upon what he'd told me. He had to make up with Matt and go to England, neither of which occurrences were compatible with him remaining in love with me.

I took a deep breath and set about comprehensively breaking both our hearts.

"Well that's a bit...inconvenient," I spluttered, thinking that was probably an understatement up there with saying the Titanic had sprung a bit of a leak.

"Inconvenient?" Jack's voice was the epitome of disbelief and I clenched my fists together hard so that my nails bit into my palms, wanting to distract myself from his incredulity at my cruelty.

"Yes, inconvenient," I snapped, providing an Oscar award winning portrayal of 'uncaring bitch'. "There couldn't be a worse time for you to say something like that and you know it."
Jack instantly recoiled, releasing me from against the counter and stepping back a couple of paces which, in terms of accessibility to him, was about equivalent to him leaping across to the other side of the Grand Canyon.

"I didn't plan this," he said stiffly. "And in terms of timing I can't foresee a time when it would be convenient," he stressed the last word, scorn fairly dripping from between his lips and, although riling him up had been my intention, I had to suppress a very strong urge to immediately apologise and throw myself into his arms. Now more than ever was the time for me to grow up and stay strong.

"Well maybe that says a lot about our situation," I blundered on quickly as my nose was tingling and I was getting a pressure headache that suggested a whole tsunami of tears was just waiting to be unleashed. "If you can't see a time when professions of love would be appropriate then maybe they shouldn't be made at all."

Pain like a whiplash shot through me as I said those words and, judging by his expression, Jack had just experienced a similar wounding.

It's for your own good! I wanted to yell. I'm doing this for you! But I knew he wouldn't understand even if I told him. He'd probably make the point that pets were sometimes put down 'for their own good' and that he'd take his chances along the hard road.

"Right," Jack spoke blandly and without emotion, his defence barriers, which I'd worked so long and hard to pull down, flying up again as he gathered up his bags once more. "I guess that's it then."

"Jack-" I didn't know what I was going to say, but I didn't want him to leave like that, even at this stage I didn't want him thinking too badly of me. But I didn't really get the chance to worry about what I was going to say because he held up a hand to forestall me.

"Don't bother, Natalia," he said crisply, his use of my full name obviously a deliberate manifestation of the gulf I had opened up between us. "I get it, I'm going and you won't have to worry about me bothering you with inconvenient professions of love again."

And go he did, striding across to the door and exiting through it without another word or backward glance. I wondered whether there was some kind of record for time it takes to get a guy to run from you in disgust after telling you he loves you; if so, I was probably a contender to win it.

I didn't move for a couple of minutes after the door had slammed shut. His last words, his cold expression, the useless, bloody unnecessary pain I’d caused him by starting this whole thing ran round and round my mind making me feel physically sick. The wave of nausea when it hit me was so strong I stumbled to the sink and retched into it, bringing up the few mouthfuls of cheese sandwich I’d had with Adam and then simply spitting out bitter bile when I’d emptied my stomach.
I remained bent over the sink, clutching the edge of the counter, for a long while after my stomach had settled back down, breathing deeply and slowly. Eventually, however, I stirred and turned on the tap, washing my face and mouth with such force it was almost as if I was trying to wash the scum of the last few days off my skin. Once my face was pink and raw from the freezing water, I turned and, in a daze, set about putting the flat to rights, picking up the chairs and the overturned table and rearranging them as they had been before. Then I went across to where the phone lay in pieces on the floor and gathered up the shards of plastic and inner components of the receiver. Next I inspected the dent in the plaster from where the phone had made contact with the wall and briefly considered the effect it was going to have in our getting our bond back.

Our. What a great word and how little it meant to me at that moment. I looked around the flat, hugging myself tightly as all sorts of memories flooded back to me. I remembered helping Jack and Matt move in and seeing the small room and thinking fiercely that I only had to get through two more years of high school and then that room would be mine. I thought about all the visits I’d made while I still lived in Bridunna, and how much I’d hated leaving because the boys always seemed to be having so much fun and I knew that home felt ridiculously empty without them.

Then came the memories of moving in, of loving feeling part of it all, part of their lives once more. I had Matt and Jack, I had Simone, and then I had Brad, life for those first six months really couldn't have been much better. I wondered now how I hadn't appreciated every minute of it. The frustrations at the boys’ slovenly ways or the hordes of their mates that’d always appeared just when I wanted some peace and quiet seemed so inconsequential now.

Recollecting all the great and no so great moments we'd all shared in the flat I realised I wouldn’t even have been able to conceive the possibility then that, by the end of my first year of living with the boys, I would be standing alone having alienated them so thoroughly.

I was ready to cry as I sunk down onto the couch realising that, until Matt decided to forgive me, I was living alone. However, no wetness appeared on my cheeks. The clogged-up, painful feeling of tears building up behind my eyes was still present, but it was as if something was blocking the way for them to gush out. I desperately wanted to call my parents but I realised I didn't have any credit on my mobile and the home phone was destroyed. This added example of my isolation forced a little whimper out from between my lips and then, clutching a cushion to me, I lay down on the couch and closed my eyes against my lonely surroundings.

~*~
I awoke some time later and was astonished to realise that I’d fallen asleep despite all
the turmoil I was in. Then again maybe it wasn’t that extraordinary, after all sleep was a
pretty good way to escape unkind realities and often things looked better after a kip. Not that
that was the case this time, but at least I didn't feel as wiped as I had before I'd had my nap.

The flat was dark now and, looking towards the windows, I saw that the light was that
bluey-grey sort which washed over the land just before proper night fell. Sitting up and
looking at my watch I saw that it was just after 6. I wondered what Matt and Jack were doing
now and found myself able to clearly picture them. Matt would no doubt be in a pub
somewhere acting as if nothing was wrong and being the life of the party, he always became
the entertainer when he was troubled about something. Jack, however, was more likely to be
sitting in Tommo's lounge room creating an architectural model using precise techniques and
steady fingers. When he was upset he preferred to bottle it all up inside and create an outward
show of control.

And here I was, crumpled and disorientated after sleeping through the afternoon and
confused about what was supposed to happen next. I took a deep, steadying breath and got up
off the couch. One thing was sure, I wasn't moping about in the empty flat for the rest of the
evening, that would be more than I could bear.

I headed to the bathroom where I stripped off, got into the shower and turned the hot
water on so high that my skin reddened instantly and I could feel the heat seeping through
into my bones.

Emerging several minutes later in a billow of steam I strode across to the wardrobe
and got dressed in my most va-va-voom outfit, a denim miniskirt paired with a camisole top
which was little more than a scrap of lilac silk valiantly trying to cover all I had to show.
Coupled with a brown leather belt with an ornate silver clasp and the strappy shoes which had
been my downfall (literally) on my date with Jack, I was satisfied that I looked sufficiently
unlike myself. Next I blow dried my hair into a halo of goldy-brown around my head and
plaited back two front sections into a sort of medieval hair style before hauling out my make
up case. I applied double the amount I usually would, focusing on my eyes until they were
ablaze in a sparkle of subtle purple and silver which, in that random way that colours work,
brought out the green in my eyes.

I stood in front of the full length mirror as I added the finishing touches of a pair of
dangling silver earrings and a slim silver chain which fastened at the hollow of my neck and
then continued down so the end dangled just above my cleavage, emphasising how low cut
my top was. Meeting my gaze in the mirror I saw that I didn't look a thing like myself, I was
projecting the image of a stranger, a fairly scantily dressed stranger come to that.

Perfect.
I didn't want to be myself that night, I wanted to be a confident, attractive stranger who didn't care about consequences or what would happen in the future. Tossing back my hair and grabbing my little clutch bag which held no more than my keys, wallet and my, admittedly fairly useless since it had no credit, mobile I stalked out of the flat.

I was going out on the town.

~*~

Wow!

Life sure was a lot easier when you were a sluttishly dressed stranger with a steely glint in your eye. People in packed bars moved for you, stools were suddenly free and rarely did you have to pay for your own drinks. I didn't shrink into corners as I might have done in the past, I deliberately placed myself where everyone could see me and guys seemed to flock. It was fascinating to realise that any girl can basically pick up a guy if she wanted, but also fascinating was wondering who the hell would want these guys? Short skirt, low cut top and alone seem to be the three criterion most attractive to sleazy try-hards but they didn't bother me that night. In fact it began to be fun inventing cutting put downs for the worst ones or harmlessly flirting with the least creepy ones.

There was that sense of power again, strong and intoxicating…about as strong and intoxicating as the drinks I was downing as if the Prime Minister was suddenly about to announce a prohibition.

Several hours later and almost as many bars down I found myself in the uni bar still in dazzling form and holding court over six or so guys who I had collected as I had bar hopped all over town. We were all talking and laughing loudly and, for the first time in a long time, the combination of alcohol and lavish attention from my new friends was making me feel invincible.

I did wonder, as the drinks kept magically materialising, whether I was perhaps getting a little too drunk but, in one of those catch 22 situations, I was too drunk to worry about it.

By about midnight I was properly sloshed; all cognitive ability had completely fled. So, apparently, had my ability to stand as, when I got off my stool to go to the loo, I fell straight to the floor with a loud shriek of surprise. Legs akimbo and with a faint throbbing of my tail bone from my ungraceful descent I howled with laughter and heard all my new friends join in.

"Whoops!" I slurred, trying to get up and finding that my legs buckled underneath me once more. "Help me!" I reached my arms up and waited for someone to lend me a hand.
I didn't have to wait long as, the next moment, strong hands gripped mine and I found myself being hauled to my feet. As I staggered on my tottering legs and high heels, a strong arm grabbed me around the waist, holding me upright. For one blinding, hopeful second I thought that Jack had come to find me, but as I further inspected the arm that was holding me, I realised, through my foggy brain, that the skin was too fair and the arm hair too light. It was, therefore, only a little surprise when I looked up at my rescuer and saw Adam's anxious face looking back at me.

"Adam!" I squealed enthusiastically throwing my arms around his neck. "Look everyone," I pulled away and looked round at all the faces which were becoming a bit of a blur, "it's my friend Adam!"

"Talia, are you okay?" Adam asked, sending my new friends what I considered a rather unnecessarily cross look.

"Fine!" Everything I'd said for the past hour or so had needed exclamation marks.

"Really?" Adam's voice was very sceptical. "How about we get you home now anyway? Just in case you're not as fine as you think you are. Is that your bag?" He pointed towards my little bag which was sitting on the bar and I nodded before deciding that nodding was a bad idea as a strange whooshing filled my head when I did.

"Yep thash mine," I agreed drunkenly, "but I don't wanna go yet."

"Yeah," the gang around me agreed.

"Let her stay for a bit longer," someone called out.

"Who are you? Her father?" Someone else sniggered.

I smiled at my supporters, thinking what a great bunch of people I'd met that night. All my friends seemed grouchy and boring compared to this lot. All what friends though? The tiny rational part left of my brain asked. Simone isn't talking to you and all your other close friends are firstly friends of Matt and Jack's.

I looked up at Adam again and tears filled my eyes as I croaked out, "You're my only friend, Adam."

"Don't be daft," he said, reaching over and grabbing my bag. "You've got lots of friends, but I think it's time we left these ones and went home, don't you?"

"Noooo!" My bar mates and I howled, but Adam had hold of me tightly and was helping me through the mass of people in the bar before the last vowel had left my mouth.

One of my stronger admirers, who had been with me since the second bar I'd visited, protested further and got off his stool to come after us, but I saw Adam send him such a withering glare that he shrugged and held up his hands in surrender. We paused for a moment on our way outside as Adam told some people, presumably the ones he'd originally gone to the bar with, that he was going home. I waved cheerily at them so Adam's friends wouldn't think me rude and the next second we were off again, Adam virtually carrying me.
Once we got outside into the car park the crisp air hit me hard on all the exposed bits of skin I had, which were quite numerous, and I shivered violently.

"Are you going to be sick?" Adam asked anxiously, rearranging my arm to around his neck and his arm around my waist the better to support me.

"Nope," I answered merrily, watching with some degree of interest as the asphalt passed along underneath me. I felt like I was floating.

"Give it time," Adam said grimly.

We reached his car with only one or two stumbles, and he propped me against the back door as he unlocked the front and basically bundled me into the passenger seat. Automatically I grabbed the seatbelt and attempted to slot the clip into the base, but for some reason, I couldn't get my aim right and I kept missing. I giggled weakly and shrugged, deciding that it was too much effort and I'd just do without a belt that trip. The next second, however, Adam reached over me and slotted the clasp closed seemingly effortlessly.

"You're so smart," I breathed in admiration and I saw him roll his eyes slightly before going round the other side of the car and climbing into the drivers' seat. As he slid his key into the ignition he asked,

"Will Matt or Jack be there to look after you when I drop you home?"

"No!" The lovely floating feeling disappeared and I suddenly felt panicked. "I don't want to go home. Can't I come to yoursh?"

"Of course you can." Adam's tone was reassuring but also, understandably, a bit surprised. Thankfully, he didn't ask any more questions just then and I was able to concentrate fully on not letting the lights of the streetlamps flashing by or the rocking motion of the car make my brain hurt too much.

Once at his flat Adam released me from the seatbelt and guided me expertly into his building, quickly depositing me on the couch that I'd slept on only that morning (or was it previous morning by now?) before padding into the kitchen and pouring me a large glass of water. I grinned inanely at him as he sat down beside me and steadied my hands around the glass. Although I wasn't very thirsty (after all I'd been drinking all night) I obediently started gulping down the water as he was looking at me with quite a concerned look on his face.

"You've only taken alcohol tonight, right?" he asked as I took my last swallow. "I don't need to take you down to the hospital to get your stomach pumped or anything, do I?"

There was enough lightness in his tone to show that he was half joking but that still meant that he was just as much serious. It took me a few moments, as I clumsily put the glass down on his coffee table, to realise what he meant, but when understanding finally dawned, I felt a bit cross that he felt he needed to ask me that.

"No, I'm not scchhhtupid!" I protested, wishing that 's' sounds weren't so darn difficult to pronounce.
"I didn't say you were," he responded mildly and I instantly forgave him. Snuggling closer to him on the couch, I rested my head on his shoulder, feeling a twinge of wrongness about it as I did so, but in my heavily inebriated state, unable to pinpoint exactly why that was.

We stayed like that for a long while, neither of us saying anything, the low hum of the fridge the only noise in the room. My thoughts bounced around like a squash ball in the middle of a frenetic game, which was quite appropriate because my head was beginning to feel like someone was playing squash inside it. Still, in a rare drunken flash of insight, I knew that the thumpings I was experiencing in my head then were nothing compared to how it would feel tomorrow. I brushed thoughts of the next day aside quickly. I wasn't prepared to face that just yet, it was better to live in the present and in the present I was sharing a nice moment with Adam, a guy who had proved to be a most brilliant friend.

"I like you, Adam," I mumbled and I could hear the small smile in his voice as he replied,

"I like you too."

Suddenly, and seemingly without any prelude or warning, I found myself wondering what it would be like to kiss him. He was a nice guy after all and I genuinely, drunk or not, cared about and liked him a lot. Did the lessons I'd had with Jack mean that I wouldn't experience any of my customary awkwardness? Would I get the tingles same as I did when I kissed Jack? Were my feelings when I was with Jack not as unique as I thought they were? Well, there was one way to find out.

I decided to go for it, lifting my head and reaching a hand up to cup Adam's face. He looked down at me in astonishment and I saw a wary look enter his eyes.

"Talia, what-?" he began, but I cut him off in the next second by yanking his face down and crushing my mouth against his.

His lips were smaller than Jack's, that I realised off the bat, and my face didn't fit quite so well against his. Also, his nose was much larger and pushed against my cheek awkwardly as I tried to summon up some passion and enthusiasm for what I was doing.

More obvious than the physical differences, however, were the feelings, or rather lack of feelings, I felt inside as my lips moved against his. Apart from all the alcohol and water sloshing around inside me I felt hollow. No butterflies, no tingles, no rapid heartbeats, no explosion of giddiness…I felt nothing.

Oh no, wait! Hang on a minute! Suddenly I did feel a great swell of emotion which dredged up every last residue of passion and feeling I had left inside me and exploded painfully in my head and chest. But it was far from positive.

Ripping my lips from Adam's I just managed to bury my face against his chest before I let out the great howl of misery that I hadn't been able to release back at the flat earlier in
the afternoon. My wretchedness was all consuming and I started to sob my heart out, freeing a whole bucket load of fat, salty tears out onto Adam's shirt and unabashedly making loud bawling noises which were something akin to the sound you hear when someone accidentally treads on a cat’s tail.

Poor Adam!

To his credit, after only a second's pause as he froze like a rabbit caught in headlights, he patted my back and made awkward hushing noises to try and console me. It was incredibly nice of him, but unfortunately, completely useless as I was well beyond consolable by that point.

I wanted my mum, I wanted my dad, I wanted my brother, but more than that, more than I had ever wanted anything in my entire life, I wanted Jack and it ripped me apart knowing that it was my own fault that I couldn't have him.

I would reckon over an hour passed as I rode wave upon wave of misery. Just when I thought I was coming down on one I'd get picked up by another and flung back into the deep end. Eventually, however, even my deepest well of melancholy dried up, but feeling absolutely and thoroughly wrung out and drained, I remained flopped soggily against Adam for several minutes after the sobs had subsided. It wasn't just that I was so exhausted that I was loathe to move, there was the added horror of having to look Adam in the face once I lifted myself off him. Poor boy must have had a coronary as a drunk nutcase threw herself at him and kissed him before pinning him to the couch as she soaked his shirt right through with tears and deafened him with howls.

I couldn't stay where I was forever though so, in due course, I peeled my red, puffy face off his chest and sat back, my vision still a little blurred behind a film of tears. Clasping my hands tightly together in my lap and staring down at them I cleared my throat, raw from my sobs, and said croakily, "I cannot even begin to say how sorry I am about that." It seemed like the tears I had been crying had contained a whole lot of the alcohol I’d consumed throughout the evening as the 's' sounds were no problem to me that time and all the bubbly, carefree feelings had, needless to say, fled long ago.

"No problem." Adam's voice was, disturbingly, as light and good-humoured as it always was. "My mum always says it's better out than in."

"Perhaps," I said slowly, looking up at him to see if he really was as cool as he sounded or whether he just had really good control of his voice, "but I shouldn't have got it 'out' all over your shirt."

Adam pulled at the patch of wet, now almost completely see-through, shirt and I winced as it made a sucking sound as it came away. "Ah well," Adam gave a little shrug and rueful grin, "it needed a wash anyway."
I gave a little laugh which came out as a sort of bubbly choke as there were still a lot of liquids swirling around my nose and throat. "You are beyond fantastic," I said fervently. And I meant it, despite my predilection to make emotional statements like that while under the influence. How many guys do you know who would handle a clearly hysterical girl that well? I could only think of one and there are no prizes for guessing who I mean.

"But I've been a real bitch to you as well and I'm so sorry," I continued. "I shouldn't have kissed you like that especially after what you said to me in the café about you and me..." I trailed off uncomfortably, but Adam just nodded to show he knew what I was talking about. "And also especially after you rescued me from the bar because I get now that that was what you did, god knows how much I could've drunk and what could've happened if you hadn't come along. So, yeah, if you're really pissed off at me don't feel alone, there's a whole bunch of people I've hacked off this year who I'm sure would welcome you into their fold with open arms."

Careful, a voice inside me warned, that last bit smacked of bitterness. That and my rambling sentences were reminders that despite the improvements in my speech I was still more than a little drunk.

"Don't beat yourself up about it. It's all cool." Adam's voice was gentler than I'd ever heard it and distracted me from thoughts of exactly how long it was going to take before I sobered up and really had to face the consequences of my actions. I looked at him uncertainly, could it really be that easy? Correctly interpreting my disbelief he gave a little laugh and added, "I'm not saying that it's done my ego any good having a girl I liked kiss me and then burst into tears, but I'll get over it."

"Liked. Past tense. Excellent!"

"Still," I checked one last time, "if there's anything I can do to try and make it up to you..."

"I tell you what," Adam grabbed my glass, got up off the couch and headed towards the kitchen, "how about we try to head off your hangover as best we can while you tell me what the hell all that crying was about. It can't possibly be because I'm that bad a kisser can it?"

"Totally unrelated," I assured him with a smile as he came back over to the couch and passed me the now refilled glass of water.

Then I told him everything because there really was nothing to hide anymore. And, although mine and Jack's secret coming out had virtually destroyed both of us, a small part of me sighed in relief at the lies finally being over.

~*~
Waking up the next morning was one of the most physically painful things I’d ever had to endure. As soon as I cracked one, still swollen, eye open a whole raft of aches, pains, thumpings and swirlings assailed me. As I peeled my dried out tongue off the roof of my mouth I fervently wished I’d chosen to down lemonades last night without the vodka.

Forcing myself to open the other eye and try to assess my surroundings, I saw that, in a strong bout of déjà vu, I was lying on Adam's couch with the same duvet and pillow I'd used the morning before. I sat up gingerly and then gave a little groan of horror as I realised I was about to be sick all over Adam's couch…

"Bucket?" Came a horrifyingly chirpy voice from above and the next second a blue plastic bucket was whisked underneath my chin just in time to catch the results of my retching. Adam stood by solicitously and then handed me a bunch of paper towel and another glass of water before deftly removing the bucket, emptying it, cleaning it and bringing it back for me in case I needed to go again.

"Ooh you're a sight for sore eyes," Adam said merrily once I'd wiped at my mouth and swilled some water around in it. "You sure know how to make a guy feel bad about what he missed out on."

"Sod off," I grumbled but he just laughed and ruffled my hair, as if it needed any more messing up.

It took me several attempts but I finally managed to get myself off the couch and into the bathroom whereupon I was close to being sick again just because of the image which stared back at me from Adam's bathroom mirror. I’d forgotten all about the heavy makeup I’d been wearing the night before and now it was smudged all around my eyes and down my cheeks in black, purple and silver smears. Add to that my puffy, red eyes and pale, greasy, drawn looking skin and I looked like the sort of beast mothers tell their children will come and get them if they don't eat their vegetables.

I could see exactly what Adam had meant now. Still, if my long story last night about all that had happened between Jack and I (with some exceptions, Adam really didn't need to know all that had happened between us) didn't put him off me for life my appearance this morning certainly should do the trick.

I wetted some toilet paper and cleaned myself up the best I could although, looking down, I realised there was little I could do for my clothes. The denim skirt was rumpled and stained but I knew it could be fixed eventually with a good wash and iron, but I was very sad to realise that the camisole top was probably done for. The silk was so fragile trying to get the mysterious and disgustingly looking stains out of it or attempting to iron out the massively deep wrinkles would probably destroy it anyway. It was a real shame as Simone had made me that top for my 18th birthday and it really was very lovely.
Thinking about Simone brought tears to my eyes, surprising me slightly as I felt I'd probably cried about a year's worth out last night. I realised then, staring at myself in the grimy mirror, horrified at what I'd done to myself the night before, that I had to make up with Simone and I needed to do it immediately. As wonderful as Adam had been, I needed my best girlfriend and no-one else at that moment would do.

I would love at this stage to say I suddenly got a mammoth burst of energy and ran out of the bathroom and Adam's flat all the way to Simone's without even drawing breath, but the reality is that it took me about five minutes just to stagger to the bathroom door.

Adam, in yet another display of his brilliantness, agreed to give me a lift round to Simone's and so, although it must be noted that it took a great deal of time and effort on both my and Adam's behalf to get me there, it wasn't too long before I was standing apprehensively in front of her door. I checked my watch just before I knocked and, noting that it was only 7:30 in the morning, I hoped that she would not resent me coming round so early. Pushing my nervous butterflies to one side I raised my hand and knocked loudly, hoping against hope that it would be Simone, not Alex who answered the door this time.

I thought, considering the early hour, that I would have to knock quite a few times before I managed to rouse a response so I was quite taken aback when, only a couple of seconds after I'd first knocked, I heard a patter of footsteps coming towards the door before it was thrown open and Simone appeared in her floaty nightie. Before I'd even had the chance to open my mouth and begin my spiel about how sorry I was that things had got weird between us, she threw herself at me and I staggered back a couple of steps as she wrapped her arms tightly around me.

"Oh thank god!" she exclaimed as I tentatively hugged her back.

"Is everything okay?" I asked stupidly after a couple of seconds where she still showed no signs of letting go of me. I was glad of course that she was accepting me so whole-heartedly, but it was still a bit bizarre, us not talking for so long and then getting a reaction like that when I finally turned up at her door so early in the morning. I'd thought it would take at least an hour of talking, and apologising on my part, before we got to the hugging stage.

"We've been worried sick," Simone sniffled, pulling back and looking at me slightly sternly. "Where've you been?"

Curiouser and curioser.

"At Adam's," I replied, nonplussed. "Why? What's going on?"

Obviously suddenly realising that we were still standing out on her porch, Simone ushered me inside her house and shut the door behind us.

"Jack and Matt have been calling since about 5:30," she said breathlessly. "Matt had heard from some of his mates that you were out and about last night dressed-" She seemed to
look properly at me for the first time and her nose wrinkled slightly, as well it might, at my
dishevelled appearance, "well, like that and that you'd been picked up by a whole bunch of
guys."

I opened my mouth to protest at this. I'd been picked up? Hell no, if anyone had been
doing the picking up last night it'd been me! But Simone barrelled on, obviously a little
flustered by the whole thing and desperate to tell me what had happened.

"Then you disappeared and no-one knew where you'd gone. Some guy said that you'd
been dragged off by this other guy and everybody has been running around trying to find
you." Simone suddenly seemed to realise that she wasn't just telling this story to an innocent
bystander and her eyes narrowed slightly. "What were you doing going on a pub crawl
without letting any of us know where you were? You know what this uni is like, you must
have known people would tell Matt about it and that he'd be worried. And why didn't you
answer your phone? We kept calling you, but it went straight to voicemail."

I bit my lip guiltily; I honestly hadn't even considered that my crazy actions the night
before would've eventually made their way back to Matt, although I should have.
Considering how far removed it is from my usual behaviour and everyone knowing how
protective Matt and Jack are of me, it was bleeding obvious now it had been pointed out to
me, that it would be all around uni within minutes of me setting out dressed as I was.

Item number 23,872 on my 'to apologise for' list: scaring the wits out of everyone. Oh
well, might as well get a start on it.

"I'm so sorry," boy was I getting good at saying that, "I didn't think." A sentence
which pretty much summed up the last couple of months for me. "My mobile was off and it
just didn't occur to me, although I know it should've, that you would hear about what I'd been
up to and be worried about me."

"Well, as long as you're alright," Simone said anxiously, leading me over to the couch
and sinking down upon it with me, her hands tightly clasping mine. She seemed really upset
and I found myself thinking that her uneasy manner was a bit unnecessary considering that I
was right in front of her and obviously in one piece.

The real reason for her concern was made blindingly obvious less than a second after
I'd dismissed those thoughts as uncharitable to my friend, however, as the door to Simone's
bedroom opened and Micky, clad only in a pair of boxer shorts sauntered out.

He didn't see me at first as he was looking down at the mobile in his hand saying,
"Sam's just texted and said that they asked Brad and he hasn't seen her either. He wants me to
ask you again whether you have any idea who she could be with."

He looked up then and his expression when he saw both Simone and me sitting struck
dumb on the couch was beyond priceless. If I hadn't been experiencing what felt like a mini
stroke at the time I'm sure I would have found it a lot more amusing than I did.
The air was charged with electric emotion as I gaped dumbfounded, my gaze switching from Simone to Micky, from Micky to Simone as what I was seeing and what I knew about Micky and Simone tried to find some common ground. Finally some clogs in my brain, still fuzzed from too much emotion and alcohol and too little sleep, began to slowly turn and the realisation of what had been going on hit me like a tonne of bricks.

"Oh!" I said slowly, and then, "Oh, I've been so stupid haven't I?"
And, while Simone gripped my hands still more tightly and begged me with those wide, grey eyes to understand, Micky assumed his usual arrogant air right before my eyes, like a cloak settling around his shoulders.
"Well," he smirked, coming over and resting his hands lightly but possessively on Simone's shoulders, "it's not like it's the first time, is it?"
"You and Micky?" Okay so obviously it didn't need much explanation, the answer to my question was obvious, but I guess I was just hoping that Simone would suddenly grin and say: 'Fooled you!' But she didn't and my last hope that it was all a big misunderstanding was shattered as Simone nodded solemnly and then winced apologetically as I looked at her in complete horror.

I leapt off the couch then and paced to the other side of the room, unable to be part of their seemingly cosy domestic tableau. As I crossed the room it occurred to me that, yet again, I was in a situation where my surroundings so did not match my mood. In fact, far from dark and menacing or swirly and confusing decor which would have been perfect, Simone and her parents had decorated the front room to be light, airy and accented by hints of calming pale blue. As well as the couch there were a couple of armchairs and a gorgeous antique sideboard. There was a bay window as well with a window seat which is where I headed then.

As I stared unseeingly out of the large window I thought back to all the times I’d felt so guilty at not telling Simone about me and Jack, all the times my stomach had twisted and turned at lying to her. Had she been doing the same? Had we both been so wrapped up in ourselves, our dilemmas, and our guys that we'd put everything before the two of us, including our friendship?

Sobering thoughts indeed.

"I can't..." I trailed off unable to even gather my wits enough to figure out where to start or even what I wanted to say.

"Come back, sit down," Simone implored, patting the seat next to her, but I shook my head and stayed where I was. I wasn't going anywhere near her or the still smirking Micky just yet, it was all too weird.

"So," I tried again, "despite the fact that you and I have been united in considering Micky as nothing but a complete arsehole for the past 6 months, you've been seeing him? As in as a couple? Yes?" I directed my comments wholly at Simone, ignoring Micky seemed like the best idea for the moment.

"Yes, but it's more complicated than that," Simone said quietly. "Not everything is black and white, Talia."

I snorted disbelievingly, Simone wanted to teach me about complications?

"I know grey areas," I said stiffly. "I've become a bit of an expert in them over the last couple of months so don't try to fob me off with vague references to complications. I'm your
best friend, or I was once, and I'd really like to know what's been going on with you." As an afterthought I added accusingly, "I thought you were dating Sam!"

"Sam?" Micky's expression suddenly uncurled itself from his smirk and twisted into a heavy scowl. "That prick wouldn't know the first bloody thing to do with-"

"Micky." Simone laid a hand gently over his and he stopped speaking just as suddenly as if she'd put that hand over his mouth instead. I was sure that if Micky's friends had been in the room there would suddenly have been a lot of cries of 'whipped!' "Why don't you go into the bedroom and call Jack and Matt and let them know that Talia's here and that she's fine," she continued, her tone the sort you would use to coax a wounded but dangerous animal out of a box.

Micky looked like he was going to protest, but then he just shrugged and wandered back into the room he’d only emerged from a few minutes before.

"Seriously, Talia," Simone said once he had closed the door behind himself, "come and sit down. You're right, we're best friends and we can sort this out. I've got questions to ask you too don't forget."

Good point, well made.

Now that Micky had left the room it felt like a fog had lifted and I felt no hesitation in settling myself down beside Simone once more. A second passed, and then another when we didn't say anything. The enormity of the gap that we had allowed to open up between us seemed too great to overcome suddenly and I searched desperately for something to say to kick proceedings off.

It turned out not to be up to me, however, as the second after that Simone turned to me seriously and said, "I'm sorry that things are weird between us, but I just want to say it out loud, off the bat, that I think I'm falling in love Micky and I won't apologise for that."

Woah! Love?

My jaw dropped so fast that I felt the hinge give a little pop. Bloody hell, you leave your best friend alone for two seconds and she goes and falls in love with your worst enemy?

Simone smiled slightly at my completely stunned expression then said gently, "Should I start from the beginning then?"

I was so dumbfounded I could only nod in reply to this. Simone took a deep breath then began to speak, her voice clear and unhurried as if, unlike me, she had pretty much made peace with the goings on of the last couple of months.

"I suppose it all began that night we went to the uni bar to watch Micky's band play. God, that seems like ages ago doesn't it? But I guess it isn't really. Do you remember how Micky did that encore acoustic song at the end by himself?"

I nodded, noting as I did so the slightly glazed expression she wore as she thought back to that night.
“I guess you don't remember because you were kind of wrapped up in Jack," - damn, had we been *that* obvious? - "but Micky just stared at me the entire time he sang, it was like he was playing it only for me and I know that sounds cheesy but that's what it was like. I'd never really paid him that much attention before because he'd barely spoken a word to me all year and because I knew you hated him, but during that song, it was like he was not only seeing me but seeing *into* me or something."

She gave a little shiver, presumably of pleasure, at the memory and I echoed it with a matching one of distaste.

"It was so hot and I couldn't take my eyes off him. When he finished I thought I was going to cry because I was scared that would be it and he'd never approach me after that."

"But he presumably did," I interrupted.

"No," Simone disagreed, "at least not that night, no it was Sam who came up to me."

"Ah, Sam!" I pushed myself more upright and looked at her eagerly, this was more like it! "Sam who you get on with so well, what happened? Did he ask you out? This isn't going to be one of those creepy stories of twin confusion, is it?"

Simone laughed a little at this and shook her head. "Let me talk," she objected, "I can't tell you what happened if you keep interrupting!"

I made the sign of zipping my lips and she nodded, satisfied.

"No, Sam didn't ask me out he just said that he knew that I liked to jog in the mornings and asked if he could join me because he wanted to build up some extra endurance for footy. We started jogging together every morning before uni and on the weekend and we became really good friends. After a while we started telling each other stuff, private stuff, like our own little therapy session. We just felt that click that you get with some people, you know what I mean?" She was smiling, but I knew what she was really saying was that Sam had filled the gap that I had increasingly left open.

I didn't have time to throw myself into another good guilt wallow at this thought, however, as Simone suddenly seemed to decide something and looked at me sternly.

"Look," she said earnestly, "I'm going to tell you something but you've got to promise that you won't tell anyone."

Maybe I'm just a particularly suspicious person, but I've never found agreeing to promise something before you've heard what you've sworn to keep quiet to be a particularly attractive prospect. It's surely dodgy. In this case, though, it didn't seem as if I had much choice but to say yes.

"Not a living soul," I said earnestly, thinking as I did so that as my usual confidants in Jack and Matt weren't talking to me it was actually a pretty easy promise to make.

Simone nodded tightly at my acceptance and then began speaking very quietly almost respectfully. "It took quite a while, but Sam eventually told me that the whole jogging thing
had been a ruse so he could spend some time alone with me. He'd really wanted to talk to me because he wanted me to know how he felt…what I mean is that he felt that someone should know…ergh I'm going about this all wrong." She stopped talking and slumped back against the couch as I let out a little sigh of frustration.

"What?" I asked a little crossly. "What did he want you to know? His feelings about you or something?"

"Oh, give it a rest, Talia." She sounded tired now. "There's nothing going on between me and Sam and there never will be. He's gay."

Hmm well that put paid to the theory of the twins fighting over Simone.

"Are you serious?" I asked, completely flabbergasted. "Sam's gay? Our Sam? But he's-"

Simone's grey eyes suddenly flashed with anger and she cut me off fiercely, "He's what? Captain of the football team? One of the guys? Tough as hell? You know as well as I do that it doesn't work like that."

I blinked in surprise at her sudden outburst, but as her words sunk in, I knew what she meant. Sure the stereotype might be that gay men are camp and effeminate but stereotypes were dangerous things to judge people by.

"I'm sorry," I apologised, wondering what number apology I was up to by then. "So he hadn't told anyone then, just you?"

"Yeah, just me." She sighed again. "He came to me not only because he was desperate to tell someone, but also because he wanted my help. You see he'd decided that he was finally going to come out to Michael but he figured he needed an intermediary, someone just to help things along, you know?"

For a moment there I almost didn't know who she was talking about as I so rarely heard people refer to Micky as Michael. Then realisation hit of what she'd just said and I raised my eyebrows enquiringly.

"He needed an intermediary with his own twin?"

Simone looked a bit uncomfortable and then admitted, "Yeah, he was worried about how Michael would react and it turned out he was kind of right to be. Telling Micky wasn't easy, in fact saying that he didn't take it very well is kind of an understatement."

Figures I thought, out loud I said, "So on top of everything else am I to assume that Micky's a homophobe?"

Simone seemed to choose her words carefully as she replied, "Not homophobic as such. I don't think he's against the idea in principle but-"

"NIMBY right?" I interrupted, "Not in my backyard, or rather, not in my brother." I snorted with disgust. "It's virtually the same thing, Simone, prejudice and ignorance."
It was Simone's turn to get up off the couch in frustration and I watched as she tried to formulate best what she wanted to say next. "You've got to remember," she began eventually as she paced the living room, "they're twins, they've grown up together being pretty much inseparable. Michael thought he knew everything there was to know about Sam, just like Sam knew everything about him and then Sam dropped a bombshell like that and it's completely thrown him. Sam's been his only confidant through all the rubbish they went through as kids and so you've got to understand that he feels betrayed."

I had to understand no such thing! That last sentence sent a little flash of anger through me and I looked up at her and said furiously, "So that gives him the right to lash out at everybody else does it?" I demanded. "I don't know if you've forgotten but Jack didn't exactly have an idyllic childhood but you don't see him playing mind games with people or just generally being abusive and rude, do you?"

"People deal with things in different ways," Simone said through gritted teeth. "Jack clams up and, yes, Michael lashes out but it's just a front."

I got to my feet as well, too riled up to sit calmly. "Front smchont," I snapped. "That's no excuse for treating people the way he does."

Her answer was quick and cutting. "To treat people or to treat you?"

We faced each other in the middle of the room, sporting identical patches of red on our cheeks. Negotiations had well and truly broken down.

Unusually for me I found that I didn't care if I was the first to back down. I so wanted to know the rest of her story that I held out my hands in a conciliatory manner and said, in a calmer tone, "Fine, for now let's just agree to disagree on this. So tell me about what happened when you told him."

Simone looked for a moment as if she wanted to keep fighting but then she nodded tightly and leant back against her sideboard. "Okay, fine. Well, you know that telling him didn't exactly go to plan. In fact he'd barely heard what I said before he stormed off. Sam and I thought it would be better if just I followed him because-

"Because he was probably less likely to punch you in the head," I finished for her and she nodded to show the truth of my words.

"So I went after him, managing to catch him before he drove away, and we talked. Actually," she amended, "I talked and he yelled, but I think at the end of it he was a bit calmer. We agreed to meet up again the next day and we talked some more then, and then we met up the day after that, and then the day after that and so on until a couple of weeks had passed and I realised we'd seen each other every single day. Sometimes we just talked, sometimes we went to the movies or went for walks, it was almost as if we were-

"Dating," I finished for her, my voice glum.
She smiled, seeming to ignore my distinct lack of enthusiasm for this part of the story, "Yeah, except he didn't even so much as put his arm around me and I wasn't sure whether I was glad or not. I mean I was developing some serious feelings for him, you have no idea, Talia, he's really so sweet and caring."

Sweet and caring? Micky? She was right. I really did have no idea.

"But then, on the other hand, he was refusing to even be in the same room as Sam, even though they were still technically living together, and sometimes he'd say these things that got me so angry." She smiled in a sort of bemused way. "I was pretty much torn over wishing he would make a move and refusing to ever see him again. Then it all kind of came to a head one night when he finally did make a move and kissed me." There was that dreamy expression again. "It was amazing, better than I'd even imagined." Her expression clouded over and she continued reluctantly, "But then he somewhat spoilt it by saying that kissing me could only have been more perfect if we were doing it in front of you so maybe you'd have a heart attack…"

I let out a little gasp of outrage and Simone met my horrified gaze miserably.

"That was pretty much my reaction too," she said, beginning to fiddle with one of her strawberry blonde curls. "He apologised immediately and said he was only joking, but I was too angry to listen and I stormed out. That's when I started to ignore him, he called me just about every hour for a couple of weeks there, but I was so upset and confused I just hung up every time. When we had to meet up because of a group thing I felt like I was going to rip in half; it hurt so much to be near him but to blank him totally."

Once again I stared out the window and felt bits and pieces click neatly into place. Simone's sudden absences and strange behaviour for a while there followed by that awful evening when she'd suddenly seemed to snap and slapped Micky. Then Matt's words came back to me from when we were up in Bridunna 'someone rang and it was like she didn't want to talk to them in front of me and Tommo so she said she couldn't talk and hung up.' And then later that afternoon that call had come from Sam's house, but as Simone had just said, Micky and Sam lived together so it was probably Micky who'd been calling. How could I not have followed those clues up beforehand?

"So that's what that was all about," I said, feeling as if someone had just turned a light on in my brain. "And then that god awful football match happened and…oh my god," I suddenly exclaimed, "that's why Micky thinks that I've ruined everything for him, you wouldn't get with him because he was such an arsehole to me?"

Simone nodded.

"Well, bloody hell!" I exploded. "How is that my fault? I mean, sure, if I'd known about the pair of you then I certainly wouldn't have encouraged you but I didn't so how can
he twist it so that I'm the one to blame? Some would say if he wasn't such a dickhead then he wouldn't have had any trouble getting with you in the first place!"

"Logic kind of gets forgotten when it comes to this kind of thing, though," Simone said quietly and I definitely heard the unspoken 'you should know that' hidden behind her calm words.

"So what changed then?" I asked, determinedly ignoring her silent dig at me. "I mean you guys seem pretty together now and considering Micky's little outburst a few minutes ago about Sam and the fact that he has been in no way any nicer to me I'm guessing something else must have happened to make you change your mind about him."

"Which I guess," Simone said with a little smile, "leads us neatly round to the second thing you have to promise me you won't tell anyone else about."

I rolled my eyes, truth be told I was getting a little bit sick of all these stupid secrets. Long live the day when I didn't have to watch what I said or did for fear of giving something away. Still, didn't look like that time was anywhere near yet.

"Of course, to the grave and everything," I said tiredly, taking a seat on one of her armchairs.

"It's to do with Alex," Simone began and my ears perked up. Ah, the enigmatic Alex! I was looking forward to finding out what had happened there. "You remember how he was refusing to tell anyone what had happened when that kid was pushed or fell or whatever off that fire escape? You know how he wouldn't admit or deny that he had something to do with it?"

I nodded, as if I could forget!

"Well, it turns out that, actually, my little brother is something of a hero." Simone beamed at this and I saw the love that she held for her bad boy brother shining clearly through her eyes. "And if it wasn't for Micky we might never have found out what really happened that night. He could've gone to juvie or anything."

Yes alright! I thought impatiently, just cut to the chase already! But it turned out that finally having someone to tell her story to meant that Simone wanted to savour the moment and get it exactly right. To this end she seemed to want Micky to be there with her and so, before I could stop her, she crossed to her room and called him out.

His time-out hadn't seemed to calm him any as he was still wearing the sour expression he'd had when he'd left earlier. We glared at each other, making it clear that hostilities had not been ceased, but both of us kept our traps shut for Simone's sake.

They sat together once more on the couch, their hands firmly entwined.

"I just wanted your help in explaining the Alex situation," Simone said as Micky continued to glower.
"Are you sure you should be telling her?" he asked, jerking his head in my direction as if Simone wouldn't be able to figure out who he was talking about.

Simone's face fell briefly but then she rallied saying firmly, "Yes, I want her to know everything."

Clearly unable to see a way out of it without properly arguing with her Micky grunted and sat back, presumably indicating to Simone that she should start off the story.

"So what happened was," Simone seemed to have totally perked up since Micky had joined us once more. It was actually pretty sickening. "About a week and a half ago Micky was waiting outside here," she pointed to her front door to show where she meant, "for me to come home. He turned up like that quite a lot over the weeks, but I'd managed to use the back door to avoid him or just driven away again if I turned up and saw him waiting for me."

I smirked at Micky as she said this, amusing myself with images of him sitting there lovelorn and pining for his lady love. He, predictably, scowled in return.

"But I'd already planned to meet up with Sam that evening so I wasn't due home for ages yet."

My smile widened, if she said it was the day that it was pissing down with rain I knew I would enjoy this story even more. Unfortunately she didn't, choosing instead to look at Micky expectantly so that he sighed and opened his mouth to continue the story.

"It's not quite as pathetic as it sounds," he drawled. "This place was on my way home from work and I just dropped by to see if she was in, I was here less than five minutes."

"Sure," I said sarcastically, but I dropped my attitude at a quick glare from Simone. I did, after all, want to hear the end of the story.

"Anyway, I was sitting on the step and this girl suddenly appeared from behind the bushes around the car park and ran over. She asked me if I lived in the flat which was obviously a bloody stupid question because if I lived here I would've just let myself in, wouldn't I? But before I could tell her this she asked if Alex lived here. Now I knew that he had something going on with him but nobody had said that I shouldn't say where he was living so I told her yes and the stupid girl burst into tears.

"Well meeting you for the first time can come as a bit of a shock to people," I said before I could stop myself.

"Oh, yes, well done, you're so damn witty," Micky snapped back, but he obviously just wanted to get the story over with as soon as possible so he limited himself to that comment and then continued. "So I told her either to tell me what was wrong or bugger off and she started to sob out all this stuff about how it hadn't been Alex's fault, that he'd only been protecting her and so it took me ages to figure out what she was talking about."

Simone clearly couldn't take the suspense any more as she butted in and took over the narration from that point. "But what she was trying to say was that although Alex had been
involved with that kid falling down the fire escape it had been an accident. You see apparently Alex and this girl had something going on together, completely platonic of course...

When I raised my eyebrows at this Simone met my eyes in perfect agreement. "Yeah, that's what they said, but although they both swear there's nothing going on beyond friendship, it seems like more to me. Anyway, they've kept it a bit of a secret because her and Alex don't exactly move in the same circles, if you know what I mean."

No, I didn't really know what she meant and so, clearly with great delight on what she was about to impart Simone clarified, "The girl is Grace Andrews!"

"No way!" Now she really had my attention. The Andrews' were the rulers of Bridunna, Mr Andrews was the mayor and owned the largest and most successful farm for kilometres around and his wife was the biggest bitch and gossip in the Southern hemisphere. The Andrews' have never really got along with my parents, still regarding them as outsiders despite the fact that they had lived there since before Matt was born. In Bridunna, however, if you're not at least a third generation resident you're considered an outsider. Also, as with many people in the town, the Andrews’ thought that me, my brother and his best friend were stuck up little upstarts to leave Bridunna to go to university. Needless to say they got along just fine with Jack's dad.

I didn't know much about Grace Andrews except that, even at fourteen, which was how old she'd been when I left, she was stunningly beautiful and watched like a hawk by her family. The only clear image I had of her was her walking quietly through town being completely dominated by her bully boyfriend and bitchy friends. I'd written her off as some pathetic girl, but as learning about Haley and now Sam had taught me, you can never judge a book by its cover. Unless the book has a picture of Micky on the front of it in which case you throw it away without even bothering to open it.

I whistled softly and then laughed, "Onya Alex! How did he manage to get in with Grace Andrews?"

Simone smiled slightly too. "She goes to that snooty private school Mum and Dad sent him to and, I don't know, somehow they got to talking and found something in each other that they liked."

Not unlike you and Micky then, I thought to myself. Goodness but the world truly was full of completely mismatched couples.

"So how was Alex protecting Grace?" I asked, getting back to the story in hand, "Was the guy who ended up in hospital attacking her or something?"

Simone nodded. "But he wasn't just some guy, he was her boyfriend. It turns out that he'd practically dragged her up the fire escape to... you know..."

"Have his wicked way with her?" I supplied in disgust and Simone agreed.
"Yeah, pretty much. But you see Alex was already up the fire escape, higher up and round the corner having a smoke or whatever so they didn't see him. But when he heard Grace protesting he came down and saw this guy molesting her. Alex grabbed the boyfriend and pulled him off her but this guy lost his footing on the edge of the stairs and even though both Alex and Grace both tried to grab him he fell and that's what happened."

Simone was grinning ear to ear by this stage and it was obvious that she was overjoyed that, for once, Alex had been doing the decent thing and wasn't really to blame.

"No wonder the guy in hospital was refusing to say anything," I breathed, wondering anew at how quickly my life had gone from drama-free to being filled with practically nothing but drama.

"Yeah, he was whisked away in an ambulance straight away so he didn't know what the state of play was. He didn't have a clue whether Alex and Grace had dobbed him in or what."

"There's a point," I said, frowning. "Why was Alex refusing to say anything? Surely he could have just explained what happened and got completely off the hook?"

Simone grimaced, but it was Micky who suddenly spoke up, giving me a bit of a fright as I'd been so enthralled in the story that I'd pretty much forgotten that he was there. "That Grace girl was so freaked out and embarrassed she asked Alex not to say anything and then ran away." The disgust in his tone made it evident what he thought about that. "And stupid Alex took her at her word and refused to say anything about what had happened to protect her."

"What a gentleman," I remarked.

"What a moron," Micky countered, "He could've saved everyone a lot of trouble and just said outright what had happened.

"No white knight lurking inside you then," I said, not at all surprised.

"Damn right. There's a difference between doing the right thing and not being thick." "Interesting that you know the distinction between the two but not how to put either options into action in your own life," I said sweetly.

"Children please." Simone interjected and I reluctantly backed off. "The upshot of this whole thing is that Grace spilled the whole story to Micky who then just about throttled Alex when he got home and forced both of them to call the Bridunna police and explain what happened. It turned out the police were looking for Grace anyway because she'd been reported missing by her parents. She'd run away to look for Alex and to tell him that she was sorry and that she was going to tell the police everything. God knows how she found this place, she's actually a pretty plucky girl. And everything worked out because of Michael," Simone finished fondly, looking up at him and smiling a secret, personal smile just for him.
I thought Simone was perhaps disproportionately allocating praise here. I mean if she'd been home then she would've been the one to sort it out, if I'd been on the doorstep then I would have done it. It was just plum luck that he'd been there! I couldn't believe that was what had caused Simone's turn around when it came to Micky.

"And what about Micky’s behaviour towards Sam and me then?" I asked crossly.

"That all just became null and void did it?"

Simone had the grace to look a bit sheepish at that. "Well, the Sam thing will take a while, but we're all taking it one day at a time and after he…um…broke Sam's nose they talked and cleared the air a bit."

Micky met my sardonic gaze head on at this, refusing to look embarrassed. I'm sorry was I the only one who thought that a sentence that was supposed to show how someone is reforming into a better person shouldn't include a bit about breaking his brother's nose? Looking at Simone it seemed that the answer was apparently so.

"And as for you," Simone continued brightly, "well you were the reason I still refused to allow us to be together properly but after that apology he gave you I..."

I choked violently on my saliva at this and gazed at her incredulously. "After that, what? Excuse me?" I looked at Micky again with raised eyebrows. "Did I miss something?"

Simone also looked at Micky in confusion. "You said you apologised, you promised..." She trailed off and I could see the accusation in her eyes.

"I said that we were going to be more civil to each other," he said stiffly. "I didn't actually get around to apologising."

"Yeah, and the only reason I said I was going to be more civil to you was because you blackmailed me, you little prick," I snapped. "What was it you said to me? That if I was a bit nicer to you, a bit more respectful you would try not to let slip to Matt about Jack and me? I guess you were hoping that if Simone saw me being polite to you she'd think that you had actually apologised." I looked at my best friend and continued, "Just for the record he didn't even get near to saying sorry, he shouted a lot, accused me of ruining his friends' lives and basically treated me like scum, but I'm afraid there was no apology."

My face reddened as the taunts he'd flung at me that day in the stairwell rose to the surface of my memory again. "And then, after all that you went and told Matt about Jack and me anyway!" I accused him. "And conclusively ruined everything not only for me but for two of your supposed friends as well."

"Hell no!" Micky said suddenly. "You're not going to pin that one on me! I got a call remember, I didn't make a call."

"So who did then?" I shouted, too far gone in anger to notice that Simone's front door had just opened. "Who else would be so cruel, so much of a bastard to do that to us?"
"Me," came a hard voice from behind me, making me jump and swing round in shock. I stared at the newcomer unable to find any words for once. Eventually, after much mouth gaping, understanding slowly began to trickle into my brain.

"Ah," I said knowingly, sinking back into my chair in fatigue. "Bloody karma."
Chapter 29

Alex crossed his arms defiantly but regarded me warily.
"Yeah, karma," he agreed, "I guess you should be careful who you tell to grow up because if they're living in the same house as your best friend they're going to find out stuff about you that you don't want other people to know."

Weirdly enough Alex didn't look half as pleased with himself as he should have. In fact he seemed a bit... ashamed? Oh for goodness sake I was never going to understand that boy!

"Wise words," I said gravely and I swore for about half a second there a glimmer of a smile appeared at the edges of his mouth.

"Look," he sighed, all traces of mirth immediately disappearing, and stared hard at a point just above my left shoulder, presumably so he didn't have to look at me as he spoke, "I shouldn't have done it, yeah? Matt and Jack are alright guys, you know? I was just pissed at you and then I heard Micky talking 'bout how he'd seen you and Jack going for it on the couch."

I blushed at this and glared at Micky wondering for perhaps the millionth time in the last half hour or so how he had managed to attract gentle, softly spoken Simone.

"So yesterday after a few drinks," Alex shrugged, "I found your number in Simone's address book and called you up to just kinda let you know that I knew. When Matt answered I sorta just blurted it out then hung up. I know it was stupid but I did it and I can't take it back so, sorry and all that."

What do you say to so blasé a retelling of the moment that ripped your life to shreds? There was nothing I really could say so I just blinked and then nodded in acceptance of his apology. It didn't come even close in making up for the damage he'd done but at least Alex appreciated that he'd done something wrong and was prepared to admit to it. Unlike some, I thought glancing at Micky out of the corner of my eye.

There was silence for a few awkward minutes which I broke by saying slowly, "So that day I came by and we had a slinging match, Alex, what was that all about?"

"Oh that." Alex rolled his eyes dismissively. "Micky had arrived round the back just a little while before you did and the pair of them," he nodded towards Micky and Simone, "were trying to figure out whether to argue or have sex. I think they did both in the end." He paused then gave another little ghost of a smile, "Hey, maybe I did you a favour. I sure as hell was wishing I was somewhere else when they finally leapt at each other..."

"Yes, alright, Alex," Simone cut in looking flustered, "I think we've heard enough now."
Alex turned those silver grey eyes of his onto her matching ones and nodded slightly. "Whatever," he sighed, mooching across the room and disappearing into the spare bedroom that he was presumably using as his own whilst he stayed there. I wondered briefly how long he was going to stay away from Bridunna. Would the school revoke his suspension now the truth had come out? Something told me that even if they did that Alex wouldn't want to go back there. Maybe it was best if the Coogans left Bridunna, after all small towns have very long memories and I knew that many people would still think it was Alex's fault. It occurred to me that, at long last, Simone's parents had to stand up and take care of their responsibilities. I hoped they would.

There was another long pause while I ruminated on how damn good my parents were looking compared to seemingly everyone else's, but it was broken as Simone said, "I'm sorry about what Alex did, I had no idea he'd overheard us talking but I guess this house is too small to conceal much."

I felt like pointing out here that my flat was smaller and that Jack and I had managed to conceal our weird relationship thing for over two months in front of my brother, but decided it probably wasn't appropriate.

Simone kept talking and, although I was sick to death of revelations I listened intently allowing more pieces of the puzzle to fall into place.

"Alex really is sorry, he came and told me what he'd done pretty much the minute he'd hung up on Matt and I called Micky. I meant for him to go round to your place and make sure that Matt didn't rip Jack limb from limb, but he saw you and thought it would be better for you to sort it out."

This was undoubtedly true and I nodded stiffly at Micky to show my thanks. He was getting no more than that, however. Despite hanging out desperately for some sign of forgiveness from Matt, I'd be damned if I'd award Micky the same courtesy.

"So that's me and mine." Simone smiled awkwardly, obviously uneasy at the continued aura of hostility that was radiating between Micky and me. "So, would you care to share your misadventures?"

It was nice of her to phrase it as a question, knowing as we both did that I owed her that much at least, but looking at Micky reclining arrogantly on the couch, I knew that there was no way I was explaining myself in front of him. "Let's take a walk," I suggested, grabbing my little bag and gesturing towards the door.

Simone hesitated then gestured a little despairingly towards my rumpled, stained and skimpy outfit. "You want to go out like that?" She asked and I felt an unexpected grin spreading across my face.

"Yeah," I said boldly, "what the hell. I'm sure there's somebody out there who hasn't seen me making a fool of myself and it seems unfair that they should miss out on all the fun."
Of course, I thought some time later, I wouldn't have been quite so keen on making my bold statement if I'd remembered just how cold spring mornings were! Still, we walked briskly to keep warm; Simone all bouncy and bright eyed while I struggled along beside her in my inappropriate shoes and movement-restricting skirt.

In silent agreement we walked in the direction of my flat with me keeping up a non-stop narration all the way. It was totally a no-holds-barred type of situation and I laid it all out for Simone, my ugly behaviour and all. Good old cathartic effect! By the time we reached my building I felt a bit lighter, a bit more in control of the situation and I'd finally decided on my new plan for dealing with everything. Lay low.

That was it. I was going to concentrate on uni, I was going to see if I could get some more hours at work and, basically, apart from that, I was going to hide away in my empty flat until the world set itself to rights. A brilliant plan if I do say so myself.

With impeccable timing, I’d just reached the end of my narration, culminating in turning up on Simone's doorstep that morning, as we reached the car park outside my building. Simone looked completely stunned when I stopped and turned to look at her.

"I had no idea," she murmured faintly. "I mean, when Micky told me what he'd seen and I put it together with everything I'd seen I just assumed you and Jack had got together naturally and nicely and, well, normally!"

"I wish," I muttered, but then I shook off the feeling of regret and stood tall. I had a plan now, I had nothing to fear. If I wasn't arguing or kissing anybody, I reasoned, the dreaded drama would have nothing on me.

"Nothing's simple," Simone said and she was spot on.

We stood in awkward silence for a few seconds. I realised, as I stood there shivering slightly on the asphalt, that as much as lies were bad the truth could be a real bitch as well. What was I supposed to say now in regards to Simone?

"Well I should get back," she said quietly, effectively solving my problem.

"Okay." I managed to bite back a catty 'oh we don't want Micky to be left waiting' remark, but I think she knew I'd thought it.

"I'll call you, alright?" She said moving forward and giving me a quick hug. "Take care."

"You too," I mumbled, feeling tears sting my eyes even though she was only going back to her home which was less than a five minutes drive from where I was standing. Cue nauseating comment on how, in emotional terms, she was much, much further away from me.

It seemed like she wanted to say more, but then she just turned around and hurried off leaving me wondering where it left us. Could I be cool with sharing her with Micky? More to the point, would Micky be cool with sharing her with me? I struggled momentarily to see if there was some way I had the moral high ground in the mess, but realised that I too had
broken that sacred rule known as chicks before dicks. I'd lied to her and ignored her to focus all my time and energy on Jack, there was no real way I could begrudge her doing the same.

Which is what I firmly told myself, but as I walked up the stairs to my empty apartment, I have to admit that there was some serious begrudging going on.

~*~

The rest of that day and the next passed in a blur of furious activity as I determinedly avoided thinking about Jack. It was interesting to note that I had no problem with hashing and rehashing the things I'd said or the way I'd acted towards Simone or Matt, but as soon as my thoughts began to veer towards a certain blue eyed boy I would slam shut a kind of firewall in my mind and busy myself with something. Over the Wednesday and Thursday I cleaned the whole flat (okay not the whole flat because I avoided the boys’ rooms like the plague) thoroughly, even finding myself climbing onto a chair to scrub the top of the kitchen cabinets which only an 8 foot giant would be able to see anyway.

I worked a couple of extra shifts at the bookstore and lugged a bag load of heavy law textbooks from the library to the flat and actually began to read them. I also took long baths and bought a new phone for the landline, although I regretted that decision immediately as every time it rang I jumped from a mixture of excitement and fear hoping and dreading in equal parts that it would be Jack or Matt. But neither of them rang.

On the Thursday evening I was having one of my long, luxurious baths when I heard the phone begin to ring. My heart did the now familiar jump up into my throat and I eyed the receiver, which I'd brought into the bathroom with me, with some trepidation.

Hauling myself out of the bath and wrapping a towel around myself I sat cross-legged on the bathmat and answered the phone.

"Talia?" My mother's voice was shrill after I said hello.

My stomach wasn't sure whether to rise or sink at hearing her voice so it did a little bounce to cover the bases. "The one and only," I replied grabbing another towel and beginning to dry the tips of my hair. "Hi, Mum."

"Don't you 'hi Mum' me!" She shrieked down the phone and I winced and held the receiver away from my ear. "Where has everyone been? We've been calling for days and days. The home phone was just dead and your mobiles are all off!" Hmm, looks like I wasn't the only one playing the avoidance game then. "Jack called us on Monday to tell us he got the scholarship and then nothing," she continued.

"So, in fact, mother, it has only been three days without hearing from us," I interjected as she paused to draw breath.
"When you have children, Talia, and they seem to disappear off the planet for only three days I'll remind you of this," my mum replied, her voice crisp with anger.

I took a deep breath, knowing I'd started off on the wrong foot, and spoke in a more conciliatory tone. "You're right, sorry. Things have been kind of hectic here lately."

"Things?" she asked.

"You know, uni, work, that kind of thing," I answered in my tried and trusted vague manner.

"Oh, I thought it was because Matt found out you've been sleeping with Jack."

OH FOR GOD'S SAKE!

A weird little cough of shock and horror got caught in my throat and I was thankful that I was already sitting down because my mother's comment would have seen me flat out on the floor otherwise.

"Mum!" I shrieked once I'd found my voice again. "Have you got our place bugged or something?"

She scoffed down the line and I could almost see her shaking her head pityingly at me. "Darling, you know I don't need electronic devices to know what's going on with you kids. I just called Tom and asked him. I don't think he wanted to tell me but he's a good boy."

Poor Tommo. I could see it now, his eyes wide and frightened, Mum's probing questions hitting nearer and nearer the mark and then, the clincher, she tells him his mum wants him to visit on his next weekend. I didn't blame him, I can't usually last out against my mother and I've had almost 19 years to get used to her.

Still, it was news to me that Tommo even knew what had been going on. Jack must have told him, but how much? Honestly, so much for a web of lies, this was becoming a web of truth and it was a hell of a lot scarier!

My mum started to talk again and, although I was terrified of what other things she knew about what was going on with me, I tuned in to what she was saying.

"Am I to suppose that, considering I haven't had any calls to let me know the date of Jack's funeral, someone was there to stop my first-born killing him?"

"Yeah, I was there, me and my friend Adam actually. Matt got a couple of swings in but Jack was okay." Well physically at least, my mind couldn't help adding.

"I did tell you that this was going to happen, didn't I? I warned you of the consequences last week, didn't I?"

Well at least she'd lasted a whole two minutes before slipping in an 'I told you so', there have been conversations in the past when that has been the opening line. Deciding to bite the bullet, I gave my mum a quick rundown of the past week's events realising, as I did so, that with each retelling it was getting easier to talk about.
When I'd finished talking I worried for a moment that the line had gone dead or my story had bored my mother to sleep as there was a long silence in the receiver. Just as I was about to check whether she was still there my mum said calmly, "I want you to give the speech at our anniversary party next week."

Okay, I was used to my mother's short attention span and her quick conversation jumps but this was ridiculous! Swallowing back the hurt at her apparent disinterest in my current crisis I managed to ask in a fairly normal voice, "Why me?"

She let out an amused little chuckle. "Isn't it obvious? I think spending some time thinking about mushy love stuff and writing an amusing and insightful speech about commitment and long-lasting affection might do you some good, that's all. Apart from that, I can't think of anyone else I'd rather have do it, I love your brother but he's hardly the most articulate person in the world."

Whereas I can't seem to stop myself speaking even when I should definitely shut the hell up. Fine, I got her point.

"Thanks, Mum, I'm honoured," I said truthfully. I was also thinking it was nice to have something else to take my mind off Jack as there are only so many baths you can have in a day without feeling guilty about the drought crisis.

~*~

So, through bits and pieces, two days and nights managed to pass without me having a breakdown and as I awoke on Friday morning I considered this a major accomplishment.

I sat through my only lecture of the day making a concerted effort to actually listen to the lecturer for a change. Adam was quieter than usual but whether that was because I was being equally reticent or because he was uncomfortable around me I didn't know. Or, rather, I didn't want to know.

We walked together as usual across the campus to the point where he went in a separate direction for band practice and I continued home. But, just before he left, Adam suddenly turned to me and said, quite intensely I thought, "Don't let this stuff with your brother and Jack be the end of the world, alright? Still go out and think of other stuff occasionally."

Hmm, so I'm quite transparent then. Good to know. I nodded reassuringly all the while thinking that I was going to do no such thing but I obviously fooled Adam because he gave me one of his trademark brilliant smiles and loped off to meet up with his band mates.

Rather him than me, I thought as I hitched my bag higher and continued along the path. I had a blissfully Micky-free afternoon ahead of me while I knew my poor friend couldn't say the same. This one major positive I had highlighted in my life at that moment
made a smile, almost as wide as Adam's had been, stretch across my face and I was still 
grinning like an idiot as I turned the corner of the library and almost collided with two guys 
coming the opposite way.

"Sorry," I said automatically and then I nearly bit right through my tongue as I 
realised who I was standing in front of.

"Hey, Talia." Tommo shot an anxious look between me and Jack. "How's things?"
No trace of a smile was left on my face as I muttered vaguely, "Oh, you know."

It was then that I had the strange sensation that Jack's eyes had turned into the 
metaphorical car crash. I didn't want to look, I really didn't but the compulsion to see how bad 
things were was the same as driving past a mangled wreck, if not stronger. When my eyes did 
meet his I sucked in a quick, harsh, breath. Oh boy, someone call an ambulance, this car crash 
was a bad one.

As if cross with himself for letting me catch his gaze, Jack ripped his eyes from me 
and stared determinedly past me, his lips pressed tightly together into a thin line.

"Right…" Tommo had obviously observed that little moment and he shifted his feet 
awkwardly as he seemed to grasp for something to say. "I'm just going to go…" he trailed off 
again and looked around, presumably hoping to spot something he could use as an excuse to 
leave Jack and me alone. Obviously not seeing anything he finished lamely "…over there."

I barely even registered his departure, I was too intently trying to calm my heart rate 
as I was feeling dizzy at the speed the blood seemed to be pumping around my body. Jack, 
damn him, obviously had less wayward organs than me because he did notice Tom leaving 
and he didn't look happy about it.

His eyes flicked back onto me for the briefest of seconds and then, without having 
said a single word to me, he went to follow his friend. I reacted out of pure instinct, in fact I 
blame my slight dizziness for the way that I desperately threw out a hand to stop Jack 
walking away from me…again.

In a move that seemed as automatic as mine had been, Jack jerked away to avoid 
contact with my hand. So it had come to that, the idea of touching me made him flinch. 
Fantastic, note to self: research 'ouch' in different languages because the English version just 
didn't seem to suffice anymore.

"Please, just wait a minute." When it looked like he still wasn't going to stop I threw 
aside all thoughts of pride and said again, "Please, Jack."

He faltered in his stride then, extremely reluctantly, stopped. That boy really was too 
nice.

He made no move to come over to me, however, so other students, unconcerned in 
their own little worlds, flowed between and around us on their way to or from classes. Now 
I'd stopped Jack I had no idea what I wanted to say. But I had to say something! I couldn't
just make a heartfelt plea and then stand there all mute. How come my mouth can hold a full conversation without any input from my brain and then falter at the most crucial moments? It was defective, I needed a new one.

"How…how are you?" I finally managed to stutter out. I immediately felt like slamming my head against the brick wall behind me. 'How are you?' I'd start talking about the weather next!

Jack seemed to find my question equally ridiculous because, through the tiniest chink in the wall of stone he'd erected over his features, I saw a flicker of disbelief pass over his face. Then he said in a flat, monotone, "I'm fine."

A girl in the process of walking past Jack gave him a strange look, obviously wondering who he was talking to. When I licked my suddenly dry lips and croaked back, "I'm glad," she looked at me equally bemused. I could see that she felt the tension emanating between us and was wondering what was going on. Still, the arctic conditions between us must have been uncomfortable because she soon hurried away. Never mind, the way the rumour mill works at this uni it probably wouldn't be long before she found out about what was going on. In fact she'd be glad of the second of awkwardness she'd felt because she'd be able to tell her friends that she had actually seen, with her own very eyes, Jack and I having a moment. It felt good to have provided some service to someone, even if she was a complete stranger.

"Are you staying with Tommo?" I asked as the girl disappeared around the corner.

Jack nodded stiffly, every little bit of his body language screaming 'I want to be anywhere but here.' Despite knowing how uncomfortable he was, I was desperate to draw out this unexpected time with him and I found myself saying, "Did you know that Simone is with Micky?"

He nodded again, glancing as he did so over at Tommo who was talking to a couple of guys I'd never met before. I could tell Jack was about to join them and that I would lose him again. Not thinking I could bare it I blurted out, "I kissed Adam," before slapping one hand over my mouth and feeling my insides liquefy at the total stupidity of what I'd just said.

It was all very well trying to get Jack's attention, but when he whipped his face back round to me, I realised that the pain of him ignoring me was nothing compared to the gut wrenching horror I was experiencing then.

I couldn't look at him; I actually, physically couldn't bring myself to look up. I think my shame over my behaviour had manifested itself into a locking of the muscles at my neck. It was the least I deserved.

"You know," Jack's voice when he finally spoke was deathly calm and sent shivers of unease up and down my spine, "sometimes you say these things and I wonder what is going on in your head."
"Me too." Misery made my voice so quiet I didn't think he would have been able to hear me but he obviously did as he strode across the gap between us, almost skittling a couple of students who got in his way.

"If you can't figure out your own thoughts, if you can't understand what makes you say the things you do, then what hope does anyone else have?" Stupid, hot tears welled in my eyes and blurred my vision so I couldn't really make out his expression as he leant in close to me. "Right, I'm going to give you this one last lesson and this is all I've got left for you so listen up."

I obligingly swallowed back my tears and listened up.

"Figure out what you want and then just bloody go for it." Jack waited for a moment, presumably to let the full weight of his words to sink in, then drew away and dropped his scary intense tone when he added, "That's it."

"But-" I began to protest, not really feeling that was all that helpful and not liking the finality in his tone when he'd said 'that's it'.

"No." Jack shook his head slightly. "It's enough now." He turned and started to walk away so I'm not quite sure if he meant me to hear him when he said, "I've had enough."
Chapter 30

I watched Jack walk away and sought to find comfort in the fact that, since my heart already felt like it was in my shoes, it couldn't actually sink any further.

I needed to get home before my mascara began to run in a really bad way, that much was obvious to me, and I broke into a blind run to my car. I drove home slowly, not overly keen to go back to the continually empty flat but unable to really think of anywhere else I could go. God, how sad is that?

Once home, I pulled out my law textbooks, refusing to acknowledge the similarity between my sudden, intense bouts of studying and the hours I'd spent with my head in textbooks helping Jack with his scholarship test. I stopped every now and again to indulge in a bout of completely selfish tears accompanied by a mental soundtrack of 'woe is me!' until, by the time the evening news came on, there was a veritable mountain of tissues next to the couch.

I didn't regret pushing Jack away, honestly I didn't, because I knew it was for the best, but I did wish I could have explained better. And why oh why had I told him that I'd kissed Adam? Obviously I'd become a fan of masochism in a big way.

As some truly awful blur-out nonsense came on, I wished Matt would get in contact with me, crap TV just wasn't the same without him. I wondered where he'd been staying and what he'd been doing. It was so unusual for me to be completely clueless as to his movements and, frankly, I was becoming a little annoyed by his radio silence. I mean he hadn't even called to yell at me for my antics on Monday night and, while that was a relief in some ways, it was quite disconcerting in others.

However, as if my thoughts could summon him up, no sooner had the credits on the first load of rubbish started to roll then there was the sound of a key being slid into the lock and in walked my brother.

"Hey," he said nonchalantly as if he'd just popped down to the shops for a couple of minutes rather than being MIA for four days.

Too stunned to say anything, and suddenly remembering our last meeting when I'd slapped him, I nodded dumbly and looked back at the TV as if watching some scantily clad girl squealing (which seemed to be all that was ever on these days) fascinated me.

Matt wandered over to the kitchen and grabbed a can of beer out of the fridge, taking a long draught of it before looking over at me and lifting his drink in my direction. "Tinnie?" He asked and I nodded again.

He collected another drink from the fridge and then collapsed down beside me on the couch. Taking the beer from him I broke the seal, making that satisfying scchh sound, and
took a dainty sip. After a moment Matt reached over and smacked his can against mine, eliciting a dull clunk rather than the traditional clink expected in toasts, and sloshing both our drinks over our fingers in the process.

"Here's to us!" he said grandly. "You and me against the world."

I fought my annoyance at his casual attitude, I really did, but all the pent-up emotion from the last few days just kind of exploded and I glared at him before snapping, "Where the hell have you been?"

"Geez, Talia," Matt sighed, obviously not that surprised at my question but not liking it either. "I've only just got back, give me a sec to settle in, won't you?"

"Well, I don't know when you're going to run away again," I pointed out cattily. "So I want to get my questions in before then."

"I didn't run away." A hint of anger slipped into Matt's voice at this, but him being mad at me wasn't anything all that new and I ignored it.

"Well there was definitely running and then you went away so what would you call it?"

"A tactical retreat." He took another long pull of his drink and added, "Otherwise known as the only thing I could think of doing that didn't include bodily harm."

A nicely succinct little reminder of the events surrounding his dramatic exit on Monday, that. I shelved some of my anger and said, in a more conciliatory tone of voice, "Fine, please just tell me where you've been."

"Why?" Matt looked at me strangely. "Have you been worried about me?"

I rolled at my eyes at his stupidity. "Of course I have, you know I have, you moron. Storming off like that and not letting me know where you were going, I've been going mental here."

"Good." Matt gripped his can a little too tightly making the thin metal buckle slightly. "You deserve a bit of worry." Before I could express my outrage at this comment he continued, "And I've been at Kristin's place, not that it's really any of your business."

Kristin, Kristin, Kristin... I turned the name over and over in my head knowing that I recognised it, but unable to remember who it was. Then, suddenly, the name fell into place and I looked at Matt incredulously. "Kristin?" I basically squealed. "Kristin Kristin? As in Jack's Kristin?"

"She's not Jack's," Matt said, fury lighting up his eyes at the mention of his name, showing me clearly that Jack was far from forgiven. "But yeah, she's his ex."

"Well..." I couldn't think of anything to say, I was too shocked, but I eventually managed to get out, "How long have you guys been – what? - an item?"

"It's been on the cards for a while." Matt drew patterns in the condensation on his can and then shrugged. "I mean I never meant to make a go of it what with her and Jack doing the
on again, off again thing, but…” He suddenly wiped the can clean of his designs and gulped down another mouthful of the brew before finishing, "Sleeping with your best friend's ex kind of pales in comparison to sleeping with your best friend's little sister, don't you think?"

"Oh you can’t be serious!" I slammed my drink down on the coffee table and looked despairingly at my brother. "You're dating her to get back at Jack? Grow up Matt!"

"Grow up yourself!" Matt retorted and I was worried for a minute there that the conversation was going to degenerate into a sibling argument. I was bracing myself for a comment along the lines of 'you're a cow' and getting ready to reply 'I know you are, you said you are, so what am I?' But thankfully, despite all the evidence to the contrary, we must have done some growing up recently because when Matt spoke again it was in a more mature tone. "Look, I'm not dating Kristin to get back at Jack. Not only would that be a pretty incredibly shitty thing to do to Kristin, but it would fail in its objective because Jack doesn't like her in that way."

Floating unspoken between us were the words: 'because it's you he likes.' Even unspoken it had a pretty profound effect on both of us I think.

After a short pause I felt compelled to ask, "So you and Kristin, it's good?"

Matt smiled in a way that told me his answer even before he nodded and answered, "Yeah, it's good."

Well, that was a turn up for the books! There I was thinking Matt was off somewhere sinking into the depths of misery and anger and in actual fact he was creating a little love nest for himself! I was glad, though, I didn't want Matt to ever be unhappy and if Kristin was distracting him from what his best friend and sister had been up to then I owed her one.

Thinking of Kristin threw another issue to the forefront of my brain and I leapt off the couch and gestured to Matt to follow me. Catching a fleeting glimpse of his confused expression I vaulted over the back of the couch and ran into my room. Once there I went down on all fours and crawled underneath my bed.

"Uh, Talia?" Matt's voice was muffled. "What exactly are you doing?"

"Just a sec," I replied, my hands reaching into the furthest corner and snagging around a scrap of electric blue lace. "Ta da!" I exclaimed, emerging out from under the bed a little dust covered but relatively unscathed. "If you're dating Kristin you can return this to her."

"Because, you see, she is the only one I could think of who that blue bra I'd found on Jack's floor might have belonged to. I believed Jack when he said it wasn't Haley's and Matt had reminded me that Kristin was the one that Jack had been hooking up with over the last couple of years. It had to be hers.

My hopes at finding out who Jack had slept with on the 19th were crushed, however, as, taking a closer look at the bra, Matt smirked and shook his head. "That's not Kristin's, it belongs to Jack."
"Oh for heaven's sake!" I burst out, rocking back onto my heels and looking up at him in disbelief. "Does Jack have some weird fetish that I don't know about? How do you mean it's his?"

Matt offered me a hand up and we both took a seat on my bed; well, I more like perched awkwardly waiting for his answer.

"To all intents and purposes the bra is his, right? He won it on the 19th." When I continued to look at him in confusion Matt sighed and added, "First one to correctly guess the barmaid's cup size got to keep her bra." I made a little sound of disgust and Matt shrugged defensively. "Hey, I never said it was a particularly classy bar."

We lapsed into silence as I twisted my hands together in a kind of physical representation of the knots my brain was tying itself into. He'd won the bra; all the various scenarios I’d imagined with Haley or Kristin or some random girl throwing the bra aside in some wild passion evaporated and I was glad they were gone. Something was still niggling at the back of my mind however…ah, the scratches!

"So all this time you thought," Matt was saying, "that Jack had had it off with Kristin?"

I didn't tell him that I'd originally thought it was Haley and just nodded.

"You should know that there was no girl, Talia. For the first time in six years Jack went to bed alone on the 19th."

"Oh don't give me that!" I exclaimed. "I saw his chest the morning after, there was either a girl or he wrestled with a possum and forgive me if I think the former is more likely."

I didn't want to look at Matt, but after a few seconds had passed with no answer, I craned my head around and saw him looking pityingly at me.

"Twigs," he said shortly.

"What?"

"One of the- ah- activities that night was to strip naked and run through a hedge in the park." When I continued to stare at him in confusion he blushed slightly. "What? You know me, I've done stupider things in my time."

"Yes, but Jack…?" I still wasn't convinced.

"I wouldn't be in any hurry to hold him up as a stunning example of maturity on certain nights, either."

Hmm, twigs. I had real trouble grappling with this concept and a voice at the back of my mind was demanding to know why I was more willing to believe he'd slept with some random girl rather than that he'd run through a hedge. The answer was, of course, completely obvious. If Jack had resorted to meaningless sex I kind of had a right to be angry with him, it was like my get out of gaol free card. I even wondered fleetingly whether Matt might have been lying but then, remembering his furious expression when I'd first mentioned Jack, I
realised he wasn't really in the mood to lie for his erstwhile friend. I could feel my high horse shrinking away into nothingness and I couldn't quite decide whether this was a good or bad thing.

Pushing away my thoughts on my own relationship with Jack I decided to seize this moment between my brother and me to patch things up between him and Jack.

"Matt, I want to tell you the truth about what happened between Jack and me."

His face shut down immediately and he went to get off the bed. "I don't want to hear it," he snapped, but I grabbed him and roughly pushed him back down.

"Tough," I said in a hard tone, "because I want to tell you and you need to hear it." Our eyes locked for one long moment and then Matt sighed and leant back on my bedspread.

"Fine," he snapped, "but for god’s sake keep it PG, I don't need to hear the gory details."

"Like I'd want to tell you them," I retorted before taking a deep breath and remembering my objective. I needed to get Matt to forgive Jack, otherwise all the heartache and pain on both sides would have been for nothing. "I need you to actually listen, Matt, and not just jump to your own conclusions. I know what we did was beyond shitty but you've got to understand how awful we feel."

"We?" Matt's eyes sparked with anger once more. "You mean you and him have been having little meetings to discuss how to get me to calm down? Well forget it, I'm not going to just-"

"See, that's exactly what I mean," I interrupted him. "Push all that testosterone to one side for a moment and just listen!"

I waited for him to capitulate and, although I could see that he hated to do it, eventually he nodded and gestured for me to talk.

"Right so, you remember when I told you what Brad had said to me when we broke up? Stuff about me having something wrong with me? I kind of laughed it off with you, but it cut close to home and I was in a pretty bad way when I got back to the flat. I was so sure that there was something wrong with me and I thought that if I just got someone I trusted to sort of acclimatise me to touching then I could get over it."

"Wait a minute!" I knew I wouldn't get very far without Matt interrupting but I was still annoyed and I glared at him as he said, "You asked Jack to have sex with you?"

"Not in so many words but, I guess, basically yes I did. In the back of my mind I never really thought it would go as far as it did. I mean at first it was exactly what I needed, Jack shook my hand and put his arm around me once or twice, that kind of thing. But then things kind of snowballed and weird stuff happened between Simone, Micky and Sam," I was careful here not to mention what that weird stuff actually was remembering my promise to Simone, "and it was like I fell into this big pit and I couldn't get out again. But, and here's the
thing, if someone had offered me a ladder I don't know if I would have taken it, I kind of started to like the pit, mainly because Jack was in it with me. Does that make any sense?"

Matt refused to look at me but, after a moment, he said, "Kind of, but I'm a simple guy, Talia, so let's try and keep the similes to a minimum."

I smiled slightly and nodded. "Fine, I was in a big mess, but even if I could've seen a way out of that mess I don't know if I would have taken that road because I was enjoying being with Jack, better?"

"Oh so much better."

"Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit," I said automatically and Matt gave a little, bitter laugh.

"Just as well I'm not trying to be witty then. So where exactly did I fit in with all this? I was living with you, it's not as if you could just forget I was there and you must have known what I would think of your little arrangement."

"At first I didn't think you needed to know because it was all so up in the air and kind of innocent, I didn't want to get you all riled up over nothing. But then, when there actually was pretty major stuff going on, I didn't want to hurt you or make you mad at Jack and me."

"So how did you think you were going to get out of it?" Matt finally looked at me, but I wished he hadn't because the tight set to his mouth showed me that he wasn't in a peace-making mood.

"I didn't think, that's kind of the point. Everything got really confusing and every day it got harder to tell you and then there was the scholarship thing." Thinking back to the last couple of weeks I realised that, Jack's attitude towards me excluded, things were actually better now that the truth was out. My head was certainly less fuzzy. "Look, cards on the table time, it was never, ever my intention to hurt you and for screwing things up so badly I am so, so sorry. There is nothing going on between us now, I've told Jack that and he's had enough of it too. I'm not just trying to worm my way out of blame here, I am fully guilty and I accept that."

Far from calming Matt down my last words seemed to increase his fury and he almost yelled when he spoke next. "What about Jack? I think he's been the most used in this. Jesus, Talia, he loves you, did you know that?"

I felt tears sting my eyes as I nodded. People should have to give some kind of warning before they say the 'L' word, he'd completely thrown me off balance saying it out of the blue like that. And what was he doing anyway? Was he sticking up for Jack?

"You know? You know he loves you?" Matt's disbelief was almost palpable. "So why isn't this little speech being delivered by the both of you? Shouldn't the pair of you be trying to convince me that I should stop being mad because love conquers all or some shit?"

I smiled feebly and shook my head. "I told him that loving me was inconvenient."
"You what?"

Oh, how to explain this to someone who wasn't there! It'd made sense at the time… hadn't it?

"Well it's true!" I protested. "Our deal was supposed to be that he helped me get over my phobia, nobody ever said anything about love. It's not fair of him to tell me that he loves me now, there's you to think of and he's going away to England in a few months…" I trailed off as Matt gave my shoulder a hard shove.

"You bitch!" he exclaimed. "So you didn't tell him you loved him back or anything? You just told him that saying he loved you was inconvenient?"

"Oh what, as opposed to punching him?" I retorted, thinking about his reaction to Jack's words.

"He told me he was sleeping with my little sister, he told you he loved you, there's a bit of a bloody difference!"

We glared at each other, both breathing slightly more heavily than usual and refusing to back down.

"God dammit, Talia, you can't control everything!" Matt exploded. "You can't force him to stop loving you any more than you can force him and me to make up. You're so fiercely determined to make sure that our lives go how you think they should go that you forget that it doesn't work like that. For god's sake, back off out of our lives and think about your own for a change. What do you want?"

"I don't know, okay?" My blood was boiling, my head was pounding and I couldn't believe I was being lectured by my usually so laidback brother.

"Bullshit!" He was properly yelling now. "Tell the truth, what do you want?"

"Don't make me say it." I'd tried so hard to build up a reality for myself that wouldn't break my heart and I hated that he was trying to destroy that. He wouldn't back down, despite the pleading in my voice.

"Come on, I know what you want and I've only had the last couple of minutes, you've had weeks to figure this out. Forget that I hate it, forget that he's going away, forget your jumped up notions of what's right for him and just say what you want."

"Fine!" There comes a time when the bough can't bend anymore and it snaps. "I want him. I want Jack. I don't want him to go, I don't want you to be mad at him or me anymore." I leapt off the bed and started to pace because a thrilling, restless energy was spreading throughout my limbs and there was no way I could stay sitting. "I want to apologise and have him forgive me and I want to be with him without the guilt. I want to stop crying all the time and I want to feel secure enough in myself and in him that I don't have these stupid fits of irrationality. Oh god!" I stopped dead and stared at Matt, my eyes wide. "I love him."

"No kidding."
"But it doesn't matter because I can't tell him that I do. That would be too selfish for words." I put my head in my hands and sank back down onto the bed with a frustrated groan.

"That's never stopped you before." Wow, blunt really was becoming my brother's speciality. "Be selfish because you know the one thing that selfish people get? What they want." I suddenly felt his hands grip my shoulders and I dropped my hands to look at him.

"Let Jack take responsibility for himself, he might hate you for making his leaving harder but he might not. I might hate you for screwing up my friendship with him, but I might not. Are you prepared to find out?"

I pushed his hands off my shoulder with a sigh. "He's not talking to me, he made it pretty clear last time we met that he'd had enough of me. He's not going to let me get near him to make my big gesture."

"You are so frickin' thick sometimes," Matt sighed, getting off my bed and walking towards the door. "Who are the only people bar you and me who Jack would do anything for?"

"Our parents," I answered without hesitation.

"And what's next weekend?" He asked.

"Their wedding anniversary...oh!" Yeah, now I really did feel thick. My mum had given me a massive hint and now even my oblivious brother had figured out what the anniversary party meant for me and Jack. He would go to it, I had no doubt of that, there was no way he would let my parents down, especially as he was getting ready to go away. I was confused, though, Matt seemed to have done a radical about face. "But what about you and him?" I called out as he exited my room. "What happened to 'I'll never forgive him' and all that? Because I don't understand why you're telling me to give Jack and me a go if you're then just going to mess it all up."

Matt reappeared back in my doorway, his expression fierce. "He messed up," he said seriously. "Maybe you did too but this is about him and me. I have no idea whether I can forgive him, but I'm game to face him and find out. Are you?"

"Yes," I said with conviction.

I guess it was like Jack had said. I'd figured out what I wanted, now I just needed to bloody go for it!
Chapter 31

The next week passed unbelievably slowly. There was no time marching on for me, on the contrary, time was behaving like a sulky teenager and dragging its feet towards the Saturday night when all the nonsense of the past two months was going to come to a head. My stomach was constantly tied in knots as I grappled with writing the speech. I knew that Jack would have to listen to me, that he couldn't run away if I was speaking to everyone and not just him, but it had to be right and that was proving to be more of a challenge then any piece of schoolwork I’d ever attempted.

Around this battle other issues flowed, such as beginning to study for exams, trying to keep my friendship with Simone alive and stopping myself from killing Matt. Because, you see, after our good long conversation on the Friday, Matt became unbearable. He slouched around the flat in a filthy mood, refusing to help with chores, refusing to explain what his problem was, basically refusing everything. As far as I could determine through his sulks, Matt was ripping himself apart trying to figure out whether he should forgive Jack or not. It seemed to me that the answer was obvious, but I guess I just had to accept that boys are slower than girls and he needed time to sort things out in his head.

Despite knowing what he was going through, I've never exactly been known as someone who has a particularly long temper and I got fed up with his behaviour after all of two hours. Suffice it to say the relationship between Matt and me was pretty tenuous.

Simone was proving much easier to deal with. As promised, she’d called and we’d had a good long talk, just like we used to before we turned our backs on each other. Upon my telling her of my grand idea for the anniversary party, she’d embarked on a campaign to find me the perfect dress. All throughout the day I could expect calls from her bombarding me with questions such as 'corset or empire waist?' or 'teal green or emerald green' until I was tempted just to turn my darn phone off. But I never did. Fashion was her thing and I'd have been an idiot not to take advantage of that. Not to mention, it was the first tentative step towards getting our friendship back on track and, although I was still hurt and confused by her decision to turn to Micky, I was more than willing to travel down the path to renew our friendship.

Things with Adam were easier as well. Lectures with him became fun again and it wasn't long before I was able to spend an evening with him on the very couch I'd thrown myself at him on without a hint of weirdness. Continuing with this theme of forgiveness and friendship I invited Haley out to the movies with me one night and had a surprisingly good time. We may have had different tastes and opinions on a lot of things, but when she finally
relaxed around me it also turned out there were plenty of things that we were in agreement on and this made all the difference.

As the week progressed and I began to reconnect with my other friends, I realised that my problems with Jack had overshadowed everything else in my life. By having a firm plan about what to do with regards to him I was less edgy and prickly with other people, which I, and probably they as well, was very pleased about.

This is not to say that everything was suddenly coming up roses. I wasn't suddenly all bouncy and full of life or anything sickening like that. In fact, as I was expending all my energy into fixing relationships with people and figuring out how to win Jack back, I was lethargic and anxious most of the time. My skin went pale and kind of pasty while my hair became lank and droopy. I wasn't exactly a pretty picture which was another reason I was so glad Simone was going to such effort to make sure I looked nice on the night itself; the Saturday which had been affectionately named J-day by all involved.

My parents, never ones to be left out, got in on the preparation act. Every phone conversation with them was a buzz of discussions and planning about the night; when the speech should be made, where I was going to stand, who was going to be in charge to make sure that Jack was present and listening, and so on. Maybe it wasn't the traditional way these things were supposed to work, ie the off-the-cuff speech and the effortless falling into each other's arms, but I did like that everyone I cared about was involved in letting me tell Jack how I felt about him. It was what was going to happen after the speech that truly scared me. I didn't know if I could take another dismissal from Jack so soon after my previous ones, and I was scared shitless of hurting him even more.

Although I'd promised to myself that I would let Jack be so he could sort out his feelings, by Wednesday the nerves got to be too much and, before I could stop myself, I found my hand picking up the phone and dialling Tommo's number. I couldn't call Jack's mobile as I knew he would take one look at the caller ID and refuse to answer. Maybe this way I could take him unawares.

"Hello?"

My heart sank as I recognised Tommo's voice on the other end of the line, but I rallied to be able to say in a friendly-enough tone, "Hey Tommo, how's things?"

"Talia!" His voice was a sort of manly shriek. "Hi! Fine! Me, that is and, you know, everything. How are you? I mean you and Matt, I mean-"

"Tommo? Take a deep breath for me," I said calmly wondering what on Earth his problem was, he was usually so chilled.

He laughed uneasily and then said, in his normal voice, "Sorry about that, you took me a bit by surprise is all. So how are things really? I mean with Matt home and everything?"
I couldn't figure out why he was so keen to know, but I replied that things were fine, that we were slowly but surely getting ourselves back to the way things had been before. Before he could ask any more questions I hurriedly continued, "Listen, is Jack there? Because I really need to talk to him, I have some pretty important stuff I want to say."

"Oh." Tommo faltered and then he said in a loud, clear voice, "So Matt’s home and things are getting better between the two of you? Things are good? That's great. And you want to talk to Jack? Because you have some important stuff you want to say to him?"

"Tommo, why are you repeating everything I'm…oh." I sighed. "Just put Jack on the phone, please," I said tiredly.

There was a short pause and then Tommo said awkwardly, "I can't he's in the shower…no I mean he's out…but I don't know where."

I laughed a short laugh which contained absolutely no humour in it whatsoever.

"Fine, could you just tell him that I'm sorry and that…nothing, forget it, just that I hope that he's alright and sorry again."

"No worries, Talia. And, hey, I'm sorry too, you know, about all this stuff. I hope it works out."

"Me too." I smiled slightly at his sweetness, but my smile slid away quickly as I remembered Jack was standing just at the other end of the line but refusing to speak to me. Honestly, who was being immature now?

I hung up the phone and redoubled my efforts to keep myself busy until Saturday, it looked like it truly did all come down to J-day.

~*~

Saturday morning dawned clear and bright. My childhood bedroom was almost glowing with the strength of the early morning sun and, as I threw off my bedclothes, I felt that the air was nice and warm. It was surely a good omen, I decided as I stretched out my legs and stared up at the ceiling I had awoken under so many times before.

Matt, Kristin and I had driven up to Bridunna the night before, ostensibly because Mum and Dad needed help setting everything up, but mainly because both Matt and I were going stir-crazy hanging around the flat. Rather than being annoyed at Kristin's presence on the long drive up, I was immeasurably glad she had gone with us because she was a calming influence on Matt.

He still hadn't got around to talking to Jack which pissed me off because Jack was surely more likely to listen to me if he knew that Matt had forgiven him. Then again if Matt didn't forgive him maybe it was lucky I was going to get in first.
I could hear the sounds of trucks and voices outside my window and assumed the huge tent/marquee thing had arrived and was being erected. I knew I should get up and go and help out wherever I could, probably taking cups of tea to the men working, but I hugged a few precious minutes to myself.

Like when people say you're dying and your life flashes before your eyes, the last couple of months flashed before mine as I lay there. I remembered the crushing embarrassment of finding out my boyfriend had been sleeping with someone else, my innocent affection towards Jack as he agreed to help me out and my slow spiral downward as I opened myself up to him and then slammed myself shut again.

I wondered when I'd first fallen in love with Jack. Come to that I was still struggling to figure out exactly what love was. I'd felt love before obviously, I loved my parents and Matt, I loved Simone and, even before the lessons had begun, I'd loved Jack in a way. But when had I first felt that strange tugging in my chest? When had I started every day and gone to bed every night with him on my mind? When he'd told me that he loved me? No, much earlier than that. The first time I'd had sex with him? No, I realised, it was even before that. Maybe when he'd first kissed me on the roof, our hair stirred by the wind, his hands tight around me? Nope, my mind insisted, you've got to go further back than that. Our first date? Our first embrace? Our first meaningful look? No, no, no. Did it go back beyond that fateful Wednesday night then? Did I have to start trawling through my childhood memories to find the key to the all consuming need I had to be with Jack, to comfort Jack, to be there for Jack, to love Jack? Did it go all the way back to the fateful Wednesday night then? Did I have to start trawling through my childhood memories to find the key to the all consuming need I had to be with Jack, to comfort Jack, to be there for Jack, to love Jack? Did it go all the way back to the first time we met when, instead of saying hi and racing off to join Matt like all of my big brother's other friends did when meeting me, he had smiled solemnly and got to know me?

But then again maybe, I had a sudden epiphany, it didn't matter when I'd fallen in love with him, only that I had.

And, like a crackle of electricity had just whizzed through me, I suddenly realised what my speech was going to be about that night. All my carefully planned words had suddenly become redundant! I threw myself out of bed and grabbed the stack of little white cards that I had written my intended speech on and, ripping them neatly in two, I flung open the window and hurled the pieces out of it. Ignoring the astonished workmen who looked up at me, presumably wondering why a girl with crazy bed hair had just blatantly thrown litter at them, I let out a whoop of excitement.

I knew that soon enough I would become crippled with anxiety and nerves, but at that moment, I was ready.

~*~
I twirled back and forth in front of the full length mirror in my parents' bedroom watching the flirty hem of my dress lift and spin. Simone sure knew her stuff, that much was obvious, the dress was soft green with a low peasant neckline and cute puffed sleeves. It flowed down smoothly over my stomach, flaring out slightly from my hips and ending a little bit above my knees. After finding the dress, Simone had quickly embroidered a little sunflower onto the bottom left hand side of the skirt so that a cheerful yellow flashed every time I moved. The dress was flattering and sweet and, with my blond/brown hair curled into loose loops and my face glowing with both excitement and carefully applied makeup, I was looking the nicest I think I had ever seen myself. I fastened a delicate silver chain around my neck and centred the absolutely miniscule diamond pendant that hung from it before slipping on a pair of slightly heeled Mary Janes and giving my hair a last tweak.

I took a deep breath then turned to face my mother.
"What do you think?"

My mum stood up gracefully and smoothed her long dark, purple dress down over her hips. "Very, very beautiful." She kissed me gently on the cheek then wiped the resultant lipstick mark away.
"You too," I smiled.

There was a soft knock on the door and Simone slipped into the room, stunning in a white, floaty empire waisted dress.
"Tonnes of people have arrived, it looks amazing down there." Looking at the pair of us properly for the first time she broke into a wide grin and added, "Wow, it looks pretty amazing up here too! The three of us are going to knock their socks off tonight!"
"I sure hope so." The nerves were hitting me in a big way.

Simone gave me a tight hug and I was glad that we were working to combat the issues that had pushed us apart, she'd always been a great comfort to me during times of stress. Mum and Simone left then to go downstairs and welcome the guests but I stayed behind to try and calm my nerves.

Eventually I realised I couldn't hide away upstairs any longer and, checking myself out in the mirror one last time, I went out onto the landing. I was just about to start descending the stairs when I looked down and felt my whole body freeze. Standing at the bottom of the staircase, looking more incredible than I'd ever seen him, was Jack. He wore a black suit with the jacket open to reveal a crisp white shirt with the top button undone. His hair was sexily dishevelled, a couple of dark strands falling into his brilliant light blue eyes. Upon looking up and seeing me standing there, unable to even breathe, I saw something spark in those beautiful eyes and my heart sped up in response.
"Jack." It was no more than a breathy whisper but I could tell he'd heard me. "You look…" I trailed off, unable to find the words to describe what it was like seeing him looking so amazing after a week apart.

"You too." Jack made a move as if to come up the stairs towards me then suddenly seemed to realise who he was talking to and hesitated. Before I could ask him not to go he turned sharply and marched off. Still, I'd seen that look in his eyes, the yearning and the desire which was so obvious in my own when I looked in a mirror, and it convinced me, more than ever, that all was not lost.

Feeling positively light-hearted, I made my way outside to the marquee, greeting various family friends along the way. Simone had been right when she'd said it looked amazing. The huge, white tent was erected on the lawn in front of the house with flaming torches lighting paths up to the house and into secluded little grottos which I'd spend most of the day hanging fairy lights in. It was obvious to me that the effort had been truly worth it as they transformed the bushes into little secret caves where I could already see people stealing away to even though it was still dusk.

Following one of the paths inside the marquee I stopped for a moment and marvelled at the impressive décor it had taken a whole team of us to create throughout the day. The fairy lights were in full force in here as well; woven through the chair backs, looped along the walls and artfully twined around bunches of twigs standing in pots dotted around the room. There were 10 large round tables covered in crisp white tablecloths each with 10 white chairs placed at regular intervals. The cutlery was shining and a beautifully ornate candelabra stood on each table, the flames of the candles flickering gently in the soft breeze which blew in from the open flaps. Silver glitter was sprinkled across every table and glinted here and there in the grass underfoot, representing the silver wedding anniversary of my parents.

It truly looked incredible and, although a lot of the work had been done by us, the tent, table, cutlery, chair, and decorations hire together with the catering was costing a small fortune. When I'd commented on this to my mother she'd smiled and patted my cheek saying, "Yes, I wouldn't hold your breath for a large inheritance when we die, dear." Which had made me grin. It was actually really nice to see my parents doing something for themselves for a change, they weren't exactly spendthrifts and this extravagance was the first I'd ever seen them splurge on. Still, noting my dad's stunned expression as he entered the tent, I was betting mum had been the one to organise the financial side of things.

"Don't you look pretty?" My dad asked as he approached me and I gave a little spin. "Yeah and you look…uncomfortable!" I laughed and he pulled at the silver bow tie he was wearing with a grimace.

"You know how I hate men who wear bow ties," he grumbled. "But your mother's on the warpath so I don't dare take it off. Anyway, how are you feeling? Nervous?"
"Incredibly," I answered truthfully, looking apprehensively at the small stage up the end of the tent where I would be giving my speech. "How long until my big moment?"

"Well," My dad glanced towards one of the tent flaps where a whole stream of people were filtering in, "we're all being rounded up so I'd guess any minute."

"Talia." I turned and saw Simone join us. "Tommo's got Jack and he's putting him where you said you wanted him." She pointed over to where I could see Tom guiding Jack into a seat right up the front. I gulped, I know it had been my idea to make sure they were sitting in clear view of the stage, but now I was kind of wishing I'd asked for Jack to be up the back somewhere amongst all the anonymous people.

"Talia!" I turned again and this time saw my mother approaching me. "Everyone's in. Tommo's got Jack in position. Are we a go?" I nodded and smiled slightly at the military air that the proceedings had taken on.

"Roger that," I replied, in keeping with the emerging theme.

"Well, maybe not in front of everyone, darling, that might be just a tad distasteful," Mum said vaguely as she smiled and waved at her friends.

Simone spluttered with laughter and my dad shook his head at his wife's outrageous ways. I was getting too wound up with tension to find it all that amusing. My mum took my arm and started guiding me through the crowd of middle aged people; Dad and Simone trailing along behind.

I was hauled up onto the stage as my mum beamed around at everyone and picked up the microphone Matt had wired up earlier in the day.

"Hello, everybody," she said, switching on her 'gracious hostess' mode and almost glowing with cheer and goodwill. "I want to thank you all so much for coming to celebrate the silver wedding anniversary of Rob and myself. It's been an amazing 25 years and we've been so lucky to have known each and every one of you."

I had to forcibly stop myself from rolling my eyes at this, honestly she was taking the whole benevolence thing a bit far wasn't she? I saw that Matt, who didn't have the misfortune of being up on stage in front of everyone, was rolling his eyes enough for the both of us and I bit back a nervous smile.

"Now," my mum was continuing, "most of you know our two wonderful children, Matthew and Natalia." Both Matt and I winced at the use of our full names. "They’ve been a constant source of joy for us over the last 20 years."

"I don't know about constant!" my dad interjected loudly and the crowd tittered appreciatively.

"Well, they've brought sporadic moments of joy anyway," my mum amended with a smile. "And tonight we have a very special treat as my youngest is going to present a speech.
Now, I've made her promise that it won't get too mushy, but she's young and idealistic so I'm afraid you'll have to brace yourself for at least a little bit of sap.

The sycophants laughed again and I realised that I was going to have to relieve my mother of the microphone soon or she was going to turn the evening into an excuse for a one woman show- the mother monologue. I gave her a little dig in her side to remind her that I was still standing there and she put her arm around me and pulled me forward. "So, without further ado I present to you Talia! Let's hope her speech isn't too long so we can eat soon!"

She passed the mic to me and glided down off the stage to the sound of applause, joining my father who was sitting next to Tommo in the front row. The clapping died down and soon almost 100 expectant faces were staring up at me, a mix of strangers, friends and family members. Matt and Kristin were sitting behind Tommo and Jack; Micky, Simone, Holly, Sean and Mr and Mrs Coogan beside them. Looking further back in the room I saw Tommo's mum with her new boyfriend and Mr and Mrs Andrews looking faintly disapproving over near the, as yet unopened, buffet. Seeing a movement by one of the entrances I watched Alex slip out hand in hand with Grace and I smiled slightly. It was kind of nice to remember that, although this speech meant an awful lot to me, it was still deemed boring enough for some to want to escape. It was a good reality check.

Taking a deep breath, I allowed my gaze to fall upon Jack and my whole body tingled in response. He was looking up at me just the same as everyone else, but there was something different, something that I knew I would only be able to find in his eyes, shining back at me.

"Get on with it!" Matt shouted and I blushed and waved apologetically at the crowd.

"Sorry," I began, "I was just thinking how nice it was to see all you guys here. Some of you I know and some I don't, but I just think it's fantastic to look out over this crowd and see that my mum and dad have so many friends. I hope if one day I reach my twenty fifth anniversary this many people would turn out to wish me and my partner all the best." My hands started to sweat as I mentioned a 'partner' and I forced myself not to look at Jack again, not yet.

"When my mum asked me to give a speech I didn't really know what I was going to say. I've never made a speech like this before and I wanted it to be just right, you know? So, over the past week or so, I've been doing research on love; quotes and all that kind of thing. I wrote them out all so beautifully, but then I suddenly realised this morning that what other people think about love doesn't matter. These famous poets didn't know my parents when they wrote their stanzas and, as far as I'm aware, no musician has ever written a song about their marriage so why should I or any of you guys care what they had to say?"

I took a deep breath and shifted the microphone to my other hand. "So I decided to take a different approach. I thought it would be interesting to talk about my parents' relationship; how they met, their first date, their first kiss, their wedding and all of those
kinds of things. I was pretty chuffed with myself for coming up with this idea, not that I'm saying it's particularly original, but then I realised something a bit disconcerting. I don't know anything about any of these occurrences! I don't know about the first time they met or their first date or their first kiss or even their wedding and this threw me. I mean they're my parents and I love them both to bits, shouldn't I know about these things?"

I saw my parents share a secret smile at this bit and was reassured that I was exactly on track with where I was going with my speech.

"But the answer I realised is no!" I said, my voice ringing clearly across the tent. "It really is none of my business. I don't need to know about their special moments because they are *their* special moments. None of us, no matter how close we are to them, can lay claim to these memories. You know that saying: 'No-one knows what's really going on in a relationship except the two people in it'? Well I think that is exactly right. I'm not a big one for making a fuss about the sacrament of marriage or anything like that but, I believe that some things are sacred to a couple."

At this I let my eyes wander onto Simone and saw that her eyes were shining with unshed tears as she clutched Micky's hand. She gave me a little nod to let me know she knew and appreciated what I was trying to say.

"What's sacred is that tingle in your stomach that lets you know the one you love is in the room even before you see them. What's sacred is that look in their eyes that you know they can only give to you. What's sacred is whatever that spark is between people that no-one, as far as I can tell, has ever been able to properly describe even though everybody, from poets to scientists, have tried. So you see I can't really talk to you about these moments my parents had which, let's face it, I'm kind of glad about because - come on! - they're my parents!"

There was another ripple of chuckles at this which bolstered me somewhat as I continued. "I guess, like my mum said it would, this speech has got a bit mushy so I'm going to try and pull it back into reality a bit. Although I'm far, *far* down the line in terms of people to first discover this I have to say it: love is hard! I don't for a minute imagine that my parents got together and then had completely smooth sailing. I know for a fact that my mother's brother, my uncle Steve, hated my dad until well after my parents were married." I looked significantly at Matt as I said this but he just raised his eyebrows challengingly as if to say: 'So?" "But whatever trials they came across I guess they rode them out or, if I know my mum and dad, took one look at them and smashed them into smithereens, because they felt what they had was more important than the rubbish they met along the way. And I think that's pretty inspiring. Especially because, in my own life, I've been cowardly when it comes to these obstacles. I know for most of you what I'm saying is old news but this is all new for me so humour me here for a few moments as I tell you about the lessons I've learnt this year."
I couldn't keep my eyes away from Jack by this point and I clutched the mic tightly as I saw he'd let the shield come over his face to stop me from knowing what he was thinking. Was that a good sign? I wondered. Was he shutting me out because he didn't want me to see the affect my mentioning of 'lessons' had had on him or had he just shut down because he didn't care what I had to say? I supposed there was only one way to find out and soldiered on, willing him to let me back in.

"Firstly, I suppose I learnt about what I've already talked about, the fact that nobody has any rights over other people's relationships. Secondly, I learnt that you might love someone, but that you cannot control their lives. Even if you think you know what's best for them you can only work in partnership with them and hope they understand when you tell them of your concerns or ideas. Thirdly, lies are bad but the truth can be equally destructive and when people start playing around with deceit and deception, or even absolute honesty, things can rapidly get out of control. Fourthly, I realised that love is overwhelming and when you start thinking about all the people who you love and who love you it can feel like you're going to be ripped apart. I mean what are you supposed to do if they conflict? Start up a list and try to rank the people you love in order of most important down to least important? Of course not! That's impossible! For starters love isn't just one thing, it can appear in heaps and heaps of different incarnations and trying to keep track of them all, well, it could do your bloody head in!"

Just as mine had nearly been done in, I thought.

"Right," I was on the homeward stretch now, "I can see that some of you are falling asleep so I'm going to finish up. My final lesson is the most amazing, important thing anyone has ever said to me and, regardless of whether this speech has achieved what I wanted it to or not, I will always view this as the best advice I've ever been given." I paused and added, "I only wish I'd followed their advice sooner and stopped all the heartache I’ve given them and myself."

God, I could feel the tears welling up and there was no way I wanted to do my puffer fish impersonation now. I put a hand on my chest as if to push the tears back down and smiled a watery smile, desperate to get my last words out before I lost it completely.

"I think even some of you old codgers might appreciate this advice and so I hope everyone is listening. Are you ready? Here we go: figure out what you want and then just bloody go for it."

There were some smiles around the room and even more nods and I was glad to see that Jack and I weren't the only ones who considered it good advice.

"And I guess, after congratulating my parents on standing twenty five years with each other, that's the point of this speech. I just wanted to say that, Jack, I know it's taken me way too long but I've finally figured out what I want. And it's you."
Chapter 32

For a moment it seemed as if Jack and I were the only ones in the room. Yeah, okay, believe me I never thought I would say such a cheesy thing but I'm all up for cheese if it's true and I can't really think of any other way to describe what happened. It was like a fog swelled up out of nowhere and covered everything except Jack and me. It even muffled the sound like I'd just donned some earmuffs.

We locked gazes and held. The shield in front of his face was gone, but I still couldn't really tell what he was thinking. Perhaps he seemed a little…afraid? No, that couldn't be right, Jack didn't get scared. 'What are you thinking?' I silently pleaded. I think he must have caught my question and not liked my attempt to get inside his head because he abruptly got to his feet, his chair toppling over at the suddenness of his movement.

I blinked in surprise and came back to reality where there was a round of gentle applause rippling around the tent. I heard someone whistling their approval and saw Simone grinning up at me, beside her even Micky had managed to bring his hands together in a couple of desultory claps. This wasn't a bringing down the house kind of applause, it was polite and restrained as people looked at each other in confusion, obviously wondering what that bit at the end had been about. They soon brushed their bemusement aside, however, and started drifting hopefully towards the buffet. I guess politician wasn't going to be one of my career goals if my speeches received such a luke-warm response. Still, I didn't care what random people thought of my speech. It only mattered to me what one person thought.

I looked back down to where Jack had stood up and felt a little drop of ice spike my stomach as I saw that he was gone. I dropped the microphone and jumped off the stage, scanning the crowd, trying to catch a glimpse of him.

Starting to panic, I pushed my way through the people, shouting out his name and receiving my fair share of weird looks for it. I didn't care, I just wanted Jack. What if he'd left already? What if my speech had done nothing but annoy him? Had I pushed him even further away?

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" I froze out of habit hearing the dangerous tone in my brother's voice, but on turning around to face him, I realised that it wasn't me he was talking to. He was over by one of the tent flaps, his arm extended to block Jack from leaving. "She makes a big speech like that and you walk out on her? I don't think so."

"So what are you saying?" Jack's posture was stiff and I began battling my way hurriedly over to join them, recognising that stance as one which usually meant bad things were about to happen.
"I'm not saying anything except you're even more of a shit than I thought if you just
leave without hearing what she has to say."

"Thanks, Matt," I said, virtually throwing myself between them as I saw Jack open his
mouth to reply, "I'll take it from here."

"Fine." Matt touched me briefly on the shoulder, gave Jack a hard stare, and then
walked off to join Tommo and the others.

There was a little pause as we both watched Matt leave, but I broke it by turning and
asking, "Were you leaving?"

He shoved a hand into his pocket and looked down at the grass. "No, not really, I just
needed to get out...away from the people, not you."

He didn't want to get away from me, surely a good sign. But then, he had been leaving
without waiting for me so...what was he saying? His face was still giving nothing away and I
felt like I was breaking in half waiting to know his response to my heartfelt speech.

"Jack, I-"

A group of people brushed past us, knocking me slightly off balance and disrupting
my sentence. Jack sighed and grabbed my hand. "Come on, let's go and find somewhere to
talk."

I managed to restrain myself from gushing that, with Jack holding my hand, I was
prepared to go absolutely anywhere, and followed him silently. He led me out of the tent,
where night was beginning to properly fall, making the sky and all the objects in view a kind
of deep violet colour, and into one of the secluded areas. We were hidden from view by sweet
smelling shrubbery and lit gently by the little twinkling fairy lights woven through the
branches.

Once in the little clearing, Jack released my hand and I covered my disappointment by
making a show of checking the ground for damp or stones before settling down on the soft
grass, my legs curled beneath me. Jack joined me, sitting close but not close enough to touch,
resting his arms on his drawn up knees.

For a few moments we both let the soft music and the friendly chatter of guests
nearby waft over us and then Jack said, fiddling with a blade of grass, "So, I got the feeling
that that speech in there was somewhat directed at me."

"Somewhat?" I reached over and grabbed the grass stem he was concentrating on and
threw it to the side. "Did you doze off or something? It was all directed at you. Well, I mean,
not the 'congratulations on 25 years together' part," I amended, "but the 'I've discovered the
meaning of love and I want you Jack' stuff? Yeah that was all for you."

Jack continued to stare off into the distance. I shifted uncomfortably, waiting for some
response but didn't like it when it came. "What's changed, Talia?" Not 'Tally' I noticed but
'Talia.' Still it least he didn't call me 'Natalia' then I really would have been in trouble. "When did it suddenly become...convenient?"

"Oh, god." I wished he hadn't brought that up so quickly. I put my face in my hands and groaned. "I can't believe I said that to you. I felt awful saying it."

"It didn't feel all that crash hot hearing it either," Jack said pointedly.

I looked up at him, smarting slightly at his comment. "I am so, so sorry. I don't think I can say enough how sorry I am." I wondered if the number of apologies made in a fortnight affected the sincerity, I hoped not. "But I did have my reasons for being such a bitch," I assured him.

"Yeah?" he didn't sound convinced.

"Yeah, I had this great 'I'll push him away' plan which was supposed to ensure that you were happy. I thought that if we weren't together Matt wouldn't have any reason to hate you and you would be best mates again. On top of that, you were going to feel freed from any obligation you thought you had to me and you would go off to England with a spring in your step and your eyes firmly set on the future."

Jack shook his head slightly in bemusement and I guess it did sound kind of stupid now I'd said it out loud.

"And what were you supposed to be doing while I was skipping merrily off into the sunset?" he asked.

"Me?" I frowned. "I guess I hadn't really thought about me."

Hearing Jack's little chuckle I looked up hopefully but saw he was still not looking at me and that, from what I could see from his expression with his face in profile, his laugh had been relatively mirthless.

"So it was all about me and Matt then?" Well might he sound disbelieving, I guess I'm not really known for my selfless acts.

"Well," I licked my lips awkwardly, "maybe it was self-serving in a way. I mean you really blew away all my worries about physical affection, I can hug with the best of them now, but I guess I'm still working on the whole emotion thing. Perhaps in the back of my mind I was thinking that if I forced you away I could protect myself from getting in too deep."

"And did you?"

I shook my head miserably. "You know the answer to that. It was too late."

Silence fell between us and, if it had been any other situation, I would've been amused by the fact that, because it was a warm evening, there were the sounds of crickets all around us. What a cliché!
"What about kissing Adam? Was that another ploy to ensure my eternal happiness?"

The sarcasm was evident in his voice, but it was tinged with something else. Hurt, I think, with a smidgen of anger mixed in for good measure.

"No, that wasn't a ploy, that was drunken madness," I said with feeling. "I know it sounds weird and unbelievable, but it was kind of an experiment. I felt so comfortable being with you, kissing you, that I wanted to see if that worked with other people too. I guess I was trying to see whether I was doomed to only feel set on fire with someone I’d decided I could never kiss again."

"And?"

"I found out I'm doomed because there was no fire, not even the smallest spark. All I did was embarrass myself and Adam and give myself yet another thing to apologise for. The way I told you was just…" I trailed off unable to really put any words to what had been my desire to get his attention and had ended up yet one more bit of pain I inflicted on Jack.

Again there was a pause as he stared dead ahead, acting as if I wasn't even there, as if I hadn't been beside him spilling my heart out. Honestly, why had he come out here with me if he wasn't going to give me a chance?

I couldn't take it anymore, I couldn't take his distance or how little my words seemed to be affecting him. Getting onto my knees I shuffled round until I was in front of Jack and took his hands in mine.

"Jack, I know it seems like I've done nothing but mess up but I felt like you were trying to tell me something when you said I should figure out what I wanted and go for it. Like I said back there I have figured out what I want and, for now, I'm going to completely ignore what Matt thinks and the awkward position it puts you in and tell you the absolute truth. I want you and this is me going for it. Now if you don't want me anymore then I guess I understand and you should go so I can hang myself with some of these fairy lights in peace, but if you still love me than please, please talk to me!"

He sighed and for a moment there his face looked as haggard and tired as an old man's. "I don't know why I keep letting you do this to me, Talia. I think I have everything sorted out in my head and then you come along and it's all just…crap! I don't think I've had a full nights' sleep since this started."

"Me neither," I said quietly, removing my hands from his and sitting back on my heels. Sure I’d wanted to know what he was thinking, but hearing that I made his life crap wasn't exactly what I’d been after. I looked down, and bit my lip to stop myself letting out a wail of anguish.

"Hey."

"I want you and this is me going for it. Now if you don't want me anymore then I guess I understand and you should go so I can hang myself with some of these fairy lights in peace, but if you still love me than please, please talk to me!"

"Look," he
continued, "I could be bitter about this. I could refuse to talk to you and go off to Cambridge with nothing decided like the wounded party has the right to do, but I can't help but think that that would just be the proverbial shooting in the foot."

"So what are you saying?" I asked cautiously, not wanting to make more of an idiot out of myself than I had already by reading more into his words than he'd intended.

"Ah, what the hell?" He brushed one of my curls back from my face and tucked it behind my ear. "Sleep is overrated anyway. Let's do this."

"You mean…?"

"Tally," he finally let a full smile stretch across his face, "I've tried being with you and I've tried being apart from you; being with you is better. Much better."

I gave a shriek of pure joy and flung myself at him, hearing him laugh warmly as my arms wrapped around him tightly. He obviously hadn't been anticipating the full power of my exuberance, however, as he was knocked off balance by me and we fell backwards together onto the grass.

"Sorry," I giggled, lifting myself up slightly so I could look at him.

"Don't be." He wrapped his arms around me, his hands warm against my back. "I think it's about time you stopped apologising, don't you?"

Forgiveness tastes very sweet indeed! I was worried for a moment that I was going to burst into huge, happy sobs but I managed to swallow my ecstatic tears back down and whisper, "Kiss me Jack."

And so he did.

His lips felt even better than I remembered and my eyes flickered closed in contentment. I could feel his mouth lift up in a smile and mine did the same until we were virtually grinning at each other through our kiss. I didn't remember us ever having kissed with such a bubble of happiness surrounding us. Passion, sure, there had always been tonnes of that, but this seemed freer somehow, more joyous.

As our lips parted and our hands gripped each more tightly, however, the smiles faded replaced by the urgency of desire built up during our lips long absence from one another. I moved my hands to his face, and tilted my head more to the side, trying to get closer still to him. That urge to consume, to meld into one, hit me again and my skin tingled with sparks as one of Jack's hands descended to brush the skin on my thigh where my hem lay. Our angle was somewhat awkward and I wriggled slightly trying to find that place where our bodies just…fit.

Obviously feeling the same, Jack rolled us over in one quick movement so that I lay underneath him, one of his legs pressed between my own, his pelvic bone hard against mine. The fabric of my dress rucked up as I hooked my right leg around his hip and I gasped into Jack's mouth as his fingers dug into the skin this move revealed. My own hands burrowed
underneath his suit jacket and set to work pulling the shirt free of his trousers until I could spread my palms across his muscled back unhindered.

I didn't care that we were only hidden by a thin screen of bushes, I didn't care that I was making little gasping noises that anyone near us would surely have been able to hear, I just didn't care! All I wanted was Jack and my bliss at touching, and being touched by, him again drove all rational thought out of my mind. In a way it was terrifying, this feeling of total surrender, but I guess you know you truly love someone when you are willing to give them that power over you.

"I think they went in there."

As far gone as I was, I was still able to recognise my dad's voice and my eyes flicked open in alarm at how near he sounded. Jack's eyes were open too and decidedly panicked looking.

"Jack?" My mum was clearly standing just on the other side of the bushes concealing us. "Are you having sex with my daughter in there?"

Mortified giggles bubbled up inside me and I buried my head against Jack's shoulder to muffle them.

"No, Mrs D," Jack replied, slight amusement and exasperation mixing with his apparent horror at being caught making out with me.

"Good." Through her brisk tone I thought I could detect some humour in my mother's voice. "Then the pair of you should get out here, we're about to cut the cake."

Cake? Jack and I must have been outside so long we'd missed dinner! Oh well, Jack was doubtless tastier than anything the caterers would have had to offer. There was the distinct sound of two pairs of footsteps walking off and Jack and I stared at each other for a moment, our expressions mirror images of shock and hilarity.

"Damn," Jack whispered before we both burst out laughing. For a minute or so we just clung to each other and shook with mirth, our laughter exorcising the jolt that we'd both received at almost being caught in an extremely compromising position by my parents. Eventually our chuckles subsided and Jack rolled off me and got to his feet before helping me up. I smoothed my dress down as he tucked his shirt back in and straightened his jacket but I knew that, as much as we tried to make ourselves presentable, there would be no concealing what we'd been doing in the bushes. Even if people overlooked the wrinkles and creases in our clothes, not to mention the grass stains, our plump, almost bruised lips and crumpled hair would leave them in no doubt as to what we'd been up to.

Still, I've said it before and I'll say it again, I just didn't care!

I reached up and pushed back some of Jack's hair, using my fingers to try and return the dark strands into some kind of hairstyle, but I was interrupted from my efforts as Jack
wrapped one arm around my waist and gave me a short, fierce kiss. Pulling away he grinned. "I think the hair is a lost cause, let's go get some cake."

Emerging out of the bushes, our arms wrapped around each other, we made our way back into the tent, blinking slightly at the bright light. Mum and Dad were standing in the middle of the marquee with their hands grasping the handle of a knife, hovering above a mammoth pavlova which Tommo's mum had made for the occasion.

"There you are!" My mum shouted, completely shattering any hopes I'd entertained of us entering the room unobtrusively. "Come up here."

The crowd parted to allow Jack and me to move to the centre to join my parents and Matt, who was standing by my father's elbow. I tried to catch his eye to see how he was reacting to Jack's and my very 'couply' appearance, but he was determinedly looking at the cake and I bit back a small sigh.

"Now that the lovebirds have graced us with their presence," my mum was saying, making me cringe back against Jack, "we can get on with our ceremonial cake cutting. Or rather pavlova cutting as it may be. Before we do so, however, I just wanted to say that I love my husband, he is my best friend and the best root I ever had."

"Mum!" Matt and I both moaned in horror at the same time as the crowd erupted into loud cheers and applause. I think the drink must have started flowing pretty freely while Jack and I were outside.

"Thank you, darling." My dad kissed my mum with a loud smacking sound. "You're not so bad yourself."

They made the first cut and then Tommo's mum took over, efficiently dividing the rest of the mammoth egg whites creation and distributing it to those who wanted some. The pavlova recipe was legendary in Bridunna and I had no hesitation accepting a big slab and pouring a stream of raspberry sauce over it. I had just taken a big crumbly bite when Matt appeared, not looking too happy.

"Oi, Whitby, I want a word with you," he snapped irritably, clearly our dishevelled appearance and subsequent good imitation of Siamese twins had not done much for his temper. Jack nodded seriously and unwrapped his arm from around my shoulders.

"I'll be back in a minute," he promised me, leaning down and kissing me on the cheek and I knew that was his way of telling me that, whatever Matt said, he wasn't going to back out of what we had going on.

I nodded to show I understood and appreciated what he was saying, but couldn't reply with my mouth full of Pavlova. I watched anxiously as the boys walked off, both their postures stiff with the 'man swagger' in full display. I hoped they would drop the macho act and just talk to each other, then again what were the odds of that? I was just wondering whether I should set some kind of time limit and go and find them if they didn't return within
it when I felt someone touch my elbow gently. Turning I saw Simone had battled her way through the crowd and was beaming widely with one arm looped through Micky's.

"Looks like things worked out!" She laughed, her eyes sparkling and I nodded excitedly.

"Here, give me that," Micky said gesturing towards the plate of dessert I was holding. I stared at him in surprise and pulled it closer against me protectively.

"Um, no this is mine. Get your own." I barely restrained my voice from being a snap, but there was still a definite edge to it.

He made a big show of rolling his eyes. "I'm not trying to steal your food, I'm offering to hold it while you jump around and squeal. In my limited experience that is usually the move that comes next when chicks get all excited."

"Oh." I felt foolish and kind of surprised at Micky's insight into the female psyche. I mean I'm sure there are plenty of girls out there who can deal with joy in a very repressed, mature way but I didn't know any. I hesitated a moment more before giving Micky the plate and wondered whether this counted as a peace offering. Probably not, I decided, as he sneered at me and snatched my food away.

Still, I couldn't be doing with his filthy attitude right now. Nothing was going to take away the glow of contentment I was feeling; not Matt's bad attitude and certainly not bloody Micky. I grabbed Simone's arms and we bounced up and down and shrieked unabashedly, ignoring the old timers who jumped and looked at us reprovingly.

Giggling, Simone and I released each other and, if it hadn't been for Micky's sullen presence beside us, it would have been exactly like old times. Micky passed my food back and I scarfed it down while Simone told me about what I had missed while I'd been outside with Jack. Once I'd finished and thrown away the empty plate she grabbed me with one hand and Micky with the other and dragged us both into the clear space designated for dancing.

The DJ was playing a mix of cheesy 80's songs and it wasn't long before pretty much everyone was up dancing. I amused myself for a time watching Micky trying not to dance because he was too cool for it whilst secretly desperately wanting to, but I always kept one eye on the place where Jack and Matt had exited the tent.

I was beginning to get sweaty and tired from flinging myself about so much when I finally saw them both returning. I pointed at them to show Simone where I was going and she squeezed my hand quickly to wish me good luck. The two boys were still talking intently as I approached, but as soon as he caught sight of me, Matt closed his mouth and folded his arms.

Arriving beside them I glanced first at Jack to see if I could gauge how the conversation had gone from his expression and then, when I was still in the dark, at my brother. Matt was red in the face and there was a hard set to his jaw.

"So…?" I asked tentatively after several moments of silence.
Matt looked stonily at Jack while he in turn looked levelly back, not as challengingly as Matt but just as strongly. With a disgusted shrug Matt snapped, "You're the best and worst people I would ever pick for the pair of you, you know? Just don't...Jack you know the drill."

And then he stalked off.

"So...how did it go?" I asked in confusion, not sure whether the news was good or bad.

"Well, he didn't punch me again," Jack smiled slightly, "so there's some improvement." Seeing my crestfallen face he gave one of my curls an affectionate little tug and his smile widened. "Hey, he's still pissed off at the way we lied to him but he's getting over it. We have a kind of understanding."

"This is one of those things I just have to let be because it will fall into place naturally, isn't it?" The tone of my voice demonstrated how little I liked those things as I was a born meddler.

"Yep," Jack agreed.

I pondered the strange workings of the male mind (and they say women are confusing!) for a moment and then Jack slung an arm across my shoulders once more, drawing me out of my musings.

"Come on, forget about all the bullshit, we're here to celebrate. Let's dance."

~*~

Three Months Later...

"Am I drunk?" Matt asked stumbling into the flat, his hands full of presents, streamers, balloons and all the other paraphernalia that is usually left over after a party.

Jack and I followed in behind him, our hands just as full, bags hanging from our elbows. "Not especially," I replied dumping a whole heap of the presents I was carting onto the couch. "You're still walking straight."

"Hmph, then I must be so tired I feel drunk," Matt snorted, throwing down his burdens on top of mine. There was an ominous crunching sound and I winced knowing that something had just been broken. "So was I drunk when I organised the leaving do for the night before Jack left?"

I exchanged an amused look with Jack. "I don't know, probably," I replied.

"It was a bad, bad idea, I'm knackered." Matt yawned and stretched. "Ah, what the hell, a good idea is a boring idea anyway. I'm going to bed."

And I watched in astonishment as he stumbled past me and wandered into his bedroom, shutting the door firmly behind him. I'd thought for sure that he would want to stay
up and spend as much time as possible with Jack while he was still here. Did that mean I was supposed to be all mature and go to bed to allow Jack to get his rest before he did his major journey? I sure as hell hoped not.

"Well," Jack's voice pulled me out of my ponderings and I looked round at him questioningly, "he handled that with better subtlety than I would have thought him capable of."

"Meaning?" I asked.

Jack smiled enigmatically and leant past me behind the couch to reappear with a large folded blanket that I hadn't noticed before.

"Come on." He took my hand and led me back out of the flat and into the corridor.

"Where are we going?" I laughed as he began to take the stairs going up at a bit of a run. I trotted obediently behind him for the two flights of stairs until we came to the heavy metal door marked 'Roof Access' and I felt a wide smile stretch across my face.

Jack held the door open for me and, as I stepped past him, I breathed in deeply. It'd been a scorcher of a day and so, despite the sun having set several hours ago, there was still that hum of warmth in the air, that distinctive smell which told you that the next day was going to be just as hot. I loved evenings like this where the clear sky is awash with stars and the slightest breeze brushes past to make sure you don't get too hot.

"I wish the weather had been as nice as this when we had our first kiss," I said, opening my arms to encompass the velvety darkness threaded with silver from the moon and the streetlights. "My hair went everywhere in the wind."

"Did it?" Jack asked with a shrug. "I don't remember, it wasn't your hair that was drawing my attention."

I grinned in return and then slipped off my shoes, delighting in the feel of the warm cement beneath my feet. Who cares how much crud and grime I was probably getting on my soles, not to mention the odd sharp pieces of who knows what? I was too young and the night was too nice to worry about things like dirt or tetanus.

While I was delighting in the balmy weather and drowsy peace of the night, Jack spread out the blanket he'd been carrying on a flat bed of concrete that stuck up about half a metre above the rest of the roof. As he beckoned me over I realised that he'd chosen that spot because it meant we could see over the protective barrier and out across the skyline.

I settled myself down between Jack's knees, my back resting against his chest, and he wrapped his arms securely around me. It was so late there was hardly any noise drifting up to our rooftop and it felt as if we were the only people left in the world.

As I snuggled into Jack, I tried to ignore the painful, throbbing feeling lodged down deep in my chest which had been there since I found out Jack had won the scholarship and which had steadily become harder and more obvious as the weeks had gone by. On this night,
the last one before Jack left me for a year or more, it felt like a huge malignant tumour steadily leaking toxic chemicals out into my body, but I was determined to pay no attention to it. I’d promised myself I would remain positive and happy around Jack, there was no way I was ruining the little time we had left together.

We’d discussed briefly the possibility of me following him to England, but it’d quickly become apparent how impractical that idea was. For one there was the cost; Jack had been provided with accommodation, tuition and even living expenses money and that was the only way he could even consider affording to live over there. There would be no way I could come up with the money for it. The second reason we discounted my going to live with him was that the scholarship was something Jack needed to do on his own, to prove to himself that he could. This combined with the fact that my whole life was in Australia and that I had my own degree to complete put paid to any wonderfully romantic but ridiculously unfeasible ideas of me following my love across the world.

No, we’d decided to leave things as they were and just see what happened. What with emails and cheap international calls it was hardly as if we were going to be out of contact, it was only the physical contact that was going to be severely lacking.

At this thought I lifted one of Jack's hands and brushed my lips across his knuckles, as if to reassure myself that he hadn't left yet, and felt him drop an answering kiss on the top of my head.

"I think this is my cue to say something romantic like: 'while I'm away look at these stars and I'll look at them at the same time and we'll be connected,'" Jack murmured as we both gazed heavenward. "But we'll be in different hemispheres so they won't be the same stars."

"The moon will be the same," I pointed out helpfully. "Maybe you can say something romantic about the moon."

"Maybe," Jack agreed. "But since the moon won't be visible to both of us at the same time that doesn't really seem to work either."

"I guess you could say 'while I'm away look at the moon and I will have been looking at it approximately 12 hours ago and so we'll be connected,'" I suggested and, even though I couldn't see him, I could hear the smile in his voice as he replied,

"Doesn't really have the same ring to it though does it?"

"No," I agreed, "but who needs the bloody cosmic landmarks to stay connected anyway? I'd much rather rely on email and phone calls."

I felt his laugh rumble in his chest and reverberate against my back and savoured it. Over the last few months I’d seen Jack smile and laugh so much more than he used to, perhaps he was just trying to drag all the happiness out of every situation to give himself good memories when he left, but I liked to think it was because being with me made him
happy. That was certainly the case for me. My sometimes seemingly crippling irrationality had kind of faded into the background along with the vast majority of my insecurity about myself. Not that it was all gone, that would be too much to hope for and would definitely take longer than three months, but it was definitely on the wane. I guess security and happiness does that to a person.

"You are the best person in the world, Jack Morgan Whitby," I sighed. "I'm going to miss you so, so much."

"Rubbish, you'll be too busy single-handedly trying to keep Matt under control," Jack replied. "It'll be me that will be missing you."

I tilted my body sideways so I leant back against his left arm and could clearly look up at him. "What did I tell you about telling someone you will or had missed them? There has to be a gap or else it's insincere!"

"Of course," Jack agreed, clearly also thinking back to that time we'd sat in his ute by the beach. "God, that seems so long ago. What lesson were we up to then?"

"Number 3," I said instantly, all those lessons were burnt forever in my memory. "It's so funny how all this started," I continued. "I mean, what if I'd just gone home, eaten a whole block of chocolate on my own and cried myself to sleep like a girl is supposed to do when she breaks up with her boyfriend? Do you think we'd have got together?"

"I don't know." I liked that Jack was telling the truth rather than making up some nonsense about how we were fated to get together. "Probably not before I left, I wouldn't have wanted to start something before going away. Then again, I probably wouldn't have wanted to start anything with you anyway because of Matt. I guess I would've just dealt with a bit of the unrequited stuff."

"Except it would've been requited, you just wouldn't have known it," I pointed out before grinning and adding, "So what you're saying is that it was actually a good idea of mine to bully you into becoming my teacher otherwise this would never have happened! And there was me thinking it had been a stupid idea."

"It was a stupid idea." Jack pulled me around so that my legs went to the side and I was able to more comfortably curl against him. "It was dumb luck that it all turned out okay in the end."

I ran my hands up his chest and then looped them lightly round the back of his neck. "Hmm, Jack it seems to me that you're the one that now has a lot to learn." I kissed him lightly on the underside of his jaw and continued. "That was luck combined with a whole load of sexual chemistry and perhaps a bit of destiny."

"I don't believe in destiny," Jack said, his voice becoming deeper with desire as I continued to run soft kisses across his throat and jaw.
"Me either." I pulled away to look him squarely in the eyes again. "But I believe in you and you believe in me and I think that'll be enough to get us by."

A year was a long, long time. So much could happen in a full twelve months, look at how much havoc and mayhem I'd caused in only two! Still, that’d turned out alright in the end. Could we make it work? We had no idea. But we were going to muddle along and give it a go anyway because, if there was one thing I'd discovered through all this, it's that, in the end, life and love is all just one big educational experience. You just have to be prepared to learn along the way.
Hello Dad,

A lot of time has passed since I've tried this, but some recent events have prompted me into taking another shot at getting in touch with you. I'm sorry you didn't feel you could come to my graduation all those years ago, it was a good day and, despite what you might think, you were missed.

There is so much to cover here, I'm kind of at a loss for where to start. I suppose I'll stick to the basics for now. I know in that email I sent you previously I mentioned that I'd applied to serve my internship at Preston and Wise Architecture. The day after graduation I found out that I got it and I'm now in my fourth year of working with them having been promoted to Assistant Junior Partner. I am the youngest architect they have ever employed in this position and I recently won the Young Australian Architect of the Year Award. I'm not telling you this to brag, but rather because I hope that you will appreciate the hard work and dedication I put in to get where I am. Perhaps in the back of your mind you might even be proud of what your son has accomplished.

I consider my status at work to be a major achievement, but I'm not so arrogant to imagine that I'd have made it on my own. I know you brought me up to think that steps in life should be undertaken alone with only yourself to rely on, but I can't believe that this philosophy has done either you or me any good. I'm not discounting your experiences, I'm just trying to explain my own.

As I said in that email I sent you before, Talia Davenport has been instrumental in my success as I pride myself in being for her. We got together just before I left for England in January 2006. However, although we tried hard to make our relationship work, the distance combined with the opportunity offered to me to study a second year at Cambridge prompted us to decide, towards the end of my first year away, that we should try to just be friends. Yet, on my return to Australia in December 2007, it became apparent that neither of us had been happy with the split and we made the decision to get back together, a decision which I consider to be the best of my life. We rented a flat together the next year sharing with Matt Davenport and his girlfriend, Kristin.
We lived in the university district a further two years until Talia finished her degree and began working at a legal aid agency. The agency takes on cases pro bono for those who can't afford legal representation and Talia loves it there, despite how draining it can be. Her tenacious, occasionally confrontational, nature ensures she often gets what she wants and she's such a formidable opponent in the courtroom it’s often been joked that it's a good thing she decided to use her powers for good instead of evil.

I'm not sure how I've ended up telling you so much about our jobs because the very purpose of this email is to explain how our careers have taken a backseat over the last few months. This is because, in the November of last year, Talia discovered she was pregnant, despite how careful we’d always been. I can't really explain how scared, confused, delighted and overwhelmed we were when we found out. It seemed like such awful timing as Talia had only been working for 10 months, I was still getting myself established at Preston and Wise and we were putting all our savings into buying a house. Still, our relationship was, and is, stable and loving and we knew that we could make a good life for our child even if it was earlier than we’d anticipated.

We had our dark days when it all seemed too much, but from the first scan, a lot of those worries just faded away. This is odd considering that the scan should have increased our worries two-fold, after all we found out that we were having twins.

Two days ago Talia gave birth to your twin granddaughters. Georgie Paulina and Caitlin Elizabeth were born, and continue to be, healthy and they, along with their trooper of a mother, are going to be released from hospital this afternoon. It’s been their birth, more than anything, that has prompted me to attempt contact with you again after all these years. I don't want my daughters to never know their grandfather, or see the property I grew up on.

I can't believe how lucky I've been, my life with Talia has turned out better than I could have ever imagined. My estrangement with you is the one black spot and I'd like to rectify that if I can. Understand that Talia and I aren't asking anything of you, just that you get in touch. If you don't feel you can, I understand, and I just want you to know that, despite everything, I'm happy.

Jack.

~*~

The end.
Other novels by Jessie L. Star:

The Do-Gooder
Private Lives, Public Property
Saving from Monkeys
Lighthouse Charlie

http://www.facebook.com/jessielstar