

RETRIBUTION

BY

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DEDICATION

To all the women out there who have survived, and to those who have yet to find their Prince Charming.

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Chapter One – The Ghost of Evil Past

Hope does funny things to people.

That innocent combination of four letters toppled me from joyful sunshine into jet black oblivion. I knew better. Of course I did.

An entire decade of being pushed and pulled between rays of light and soul consuming darkness had taught me that the bright white light at the end of the tunnel is quickly masked over by the presence of demons.

Yet, the sight of the ruffled red dress hugging my stick-thin figure was something I revelled in. The sleek fabric gliding against my skin made me feel like the treasured princess I often dreamed of being—even if just for a second. Turning from side to side, my reflection beamed back at me, giving me a boost of self-confidence.

“What do you think?” I asked Adam, my partner of ten years, and father to my eight-year-old son.

His dark eyes glazed over with a familiar hardness. He clenched his jaw. Bone scraped against bone. A muscle twitched in his cheek.

In that split second, my joy of the past few weeks being bliss between us popped like an overfull balloon. My moment of ecstasy faded away with the dying sunset, leaving me alone in the eerie land between light and dark.

“I don’t like it,” he said. His clipped tone constricted around my heart like a snake. “The colour doesn’t suit you at all. Unless you want people to think you’re some sort of hooker.”

He lunged towards me.

I whimpered, biting down on my dry, chapped lips. A piece of cracked skin tore free from my bottom lip, making me flinch. Blood swelled to the surface, trickling across my tongue with a metal tinge.

He tweaked his mouth up in amusement. This was all he needed for my new-found confidence to slip back through my hands like grains of sand.

“Things have been so good between us lately, Louisa. Don’t ruin it now.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, licking at my wound. “I’ll change it.”

He gave a curt nod and stepped back towards the doorway. “Trousers and a top will do just fine. A decent top.”

I stared at the floor and nodded.

He walked away, leaving me shouting at myself in my head for the millionth time. How could I have been so stupid? The past few weeks had lulled me into a false sense of security, leaving me thinking that maybe, just maybe, I could start to grasp onto parts of me again. Parts of me that were once so bold, wild, untamed.

But this evening had stamped all over those dreams like a butcher braising meat.

Biting back tears, I peeled the dress from my body, involuntary trembles taking control of me. The sinking disappointment in my gut turned into a ball of churning nerves when the floorboards creaked with his return. I hurried, burying the only colour in my life in the depths of my wardrobe. Never would it see daylight again.

He stepped inside the room, his arms crossed over his chest. Glaring at me with scorn oozing from his entire body, he said, “Where did you get that dress from?”

The anger rolled off him in waves, hitting me with such force a cold sweat broke out all over me. The radiating stare he burned through me made sure I didn't dare challenge his eye contact.

I focused on a flower in the carpet pattern and replied, "Mum bought it for my birthday."

"Your birthday was over six months ago. I've not seen it before." He paused—the effective tactic he knew would stop my racing heart dead. "I'll ask you again—where did it come from?"

"It's been in my wardrobe," I said, taking extra care to keep my voice low and quiet. "I've not had a chance to wear it before now."

"Are you getting at me?" He slammed his hand down on the wooden dressing table behind him. The sharp clap made me jump but I was already shaking my head, desperate to keep him calm. "I ask you to come out with me all the time, Louisa, don't I? But you always turn me down." He leapt forwards and grabbed my arms. "Why is that, hmmm?" He dug his fingernails into my soft flesh.

Tears sprung from nowhere. An act I'd learned made him feel like the 'winner'. "Because I'm boring. I'm sorry."

He was balancing on a knife edge. I knew placating him with recognition of my atrocious behaviour was the best, and least painful, thing to do.

"Good girl." He let out a breath, the rancid smell of rotting food washing over my face. "But we're going to work on that, aren't we?"

Yet again, I gave him the response he wanted, nodding in automation. I needed to pull him back from his unbalanced footing.

"Excellent. Now, get rid of that disgusting dress. Do you understand me?"

I stared at the mole on his big toe whilst trying to stem my flow of tears. "Of course. I'm sorry I upset you."

"Get dressed." He released me, leaving me a shaky, apprehensive mess. "And I mean in something a lady would wear."

I opened my eyes, blinking several times to bring myself back to reality. Staring up at the bright white ceiling, I took a few seconds to regain control of my emotions before sitting up.

"How was that, Louisa?"

The round, smiling face of my therapist, Dr Strawson, eased me back into comfort.

Letting out a slow sigh, I shrugged my shoulders. "Like reliving a nightmare."

She nodded, her short, permed grey hair bouncing forwards. "That's good. It means you're not repressing your memories. As horrible as they may be, burying them in the depths of your mind is just a recipe for future disaster."

I gave a weak smile and wrung my hands together. Looking down at my painfully bitten off nails, I scrutinised them for growth to nag off.

"Louisa—" I glanced up—"attention on me, please. This self-mutilation is all a part of your anxiety and your past. You need to be conscious of when you're doing it and make a concerted effort to stop it. By acknowledging that you are choosing to stop it, you are controlling your thoughts, your emotions, and therefore his hold over you. Do you understand?"

"Yes. It's just something I do when I feel awkward, when I need to distract my thoughts."

“I know, dear. It’s perfectly normal, but we are going to learn some different techniques instead. Some pleasant methods.”

Taking my hands from my mouth, an overwhelming sensation of being bare, naked almost, started to flood me. The silence in the room ticked on. I could feel her pale blue eyes watching me, observing my every movement to ‘study’ me. I glanced around the room, trying to busy my mind.

The large office I’d been visiting twice a week for the past eight weeks had a peaceful feel to it. The leather couch I laid down on today was so comfortable, I wanted it as a bed. Pictures of exotic beaches, beautiful woodlands, and cute animals lined the walls. Books were scattered around on varying shelves, and the fruit bowl on the pine table in front of me was always overflowing with fresh fruit.

“We have twenty minutes left. Do you feel you can cope with a few more minutes of regression?”

Feeling nothing but numb and emotionless, I nodded.

“Adam, please.” My tears fell onto his weathered hand—the hand wrapped around my neck. “There’s nothing going on. I promise you.” He tightened his grip, making my final plea nothing but a breathless gasp of air.

A hug from my boss as we left my works Christmas party. He stood at the door, hugging and thanking everyone as they left. It had all been so innocent. But to Adam, it was something else entirely.

“How dare you. How fucking dare you. After everything I’ve done for you, you ungrateful whore!”

I knew what was coming before he did it. There were patterns in his ire that enabled me to pre-empt when I would be struck, and more often than not, where. Tonight, I’d merely angered him enough to warrant a ‘telling off.’ The dull thud as he connected his shovel sized hand with my eye socket echoed through my brain. The back of my head smashed into the cold bricks behind me. A familiar ache burst through my brow arch, spreading like wild fire down my nose and across my cheek. I guess that settled my make-up choices for the next few days.

The crushing hold on my windpipe made sure I remained silent. Once he crossed the barrier into physical assault, my screams only fuelled his anger further anyway. I’d learned to take my beatings behind a mute iron curtain.

He curled his top lip back in a menacing snarl. He looked nothing short of a rabid wolf. “Nobody touches you unless I say so.”

I nodded, eager to show him I understood, but still taking care to avert his penetrating stare.

“And yet you still allowed it?” He spun around and threw me down on the sofa. “Don’t move.”

My body quivered of its own accord. Ice was creeping across the landscape this evening, but it wasn’t the cold, lacy vines bothering me now. It was the long, bony fingers of Death himself, lingering in the shadows, just waiting to snatch my soul.

Adam returned, a wicked glint lining his dark eyes. With a grin only a psychopath would be proud of, he knelt in front of me. The sinister aura surrounding him was a familiar enemy to me. I knew agony was my dessert this evening. The evil etched into his tanned skin sent

shudders down my spine. Switching my emotions off, I shrouded myself in a torturous tomb of impassivity.

He snatched at my left arm, burning my skin with his agonising seizure. Boring a dead stare into the opposite wall, I waited for my flesh to be sliced, burned, bruised.

But that's not what came.

Dawning horror pushed me free from my crypt of silence. I couldn't believe there were depraved depths of Adam Wilson I still hadn't met.

I could do nothing as he slapped the sickening item on to my soft flesh. The handsome face that had once looked at me with such love and care now gave away nothing but an intense focus and a malicious smile.

A deep, guttural scream pierced the bitter night air. The excruciating, rough grit of sandpaper rubbed up and down the smooth skin of my upper arm. A river of tears drenched my face. Pleas and begs only deepened the gruelling, searing torment. Blood, flesh, and tissue mixed together into a sandy yellow coarseness.

Death smiled at me. The fear of his skeletal fingers finally closing around me was something I now welcomed. I wanted him to pluck my soul from this malevolence. At least then I might find some peace.

Chapter Two – The Ghost of Hopeful Present

Eighteen weeks later...

Where it concerned my love life, and no doubt the love lives of millions of other women, both Hollywood and Walt Disney had a lot to answer for.

Right now, however, Hollywood was doing a mighty fine job of presenting its own option to me. Sat on the other side of my table, licking away at a melting strawberry ice cream, was the one and only Jake Murphy. A-list Hollywood actor, film producer, and general all around rather fine male specimen.

Ruffled, dark blonde hair glinted under the spring sunshine like a sparkling gem. His bright blue eyes twinkled with playfulness, and his rosy red lips were sprinkled with ice cream.

I couldn't help lingering over the baby blue cotton shirt clinging to his broad muscled shoulders. The pale colour highlighted his bronzed skin perfectly, showing off his definition even more.

He'd been sat down for a good couple of minutes, and I had yet to digest the situation. How on earth was someone who I'd watched in several box office hit movies sat opposite me? Regardless, I refused to act like an airhead bimbo. He was after all, still only human. Being a celebrity didn't make him a God. Although, that could be debated.

"Busy place, isn't it?"

His voice was as smooth as his looks. If he was chocolate, he'd be *Galaxy* for sure. Despite my tortured past, being alone for five months had more than awoken the red-blooded woman in me.

"Yes, it's always packed whenever we come here."

The café at my local shopping centre was always heaving with customers. Sharing tables was a common thing if you wanted to sit in. I was still thanking my lucky stars that the only free tables today had been mine, and that of two elderly women who were chatting about the best way to cut carrots.

I'd been halfway through reading *Front Row* magazine when he'd startled me from the latest article about how to keep your man from straying. Now, after the standard awkward silence, and with the page still open on said article, he glanced down at it, and smirked.

"I hope I'm not interrupting your reading?"

My cheeks instantly began to burn up under his mischievous gaze. "I didn't buy it. It was already here when I sat down."

"You know," he said, licking the last of his ice cream off his lips. "It's often said that rapid denial is a sign of guilt."

I laughed, trying to brush away the fact he'd caught me off guard. I cast a final glance at the magazine and pointed to a picture of him at the bottom of the article. "Oh look. There you are."

He chuckled. "There's no shame in reading the paparazzi's finest. Nor appearing to be associated with it. I often surprise myself you know."

I giggled. "I don't know how you deal with it. It'd drive me mental having them follow me around everywhere."

“Ah, there’s the tricks of a good lawyer.” He gave me a cheeky wink. “Tie them up in so many knots, the most they dare do is feature a thumbnail picture at the end of a trashy ‘advice’ column.” He leaned over the table, peering at his small picture. “I ought to have them for that really. Not my best side.”

I burst out laughing. “I’ll email them and inform them that the picture of a so called faithful man isn’t satisfactory.”

He laughed. “Well, if you’re going to try and sell something, at least sell it at its best.”

“Fair point. But I think a lot of people would be happy if their best side looked half as good as that.”

“Camera trickery,” he said, cheekiness oozing from his handsome face. “It’s all about angles and lighting. Besides, you look plenty good enough from all angles to me.”

My temperature shot to boiling in less than a second. A hot blush flooded my face, turning me into a tomato instantly. The sly smile tweaking at the edge of his lips only heightened my sudden embarrassment. I didn’t know where to look or what to say.

Thankfully, before I started picking my nails for something to distract myself with, he changed the subject.

“So, who is the lovely lady and charming young man I am privileged to share a table with?”

“I’m Louisa and this is Harvey,” I said, resting an arm around the shoulders of my young son.

He extended a hand over the table. “Well, you know who I am. This—,” he said, hugging the boy next to him. “—is Lewis.”

I placed my hand in his. My heart hammered inside my chest. He gripped my hand and gave me a firm handshake—a proper man’s handshake. Fuzzy tingles shot up my arm before fizzling through the rest of my body.

“Pleasure to meet you, Louisa,” he said, smiling.

“Likewise.”

“So, what brings you here today?” he asked.

“Easter holidays, left over annual leave, nice weather. Usual.” I took a sip of my lemon iced tea. “What about you? What could possibly bring you to Lincolnshire of all places?”

“Unfortunately, nothing as exciting as vacation time. I’m working on a new film close by but luckily for me, Flo has twisted her ankle and been ordered to rest up all weekend.”

“Flo?”

He chuckled. “Sorry. Flora Childs. She’s the lead actress in the new film I’m working on. She got a bit over zealous in one of her scenes and hurt herself.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Wow, she’s a big name. Is she as much of a diva as they say she is?”

Leaning back in his chair, he gave a deep, hearty laugh. “Now that would be telling. But let’s just say her husband has a lot more patience than I do.”

I couldn’t help but giggle. “So, what’s so special about this part of the world for the film?”

“All the Georgian buildings in the town centre, and the castle on the outskirts of town. It’s a period drama we’re filming so authenticity is rather key.”

Images of him dressed as Mr Darcy sprang to mind. Now that would be a sight to see. Before either of us could continue the conversation, a loud scream pierced the air somewhere behind me. The wooden flooring clumped with the sound of ridiculous shoes as the screamer attempted to run in them.

“Oh my God! Please can I have your autograph? I’m like your biggest fan!”

I looked up to see a young brunette who could have only taken make up tips from a circus. Bright blue eye-shadow was painted all over her eyelids, and her eyebrows resembled black slugs. The vivid red lipstick did nothing to compliment the orange bronzer she would need to chisel off before bedtime. She couldn’t have been much more than nineteen. Her clothing was also something to be desired—she looked like she’d gotten dressed in a hurricane whilst visiting the wardrobe of The Spice Girls.

As she thrust a picture of herself in Jake’s face, she glanced down at me. She curled her top lip back into a sneer, and narrowed her eyes. I folded my arms over my chest and gave her my own unimpressed glare. I’d had a belly full of being intimidated in my short thirty years; I sure as hell wasn’t going to accept any attitude from a snotty nosed, hormonal girl.

Jake, seemingly oblivious to the little showdown going on in front of him, obliged and signed her picture followed by various things from t-shirts to arms of her ‘mini-me’ gang. After what felt like an age, she led her troops away, shooting me a final snooty look as she did so. I flashed her my best smile as I sat back in my chair and smirked. I couldn’t help but wonder how on earth celebrities put up with people like that hounding them constantly. That was something else that would drive me insane.

Unfortunately, after the unwanted interruption, both of the boys were now restless, and playing sword fights with a small drinks menu and the straw I didn’t want from my iced tea. My heart sank a little as this was obviously the closing point of our brief meeting.

“I’d better get Harvey moving,” I said, plucking the bent straw from his hand. “It was lovely to meet you. Best of luck with the films and all.”

I groaned inwardly. Did I really just say that? Bending down, I reached for my handbag, hoping he might not have heard the ridiculous sentence that just left my mouth. I stood up, and checked through my bag, making a fuss over ensuring I had my keys, purse, and anything else that might hide my red face for a few more seconds. Had I really been away from normality and society for that long?

Jake stood up suddenly, his chair screeching against the polished floor. “Are you going home?”

I shook my head, my heart leaping against my ribcage. “Not yet. My aim for today was to wear Harvey out so I could have a relaxing evening.”

He chuckled. “I know that feeling.” A slight shade of pink spread over his cheeks as he ran a hand through his hair. “Would you mind if we joined you?”

My jaw dropped open. Everything inside me, pulse included, froze. Had I heard that correctly? Too stunned to process any answer, let alone the right one, several silent seconds ticked by.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I shouldn’t have even asked. I didn’t mean to encroach on your time with your son.” He offered his hand again, those beautiful blue eyes looking everywhere but at me. “It was lovely to meet you, Louisa.”

Harvey tugged at my arm, snapping me from my daze. “Can we buy a football, please? Then I can play with Lewis in the park. Please?”

Heat ravaged me as I glanced up at Jake. He was watching me, waiting for me to take the lead. The words were there in my mind, wanting to leap out with a scream, but they were lodged in my throat, choking me with insecurity. A wall of tears threatened to build behind my eyes. When was I going to get over this?

Jake gave me a broad, soul-warming smile, relaxing me instantly. “I’m ok with that if you are?” he said.

I nodded, already wondering what we were going to talk about. Harvey was always my distraction, my ‘escape route’ from social situations I felt uncomfortable in. I’d either turn the conversation to him if I could think of nothing to say, or I’d say we needed to go for one reason or another.

Re-focus. Chat was flowing easily before the girls showed up. Take a deep breath, and let it out slowly. Imagine all your worries being pushed out as you exhale...

Patting my jeans pocket, I pulled out the ten pound note I’d gotten as part of my change when I bought mine and Harvey’s drinks. Too flustered at the impatient cashier, and the long line of people behind me, I’d stuffed it, and the rest of the change, in my pocket in a bid to just hurry up.

“Please,” Jake said, shaking his hand at my money. He thrust his hand into his pocket and took out a dark brown leather wallet. “Let me.”

In a split second, my nerves dissolved, irritation sparking inside me instead. Did he think I couldn’t afford to buy a football? Did I really scream destitute damsel in distress? Is this what made me the perfect pickings for Adam? I pushed the thoughts away and swallowed the lump in my throat.

Don’t be defensive. Being defensive indicates you’re being attacked. Sometimes people are just nice, Louisa. Wise words from Dr Strawson.

“Thank you, but I can afford to buy a football.”

He stilled, his mouth open but no words coming out. Lewis jumped at Harvey, who needing no further encouragement, snatched the money from my hand, and dragged his new friend to the nearest sports shop.

“I didn’t mean to offend you,” Jake said, his voice low and hushed.

I smiled, trying my hardest to ignore the creeping doubts trying to infiltrate my mind. I’d been through intensive therapy since leaving Adam. I’d even felt stable enough to step the sessions down to once a week. Was I being too trusting with this guy? Yes, he might be an A-list celebrity, but that didn’t mean he didn’t have dirty little secrets he kept behind closed doors. Wife beating could easily be on that list.

Think positive, and positive will attract itself to you. You are the magnet, Louisa. Repel the negative, and accept the good things in life—the things you deserve.

The one thing that my therapist repeated to me at the beginning and end of each session. After the hell I’d lived through, to not see things negatively had been impossible. Now I’d managed to turn my perceptions around, I wanted to keep a firm hold of them for as long as I possibly could.

“You didn’t offend me,” I said, embarrassment seeping through me. “I just like to pay my own way. Independence thing.” I shrugged my shoulders in the hope he’d take it as a nonchalant comment.

He nodded and slid his wallet back in his dark denim jeans. “Very admirable.”

The sound of running feet, and shouts of joy took our attention. We both turned to see the two boys sprinting towards the park with a new football. Not caring for the other shoppers, they ran straight through the middle of them, heading for the vast green at the end of the complex. Stylish red brick shops came to a peaceful meeting with perfectly landscaped gardens. Complete with a small stream, cute wooden bridge, and dozens of ducks all waddling around looking for their next treat, it was a lovely place to just *be*.

Clattering over the bridge, the boys disappeared into the shallow tree line which edged the huge park just the other side. I came here quite often, and it never failed to amaze me how you could literally step from one world into another in just a few strides.

Jake and I both looked at each other which then resulted in shy laughs. He motioned with his hand for me to go first. I hesitated, unsure of having a stranger behind me, but I knew he was just being a gentleman. My worry ended when we stepped outside and he walked next to me, matching his speed to mine. The urgent need to say something consumed my thoughts. What was I supposed to say? What could I say? As the silence continued, I fought hopelessly with a conversation starter.

We managed to reach the bridge before a second mob of young girls caught sight of Jake and made a beeline straight for him, shrieks and cries of joy filling the air.

Jake looked at me. I smiled and began to retreat over the bridge, happy to leave him to his autographing duties. But then he did something which flipped my world upside down—he reached forwards and grabbed my hand.

It wasn't a violent or aggressive move, but it shocked me still the same. I gasped as he drew me back next to him. At least ten disappointed, scowling teenage girls glared at me.

"Hi, girls," Jake said, flashing them all a dazzling smile. "Would you mind awfully if I have some private time here with my dear friend?"

Several of them stepped back whilst others groaned with displeasure. Of course, eager to please their sexy idol, they all nodded and agreed, resigning themselves to an empty-handed walk back home. My head was still whirring over the sudden contact between us and his terming me a 'dear friend'.

"Thank you," he said. He reached into the breast pocket of his shirt and pulled out a handful of cream coloured cards. "As a way to say sorry for not spending time with you all today, take this card and give this guy a call. Tell him Jake said you can have tickets to my next premiere."

Like children at Christmas, more ear shattering screams filled the air before they all ran off, squealing with delight.

"Quite the people pleaser I see," I said, smirking.

He smiled as he took the lead and walked us over the bridge. "At the end of the day, I'd be nothing without them. I can't deny it doesn't get a bit much some days, but I appreciate every one of them. However, I do have to have a life and I've learned to draw the line over the years."

"Who's the guy they've got to call?" I was curious how the poor chap, whoever he was, would deal with a dozen teenage girls on the phone.

He grinned. "That would be Ray, my PR guy. He loves it."

I raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"He'll have a new number by next week. Won't be the first time. Besides, he likes to feel popular. I'm just being a good friend by pointing more people in his direction."

I giggled, already pitying Ray. As we walked through the gardens, around the pruned bushes, and extravagant stone ornaments, the bright blue sky lit up intensely, as if someone had flicked a 'boil' switch on the sun. For the briefest of moments, I closed my eyes, revelling in hot sunshine, bird songs, echoes of feet kicking footballs, and the sensation of a caring hand wrapped around mine. It was bliss.

Opening my eyes, I realised for the first time ever that what I saw in my mind was actually real; the delightful moment I'd had only a second ago was my reality. Before,

daydreams like that had only ever existed as a comfort, something to distract me from my living nightmare. When I thought back to where I was a year ago, a violent shudder ran down my spine.

“Are you cold?” Jake said, rubbing his thumb over the back of my hand. “I have a jacket in my car if you’d like one.”

“No, I’m good, thank you. Someone walked over my grave.”

He chuckled. “Quite fascinating really, isn’t it—the human body?”

I pondered over his question, and had to agree with him. “Yes, it is, I guess. The things it does, things it can do, things that can happen before it finally gives in.”

Raising an eyebrow at me, he pulled his lips into a thin line. “I didn’t mean on such a morbid point, but yes, you have a point there also.”

“Oh,” I said, my cheeks burning. “Sorry. I just...you know, films and things, and you hear of torture victims living for days without organs, et cetera. I figured that’s what you meant.”

“No, I was referring to your involuntary shudder. Forgetting the old wives’ tale, it’s actually the subconscious release of the stress hormone, adrenaline. It’s usually triggered by some sort of poignant, emotional memory.”

My heart thumped to a dead stop. I was gobsmacked. But exactly at what, I couldn’t quite decide. Was it the fact that he’d picked up on my shudder and my old memories, or was it that such a gorgeous, so far charming, man also had what appeared to be a vast knowledge of in-depth subjects?

I opened my mouth to speak, but found my throat was so dry, I had to swallow several times just to be able to say two measly words. “That’s cool.”

Hearing the shouts of Lewis and Harvey enjoying their game of football, we picked our way through the small copse of trees. Dotted around the edge of the tree line were several picnic tables. Nestling in the shade, Jake gestured towards the nearest empty one, asking if I’d like to sit down. I smiled and followed him over to it, trying to stop the stampeding thoughts of what that conversation had meant.

The sharp crack of a twig snapping came from behind me. I jumped, and gasped for a breath. My heart was racing, coursing adrenaline through me like wildfire.

“It’s alright,” Jake said, chuckling. “It’s just a monkjack.”

I followed his pointed finger with my eyes to see the small deer-like animal meandering through the undergrowth several feet away. Slapping a hand over my heart, I laughed.

“Flipping thing gave me a heart attack,” I said, trying to forget the instant thought that it was Adam coming for me.

Jake chuckled as we sat down on the aged wooden bench. I’d assumed he’d go one side, and me the other, but he sat next to me, keeping a hold of my hand. My heart was in my throat, nervous apprehension tingling through me when I focused on the fact we were touching. It was almost like being back at school and holding hands under the desk, hoping the teacher wouldn’t realise.

Watching the boys for a minute or so in a comfortable silence, it suddenly struck me how simple and innocent everything was for a child. They didn’t care for politics, skin colour, age, deformities, clothes size, or anything else. All that mattered to them was having a good time, being happy. Could I ever look at anyone without prejudice again? Without assuming they would have an ulterior motive, or be a copycat of Adam?

“Have you always lived around here?” Jake asked, breaking my thoughts.

I looked at him, startled by the intensity of the blaze burning in their depths. "Yes," I said. "Born and bred around here, I'm afraid."

"It seems a nice place. I wish I'd grown up somewhere like this instead of the hustle and bustle of London. Quite a different life down there."

I nodded. "Was it hard growing up in the city?"

The corners of his mouth tugged upwards. "It was an evil necessity. If I hadn't, I don't think I'd quite have the life skills today that I really cherish."

I frowned. "Such as?"

He grinned. "The ability to tell people to bugger off. And mean it."

I couldn't help but laugh at his answer. What a thing to say. "Seriously?"

"To an extent," he said, slowly turning serious. "The film industry is a dog eat dog world. So is city life. You have to hold your own, take yourself seriously. After all, if you don't even take yourself seriously, why would someone else?"

I thought over his words. He had a point.

"I've done the whole drugs, drink, and err...other things. If I hadn't done that before I became this 'mega star', I could have easily slipped off the rails and ended up on a path of utter self-destruction. But, I've been there, done it, got the t-shirt. I know the damage it causes, and I have no desire to go back there again."

"In other words, it made you street wise."

He nodded and smiled. "Yes. As a result, I still have money in the bank and not stuffed up my nose or in some stripper's thong."

I giggled. His blasé honesty was surprising. I'd always expected anyone of his status to be full of airs and graces, minding their p's and q's.

"So, what do you do, Louisa?"

The way he emphasised my name sent shudders down my spine. I'd always hated my name, yet I'd never had the heart to change it.

"I'm an accountant for a local food manufacturer. I've been there since I left school, so nearly twelve years now."

"Nice. So, you're how old then exactly?"

I grinned. "Haven't you ever heard its rude to ask a lady her age?"

"I apologise." He held his hands up in a surrender sign. "How old were you when you left school?"

I laughed at his clever tactic. "I was eighteen in the June, started there in the July."

"Nearly thirty then?" He nodded to himself, as if approving something. "When's your birthday?"

"June sixteenth."

"Not far away at all. What have you got planned? Anything special?"

I really did have to laugh at that question. "Hiding under my duvet all day pretending it's not happening."

"It's not that bad, I promise. I'm forty next year. Now that I am worrying about, but that's a secret between me and you." He touched the side of his nose and winked again.

"What did you do for your thirtieth?"

He looked at me with such an intense focus, my breath caught in my throat. Squeezing my hand, he gave me a dazzling smile.

"I tell you what," he said. "I'll answer any question you wish to ask me." I opened my mouth to speak but he raised a hand, stopping me. "On one condition."

I was wary now, expecting something like he wanted a blowjob. "What's that?"
"That you let me take you out for dinner."

DO NOT COPY

Chapter Three – Dreams Can Come True

I managed an excellent impression of a dying goldfish in response to his unexpected question.

“And that means letting me pay,” he said, a quirky smile folding over his features.

“I...but you barely know me,” I said, trying to steady my spinning mind.

“I know. Hence asking you to dinner. I would like to know more about you.”

Before I could say anything, the boys came running over, begging us to join them in their game of football.

Jake checked his watch and sighed. “I’m sorry, Lewis, but we’re going to have to leave. I’ve got to have you back at your mum’s shortly.” Jake looked at me and smiled. “So, was that a yes to dinner?”

My heart skipped several beats as I finally found the voice to accept. Was this really happening? As we stood to leave, he lifted my hand to his mouth and brushed the lightest of kisses over the back of it. Thankfully, the boys had had a race to go and fetch the football, so my audible gasp was heard just between me and Jake.

“Here,” he said, handing me a thick, off white coloured card. An art deco gold border framed the simple black numbers running across the middle of it. No name, nothing. Just the number. “Text me your address. I’ll pick you up at seven. Does that work for you?”

After a few seconds, I tore my eyes from the number emblazoned on the card, and looked at Jake. He was so handsome. Those cheek bones, the sparkling blue eyes, tanned, silky skin—this had to be a dream, surely?

“Yes,” I said, nodding. “That works.”

Now being five minutes to seven, I was pacing up and down in my living room, chewing my nails in anxiety. Mum was upstairs with Harvey, playing Mario Kart on his Wii.

With my stomach churning over in knots, I could do little to calm the doubting thoughts which told me he wouldn’t turn up, it was all just a dream, or worse, a joke. Aside from the fact this was my first date since splitting with Adam, it was also the obvious point of *who* it was.

I’d been through three dress changes, finally settling on a black and white number with an asymmetrical line. It was figure hugging, and still looked new as I’d only worn it once before. Complete with a thick black shawl draped around my shoulders and upper arms, and a pair of black and white strappy sandals, I was satisfied I looked ok to be heading on a date with an A-list movie star.

Panic stricken thoughts about Adam began to creep through my mind as I heard a deep throaty rumble from outside. My heart stopped dead. A fresh sweat broke out all over my body. He was here. He was actually here. I grabbed my perfume, dowsing myself one last time just as his knock echoed around my house.

“Have fun, Lou,” Mum said, almost drowned out by Harvey’s shouts of joy at winning. I smirked to myself, wondering if she’d let him win—he was a sore loser to say the least.

I drew a deep breath and headed for the door. Opening it, I struggled not to voice the 'wow' that wiped my mind blank of all other words. The marvellous man standing before me looked too good to be true. Was he really here for me?

Tailored black trousers hung from his hips, hugging his legs just enough to give definition. A lemon coloured shirt complemented not only the dark trousers and matching jacket, but his sun-kissed skin and fair hair. With just the top few buttons on his shirt undone, it gave the perfect sharp, sexy, casual look.

A broad smile illuminated his face as he looked at me. "Wow. You look absolutely amazing." A slight shade of pink flushed his cheeks as he held a hand out to me, presenting me with a single red rose. "My lady," he said, offering me his other hand.

His playful tone eased my nerves, and the second I placed my hand in his, all my worries seemed to melt away. It was easy to say I was thoroughly swept away in the moment. He lifted my hand to his lips, brushing a light kiss across the back of it. A shot of excitement ran through me, reminding me just how thrilling this part of a relationship could be.

He escorted me to his car—a sleek, black Audi complete with tinted windows. Being the perfect gentleman, he opened the door, waited for me to settle in the seat, and then closed the door. The inside was pristine, like it had just come out of the showroom. It was that clean, I felt out of place being in it.

I dared to glance back at the house and noticed Mum peering out of the window with a stupid grin on her face. All she needed was a yellow sticker saying, 'Neighbourhood Watch'. She hadn't believed me when I'd told her who was taking me out. It was only when I'd sworn on my father's grave that she'd taken me seriously. Well, now she had seen the truth for herself. I grinned as I thought of the fifty questions I'd get in the morning.

Snapping out of my thoughts, I glanced around at Jake, startling as I met his soft gaze lingering on me. He lifted a hand, leaving it to hover in mid-air for a second or two before moving it to the gear-stick.

"You really do look incredible," he said, his voice almost a gentle whisper. The sincerity each word carried matched the soulful depths of his eyes.

"You're starting to creep me out staring at me like that," I said, hoping the joke would lighten the atmosphere.

He smiled and started the engine. "Sorry. You just...wow." He shook his head and started driving, his attention now on the road. "You don't look like the same woman I met earlier."

Feeling at ease around him already, I couldn't help my mouth running away with me. "Charming. Is that your way of saying I looked awful earlier today?" I kept my tone flat and deadpan, making out I was offended.

He glanced over at me, horror written all over his face. "What? No! I meant it as a compliment." Seeing my cheeky smile, he laughed and shook his head before concentrating on the road again. "Do you do that with every compliment you receive?"

I blushed. Compliments were something of a stranger to me. I couldn't remember the last time I'd received one before Jake. Thankfully, he didn't wait for me to respond.

"I was merely pointing out that your day look and your evening look are exceptionally different, which by the way, is a good thing. As are both of your looks."

"Hmmm," I said, giggling. "I suppose that's not a bad way to dig yourself out of a hole. I'll let that one go."

He smirked and shook his head.

"So, where are we going?" I asked, curious where people like him tended to favour.

"It's my favourite restaurant. Their food is delicious. Do you have any allergies or anything I need to tell them about?"

"If they serve anything like snails, frogs legs, or some other peculiar culinary dish, then yes. I'm a vegetarian."

A broad smile spread over his face as he chuckled. "Don't worry; they serve nothing like that. Their most exotic dish is lobster, so you'll be fine. On a personal recommendation, their linguine is fabulous."

"Is it Italian then?"

"More a mix and match of popular dishes from everywhere really. Everything is cooked fresh as well so if you don't want something in your food, or want extra of something, they're very accommodating."

I smiled and nodded. My stomach was beginning to rumble already, but I was a little nervous about eating in a fancy restaurant, let alone with Jake Murphy sat opposite me. A thought then hit me—I couldn't have linguine, or spaghetti, or anything similar. It was hardly the most elegant thing to eat when you were in your own home, let alone in public.

Public. People. Camera's. My gut lurched as the realisation of possibly being photographed dawned on me. I could picture it already—waking up in the morning with my mug shot all over the papers, and Adam banging down the front door, to do goodness knows what. A memory from a few years ago popped into my mind.

Before I'd met Adam, I'd been a life-loving, fun-time girl with the social life to rival any celebrity. Pictures of drunken nights, random people, and fancy-dress costumes were in abundance. Not too long ago, Charlie, my best friend, had found a box of such pictures, and decided to post them on Facebook. I'd known nothing about it until I was dragged out of bed at two am, by my ankles, and strangled to the point of unconsciousness whilst Adam ranted and raved in my face. Even though we weren't together now, I knew he thought he would get back in at some point. If he saw a picture of me with another man...

I closed my eyes, and shuddered.

"We have heated seats if you're cold," Jake said.

His silky voice rippled through my thoughts like a stone skipping across water. "Thanks. Must have just been an old memory or something."

Grinning, he chuckled. "I can be a bit of a nerd sometimes, please forgive me. My random knowledge of odd things like that tends to come out before I can stop it. Too many sleepless nights watching the Discovery channel, or reading various books."

"It's ok," I said, biting back a smile. "We all have our quirks."

"What's yours then?"

"Um, I don't know really. I guess I have a bit of a thing about my books, CDs, and DVDs being in alphabetical order."

"That's OCD," he said, laughing. "Not a quirk."

I blushed. "OCD is quirky."

"Touché."

"Is it big, this restaurant?"

"No. It's very private, small, and quiet. No interruptions."

I smiled back at him, and changed the conversation, probing into how he got into acting, and what life was really like on the other side of the fence. He was detailing me on one of his first auditions in which he had to strip naked when my phone vibrated inside my bag. When it continued vibrating, I realised it was a call, not a text.

"I'm so sorry," I said, opening my clutch bag. "Just need to check if it's Mum or not."
"It's fine, honestly. No need to explain yourself."

Seeing **MUM** flash up on the screen, I instantly thought something had happened to Harvey.

"What's wrong? Are you ok?" I said. No need for pleasantries if something was wrong.

"Yes. Well, no. Kind of." She did one of her dramatic pauses which she always did before delivering some bad piece of news. My heart leapt into my mouth. "Adam's here."

DO NOT COPY

Chapter Four – Sweet and Sour

“He’s asking where you are,” she said. “And he’s demanding to put Harvey to bed.”

I broke out into a cold sweat. My heart was beating so fast, I didn’t think it was humanly possible. I felt like I’d been caught doing something I shouldn’t, even though everything was innocent and we weren’t even together. The roots of his abuse were going to be as hellish as a verruca to remove.

One step at a time, Louisa. Don’t forget the small victories. One brick doesn’t make a wall, but gradually putting lots of bricks together gives you what you need.

I was out with another man. That was a huge step for me. I was living my life, finally, with no one pulling me down, or telling me I can’t do something. He couldn’t do anything right at this minute. I was fine. I refused to let myself think of what could happen when I next saw him.

“This is why I want a dog, Mum. Do you get it now? He wouldn’t even be there right now if he knew I had one.”

“Yes, I get it. I never said I didn’t. It’s just the money aspect, that’s all. Anyway, we’ll talk about that later. What do you want me to say to him?”

“Tell him I’m at Charlie’s or something. And let him put Harvey to bed. No use arguing with him—at least he’ll be gone quicker if you just let him get on with it.”

An exasperated sigh sounded down the phone. “Lou, it’s that laid-back attitude that got you in this mess. You need to start telling him no instead of looking for the easy route all the time.”

I ground my teeth together and bit the inside of my cheek. Deep down, I knew what she was trying to say, but I couldn’t help the defensive part of me wanting to snap back at her for insinuating it was all my fault.

“Is that all you wanted?” I said. “Because you’re making me look very rude right now.”

“Ok, have a good night. See you in the morning.”

I muttered a ‘bye’ and hung up, well aware that Jake probably heard every part of that conversation. Trying to cool the heat racing to my cheeks, I fired off a quick text to Charlie:

Me: If Adam asks, I’m with you tonight. Tell you more in the morning xxx

Her reply was almost instant:

Charlie: Shit, hun. I’ve just seen him in the Chinese. I’m here with Andy. Ring me if you need me xxx

“Everything ok?” Jake said. His brow furrowed together, and his eyes were full of concern.

Stuffing my phone back in my bag, I faked a smile, and nodded. “Just Harvey’s dad turning up unexpectedly. Nothing major.”

“Forgive me if I’m overstepping the mark here, but in my opinion, that is pretty major. I presume I’m correct in assuming you’re not together?”

“Yes. We split up just before Christmas.”

“Sorry to hear that,” he said, pulling his lips into a thin line. “Couldn’t have been very nice for you.”

No, not really, considering I was in hospital after being stabbed, beaten, and tortured. But the silver lining was he moved out. “Shit happens,” I said, shrugging my shoulders.

He glanced over at me, surprise flashing across his face, but he didn't comment on it. "Well, turning up unannounced, especially if you have a visitation order in place, is very frowned upon in court."

"I don't have anything official in place, so he just kinda pops round when he feels like it."

"You know he's not allowed to do that. Not legally. If you have shared custody then it should be an equal split, not him turning up to the family home as and when he feels like it."

I was at a loss for words. I knew what Jake said was right; it was nothing Mum hadn't already said to me already. It was just so...*complicated*. I wanted to fix myself, make sure I was in the right place mentally before I went down official routes. At the moment, placating Adam kept me in one piece, and Harvey still got to see his father. It was a win-win.

"I'm sorry," Jake said, smiling at me. "I tend to be a little...opinionated when it comes to people not doing things as they should. Just tell me to shut up if I do it again."

"It's ok," I said, giggling. "I appreciate an outside view. Thank you."

Thankfully, Jake turned the conversation back to before my mum rang. My unease about the situation at home soon dissolved into nothing. By the time he guided the car down a small one-way street, I was relaxed, hungry, and full of nervous anticipation. He parked the car in the last space available on the cute cobbled street, and switched the engine off.

I reached for the door handle, thinking nothing of letting myself out of the car. When Jake placed his warm hand on my forearm, I jumped.

"I get the whole independence thing, but just indulge me for an evening. Please?"

A grateful shyness crept over me, making me blush. Being treated like a lady with having doors opened and closed, the back of my hand being kissed, the compliments; it was nice. It was like having a spa day—you knew it would be a 'one off' occasion, but that didn't take away the special feeling it delivered in the meantime.

Now reaching for my hand to help me out of the car, I made the mistake of looking up into his handsome face. The bright rays of sunshine dipping behind the sandy bricked houses gave a fantastic glow. With such a stunning backdrop, and such a gorgeous man looking down at me, for a split second, I felt like I was in my own movie. He looked incredible; perfect. Twinkling eyes, succulent pink lips, a lazy, delightful smile, and shadows darkening some of his smooth skin, I was hypnotised.

He kissed the back of my hand, filling me with tingles and desire. I couldn't care less this was a once in a lifetime thing. After everything I'd lived through, I damn well deserved my own Cinderella story, regardless of whether it ended with a happily ever after or not.

I glanced around me, in awe at the quaint, quirky houses lining the road. With crooked roofs, old stonework, and no two houses the same, it was like a part of history meeting Harry Potter.

He pulled me from my amazement by interlacing his warm fingers with mine. "This way," he said, leading us towards a dainty looking town house squished between two old trees.

We approached a dark green door with a brass door handle. I frowned. "Isn't this someone's house?"

He smiled and shook his head. "It was a coaching inn, centuries ago. It's now a hotel and restaurant. I can guarantee you will find nowhere with better food and a more perfect setting."

The heavy door groaned as Jake opened it, the aged black hinges really giving authenticity to its era. As we stepped inside, I was lost in astonishment. Bare wood was

everywhere—floors, ceilings, and walls. A steep, narrow staircase sat to the left, its heights disappearing into the soft glow radiating from several oil lamps. To my right was a small waiting area, two red and gold plush sofas facing a dark wooden table. Intricate black iron candle holders sat on the table, giving an edgy feel to the dusky scene. Directly in front of us was a well-stocked bar with a beaming Chinese man stood behind it.

“Mr Murphy!” he said, rushing out from behind the mahogany bar. “Your table all ready for you.”

“Thank you, Jimmy,” Jake said. “Especially as it was such short notice.”

“Anything for you, Mr Murphy. You long time good customer.”

I struggled not to giggle at his broken English, but admired the respect he obviously held for his customers. He led us towards a doorway next to the bar, and down a fantastic mahogany spiral staircase. I tried my hardest to keep the clunking of my heels as quiet as possible as we descended into what I presumed was a basement.

Soft, soothing music floated through the air along with the sound of clinking cutlery on china. Shadows from candlelight danced on the white walls and the gentle hum of chatter underlined the music. The low hanging ceiling was fabulous with the genuine dark oak beams stretching across its length.

A number of tables were scattered around the large room. Several tables hugged the walls, red velvet partitions curving around them for extra privacy. The only light down here was from the flickering candles, and the bright white lights from the open view of the kitchen. The heavenly smells of cooking food drifting through the air made my stomach grumble.

As we walked in, nearly everyone stopped and watched us make our way to our table. I took a deep breath as we walked across the stone floor, refusing to be submissive under their penetrating stares. Sweat broke out on my palms. The fear of falling over hit me as my heel caught the edge of a raised stone.

Jake wrapped his arm around my waist and gave me a reassuring squeeze. I knew he didn't have a clue what I was feeling or thinking, but I pretended he did. It was a big thing for me to have the attention of people. But I could do this. It was just a few steps to a table.

Leading us to the far corner, Jimmy gave a half bow and said, “Your usual table, Mr Murphy.”

My heart sank a little. I couldn't ignore the pang of jealousy that shot through me despite telling myself not to be silly. I'd felt so special right up until this moment. Now I was picturing him with dozens of blonde bombshells. We sat down and were served two glasses of white wine from a very old looking bottle before being left with the menus.

Jake smelled the wine before tasting it, and took a sip. “Not bad,” he said, motioning for me to try it.

“I don't really drink,” I said, trying to excuse myself from the wine.

“Honestly, just try a sip. You don't need to drink the whole bottle.”

I felt rude to decline again so obliged. As far as my wine tasting went, which went as far as eating grapes, it was quite nice. A soft, fruity tang fizzled across my tongue, leaving a silky trail down my throat as I swallowed.

I smiled and nodded at Jake. “That's really nice. I like it.”

“Good. I'm only having this half a glass as I'm driving, so the rest of the bottle is yours if you want it.”

I smiled and opened up the menu, instantly knowing this place was expensive as there were no prices anywhere. I soon found what I wanted and placed my order with the polite waiter who came to our table a few minutes later.

Once we were left on our own again, he questioned me. "Are you ok? You've been very quiet since we got here."

"Yeah, I'm good, just hungry. I'm not the best person to be around when I'm hungry. Or cold. Or too hot either, actually."

He chuckled. "Ah, but you're ok to be around in general then?"

I giggled, trying my hardest to ignore the slow burn heating through my cheeks. "Do you come here often?"

Taking a sip of his wine, he smiled at me. "Is that what you're really wondering? Or are you wondering how many women I've brought here?"

I froze. My heart lurched inside my chest. The burn in my cheeks began to scorch through my skin. "I...well with Jimmy saying it's your usual table and with where this place is, it just seemed an obvious thing to ask."

A deep chuckle sounded across the table. He winked at me and then said, "Not a bad way to dig yourself out of a hole."

I laughed and put a hand over my chest as I let out a breath. "That was mean."

A cheeky smirk folded over his lips. "To answer your original question, I do come here often, yes. Quite regularly on my own." His smirk disappeared. An intense shadow edged the atmosphere with a serious tone. "I'm not a womaniser. I don't have a different woman every week."

To say I felt uncomfortable was an understatement. I barely knew him, and I felt like I'd made him bare his soul. I opened my mouth to say something, but I didn't know what to say. I'd definitely lost more than a glass slipper in my Cinderella story.

He reached across the table and placed his hand over mine. In a quiet voice, he said, "I haven't been near anyone since Gina and I finished. I've either been too busy or just not interested."

With my pulse racing and my thoughts consumed by his hand on mine, I bit back a tear of self-pity. I only had myself to blame for screwing this one up. Gina Edwards had been Jake's partner for nearly six years. She was an actress who really hit the big time not long after she met Jake. They'd separated around nine months ago due to a 'mutual agreement'.

"I'm sorry," I said, looking down into my lap. "I didn't mean to pry or anything."

He squeezed my hand and stroked his thumb over my skin. Goosebumps began to raise on my arms. "What are you sorry for?" He moved his hand to my chin and tilted my face up. "You haven't done anything wrong."

I thought back over the conversation we'd just had. "But if I hadn't asked how often you come here—"

"If I didn't want this conversation to go the way it has, I would have answered your question with a simple yes or no."

My heart thudded against my ribcage. What was he trying to say? Why had he wanted the conversation to go like this? More importantly, was that classed as manipulation?

No. Don't go there. You're overthinking things again.

Before I could chastise myself any further, my phone buzzed into life. Immediately thinking of Mum and Harvey, I grabbed my bag and fumbled through it.

ADAM

A blast of dread ran through my chest and settled in my feet. I hovered over the answer button but took too long to answer. A patterned streak of panic shot through me as I realised I'd missed a call from him. I let out a breath when I reminded myself I was no longer with him.

"Did you want to answer that?" Jake asked, his blue eyes misting over with curiosity.

"Pardon?" I looked up to see him looking at my phone. "Um, no. It's nothing important." I stuffed my phone back in my bag and ignored it.

An inquisitive expression passed over his face before he changed the subject. "Tell me about your hobbies and things you like to do."

Keeping my attention on his glittering eyes, I eased back into normal chit chat, all thoughts of Adam evaporating like water under the sun. I detailed him on horses which had been a life-long passion. He also learned about my love for thrillers to read, rom-coms and action movies to watch, and my guilty pleasures for music—Taylor Swift.

"What sparked the interest in thrillers to read but not watch?"

I thought over this for a second. "Books draw you in, make you feel each emotion, drag out the suspense, but films are different. With films you get a glimpse of a man looking anxious and then a shot of him grabbing a door handle. In the book you get so much more description; it's like you're there doing it rather than watching it. Does that make any sense?"

He chuckled and nodded. "I understand. What drew you into thrillers in the first place?"

I grinned. "Do you remember the children's books, Goosebumps?"

"Yes," he said, grinning. "Some of those were terrifying."

I nodded. "I know. I still remember some of them because they scared me that much. I never read them in the dark either."

"So who do you read these days?"

"Karin Slaughter, Dean Koontz, James Paterson. I also quite like Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman if I'm feeling a little quirky."

He laughed. "Talk about opposite ends of the scale."

My phone vibrating cut through our talk. Heated embarrassment washed over me. I couldn't turn it off in case Mum needed me, but if he was going to persistently call, I wouldn't have a choice.

Jake motioned his head towards my small clutch bag. "You can answer it, you know. I'm not an ogre who expects all your attention, all of the time."

"Thank you, but it's really ok. It can wait."

He nodded and smiled. As if the universe was trying to prove a point, Jake's phone then sprang into life. Horror flooded me. It couldn't be Adam, could it? No, he'd have no way of getting Jake's number. Besides, he didn't even know who I was with. Despite my attempts to reassure myself, the underlying panic that it might be Adam just wouldn't go away.

Happy place, Louisa. When you feel your thoughts spinning out of control, go to your happy place.

I closed my eyes and there I was. Summer sunshine warming my face, the overwhelming feeling of freedom, the connection between human and horse. Hooves thundered beneath me, the wind whipped at my cheeks and whistled through my ears. Grass and trees became one green blur around me. All that mattered was this incredible feeling like I was flying, and the beautiful horse carrying me to pure joy.

Now feeling more relaxed and in control, I took a deep breath and looked around me with renewed life. Jake looked over at me and mouthed 'Sorry' as he continued to listen to whoever was on the other end of the line. I smiled and took the opportunity to see who had been trying to contact me this time.

Adam: Where are you? I know your mum lied when she said you were with Charlie.

Panic consumed me. I knew the next time I saw him it would not be pleasant. My stubborn, defiant side appeared, telling me it didn't matter; we weren't together, so he could jog on.

"Are you sure you're ok?" Jake asked, snapping his phone shut. "You look very pale all of a sudden."

"Yes," I said, waving my hand nonchalantly. "Just hungry."

He winked at me. "Ah, yes. Best watch what I say, eh?"

I couldn't help but giggle. Thankfully, the starters turned up, which turned the conversation to different foods we both liked. Once we'd finished and the waiter cleared the plates, Jake leaned forwards on the table and clasped his hands together.

"That was Ray on the phone. He was informing me that the promo tour for my latest 'Mafioso' film has been brought forward."

I was a little confused. Why was he telling me this? Not knowing what else to say, I simply said, "Oh."

"It means that instead of having two weeks off after filming here has finished, I'll be going to Paris the next day."

Picturing a sweet romance film in my head, I could see him in the lamp-lit streets of Paris, stars shining above, stroking a woman's cheek as he tells her how much he loves her. Before I lost myself completely, I came out with an even more ridiculous sentence.

"That'll be nice."

A wide grin spread over his face. "Yes, it will be. Paris is a beautiful city. You should check it out sometime."

I smiled. "Maybe one day. We'll see."

He continued grinning to himself like the cat who'd got the cream. Our mains arriving cut through the weird element of our conversation. We chatted through our meal, discovering that both of us like to people watch. Just for fun, we picked a table on the other side of the room with an older gentleman and young lady having dinner, and began swapping ideas on what their story could be. It was so relaxed, such fun, and really refreshing. I hadn't expected him to be like this at all.

After declining dessert and the waiter gently informing us that the kitchen was closing soon, I gobsmailed to see it was nearly eleven o'clock. Jake handed the waiter a card and glanced at me afterwards.

"I know," I said, grinning. "I promised to indulge you for an evening."

Smiling, he reached over and took my left hand. Before I knew what was happening, he'd lifted my hand to his mouth and kissed the back of it twice.

My heart skipped several beats at the simple yet romantic gesture. A small tremble took control of me. I didn't know what was happening, but I knew the feelings this guy flooded over me were becoming addictive.

"I hope that wasn't too bold of me?" he asked, his voice all but a whisper.

Pressing my free hand to one of my cheeks in an attempt to hide my intense blush, I shook my head, smiling.

Lost in a daze of Jake's touch on me, I wasn't paying attention to my shawl; my cover. The next thing I knew, his eyes were widening and he gasped. "Your arms..."

DO NOT COPY

Chapter Five – Glimpses of Before

I struggled to hide my burning cheeks as he caught his first glimpse of my past.

He dropped my hand and hovered both of his over my arms, inches away from touching me. Concern and confusion mixed on his face as he took in the dreadful scars.

“What on earth happened?” he asked.

“Just an old riding accident,” I said, shrugging my shoulders.

His sparkling eyes searched mine for a second or two before he accepted my untruth. Picking my shawl up, he laid it gently around my shoulders, taking care when placing it against my arms, as if it might hurt me.

My heart was racing, thudding against my ribs. A small sweat coated my palms, which when Jake took my hand as we left, made me cringe.

The entire drive home, Jake chatted with me, never leaving a moments silence between us. Wringing my hands together in my lap, I tried my hardest to ignore my paranoia, my fear of an angry Adam storming into my life once again.

I learned a lot about the man next to me, each new fact drawing me in further. When I thought about my appalling behaviour this evening, it stung like a thousand bees because I knew he wouldn't want to see me again.

His favourite place to visit was Thailand because of the stunning scenery that nowhere else on earth offered. His first car had been a questionable shade of brown and so rotten that one day, he literally saw the road beneath his feet. In his younger days, when he'd spent his time drinking and chatting up girls, he'd woken up one morning to find his mates had shaved off his right eyebrow and the left side of his head—that had been the end of his relationship with absinthe.

By the time we arrived at my house, its solid presence looming in the night shadows, I was relaxed to a point where my earlier woes were mere whispers in my mind. But now I had to face the reality of a huge failed date—and I only had myself to blame.

Escorting me from the car to my front door, despite it only being a matter of metres across my driveway, he took my hand.

“I've had a lovely time tonight,” he said. He laid his hands on my upper arms, slowly rubbing them through the softness of my shawl. “I would love to see you again.”

My heart leapt up into my throat, all but stealing my breath. “Really?”

He chuckled and took a step forwards, taking the last of the personal space between us. “Yes, really. That's if you want to see me again?”

His quiet, smooth voice combined with his sincere words raised goosebumps all over me. I shuddered. “Of course. I just...I've been so rude this eve—”

“You haven't been rude at all. We all have lives, issues, problems. Just because you go out on a date, it doesn't suddenly make all of that go away.”

I smiled, albeit weakly. Being this close to someone again, having them say all the right things, it did funny things to my head and my heart. The more I looked into his sparkling eyes, the quicker I was losing my footing.

You will find someone, Louisa. And when you do, you need to learn to trust and give yourself to them freely again.

With a full moon gleaming above us in the clear night sky and the stars twinkling, it was almost my imagined Paris scene, except right outside my front door. But I didn't care; the setting was perfect for him to kiss me a tender goodbye.

He moved a hand towards my face. Half day-dreaming, I wasn't expecting it. Panic grasped me. I jumped backwards, adrenaline pulsing through me. The sudden movement on high heels I'd not worn for years could only spell disaster.

I tumbled backwards, falling against my front door with a heavy thud echoing through my head.

"Jeeze," Jake said, rushing to my side. "Are you ok?"

I nodded, blinking away hot tears of embarrassment and failure. I was never going to get this right. Adam had damaged me well beyond repair.

"Let me see your head," he said, tentatively lifting a hand.

I scrabbled to my feet, using the cool bricks at my side to steady myself. "It's ok, thank you."

Bright blue eyes scanned over me for a few silent seconds. I could see him thinking over things, working it all out. That was something I really couldn't face. Not now.

"I...um, should head inside," I said, putting my hand on the brass door handle.

"Yes, of course." He stepped back, a flash of something I couldn't quite name filtering through his eyes. "Can I call you in the morning?"

Avoiding his eye contact through sheer humiliation, I nodded.

"Hey," he said. He stepped forwards and placed a hand over mine. "Are you sure you're ok?"

"Yes," I said, biting my lip and facing him. "I guess I'll have a headache in the morning." I attempted to laugh, if anything to lighten the atmosphere, but then I failed at that. Creasing my face up in my half-hearted joke pushed my tears over the edge. "Thank you for tonight. I have really enjoyed it."

He interlaced his fingers with mine and carefully peeled my hand from the handle. Glancing up at me, he caught my eye contact, locking me into such an intense moment, I didn't notice him taking my hand to his mouth. It was only when his velvet lips brushed a kiss over the back of my hand that I realised what he'd done.

"I'll call you in the morning," he said, all but whispering. "Goodnight, Louisa."

When his skin left mine, he had me immediately yearning for his touch. Pushing the thought to the back of my mind, I replied, "Night, Jake," and headed to bed.

I wasn't drunk tonight, not after all the antibiotics I'd been on. It still seemed strange to me that seven days ago I'd given birth, yet here I was, no one any the wiser as I sipped at my Malibu.

Adam was distant, almost 'switched off'. I figured it was the stark reality of becoming a dad that had now finally hit him full force. He should have felt what I did—that would have been a wake-up call. His Uncle, who he lived with, had suggested we spend the evening together whilst he watched over Harvey.

After nine months of aches, pains, sickness, and feeling like a beached whale, I didn't need to hear it twice. So here we were, dressed up to the nines in the city of Lincoln, making our way from pub to pub.

"You want another?" the barman asked, pointing at my empty glass.

I giggled and nodded. "Please."

"Sure thing." He turned around, preparing my drink for me. I took a moment to scan the crowded bar for Adam but couldn't see him. "Here you go." Giving me a cheeky wink with his long, dark eyelashes, he said, "Have this one on me."

I smiled and lifted the glass in a toast manner. "Thank you."

"So," he said, putting his palms on the bar and leaning forwards. "What's your story?"

The guy was cute—all tall, dark, and handsome thing going on. From his ripped muscles, he obviously worked out a lot.

"Well," I said, taking a gulp of my drink. "Would you believe me if I told you I'd just had a baby?"

He raised a sooty eyebrow and cast an eye over my short, red dress. "A baby what? You mean you got a puppy or something?"

I laughed and shook my head. "No."

He nodded and smiled. "You definitely don't look like you've just had a baby. How old is..."

"He. He's a week old." A strange sense of pride burst inside my chest. I was a mum to a beautiful baby boy.

"Wow. You look incredible—better than a lot of women who haven't even had kids."

I giggled and downed the rest of my drink. "Thanks."

My nature was flirtatious, it was just who I was, a part of me. Nothing ever meant anything though.

Taking my glass, he refilled it and passed it back to me. "You're the fantasy of a milf if I've ever seen one."

I burst out laughing. "I wonder if I can put that after my name? You know instead of PHD or something, it'll be Louisa Simmons M.I.L.F."

He chuckled and shrugged his shoulders. "Sure, why not? It's a title I'd be proud to have."

Before I could respond, a familiar arm slid around my waist followed by the overpowering scent of Adam's aftershave.

"Leave that," he said. "We're going."

His deadpan face and emotionless tone of voice surprised me. "What? Why?" I checked my watch. "It's only just eleven o'clock."

"I'm tired."

"Well I'm not."

He reached over, took the drink from my hand, and shoved it back at the barman, spilling Malibu and Coke all over the mahogany bar and the poor guys shirt. Grabbing my hand, he dragged me outside to the nearest taxi.

The twenty-minute ride home was silent, leaving me wondering what had crawled up his ass tonight. I stifled a giggle as images of rats flooded my mind. I stared out of the window all the way home, lost in daydreams of my boy.

We pulled up outside our house, a picturesque traditional farmhouse. It was spacious, adorned in history, and I loved it. Adam paid the taxi driver and waited for him to leave. Taking my hand once again, he led me to the front door.

"What was the life or death urgency to leave?" I asked, slightly miffed he'd ruined my night.

He cupped my face in both hands, drawing our faces so close together, our noses were almost touching. I closed my eyes, expecting a tender kiss before a night of untold passion.

"This," he said.

Faster than I could even process, he drew his head back before slamming it into me. A sickening crunch resonated through my head. Agonising pain exploded across my face. White dots blurred my vision and I stumbled backwards, clutching my nose. The warm, red liquid pooling in my hand sobered me up in an instant.

Eyes wide, I glanced at Adam, trying to ignore my entire body shaking. "You...you broke my nose!"

He shoved me out of the doorway, not even flinching as I hit the cold earth. "Not so much of a milf now, are we?"

DO NOT COPY

Chapter Six – When the Past Comes A’ Knockin’

I woke the next morning with a pounding headache, but thankfully, no broken nose to go with it. Dr Strawson had warned me that actively reliving certain instances, especially the more traumatic ones, would result in dreams or nightmares—she made a point of telling me that what I classed them as was purely a matter of perception.

Running my fingers over my nose, I found the slight bump on the bridge of my nose that was my first scar of Adam. I shook my head, hindsight again making me wish I’d left him then. But, at the time, it was justifiable—or so I had told myself.

We were both drunk, still reeling from the reality of becoming parents, and he just got a little overprotective at a guy paying me a compliment. He’d spent the entirety of the next day begging for forgiveness, tears and all, pleading with me that he didn’t know what came over him. He barely remembered doing it.

With raging pregnancy hormones, a strong foundation of a relationship behind us, and the addition of bouncing baby Harvey, a man could be forgiven for one mistake. Like he said, it wasn’t like he’d betrayed me and slept with someone else.

Now I was out the other side, the ridiculousness of my logic still boiled my blood, but when you’re in the middle of it, everything clouded by emotion and reality, it all makes sense. As Dr Strawson keeps reminding me, everything is about perception. It has the ability to turn a living nightmare into a lifelong dream or vice versa.

The clinking of bowls downstairs brought me back to the present moment. Mum and Harvey were obviously up. I grabbed my phone from my bedside cabinet and dared to look at it. I had messages from Adam most days, some nice and trying to win me back, others nasty and reminding me what a dreadful human being I was.

After last night, with me not replying to his text, I dreaded to think of the barrage of abuse he would have sent my silent phone.

00:12 - You still haven’t answered me?

00:27 - Don’t make me come round there!

00:43 - Do NOT ignore me, Louisa. Don’t make me do something I’ll regret.

01:03 - I don’t understand why you do this to us. I’ve never loved anyone like I love you. No one will ever love you like I do. You know we belong together xxxx

01:29 - DON’T SAY I DIDN’T WARN YOU.....BITCH

I swallowed the dry lump lodged in my throat. His typical merry-go-round of confusion still unnerved me. Threats turned to niceties which then evolved into unbridled rage. Throwing my dressing gown on, I padded downstairs, phone in hand.

Mum glanced up at me, smiling. “Morning. Good night?”

I nodded. “Until I woke up to these.” I handed her my phone and gave Harvey a hug. Noticing his giant bowl of Cheerios, I ruffled his hair. “You got enough there?”

His response was to continue shovelling them into his mouth as if someone was about to take them off him. I couldn’t help but smile.

Mum passed my phone back and gave me a sympathetic look. “I’m here for you, Lou, you know that, but you need to help yourself when it comes to him. It’s no use other people stepping in for you—it’s you that needs to stand up to him to make him realise enough is enough.”

I sighed and nodded. “But it’s been five months already. When will he get the message?”

“Sweetie, he had ten years with you, controlling you and Lord knows what else. Five months is a drop in the ocean to him. He’s still in contact, which for him, is more than enough to get you back.”

I snorted. “He’s delusional if he thinks that will ever happen.”

Tilting her head to one side, some of her wavy blonde hair fell from her messy pin-up do. “You of all people must understand delusion.”

I kissed the top of Harvey’s head and said no more on the subject. Mum didn’t know the full extent of my hellish time with Adam. Things had only gotten really bad after Harvey’s birth. Along with the sudden death of my father, post-natal depression, and general daily life, everything had just merged together into a dark, saturating mess.

Just as I was heading back upstairs, Mum called out, “Do you want me to have Harvey for the weekend? Take him back to mine?”

I raised an eyebrow, surprised at her suggestion. “Sure. Might be best seeing as I’ve pressed his buttons again.” I ran my hands over my face and suppressed a groan. “Thank you.”

“No need to thank me,” she said, following me up the stairs. “Hopefully this delightful new chap of yours is the worthy man they make him out to be.”

Rolling my eyes, I folded my arms over my chest and turned to face her. “Have you been on Google again?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “You said I need to keep up to date with current affairs and things.”

“Technology, Mum. I told you to keep up with technology.”

“Exactly. I was practicing my technological skills by navigating through Google.”

I shook my head and disappeared into my bedroom. Mum wasn’t old, but she wasn’t one to embrace change. The only typing equipment she possessed was my gran’s old typewriter, which to be quite frank, looked as if it had come from WWII. She had no mobile phone, still had dial-up internet, and even refused to have a cordless phone.

Over the past few months though, I’d been gradually teaching her the various wonders of modern day advances. As a result, she took the opportunity to ‘surf’ whenever she came to mine, often spending hours trawling through the net.

My phone vibrated in my hand, making me jump.

JAKE flashed up on the screen.

My heart stopped, did a triple flip, and leapt into a hammering rhythm. I couldn’t believe he was actually calling me. I’d honestly thought after last night that he was just being polite and letting me down gently.

“Morning,” I said, trying to ignore the urge to fiddle with something.

“Good morning. How are you feeling? Is your head ok?”

“Nothing some paracetamol won’t fix.”

“Good,” he said. “Have you got any plans for today?”

I sat down on the bed, wondering if this was general chit-chat or whether he was going to ask to see me.

After last night, don’t be daft.

“Actually, no. My mum is taking Harvey to hers for the weekend, so I’m child-free. It feels odd, nice but odd.”

And alone. Don’t forget you’re child free and alone.

The churning in my gut kept nagging at me, wanting me to pay attention, be on alert. I squashed the feeling away.

“Would it...would it be too much if I asked to see you again?”

I balked, my mouth wide open. Had I just heard that right?

“Louisa?”

“Sorry. No, that would be lovely.”

“Great. I’ve just had a shower so I can be with you in about half an hour. Does that work?”

Tingles of excitement fuzzed all the way through me. He was really going to see me again. I tried my hardest not to squeal.

“Yes,” I said, already grabbing my towels and heading for the shower.

We said our goodbyes just as I flicked the shower into life. Mum and Harvey were packing his overnight bag. I quickly filled her in before racing my way through the world’s fastest shower. By the time I got out, her and Harvey were calling out their own farewells as they headed off.

An eerie silence descended over the house. It was a big house to be in on your own and with the current situation, it rather unsettled me. Hurrying to find some respectable clothes, I was just pulling a brush through my hair when I heard a knock at the door.

I all but skipped down the stairs, thinking it odd I hadn’t heard the distinctive grumble of Jake’s car, but it had been exactly half an hour.

I opened the door to find Adam stood there, his brown eyes glazed over in a drunken haze. Hatred oozed from every pore. He was livid.

Without even thinking, I slammed the door shut in his face, locked it and slid the safety chain across. My heart was beating like a mad man in a padded cell. Then came the flood of doubts. If I’d just replied to him last night, humoured him at least, he wouldn’t be here now.

The solid wooden door vibrated from his pounding fists. I ran back, as if the door would bite me.

“Let me in, ya moody cow.”

His slurred speech told me he’d really gone to town with the beer last night. Bearing that in mind, how the hell had he gotten here? I lived at the bottom of a dead-end road—a three-mile-long road.

With two convictions for drink driving already under his belt, it wouldn’t surprise me if he’d driven here, but if he had, Mum would have seen his car and been back in to tell me.

“Lou, I love you. You know I do.” A slap sounded from the door. “Please let me in. I miss you so much.”

I knew now that this wasn’t love. Love is about respect, care, enjoying someone’s company. Trusting that they’ll be there for you no matter what—not dreading every conversation or fearing what will happen when they walk through the door.

“Louuuuuuu, you’re killing me.” A heavy thud sounded against my only barrier. “Pleeeeeeeeease, baby. I need you.”

He carried on for a minute or so, pleading and begging. Then came the violence. He kicked the door, making the letterbox flap open from the force of it. Maybe he wasn’t as drunk as he looked.

Stood in the large entrance hall, quivering like a frightened rabbit, I nearly had a heart attack when he appeared at the window to my left, banging on the glass.

He can’t hurt me. I’m safe. I’m safe. Don’t react. Stay calm.

He stumbled off across my neatly mown grass towards the shed. The door was wide open, gently moving in the slight breeze. I rarely went in there so why was the door open? Had he slept in there last night?

Horror crept over me, a dawning realisation slowly seeping in that I had a serious problem with Adam and his behaviour. I had little faith in the police after each and every charge was dropped due to 'insufficient evidence'. The reality was that his uncle was high up in the Crown Prosecution Service and pulling the necessary strings to keep his nephew squeaky clean and out of prison.

Staring at my phone, I hovered over the number nine key, debating whether this would be classed as an emergency or not. I didn't want to bother the emergency services with my silly domestic things—they had bigger things to tend to than a raging bull of an ex-partner.

A deafening clatter against the glass made me yelp in surprise. As if I wasn't scared enough, terror clenched my heart when I saw what he'd done. He'd thrown a spade at the window which had now left a spider-web crack all the way across the outer pane of glass. One more whack and that would be gone.

Panic spurred me into action. Fumbling with my phone, I knew calling the police was the only card I had to play. All fingers and thumbs, I dropped it in my haste to raise the alarm. Scrabbling around on the floor, I almost cried with relief when I heard the distinct rumble of Jake's car.

My heart raced to triple speeds, first at the thought of Jake, and then at the realisation he was getting a front row seat to my miserable past. I dashed to the door, pressing an eye up against the peephole.

He pulled onto the driveway, all but skidding to a stop. He jumped out of his car, shock flashing across his handsome face as he caught sight of Adam wielding the spade for hit number two.