

# ~ Beginnings ~

by Fingersmith

## Synopsis

'Summer - 1974. Hot, sticky and filled with promise. Days filled with nothing but what my imagination could conjure up - and that could be pretty frightening.'

Lou Turner loves Ashley Richards. Always has ... always will. This is her story ... a story spanning thirty years ... from the innocence of childhood to the bitterness of adulthood.

But can Lou use her beginnings to shape her future?

## *Disclaimer*

Here I am again ... some people would say I'm addicted ... So. Here we go:

The characters do resemble a couple of ladies from a very well known TV show, BUT they are all mine ... eventually. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of those fantastic writers out there who have filled my head with images, stories and fantastic plots for so long. I just hope you get a millionth of the joy I have received from them from reading my story. I would also like to thank all of the people who have supported me with their kind words of encouragement.

Thank you to my beta readers who were fantastic at spotting my many mistakes. Dec and Heike ... you are stars.

***Language:*** English! Definitely in the broadest sense! Be prepared for some good old-fashioned 'effing' and 'jeffing'. My characters are the ones to blame ... they should have their mouths rinsed out with soap and water.

***Violence:*** A little ... that sometimes can get uncomfortable. Especially for the people involved ... tee hee hee.

***Sex:*** Erm ... cough ... yes. It can get a little steamy at times, so if you are under the legal age to read such '*filth*', or live in a place where this is illegal ... I'm sorry (honestly ... look at my face - I'm wracked with sorrow). All you have to do is wait until you are a little older. You could even move. Or both, if the mood takes you.

This story is set in Manchester and Norwich ... not at the same time though. If you find any spelling mistakes please put it down to one of three things. Firstly, I'm English. Secondly, I can't spell. Thirdly, I'm just too lazy. And for crying out loud, don't check my grammar!

Please let me know what you think about this story ... try not to be too harsh, as I am really

sensitive and will probably cry for weeks ... months ... are we talking years here?

***Acknowledgements:*** I have quoted from various texts, especially poetry, and songs throughout this piece. All music quoted has been used without the permission of the artist. This is not an attempt at plagiarism: just a tribute to their great words.

## **Prologue**

I could tell you what has happened. But for you to understand, I need to take you back ... right back. To 1974.

When people talk about the 70s, they will fill your head with free love, drugs and rock and roll. Actually, that sounds pretty good, especially the free love part.

But what I'm going to tell you is initially from the eyes of a six year old - me, funnily enough. I know you want to put this down, but bear with me. We all like to peek into someone else's life - however boring it may be.

So. Let's find our setting.

Are you sitting comfortably?

Then I'll begin ...

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## **Chapter One**

### **1974**

Summer - 1974. Hot, sticky and filled with promise. Days filled with nothing but what my imagination could conjure up - and that could be pretty frightening. Streets were packed with children on school holidays, playing 'tiggy-it' and kerby, and avoiding cars as they raced to retrieve an errant ball. Space hoppers were the new black.

I was six years old. It was Levenshulme. Once an affluent part of Manchester, but now filled with students and ethnic minorities. Old radios blasted '*Shang a Lang*' and '*Puppy Love*' into the street. Mothers bawled at kids climbing the fence to the railway tracks where they would flatten pennies, completely unaware that they could be flattened too.

I loved my childhood. Loved it in a fucked up way. We were poor - dirt poor. I came from a family of five brothers and two sisters, all older than me, and all avoided me like the plague. Except Jo of course. She was sixteen months older than me, and my idol. Her role on this earth was to be my surrogate mother, and to this day she still holds that place. We were like Siamese

twins, but without the shared organs. Even our farts smelt the same. Uncanny or what? But Jo still brags that hers don't smell (they always did, but I tried to ignore it and closed my mouth sharpish). We looked completely different, but relatives still confused us, and my mother had to resort to colour coding to differentiate. Of course we mixed and matched outfits just to be little bleeders, and Jo hid her pink-rimmed National Health glasses at family gatherings as the final straw.

Kids. Gotta love 'em.

Well ... I have told you this much, I might as well introduce the other spawns in my family. Five brothers ... urgh! Every girl's nightmare, and if you met them you would understand why. Patrick, aka Sniffer (which characterises his approach to the opposite sex), is the eldest son. Simon, who is fondly known as Ebenezer (need I say more?), is the second eldest. Brian was the third, and in the words of my mum, 'is such a bloody liar'. He was the one where the doctors after the birth, advised my mother to use birth control in the future.

No such luck. Aiden popped out, much to the disdain of my mother, who initially disowned him. Pity she didn't stick to her guns. But then came the crowning glory. Queen Angie, Queenie, Dammer, Screamer. 'Who is this bundle of fun?' I hear you ask. My big sister, sometimes wonderful ... sometimes a psycho - which I found out the hard way. She was a git to all of us when playing chief babysitter and tyrant, when my mum worked at the nightclub. Over the years our relationship has grown stronger though - probably because now I can protect myself.

The last brother finally came ... what a prize! Alan. Our Adge. Skid mark. Yup ... Skid mark, on account of the very fancy designs in his underpants. David Hockney watch out - abstract (f)art.

Then it was Jo's turn (short for Joanne) - the last but one. She had a myriad of names ... but Bulber and Mazda were the main two. Reason being - her head was uncannily shaped like a light bulb, and it looked like her body was constantly having brilliant ideas.

Now me, I had a fine selection of nicknames. So many in fact I had trouble remembering my real name, which didn't add to my appearance of intelligence. Primarily I was known as Bergans (left outside the butchers of the same name for five hours, and not missed until tea was being dished out) and Chunky (generic name with the rest of the family). I introduced myself as Chunky. Other names sneaked in - Henry the Eighth - no - I wasn't a fat polygamist with syphilis ... or a beard. It was just the way I used to eat, you know, like it was the first morsel that had passed my lips in ages.

But wait. I think I need to go back just a little bit further - you know, complete the picture of the darling child I was. I'll totally understand if you don't want to read anymore, but please believe me - it does get better!

I was born (very David Copperfield-ish - not the magician - the sponging whining fucker Dickens wrote of), in the year of our Lord, Nineteen Hundred and Sixty Eight. To say I was a beautiful baby ... would be a lie. I was very long, very ugly, with a bald head, and eyes like a Lemur. Of course I developed into a fat toddler but still with very large eyes, which, fortunately,

enabled me to see in the dark when the Electricity Company cut us off.

I was the last of the bunch. One look at me and my mother finally cried 'No more!' Years later, she admitted that if the umbilical cord had not been attached, she would have sworn I wasn't hers. Angie loves to recall the day that they brought me home from the hospital. Her job was chief guard, standing at the front door like a bouncer, barring entrance to the neighbours: 'As not to frighten the womenfolk and kids.' This tale is told at every opportunity, usually between hysterical laughter and finger pointing (in my direction - where I would sit ... glowing). She loves to retell it, like the Ancient Mariner, as she feels 'cursed' to regale it over and over again. She even takes on the features of the decrepit old seaman -dribbling accompanying the overexcitement and spitting.

My mother used to bounce me and Jo down the road in a dilapidated pram, (Jo, who was cuddly, beautiful and always had a ready smile), trying to avoid well-wishers in her path. Jo, of course, removed people's attention from my owl-like eyes, but on the occasions she wasn't present, the focus of the admiration went on the pram. I didn't care as long as they left me alone to chew through the plastic mattress at the base. It was bliss on raw gums ... cool, yet satisfying.

I wasn't the bravest of children. I was even scared of a rabbit once. Yes. You read that right - a rabbit. You may think that rabbits can't hurt you, but they can, as I will prove.

There was a woman who lived up the road from us. Weird bugger. Smelt of bleach and cigarettes. Well ... she was a creative soul and a bit of an animal lover - and I mean 'bit'. In her back garden she had erected a majestic centrepiece consisting of soil, broken bricks and bottles. It was beautiful ... in a soily, brokeny bottle and brick kind of way - almost modern art .. and very underrated by the rest of the community

The hutch itself sat pride of place, resembling an Anderson shelter sawn in half and decorated lovingly with chicken wire. I can remember it as if it was yesterday ... it was class. My sister led me up to the monument that proved women should never be given free reign with a drill. (This was the 70s and I can be Politically Incorrect - just this once). All it took was the aid of climbing gear and (in the words of a Blue Peter presenter), 'a responsible adult'.

The ascent began.

Never in my young life had I been so scared. Thoughts flitted through my mind of what terrible monster would be imprisoned in a fortress like that. So, being an idiot, I started to back off, caught my heel in a broken Dandelion and Burdock bottle, fell backwards onto an artistically smashed house brick that was coyly peeping from the middle of the mound ... and gashed my head open.

Of course , the wailing started. Many of the elderly residents thought the Germans were invading, as they had been secretly and quietly preparing for years. Have you ever noticed that children initially cry with no sound? Their mouths stretched to capacity, eyes dry, but not a sound to be heard. Then suddenly a low whine is discernible, culminating into the loudest, most annoying howl audible to mankind (heaven knows how dogs cope), and the waterworks go into

overdrive.

I raced away, vowing silently I would never trust another Blue Peter presenter again, with my hands rising in slow motion up to the cut on my head, needing my mum like I'd never needed her before. All this amidst the initial laughter of the neighbours. Bastards. Concern came later, especially when my family came round to sort out the 'caged monster' and the smelly weird fucker who would allow a child to climb her monument unarmed.

As I said before, Levenshulme was very multicultural - especially of Asian descent. There was an Indian kid who lived down the road, who Jo and I were friends with. One day, his father gave us an onion bahji. We had never seen one of these strange things before. So ... Jo and I played catch with it for a while and then bounced it home. How were we to know that this was a special offering from one culture to another? Just think how offended we would have been if we had given them a Holland's Steak and Kidney pudding and they had played cricket with it. But we were kids ... how were we to know?

Anyway. Jo's best friend, Tina Brace, lived in the road opposite ours. Tina's nickname was the 'Rooter', as most of her playing time was spent rooting through my mum's drawers and the kitchen cupboards. We used to slag her off, but she did come in handy. If we couldn't find anything, Tina always knew where it was and would direct us to it. 'Oh, I noticed that when I was going to the toilet. It's in the Lads' bedroom ... in the cupboard in the far left corner ... second drawer down, right up the back'. She was to be one of many strange friends who would come and go over the years.

I was unfortunate in that I had to share a bedroom with Angie, Jo and the whole Osmond family (especially Donny). This should have mentally scarred me, but it just made me stronger ... and thankfully, when Jo's Cliff Richard obsession kicked in ... I was prepared.

Donny Osmond was Angie's idol. Whatever pop tune rattled forth from between that enormous set of teeth, was like the National anthem for my sister. The whole family had to stand to attention (in absolute silence) for the King of the teenybopper world. When I woke up frightened in the night and couldn't sleep (being a 'whinging little get' as Angie called me), she would try to calm me down with the words 'Donny's laughing at you.'

Right enough he was. Wherever I looked ... he grinned back. Even when I opened the drawers he was flirting with me through the mound of my underwear. God, I hated him ... smarmy bugger - and the rest of his family! I hated *Puppy Love* and bloody *Paper Roses*. I hoped he would get distemper, and someone would pour petrol over Marie's roses ... ending with a delicate kiss with a lighted match.

Before I go on to tell you what happened to me when I was six, I need to tell you how I became the distrustful person I am today. Nothing spectacular - but let's just say a lesson learned, okay? You can be the judge.

Would you be tempted with a free glass of lemonade? Especially if all you usually got was Corporation pop (water), or when your mum was flush ... Vimto? I was. Very.

It was an ordinary evening. Quiet ... for some unexplainable reason. And it all boiled down to my sister ... Jo. She asked me if I would like a drink of the aforementioned lemonade. Of course I did! What sugar-craving child wouldn't? The lemonade, as free gifts usually do, came with a catch. I had to carry her on my back, on all fours like a donkey, for half an hour. I should have guessed that Jo did not have any lemonade ... she did not have any money to buy lemonade ... but I trusted her. She *was* my surrogate mum after all.

On the floor I went, not even four years old and scrabbling around on all fours building up my thirst. I asked intermittently when I was going to receive my well-earned refreshment, only to be told 'Soon. Soon.' Now, looking back, the crooning tone of her voice should have told me something was not right. The innocence of youth, eh?

Eventually, through sheer exhaustion, I rebelled and demanded that I should be paid in full for my services. Jo paid in full ... by the God, she paid in full. The payment of lemonade came in the shape of pee - donated by her - over my back. I can still hear the laughter in her voice as she shrilled 'Enjoy your lemonade, you deserve it!' All I can say is it's a good job that she never promised me chocolate. To this day, she still can't tell me why she did it, just mumbles something about being possessed.

The story doesn't end there I'm afraid. My brother Patrick's latest victim, sorry girlfriend, was staying with us at the time, and every time a police car went past she wanted to play '*Let's Hide Under the Bed*'. Once again - children are so gullible. Nowadays I would be at the bedroom window screaming 'She's here ... in here ... under the bed!' Unfortunately, she had to share the room with me, Jo, Angie, and the Osmonds (all of us in a dilapidated double bed), but when she walked into a puddle of pee, I thought the shit was going to hit the fan. Obviously it was my fault ... and she classed me as a disgusting degenerate (my face said 'uh?'), and promptly stormed off to sleep with my brother. Many years later I realised this was her golden opportunity to get between the sheets with Sniffer, and I wasn't really a freak of nature - still not sure about Jo though.

I know ... I'm going off the point.

Oh ... all right then ...

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I was six years old. It was Levenshulme. And that's where I first spotted Ashley Richards ... or Ash, as she liked to be called ...

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## Chapter Two

Ashley Richards. Even today, when I say her name my whole body smiles.

I can still remember it vividly ... the day she fell into my arms ... fell into my life.

Yes.

Fell.

In our front garden we had a huge tree in the corner ... huge. I used to love climbing up as high as I could to get away from the brood, and even at six years old I could get pretty high. My mum, to this day, doesn't know I used to climb it. I used to sit above her when she would be bellowing out into the streets the litany of names of my siblings, all in rank order, announcing that 'Your bloody tea's on the table!'

Amazing what power you can possess by being just a little higher than everyone else. I felt on top of the world.

Every teatime it was the same. Until one Sunday that is ...

I had climbed one branch higher than usual and was perched there, gloating. Mum had been and gone and I had watched my brothers and sisters trundle in the front door one by one, ready for tea. I had just climbed down when I heard a distinct rustling of leaves coming from overhead.

It was, or so it seemed, a split second later when something landed on me. It was big. It was heavy. It was wriggling like crazy on top of my battered and bruised body.

It was Ash (as I later found out).

Blue eyes wide with shock and panic - and pain .... if my aching backside and stomach was any gauge. Instinctively, my arms wrapped around her, and both our squirming bodies meshed into each other. Black hair tumbled forward and part of it went inside my mouth, an obvious distraction when I was trying to scream.

The more we tried to separate, the more entangled we became. A voice from above me hollered 'Stop!' and like the good girl I was - I did. I lay there completely rigid as the blue-eyed girl systematically pulled herself free, allowing my scrawny arms to flop lifelessly to my sides.

'Are you okay?' Concern was evident. The tears I had felt welling up in my throat - you know the ones we try to swallow but become like footballs - miraculously disappeared. Silently I nodded my head, looking at the now towering girl looming above me. I wasn't okay, but damned if I was going to admit it to her.

She held her hand down towards me to help me up, and for a split second I considered the idea of refusing, but the pains shooting up the cheeks of my arse told me to stop being a martyr and accept.

So I did.

Her hands were cool in comparison to my clammy, dirty ones, and with one deft movement I was on my feet ... I don't think I even had the chance of bending my legs. I staggered forward only to be captured by her once again, my head hitting her in the chest. Jesus ... she was so tall. The feeling I had whilst lying on the ground came back - she still towered above me!

'Sorry about that ...' her eyes flicked to the tree, 'I kind of lost my footing somewhere along the line.' I just stared at her, gob-smacked. I wanted to demand why she had been there in the first place, but nothing would come out. I must have appeared simple ... and I think for those few minutes I was. 'Are you sure you're okay?' A quick nod was all I could muster. Her face took on a concerned look ... and my arse was still throbbing to the tune of the birds singing.

After about a minute of staring at me, she stuck her hand in my direction. 'Ashley Richards. Ern ... or Ash. I just moved down the Avenue about two weeks ago.'

I was just about to answer - my mouth had formed around a word and was ready to let it slip through my gormless lips when 'Bloody hell, Lou. Your tea's on the table. In!' Mum. And she was pissed off. Big style.

I turned back to Ashley and flashed her a smile, 'Got to go. See ya around, yeah?' Her face broke out into an enormous grin and she nodded, her hand still outstretched. Impulsively, I grabbed her hand and pumped up and down like I had seen my mum doing to people she had just met. Those cool fingers clutched at mine for a brief moment before my mum's increasing ire got in the way.

'Inside now, lady. You can speak to your friend tomorrow.'

Another smile lit up my face. A friend. Yup. I liked the sound of that.

Before I had a chance to say anything else, she was gone. And I turned back and wobbled indoors, the cheeks of my arse screaming, but the smile on my face said 'Stuff it. I have a new friend.'

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Sunday night was always nit inspection night. My mum was like a woman possessed when it came to our six legged friends who liked to party in her kids' hair. So Sunday night was known as *'The Treatment'* night.

Every Sunday was the same. Bath. Clean pyjamas. And a thorough grooming, ready for school the next day. Just because we had broken up for school holidays didn't stop the de-lousing regime. Unfortunately. And let me tell you, if you have never had the 'pleasure' of Derbac ... well ... you've been lucky. At least it didn't set in your hair like Suleo.

Anyway, mum would line us up in order of age and douse the louse with the most fouling



smelling lotion ever invented. Even today I prefer dog farts. It wasn't just the lotion - it was the combing. I think the person who invented the comb must have done so with the help of a microscope and evil intention. My hair tangled easily, and having something so fine scraped through was agony. The effect was tearstained cheeks, red rimmed eyes and Christopher Lee hair - the lot of us were like a band of extras in a Hammer House Production.

Over time this regime dwindled down to just Alan, Jo and me, as the others had grown and adamantly refused. And they used to sit ... smugly ... in the front room, when the 'infested trio' would have to stay in the dining room and were only allowed to go in the best room if we stayed away from everyone - especially out of line of draughts from the windows, which would waft the smell around the room. God help us if we sat on the furniture. We could have been hired out on Safaris - elephants would have been stunned at twenty paces.

This Sunday was no different. The agony ... the screaming ... the pleading for mercy. And that was just my brother. He was such a boy sometimes. It was funny ... in retrospect, obviously. Especially watching my mum crack the little critters between her nails when she had caught them in the comb. Word of warning - never struggle with your mother when she is de-lousing you - there is only ever one winner, and it sure isn't you. And ... and this is a biggie ... always be ready to run in case her cig sets your head on fire. No. That's a lie. She always made sure it never went near enough to actually catch alight, properly balancing it on top of the gas fire.

But Alan ... Alan was a mard-arse - always was, and most certainly still is.

It still makes me smile to remember him in the throws of a rain dance, wailing to the gods, informing everyone and everything he hated them ... with all his heart. He was always the main attraction on Sundays ... we could have charged admittance, but we were used to it. Every week the same.

Then the doorknocker went. The insurance man had dropped by for mum's contribution ... and we didn't even have time to hide behind the furniture. Not that we could have got away with it, as Alan was in the midst of his jungle fever. Only now I realise my mum was embarrassed by the smell and the noise. No one else actually paid any attention to what was going on - in a household our size it was very unusual to have quiet time.

All the time the insurance man was there, Alan danced. Every question the man asked my mum had to ask to be repeated because of Alan's rantings. Jo and I just sat on the floor, quietly doing Christopher Lee impressions, but inside laughing our asses off. Alan was a knob head - still is.

I still believe this episode scarred my brother. Mainly because he had the lotion on longer than the thirty minutes - I don't know. All that medication soaking through his scalp, breathing in all those fumes whilst screaming *must* have taken its toll. Definitely the reason why he has never intellectually advanced - or maybe it's because he was always a wanker. Who knows?

After the insurance man had gone, and Alan had been thoroughly dealt with, Jo and I were sent to bed to meet Donny et al. Fucking Osmonds.

It was only after mum had gone back down to give Alan another pasting to stop his crying (go figure) that Jo asked me where I had got my bruises from. Her eyes held concern ... and I knew she must have been worrying about this since bath time, as the bruise started at the base of my spine and curved itself around one cheek. There is no way she wouldn't have noticed it ... although Angie hadn't. She was too busy trying to get us sorted so she could get up the park with her mates.

Donny was smiling at me as I turned to Jo, 'I was standing under the tree ...'

'What have I told you about climbing that tree? I'll tell mum if you go up it again.'

'I didn't fall out of it. Ash did.'

'How on earth can ash cause a bruise like that?' And I started laughing. 'It's not funny, Lou. You'll end up killing yourself or worse.' Nope. I didn't get it either ... killing yourself or worse? Never mind.

'Not ash! Ash!' She looked at me like I was an idiot, 'Ashley ... Ashley Richards from down the Avenue?' Still a vacant look. 'Moved in a couple of weeks ago.' Realisation broke out and I could see it take over the blank expression from earlier.

It was short lived.

'What do you mean Ash fell out of the tree?'

I loved my sister, but sometimes she was too overprotective. It was a full twenty minutes later before she was satisfied I had not been ambushed.

As I snuggled into bed, the big dilapidated double I shared with both Jo and Angie, I smiled to myself.

'I've got a friend.' Then silently wished Donny goodnight.

And I couldn't wait to see what the next day would bring.

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### Chapter Three

It wasn't long before we were firm friends, although Ash was Jo's age. As for Jo ... well ... she wasn't too pleased my affections for her had been split. But being her, she took it on the chin and allowed me some semblance of freedom.

Days were spent in childish adventure. Ash was so much fun, although she barely said a word to anybody else. Mum nicknamed her my 'shadow', as she was always standing quietly behind me

whenever she was in the company of any of my family.

Now, my family were friendly, don't get me wrong. They were just ... big. There were loads of us. The only person Ash hadn't met was my dad. And come to think of it, I hadn't seen him myself for quite a while. He was a long distance lorry driver and spent a lot of time on the road; the time not on the road was spent in the pub.

I remember when I was about four, my mum had got me up in the middle of the night, or so it seemed, to introduce me to him. Years later I realised they had been in the middle of an argument. To put it mildly, my father was a tosser. He didn't give two shits about his family. All he cared about was himself and the pub. I can still remember him sat there in the front room, sunglasses on (at night time) listening to Dean Martin's Everybody Loves Somebody Sometime, and singing really badly.

Mum had ushered both Jo and me into the room and it was like the rabbit incident all over again. Who was this man sat in the chair singing whilst wearing sunglasses? Even to this day I read people's eyes - I don't trust people if I can't see their eyes. I learned that the hard way.

It was only because Jo seemed to know him that I let down my guard.

I wish I hadn't bothered.

Enough about him for now ... you'll hear more about that tosser later.

Ash. I wanted to skip every time I thought of her. She was a lot taller than me even though she was nearly eight (well ... seven and three quarters- eight in October) - but she appeared bigger. Black hair cascaded down her back; her face was slightly tanned through all the outdoor activities we shared. But the most striking thing about her was her eyes. Blue, a light blue, a twinkling blue that captured the sun's rays and made them dance.

It wasn't long before she became the centre of my world. Everything I did I wanted her to be a part of it. Everything I saw I wanted her to see.

We were inseparable. It was fantastic.

Jo backed off from me and spent more time with Tina, telling me I was always welcome to hang about with her anytime. I don't know why, but she didn't really take to Ash ... but at the time I didn't give it much thought.

Summer days were spent in play ... in adventure. Things I had done a thousand times on my own seemed to take on a different meaning when I did them with Ash.

She even showed me how to climb that damned tree properly, although I still had the memory of her plunging down from quite a height.

I trusted her.

Completely.

I fit quite nicely into her family too. She had two brothers, Stephen and Anthony, one older, one younger. Her dad used to torment her, saying it was an Ashley sandwich. I could tell she was their pride and joy.

It was strange to watch her family together. Her parents were so interested in what they all were doing, taking time to chat to them, ask how their day had been. Her mother was a full time mum, always there for them. Her father was a policeman, and he made my brothers nervous - especially Sniffer's girlfriend.

It made me reflect, in my childish way, about my own parents. I loved my mum so much ... she tried as hard as she could to provide for us, considering my dad was AWOL most of the time. Now I'm an adult I fully realise what she had to go through. Eight children and barely two pennies to rub together. No wonder she had to work at a night club to earn enough to clothe and feed us. A man can't support both the pub and his family, and my father preferred to support the local brewery.

Ash's family semi-adopted me. I spent most of my free time there, reading her books - especially loving it when she read to me. This treat sometimes followed us up the tree where we would sit, hidden from view and she would read to me. I had to be careful I didn't relax too much and fall backwards ... again.

Ash, her two brothers and me used to perform Abba's Waterloo in her bedroom. I don't think Stephen and Anthony really wanted to be Benny and Bjorn - but they didn't really have a say in the matter. Ash could be quite forceful when the mood took her.

We practised for days trying to get the moves right, turning our heads at just the right moment. I still haven't got the hang of coordination, but that's beside the point.

When we thought we had perfected it, we put the single on the small box record player and performed our masterpiece to her parents. I followed her every move ... like usual ... and shrilled out 'My my ... At Wa-ter-loo Na-po-le-on did sur-render ...yeh yeh ...' The applause from her parents was deafening ... nearly as bad as our singing.

I felt on top of the world.

Again.

I should have sung the Carpenters.

One of my favourite memories was the day we went to Concroft Park. It was the day I realised Ash was everything I would ever want or need in my life.

It was quite a walk from our house, and we were toting carrier bags full of sandwiches and pop

to eat on our day out. Inside the bags were also two books, Ash's jumper, an old blanket and a ball. It was going to be a good day.

And it was.

The very first thing we did was feed the ducks. We stood there, side by side, looking for all the world like a pair of ragamuffins, not speaking in our task but fully content just ... to just ... be. I think we gave them nearly all our sandwiches but we didn't care.

Swings, slides, roundabouts and reading. In that order. Then, we did it all again, but this time we had a game of catch before we lay back on the grass and just read.

I didn't know how long I had been asleep, I suddenly felt the splodge of rain hit my skin like an ice cube. And again ... and again ... until it was constant. I felt Ash looming above me, her shadow blocking my view, her body sheltering me from the downpour.

'Lou ... come on, Lou. We need to go.' Her voice seemed echoey, distant. The chill from the rain made me shiver. I had only a t-shirt and shorts on and I was freezing. I could see Ash shaking with cold too. Her hand was trembling as it reached down to me, rivulets of water running down the bare flesh.

'We need to get back.' I grabbed her hand and with one deft movement she pulled me to my feet. 'Here.' A jumper was shoved in my direction. My eyes looked into blue, which were clouded with worry. 'Put it on ... you'll catch your death ...'

'But ...'

'But nothing. Put it on ... no arguments.' I watched her as I pulled the jumper over my head, missing the sight of her as the thick red material fell over my eyes. The jumper was barely on my skin before she grabbed my hand and began to pull me along.

Rain lashed against us as we struggled against the downpour. There was no point looking for shelter, as the rain looked as if it would be with us for quite a while.

Ash had the blanket and books (the ball long forgotten) shoved under her arm, her other arm occupied with pulling me along, my short legs struggling to keep up.

We had gone a little way before she pulled me under the bus shelter just outside the park. 'We can't get the bus, Ash, we haven't any money.'

'Shhuuusssshh. We're not getting the bus ... here ... hold these.' She thrust the books into my hands and started fluffing out the blanket. Her face was filled with concentration as she struggled with the chequered cloth, her black hair sticking to the side of her face. I was freezing, and by the looks of her shaking body, so was Ash.

'Come here.' Her voice was quiet, barely a whisper. But I went without question. 'I'm going to try

a stop us getting completely soaked.' I looked up at her, forever in awe of my older friend. She made me feel so protected. I knew she would take care of me whatever happened. 'I'm going to hold the blanket over us. Here ... put your arm round my waist and hold on.'

As soon as I slipped my arm around her, which was quite an effort because of our height difference; we were off, the slick and slippery pavement almost a blur.

Ash was determined we wouldn't get any more wet than we already were. The books I held were becoming soggy and heavy, and my grip tightened about them with grim determination. I wanted to keep my part of the bargain.

It seemed like forever. The rain really held us back, but I didn't feel frightened or worried. The presence of Ash calmed me. The feeling of her guiding me both with her body and the top of her arm made me feel secure ... and, strangely enough, happy.

When we got outside her house I fully expected her to dash in and send me on my way, but no, she insisted she saw me to my front door, with a mumbled 'That's what friends are for.' Secretly, I was pleased.

The front door loomed ahead of us, and I could feel her slowing down. It wasn't until we reached the gate that she stopped. 'Go on ... you get in.' Impulsively, I threw my arms around her neck and planted a kiss on her cheek. I think I surprised her because she dropped the blanket to her shoulders and looked me squarely in the face. 'What was that for?' Her voice was quiet, but I heard every word as if it has been shouted.

'For taking care of me.'

'Don't be daft.' But I could see she felt pleased with my words. 'Go on ... get gone.' And she planted a little kiss on my forehead, before she gave me a gentle shove.

I raced towards the door and hammered the knocker, turning to face Ash whilst I waited for someone to let me in.

The image of her standing there will forever be etched into my mind. Rain pummelled down on her, but she just stood there, staring right back at me. Her hair was a tangled mess of wetness, clinging to the side of her face, her fringe dripping water into her eyes. The pale cream t-shirt was like a second skin, transparent and heavy. Rivulets of water raced down her legs and collected at the tops of her ankle socks. Splodges of dirt coated her calves and knees, but they were beginning to become washed away.

'Bloody hell, Lou! You're pissed wet through!' Mum's voice broke through my thoughts, and I turned to face her. 'Get in and get those clothes off before you catch your death.'

Ash's jumper! I still had it on. I turned to speak to her but she was on her way out the gate, the blanket covering her shoulders. 'Ash!' She stopped, and turned towards me, a question in her eyes. 'Your jumper!'

'Keep it ... I'll get it later.' Her face broke out into a dazzling smile and I forgot about the rain, forgot about the jumper, forgot how cold I was. That smile lit up everything and made me feel warm inside.

'Come on, Lou ... in!'

'Laters, Ash.'

'Laters.' And she was gone. Racing through puddles, water splashing up her legs, the blanket billowing out as only soaked blankets could do.

But there wasn't going to be any 'Laters'. 'Laters' had to wait for another ten years.

My father made sure of that.

Bastard.

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## **Chapter Four**

After a hot bath, shared with Jo of course, it was tea and an early night. I felt so happy going to sleep, but the happiness didn't last long.

Voices woke me. Not gentle voices ... by any stretch of the imagination. These voices were raised in argument, words spewing forth that no child should ever hear.

It was my parents.

Funny thing is, even though my mum and dad didn't get along as well as other parents, they rarely argued. So, this was a surprise to say the least.

Honestly speaking though, surprise was the last emotion I was feeling at the time.

Fear was top of the list.

'You all right, Lou?' Jo's voice filtered through the darkness, a small hand came and landed on the top of my arm, stroking up and down.

The shouting was getting closer, the anger more evident. I could feel the tears welling up and slipping from my eyes. I began to shake - couldn't stop it - I was scared and confused. I could hear Jo trying to comfort me, but I could hear the fear in her voice also. This must be bad if she was scared.

Raised voices were right outside our door now, the words clear to everyone.

We were leaving. Tonight. Mum had obviously found out about all the affairs my father had been having, and the child his girlfriend from Scotland was carrying.

Only later did I understand the full concept of these revelations. Only later did I overhear my mum telling one of her sisters of a letter she had found, addressed to her, in his work bag. A letter from a seventeen year old girl who was three and a half months pregnant. Only later did I fully understand this man was a total wanker, although I'd always had my suspicions.

Even Donny didn't seem to be laughing now.

Light blinded me as the door flew back and my mum came into the room with a roll of black bags.

'Come on girls. Get yourselves up. We're going on a trip.' She tried to keep her voice cheerful, but we knew this trip wasn't to Butlins. 'Here...' She passed us a couple of bags she had torn off, 'pack as many clothes as you can into these ... Angie's too.'

'Over my dead body!' My father bellowed.

'It can be arranged.' Her voice was a growl, and even my father slunk back, knowing that she would rip his head off if he as much as made a move in our direction.

Not that he would have put himself on the line like that. He was neither brave, nor did he give a damn. His kids and family meant nothing to him. He had proved that with his inability to give two shits about anyone but himself.

My body was shaking. My small hands were grabbing everything and anything, randomly shoving clothes haphazardly. Jo was crouched next to me, tears trickling down her face as she slowly placed each item carefully into the sack.

My world was falling apart ... falling apart ... falling apart. Each refrain mimicked the action of my hands, as they silently packed the few belongings we owned into shiny black plastic. Every muscle seemed to vibrate through me ... panic and fear vying for dominance ...

Until it struck me ...

Ash.

When could I see Ash?

Could I say goodbye to her?

I didn't want to say goodbye ... a noise danced in my throat ... a wail waiting to be released into the silent room. I didn't want to leave Ash ... she was my friend ... I didn't want to leave.



Tremors shook through me, the wail winning out, the tears flowing freely now. I brought my hand to my face to smear the tears across my cheeks, my nose bunging up, breathing becoming difficult.

'Come on sweetheart. It'll be all right.' Mum was crouching next to me, trying to get me to calm down, her loving hands on my shoulders, quickly rubbing the knotted muscles. 'We'll still be together ...'

Instead of calming me, this thought just made me cry even harder. Loving hands slipped underneath my armpits and I felt myself being lifted into the familiar scent of my mum. 'Shush there, sweetheart ... I've got you.'

It was ages before she let me go. She rocked me back and forth, stroking up and down my spine. Jo stood silently next to us both, her hand tangling through my hair.

That's just like my sister. She must have been feeling just as scared as me, but she still rose above it and worried about me first. That is why I love her as much as I do.

An hour later saw us in the back of a black cab. Mum, Angie, Alan, Jo and me ... five bin bags and not much else. We looked a sorry sight. The rest of the lads decided to stay with their father - their father, as he was no longer mine ... and I doubt he ever was - although biologically I could never escape that fact.

I can still remember the taxi driver reversing into Ash's road, and my eyes staring up to the dark window of her room. I wanted to wake her up ... tell her that whatever happened she was still my friend and I loved her.

But as the taxi pulled away, I felt a part of me stay there in Levenshulme. I just hoped that Ash would find it and know I didn't want to go ... didn't want to leave her.

I had to take some comfort from the knowledge that no matter how long it took ... I would find her again.

That was a promise.

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## **Chapter Five**

1984 - Ten years later ...

Loads of things had happened in those ten years. Too many to go into any detail, but the main thing was, I never had the opportunity to see Ash again. Never had the chance to say goodbye.

Every time it rained I thought about her. I know ... weird. Even to this day, as soon as it rains

heavily, I still have the image of her standing there, drenched to the skin, hair and body soaking wet, smiling at me, even though she was freezing cold.

I still have those books from that day. They still look like concertinas, all bevelled and ruined. The pages barely separate and they look tired and old. I keep them wrapped up in a bright red jumper. Her bright red jumper. They were the only things I had of hers and there was no way I would part with them.

Ever.

After my mum left my dad, I found out she had actually been seeing someone else. It was funny in a way, because I had met him on more than one occasion. He worked with my mum at the nightclub - he was the head chef, so I had never thought it was weird when my mum had taken me and Jo around to his flat to meet him.

To tell the truth, I thought he was wonderful. He always had time to chat, always took an interest in what we were doing, and in retrospect I realised he thought the absolute world of my mum. It was good for the soul to see her so happy. Years had been wasted with a man who had told her nobody else would ever give her a second look, but now she was with a man who thought the sun rose and fell because she was on the earth.

Those ten years were not easy, by any stretch of the imagination. My dad had great joy divorcing my mum on the grounds of adultery. All his philandering meant nothing to him, and he glorified in his statement that he would never forgive her for leaving him ... 'for another man at that.' He failed to recognise his own shortcomings - the affairs, the lies, the fact he got a girl who was a year older than his daughter pregnant, believing it was his right to do all these things.

My brothers were on his side, following steadily in his footsteps as womanisers and drunks. All except Alan, and as soon as he was old enough he was off to join the gang. I told you he was an idiot didn't I?

Angie had married a man who looked like Brains from Thunderbirds, although most of the time he reminded me more of Joe 90. Four of my brothers got married and then three of them got divorced. They were definitely like their father. Actually Aiden was remarried ... and wifey number two was getting sick and tired of his absences ... and I don't mean the times he spent in nick either. I doubt they will ever learn.

At sixteen I left school and started college to do my A levels.

And that is when I saw her again.

Ash.

My Ash. In the flesh. Bigger, taller, darker, and absolutely positively the most gorgeous creature on the planet.

I hadn't been enrolled very long, and was still trying to find my way around Stockport College, when I saw her. Don't get me wrong here. I didn't look at her and say to myself 'Oh look! That's Ash.' It was more embarrassing than that.

A lot more.

Being a 'newbie' we were constantly the butt of everybody's jokes. When we asked for directions we were sent the opposite way; we were told stories about teachers to make us wary of the staff. They took the piss out of us constantly, but that was to be expected. All in all, it worked out fine.

Until the incident.

I still cringe about it to this day, but realise if it hadn't happened I would never had met Ash again.

I had been at college for two weeks, and had made a few friends who insisted I went along to the karaoke night at the student union. As you well know, I couldn't hold a note (still can't), but I'd agreed, on the understanding I would not be getting up there and making a fool of myself.

Big mistake.

I should have stayed home and washed my hair ... watched telly ... read a book. Even studied.

But no. Karaoke night it was.

My friends were there, all cramped around a table with some older students, laughing and fitting in well. I bought a coke from the bar and joined them. They seemed like a nice bunch, although slightly pissed already and it was only eight o'clock.

As the night wore on, more people were getting up the nerve to sing. Not me. I just sat there and sipped my drink, laughed in all the right places, and chatted mainly with Mandy, a girl who was in my A level Sociology course, and at who's house I would be staying over at that night.

I felt quite relaxed, and I think it had something to do with what Ray, an older Art student, kept slipping in my drink. He thought he was being sly about it, but he was too pissed to realise he was being obvious.

Then came the joints. I had never even smoked a cigarette, never mind a joint, but hey - it was college, and everyone else was doing it.

Another ... big ... mistake.

I swear, I only had a couple of drags ... honestly your honour ... just the two. But it felt like I had smoked ten. And that's how I found myself on the stage, in the student's union, singing 'Waterloo'. Fuck.

And then ...

Double fuck.

The lights in the place were blinding. The smoke in the air was making my throat dry up even more than it was already, but for some strange reason I didn't care. I was waving my arm above my head and croaking out the jumbled words to Abba's winning song. I was killing it ... slaughtering the poor song ... hanging it up and slitting its metaphorical throat.

About a third of the way through, I felt someone come behind me on the stage and begin to sing with me. I was overjoyed, and not a little zealous, to thank this person for becoming part of my act. I turned and stumbled into something warm and tall. I knew it was female because my face was pressed into some very impressive breasts. A laugh escaped as I stumbled back and looked up into ...pale ... blue ... eyes.

I froze.

The eyes had me.

The rabbit incident happened all over again. I don't know why I stepped away, maybe it was to focus my attention on the whole package, and not just those blue eyes gazing intently into my own.

Now this was the biggest mistake of them all. I know ... drinking alcohol as a minor, smoking pot, murdering an Abba song - they were mistakes, kind of ... but stepping back ... stepping backwards on a tiny stage and not paying attention ...

That's the show stealer.

I landed squarely on top of a table full of empty glasses, surrounded by amorous young men, ready for a woman to drop into their lives. Plastic glasses flew in all directions, my arse hitting the edge with enough velocity to tip the table forward and enable me to slide gracefully to the ground.

The music stopped. The room was silent for what seemed like an age. And then the laughter began. Raucous laughter that ricocheted off the walls and pounded in my befuddled ears. The room began to spin - not a good sign, especially because my stomach began to spin with it.

A concerned face hovered in front of me, and I struggled to control my wandering eyeballs, which decided to move on their own volition about the sockets.

They landed on blue eyes, twinkling blue eyes that captured me in a tractor beam gaze. I was transfixed. My body ceased to squirm, my eyeballs decided to behave and focus on this vision in front of me.

'Lou?' That voice. So familiar, yet so different. 'It is you, isn't it?' I couldn't answer ... I was

struck mute by the situation, the alcohol, the pot, and her eyes. 'Louise Turner? It's you, isn't it?' Her hand came out and stroked my cheek, my eyes fluttering closed.

'Ash.' The word parted my lips in a gesture of hope. I couldn't believe it was her ... couldn't believe after all these years she would just pop into my world again.

'Yup ... in the flesh.' I opened one eye to focus on her, taking in her classic beauty again. My reaction to this vision was one I bet many of you have experienced at one time or another.

I threw up.

All over her.

In a bar full of people.

And then I threw up again.

I told you it was embarrassing, didn't I?

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## **Chapter Six**

Grey dawn peeked through the window and nearly blinded me. My eyes felt like red hot coals in snow. Not good.

The taste in my mouth was indescribable, as all the flavours that had spewed forth the previous night came back to haunt me. And I mean spewed ...

The bed I was in was big ... and not my own. And even in my state, I knew I wasn't alone. Shit. What had I done last night?

I tried to think ... but my brain was AWOL ... and the empty space where it should have been sitting was occupied by a full out drum section.

Mandy's. I was at Mandy's. It must be Mandy's bed I was curled up in, and that must be Mandy who is spooning up the back of me with her arm draped over my belly.

Just a minute ... spooning the back of me? With her arm around my middle?

A quick look under the covers told me I was undressed ... a t-shirt that obviously wasn't one of my own was covering my top half, but the bottom half was ... gulp ... naked. Shit ... again. What had I done last night?

Tentatively I turned around, fully expecting to see Mandy's ruffled brown hair on the pillow behind me.

But I was wrong ... oh, so wrong. The sight that greeted me was like a blast from the past. Long black hair cascaded over the pillow, a fine chiselled face angelic in sleep, the nose straight and perfect.

Older, yet still flawless.

Ashley Richards.

My eyes shot open at this revelation. I was half-naked in bed with Ashley Richards. Ash. My Ash. *The* Ash I hadn't seen for over ten years. And here I was, hung over, with the taste of dead kittens lingering around in my mouth. Shit ... big time.

To say I was embarrassed would be redundant, as images of me puking over her the previous night came gallivanting back into my mind. Not sick on her once ... but twice! How was I going to get away with that one? I wanted to get up, dress, and run. My wild eyes scanned the room, looking for my jeans and top from the previous night.

They weren't anywhere. Fuck.

The idea of going home with just the t-shirt on actually became an option at one point. But could I really do with all the stares on the bus? Well ...

'Morning, Lou.'

Too late! I took too long! I was caught now. Oh crap. I resigned myself to the situation, albeit unwillingly, and said the only thing that popped in my mind.

'Can I borrow a toothbrush?' Sweet, eh? I hadn't seen her for ten years and all I could manage to do was throw up all over her and then ask to borrow a toothbrush.

Her face broke out into an all out grin, white teeth shining in the morning's growing light. She threw her arms above her head, and I felt the loss of the contact immediately. She stretched, making a little mewling noise as she did so. 'Sure ... I'll just show you where the bathroom is and get you a toothbrush.' That smile again. 'I bet your mouth feels like crap, doesn't it?'

Could I go any redder? Nope. Not unless you dipped my head in ketchup.

'Come on then ... I'll show you.' With that, she leapt out of bed, exposing miles of naked legs. Did I say I couldn't go any redder?

I lied.

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I spent ages in the bathroom. Ash had told me to grab a shower if I wanted one, and by one quick

sniff of my skin, I decided she hadn't asked out of politeness.

The water was like a gift from the gods - cool on my over heated skin, the throbbing of the brass band in my head was calming to a dull roar. Minty toothpaste tried its very best to decompose the lingering tastes in my mouth ... and eventually I calmed it down enough to feel a little more confident about speaking to people.

I had been in the bathroom for a good forty minutes before I realised I was at Ash's house. I knew I was at Ash's house, what I meant to say was *Ash's* house - from when we were kids. I couldn't believe it. After all these years she was still in the same place where I had left her. I also couldn't believe I hadn't noticed where I was before that.

Blame the hangover.

A sense of sadness washed over me. Why hadn't I written to her? I had missed her so much in those ten years - I could have dropped her a note to tell her what had happened. I honestly can't tell you why I didn't ... I felt so stupid ... so shallow. The only excuse I could think of was that I had been only six at the time, and by the time I could have written to her, tried to find her or made some effort to try to contact her again, too much time had passed.

I wasn't even sure she'd remember me.

What must Ash think of me? What must she have thought when I just disappeared off the face of the earth one night and never even contacted her ... when she lived at the same fucking address she always had?

The sadness flopped into my gut, stopping the churning of misspent youth, and weighing heavily on my conscience. I sat on the toilet seat and put my head in my hands, trying to find some semblance of reason in my fucked up mind.

Then it dawned on me. Like a lightning bolt from the subconscious. Why hadn't she tried to find me? Unreasonable, I know, but anything to pass the buck.

I leaned back against the cool wood of the toilet seat and sucked in a breath. What was the point of going over past events? It wouldn't change anything, would it?

At least I had the opportunity to see her again ... like I always promised myself, but was too bloody lazy to do anything about. A grin split my face. I was here, in Ashley Richards' house, and she was just down the hallway from me. I had the opportunity to have her back in my life once again ... A bigger smile adorned my face.

'Lou? Are you okay in there?' Her voice was like nectar to my ears. I felt like I had been transported back ten years. 'I've made you a coffee ...'

'I'll be right there!' Then I quickly rubbed the towel through my long hair again, threw on the dressing gown she had given me, and opened the door to my future.

Ash. My Ash. Back in my life again.

What a day! What a bloody fantastic day!

Hangover forgotten, I nearly skipped down the hallway to my old friend's bedroom.

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Over coffee, Ash told me about her life up to now. She was studying Law, Psychology, Social Sciences and Maths at A level, as she wanted to join the police force like her father. Well, she had the height for it; she must have been getting on for six foot if the length of her legs were anything to go by.

They went on for miles. I don't know what had possessed me that morning, but I had difficulty tearing my eyes from the long expanse of flesh sticking out from the bottom of her sleeping shorts.

Weird. I had never had the inclination to eye up another female's legs. But they were really long ... and I mean really long. Probably because mine are really short.

Time with her seemed to fly by, and we chatted about college courses with ease, but at the back of my mind I really wanted to tell her why I hadn't contacted her, why I hadn't had the chance to say goodbye.

The problem was, I didn't want to broach it ... it was still painful for many reasons. Luckily enough, I didn't have to.

'Sorry to hear about your parents splitting up.' My eyes shot up to her face, captured in the blueness of her eyes. Concern radiated from them ... and once again I felt her protectiveness, her willingness to take care of me ... just by her voice. 'It was a bit of surprise when I came round to get you the next day ...' a small laugh escaped her, and she shook her head from side to side.

'Did you speak to anyone?' My voice sounded small, childlike.

'Your dad, actually.' She shifted in her chair, and I could sense the unease pouring from her. 'He ... erm ... well let's just say he wasn't very forthcoming in giving too much away.'

'What did he say?' My voice was firmer now, and I could feel the hatred I had for my father welling up inside. Bastard. He had still found an opportunity to fuck up my life. No wonder she hadn't tried to find me. I know, I know ... she was only a child ... but I had to blame someone ... I had to try to rationalise what had happened.

Blue eyes looked at me nervously. 'It doesn't mat ...'

'What did he say?' The anger in my throat was choking me; I wanted to scream out for some



reason. And this alone made me even more angry. After all these years, he could still get to me. Every time I thought of what he had done ... not just to me, but to us all ... especially my mum ... I couldn't seem to control my emotions.

'Look ... Lou. It's in the past.' As she said this, she leaned forward and placed her hand on my leg. The contact made me suck in my breath and I felt the fight leave just as quickly as it had arrived. 'Don't let him win.' Her voice was so soft, so caring, so Ash. How could I fight that?

My gaze drifted back down to her hand, which by now was making gentle circles on my thigh, and I could feel a sensation building inside my gut.

It wasn't a feeling one friend should have about another. Definitely not.

I jerked back on the chair to escape her touch, embarrassed with this sensation. My eyes drifted to her hand ... stopped ... and ... stared at the long tapering fingers moving serenely over my goosebumping flesh. I shook my head to break the gaze and then allowed my eyes to travel up to meet her face. Those blue orbs just escaped my bewildered look, as they slipped down to rest on the unconscious action of her hand.

Surprise unmasked and raw coated her face, only fleetingly, granted, but still there for the briefest of moments. Without warning, she snatched it away, curling the fingers into a pose of protectiveness, like she had be burned.

'Ash?' The questioning tone I used on her name focused her attention back on my face. Her eyes seemed troubled, like whirlpools. Troubled ... yes, that's the word to describe her look. She seemed troubled for some reason. I don't know why. 'What is it?'

It took less than a heartbeat to change her expression from perturbed to the face splitting grin she always had ready. A shrug of the shoulders, followed by a hard resounding slap on my leg was her next action. A familiar reaction between friends.

I laughed, although she had a good slap on her, my reddening leg living proof. The laughter seemed to break the amounting tension in the room, and it seemed to fit with the situation. Then she joined in, her eyes still seemed a little distant at first, but gradually became softer as the laughter took hold.

It was in this state of laughter that her previous words of comfort came crashing back into my mind.

She was right ... the past doesn't matter, it can only guide us to a better future. A learning process we needed to acknowledge before we could move on.

I decided to move on. And hopefully take Ash with me.

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## Chapter Seven

It wasn't long after that I got my clothes back (which she had kindly washed and dried because of the splattering of vomit that coated them), got dressed and found I didn't actually want to go home. It felt good being in her company once again.

But, I had to go. I had promised Jo I would go shopping with her, under duress of course. I hated shopping with her ... everything turned into a marathon. It was as if she was on a bet with God, and the bet was she could spot every bargain ... try on anything that remotely fitted her ... and piss me off in the process.

Nevertheless, I had promised. Even now, I can't contain the sigh that escapes when I think of shopping with my sister.

Ash and I exchanged addresses and phone numbers, and I distinctly remember folding the little sheet of paper so neatly and tucking it in the back pocket of my jeans ... it felt like an offering.

As I was leaving, her mum appeared. She didn't look a day older than I remembered - her hair was still jet black and long, just like Ash's. They were similar in appearance except for the eyes ... her mum's were grey, whereas Ash's were blue like her dad's.

'Well I never ... its little Lou Turner, isn't it?'

'In the flesh, Mrs Richards.'

'Well I never ... how long has it been? Ten ... eleven years?' As she was saying it, she was walking over to me, peering into my face just to make sure. I should've known what was coming next, but the years had been kind to me. Mrs Richards had a habit of nearly crushing the life out of you when she was happy, and then, to add insult to injury, she would pinch your cheeks and wobble the flesh up and down until your mouth made a farting sound.

Not a pretty sight ... or noise for that matter.

And it hurt like buggery ... but nevertheless ... it felt good to be remembered, and with such fondness too.

'You're not running off already are you? Stay for a cuppa.' She still had my face in a vice like grip and my answer came out like a wet fart. 'Soon then?' I looked at her wide-eyed. How on earth had she understood my answer? 'Come for tea one night, yes?'

I nodded, and then sighed with relief as she let go of her death grip on my cheeks, the blood had fled in fright, and I must have looked a vision with my pasty fingerprinted face surrounded by a big red blob.

'Td love to.' As I answered, I automatically turned to face Ash, who was grinning idiotically

behind my back.

'Tomorrow, then? Sunday tea?'

'I ... I ... well ...'

'Mum ... don't pressure the poor girl. She's probably got arrangements already, haven't you?'

'Well ... no, not really.'

'So you'll come then?'

There was no point arguing with her, so I just nodded, which gained me a huge smile from both of the Richards women. Women.

Women.

Ash was a woman.

That little girl of seven and three quarters was nearly eighteen. A woman.

Emotions flushed through me, happiness, sadness, maybe a little anger too. I had missed the ascent from childhood to adulthood, not just with Ash, but my own also. It is amazing how different your life becomes when one day it's all turned upside down for no fault of your own.

Ash's eyes clouded with concern at my expression, and I staved off the question I knew was bound to come with a beaming smile. Keeping my voice light, I answered, 'I'd love to.'

Sorted.

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Stockport market was heaving with people. I can't tell you how many times I lost Jo amongst the crowds. She was like a spitfire, racing around the stalls, holding up the most hideous clothes to me and mouthing 'This will look great on you.'

Yeah ... when I'm dead. Then I wouldn't be able to argue about the shit colour and the crap style. At least it was more fashionable than the creations my mum used to pick out. Jo and I could tell what she was going to pick up even before my mum spotted it. It had to be multicoloured, or just a biddy colour, and preferably with a kitten looking wide eyed on the front ... ball of wool et al.

It makes my stomach churn just to think of it.

As I was saying, Jo was in her element picking up shite and measuring it against herself whilst I was looking my damndest to look alluring, propping myself up against the small wall at the side of the stall. I realise now I must have looked like a prostitute or just plain simple.

The beauty of youth, eh?

I was lost thought, mainly about Ash ... obviously, and didn't hear Jo's question the first time round.

'Oi ... gormless ... I'm talking to you!' My eyes shot up to meet the daggers my sister was throwing me. 'Returned from Never Never Land, have you?' I shrugged. I thought I was so cool ... you know what it's like ... never let your guard down in front of absolute strangers.

'What?' I went for bored, hoping she would take the hint, and take me home so I could lie on my bed and think whilst blasting the neighbours with music.

'I asked if you had a good night last night.' She looked me squarely in the eyes. It was funny, but I hadn't even mentioned to her about bumping into Ash, I don't know why. Maybe it was because I was embarrassed about how it all happened.

'It was okay, I suppose.' I looked somewhat sheepish at this point, and there's one thing you can't keep from my sister. That's it ... you can't keep one thing from her ... she could read me like a book.

'What happened?' The smile slipped from her face and I knew I was on the verge of being interrogated.

'Not much.'

'Really?' She laid the top over the rack and slowly stepped away. Shit. I knew what was coming now.

'Fancy a coffee?' Here we go ... her perfect interrogation technique was underway. She always thought I would crumble if she took me to a café and bought me a coffee.

Funny thing was ... I did.

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I didn't expect laughter. What I did expect was a thorough telling off. Especially for smoking pot. She surprised me by laughing, loudly, and pointing her finger at me. When I told her about falling off the stage, then throwing up, she laughed even harder, spluttering words along the lines of me deserving everything I got.

It was strange to watch the total change in her when I mentioned I had met Ash again; and that I had slept over at her house.

She was silent. All the laughter and finger pointing ceased. I didn't get it. One minute laughing: the next, stony silence.

'Are you going to see her again?' The question was so quiet, I had to strain to hear it.

'Well ... erm ... her ... erm...' Why was I acting like a dick head? Why did it bother me that Jo didn't like Ash?

'Are you ... or aren't you?' Clipped words.

'Yes ... erm ... Ash's mum invited me for tea tomorrow.' I looked at her, my eyes wide, one eyebrow raised, and my mouth slightly open. I did look slightly simple, but I think I was waiting for her to say something.

She didn't. She just got up and paid the bill. It was only when she had nearly reached the door that she turned to me, flashed me a huge grin and said, 'Come on lard arse. There's bargains to get.'

I shuffled under the table to collect the three carrier bags of hers she already had me carrying, and scuttled after her.

I had a grin plastered on my face, but underneath I was confused, and a little intrigued. I couldn't help but wonder again why Jo seemed to put a distance between my friendship with Ash and my relationship with her.

Maybe one day I would get to the truth.

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## **Chapter Eight**

Sunday tea is always a good tea isn't it. It's the time where you have the opportunity to go all out and make something nice. Now, personally, I love my mum's roast dinners, although my dad (yes ... he's my dad) is the chef. I think it's what you get used to really.

But Sunday tea is still a time where the family get together, and share stories. In my family, we always told stories of the past ... the funny ones ... especially stories about what we did as kids. I used to love those teas ... erm ... still do, in fact. It's tradition. Eat sandwiches and cake, drink bucket loads of tea, and laugh at each other.

Perfect.

Now to miss Sunday tea at our house there had to be a good reason. Near death experience was okay, as long as you had a doctor's certificate ... But general pissing off to see your mates was a no no. It was family time - or as my sister Angie always says (and this is enough to fuck anyone off) 'Quality Time' sounding more and more like a Hallmark greeting card.

I wanted to go to Ash's for tea. Obviously. My parents wanted me there. Obviously. Therefore, there was no competition.

I was going to Ash's ... come hail or high water ... I was going to her house for tea.

Stuff the consequences.

Initially my mum just gave me the look. Instead of explaining, I did what all teenagers did best.

I went 'into one'. Having a paddy ... as my mum always said. I ranted and raved about never having any freedom, and when were they going to realise I was an adult. Mum just shot me another look, daring me to continue.

I'd had enough, and stomped up the stairs, making sure I banged every door on the way. Twice.

After throwing myself on the bed, burying my head in the pillow, and screaming into aforementioned pillow about how unfair my life was, how everyone was out to get me, I did the next best thing teenagers do.

I fell asleep.

It seemed like I had been asleep for hours, although it was more like forty-five minutes, I awoke to a gentle shaking of my shoulder. My head was still buried in the pillow, and for a split second, I thought I had gone blind.

Then unreasonable teenage angst traded places with fear of a life in the dark, as I remembered why I was in that position in the first place.

Muffled warnings about being left alone to grow old and fester in my room, escaped from the confines of the pillow.

'You can go ... I've explained.' Jo. But ...Jo? Jo didn't like Ash. Why would she explain for me? 'Mum said you can go to Ash's, but to make sure you are back before ten.'

Ten! I didn't care I had a curfew ... that would leave me plenty of time to get to know my old friend again.

I turned over, leaving the pillow slightly damp from where I had drooled. Jo was sat on the edge of the bed looking at me with some concern. All the love I felt for her raced to the surface, and I threw my arms about her. 'You're a star, Jo. An absolute star!'

I could feel her smile on my shoulder as I hugged her senseless. Once again, my sister had gone out of her way to make me happy, knowing I was too awkward to do anything about the situation myself ... knowing I was too much like a typical teenager to back down and talk about things reasonably.

Then a doubt crept into my mind. Why would she do that so I could see someone she visibly didn't like? Confusion masked my features until a thought poked itself into my brain.

Because she loves you, dumb ass.

Once again, I felt my face crack open into a grin.

And I love her too. Wouldn't you?

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Tea at Ash's house was exactly like ours. There was a huge spread laid out, and even though my stomach was in knots, for some unknown reason, I still could eat half of what was there.

All the family were present. Anthony, Stephen, Ash's mum and dad. Stephen had brought his girlfriend for tea and she sat, quietly, in the corner of the front room watching every move he made.

It seemed like yesterday when I had last been with this family. They all greeted me like an old friend, which of course I was, and made me feel like part of the family.

Tracy, Stephen's girlfriend, just sat there taking in the scene unfolding in front of her, her faced shouted suspicion, but her lips just became thinner and thinner. I was introduced as the long lost family member and she stuck out her hand in gesture, but the sentiment never reached her eyes.

Nobody else noticed but me. Ash was too busy running around finalising the spread; her parents were poking fun at her shouting 'Faster Ash! Faster!' and the lads were talking about football.

It was just me and Tracy.

Unfortunately.

She looked over her shoulder to make sure nobody was watching, gripped my hand tighter and pulled me closer to her. A harsh whisper spat out of her mouth, 'Keep your fucking hands off Stephen.'

Uh? What the hell had brought that on?

It was only half way through tea that the penny actually dropped - well fell, clinking and clattering on top of the table in front of me. By all accounts they had all been ribbing Stephen before I came round about how he had had a crush on me when we were kids. He had been nearly nine then, and I couldn't believe his girlfriend had reacted in such a way.

What a gormless mare.

I had to put up with glaring looks from her, the Child Catcher, when all I wanted to do was take her outside and slap her around for a bit. All because Stephen used to have a crush on me ten years ago.

I mean - ten years!

How sad is that?

But my attention was taken as my eyes drifted on their own volition over to Ash time and time again. It was so good to be back with her and her family after all these years, and for some strange reason it didn't seem like I had been away.

It was the same chitchat; the same ribbing, joking and love bouncing back and forth to each member of the family.

I felt reborn.

And it felt good.

Stories were thrown around of childhood experiences ... times that made us all flush with embarrassment. Ash even told the story of how I'd got my foot caught in the flared bottoms of my jeans and I had somersaulted arse over tit and landed, ungraciously, in a heap in the middle of the playing field.

God ... I loved those jeans. Pale blue with embroidery of cornflowers growing up each leg.

Pure class.

Before I knew it, we were clearing the pots away and stacking them in the kitchen ready to wash. The whole family joined in, me included. The only one who didn't help was Tracy, which was no surprise. She just plonked herself back onto the chair and picked up the Sunday supplement from the newspaper and began flicking through the pages.

Everyone took turns giving her a look as they passed, but she didn't pay any attention to them, just carried on turning the pages and ignoring us all. I honestly couldn't see what Stephen saw in her. She was nothing to look at, and he was gorgeous. Tall, with raven black hair that seemed tousled in his boyish way. His eyes were a darker blue than Ash's but still intense ... although they didn't catch the sunlight like hers did.

I caught myself staring. Not at Stephen ... at Ash. She was so beautiful, and had a body to die for, although that rather defeats the purpose I suppose. Every movement she made seemed effortless ... almost like she was a dancer on stage, captivating her audience with her graceful way.

And she was only washing up!



I stood there with the tea towel in my hand, gawping at her ... mouth open ... the works.

'Ah ... we have a fly catcher amongst us.'

Ash's dad had decided to come and stand directly in my line of vision and make a smart arsed comment. I can vividly remember ducking my head to the side to continue to watch, and then feel embarrassed for some reason.

Funny how memories go. I can't really remember much else apart from embarrassment ... the scarlet sheen my face had adopted more than compensated for the memory lapse, and the voices around me took on a definite burring quality.

The next thing I recall was a pair of twinkling blue eyes looking into my own and a firm hand on my arm. Her voice swept through me ... caring tones ... soothing tones ... I looked at her, startled back into reality, and flushed even harder.

If that is possible.

'I have ...' A cough to relieve all the emotion in my voice, changing it from a high-pitched squeak to a tenor with a cold. 'I have to go ... I have to get home.' Why did I lie? It was only eight o'clock, and I still had two hours before curfew.

Worst thing was ... Ash knew this. She looked at me slightly puzzled and her face dropped ... just a little ... but it dropped all the same.

A nod. Swift and sure. She turned around, her back was my only view. 'Okay ... Will you be all right getting back?' She sounded different somehow ... distant for some reason. 'I can get Stephen to run you home if you want ... Tracy will have to lump it.'

'I'm fine ... honestly ... I can walk ...' She turned around so quickly, my eyes spun in their sockets trying to focus.

'You'll do no such thing! Stephen! Stephen!' And she was off, racing into the front room, leaving me standing there in her kitchen like a lemon.

Thirty seconds later, she was back, her grin splitting her face. 'Sorted. Stephen said he'll take you at nine.' I looked at her squarely in the eyes. She cocked her head at me, one eyebrow raised in challenge. 'And you'll still be early.' Her expression begged me to argue with her ... but I was no fool.

Not then anyway.

We spent the next hour in her room, sprawled on her bed, her music blasting from her record player. Every teenager's dream ... loud music and idle chatter. Ash had Yazoo's Upstairs at Eric's playing and we were lying on our backs staring at the ceiling. I had listened to the album before, as it was already a couple of years old, but hadn't really paid it much attention before now.

Then I heard it.

The song.

*The song.*

Alison Moyet's pure and sensuous voice filtered through the gloom of Ash's room as 'Only You' started.

*Looking through the window above*

*It's like story of love*

*Can you hear me?*

*Came back only yesterday ...*

*And all I ever knew*

*Only you ...*

I felt my heart open and then ... crack ... a splintering splitting noise reverberated through me ...

*All I ever needed was the love you gave*

*All I needed for another day ...*

'Lou? Lou? Are you alright?' I snapped myself into consciousness, now fully aware I was sitting bolt upright, my hands balled into fists, the covers of her bed wrapped firmly within my grip. My knuckles white and nails were jabbing into the sensitive flesh of my palms.

For a reason I had no clue about. 'Are you ...'

'I'm fine, Ash ... honestly ... just felt a little bit of cramp coming ... it's gone now.' Her face was so full of concern, and I felt like a git lying ... again ... to her. What was wrong with me? I had developed a deep-rooted need to lie through my teeth.

The song had finished and the next one on the album had started. I couldn't concentrate on the lyrics, as I felt slightly dazed by emotion. It was confusing, to say the least. How on earth ... or should I say, why on earth had I reacted in that way to a song? I had heard it hundreds of times before and ... nothing.

Fifteen minutes later I was in Stephen's beat up Ford Escort, Tracy in the front ... glaring at me ... her eyes screaming 'Fucker!' but her face oozed anxiety at my predicament of being without either a car, or a boyfriend with a car. At least I understood why she was such a troll. A fucking shallow one at that.

I left Ash with a promise of getting in contact in the week; maybe have lunch if our timetables allowed it. She waved vigorously from her doorway, and was still there as her brother's car

turned the corner.

I settled down into the back seat.

What a day? Or evening ... I should say. I made a promise to myself to buy Yazoo's album. I don't know why. Especially after my earlier reaction. It just seemed the right thing to do.

But being a teenager at college, money was scarce ... So, I decided to get myself a Saturday job ... up the coffers a little bit. It would do me good to have a bit of cash to spend on things. And the sacrifice on part of my free time seemed a small price to pay for a little bit of monetary freedom.

Bugger. I hated work ... although it does fascinate me. I could, without doubt, watch it all day.

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## **Chapter Nine**

The week flew by in a blur, and I hadn't seen Ash at all. This was mainly due to me avoiding all of the usual haunts, and telling mum I was too busy to take messages when she called ... twice.

I felt bad. I don't know why ... and I didn't know why I was avoiding her. I wanted to see her ... really wanted to meet with her for lunch, become part of her circle of friends ... get to know her again.

Then another week passed. This time with no phone calls ... and I was withdrawing more and more into my own little world. I still had friends, but for some reason they didn't seem to be enough. I didn't see Ash at college, but strangely enough, I saw Tracy six times.

Six fucking times!

Each time was an experience, to say the least. Each time made my skin crawl as if I had scabies. A bunch of cronies sporting bad mullets and peroxide blonde fringes always flagged her. How cool is that? Lacy tops showed wife beater t-shirts underneath, and scrawny white arms reflected fluorescent lighting.

In a word - trashy.

I ignored her snide remarks as I passed, but swore one day to paste the living crap out of her. She was trying to intimidate me, thinking I was scared of her. If she only knew the thing that scared me the most was her smile ... now that was freaky. Black kohl pencilled eyes showed a blankness that belied reason. She appeared to have the intelligence of an amoeba ... and the sexual lure. God only knew what Stephen saw in her.

But I didn't care about Tracy ... oh no. It paled in comparison to how I was missing Ash. The pain I had experienced as a child when I had lost her seemed to disappear when I realised how much I missed her now. And I had only seen her twice.

The third time came on the Friday afternoon.

Now there's a memory. Even better than the rabbit incident ... the treatment night and Alan's dancing ... even the free glass of lemonade. Although the overall effect combined caused more fear, laughter and embarrassment than the previous three memories put together.

Do you want to hear it? Tough ... you've got this far ... now deal.

I had just finished A level English and was making my way out of the door, chatting with Sue, another student, when I heard my name being called above the din. I couldn't mistake that rich alto voice.

Ash.

I turned to see her fighting against the tide trying to get to me. Students shoved and mumbled as she ducked past them, her eyes never leaving mine ... like a tractor beam luring me to her.

I just stood there. Transfixed. Waiting for the ear bashing she was going to give me. I did feel guilty for ignoring her phone calls and the messages to call back.

That wasn't all I was feeling.

No.

Not by a long shot.

Adrenalin pumped through my veins as I stood there waiting for her to get to me. It must have been less than a minute, but it seemed like a lifetime before she was standing, grinning, in front of me, making my heart bounce around trapped within my rib cage. I think it was in fear ... or ... I don't know ... it was just there like a tennis ball rebounding and punching the inside of my chest.

'Hello stranger.' That voice could melt butter straight from the fridge.

Hold on a minute!

Melt butter straight from the fridge? Where the fuck did that come from?

I just stood there and grinned like a Cheshire cat ... clearly the simple looking grimacing beetroot one you don't usually come across in the illustrations for the children's book. I started to nod, my mouth opening and closing, words escaping me and the only sound was that of a captured fish.

She just stared at me, the grin fixed on her face in genuine affection, waiting for my dumb brain to acknowledge her with a simple hello.

When it didn't come, she shifted nervously, the smile leaving her face briefly, but coming back twice as powerful. 'Where've you been? I've called a couple of times ... left messages ...'

Thankfully, the mute spell that had bewitched me, lifted, and I spluttered out an incomprehensible excuse, which only made her grin wider and grab hold of me in a bone-crushing hug.

'Oh ... I've missed you, Lou. Don't ask me why ... but I have.' Her breath tangled in my hair and brushed my cheek. Her arms were strong and I felt the feeling of safety cascade down my whole body ... like I always did when I was with her.

She pulled back and released me, the air of the corridor bouncing off my skin like an alien concept. I missed her closeness for some unknown reason. Weird, I know ... but I did.

'Fancy a coffee?' I started to say no, but the look on her face made my resolve drift away. I couldn't remember why I was avoiding her in the first place. Come to think of it ... why was I avoiding her?

'Love to.' I didn't want to analyse the reason for a teenagers whims ... I must have had a good reason, but for the life of me I couldn't think of it now. All I could think of was the enchanting look on her face; the crooked smile playing on her lips, an eyebrow lifted in question as she waited for my response.

And maybe that was the reason ...

And maybe I should have said no and walked away ...

And maybe I wouldn't have experienced the combination of rabbits ... Derbac ... and lemonade all rolled into one.

Well ... maybes don't build experiences ... and I was on a one-way trip to Experience Land.

Unfortunately.

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The canteen, or refectory as some sad git called it, was packed, and we had to scrunch up in the corner with hot chocolates in polystyrene cups. A couple of art students were sitting opposite us with the traditional dyed black hair, makeup that would make Alice Cooper blush, and pasty white skin. They were giggling and religiously touching each other ... quite inappropriately for a college canteen ... erm ... refectory.

Boys today, eh?

It was a bit of an eye opener that's for sure.

Before long, I had forgotten about why I had tried to avoid Ash and just glowed in her presence. She gabbled on about her courses, what she had been up to, whilst I barely said a word. I was content just to sit in her shadow and soak up all that was her.

It was such a wonderful feeling ... intense ... but wonderful. The smile on my face grew wider and wider as she entertained me about some sad bastard on her course that couldn't even make a cup of tea without adult supervision. He wanted to be a Solicitor ... and couldn't even work the washing machine. I felt sorry for his future clients.

Within thirty minutes, I was laughing aloud at her antics, and was finding it increasingly difficult to breath. My chest ached with laughter ... and with something else, which at that time I didn't want to put a name to. Well ... not as much didn't, as couldn't.

I can't tell you how long we sat engrossed in conversation, but I could distinctly feel the canteen empty ... the touchy feely boys had long since gone, and then it was just me and Ash ... again.

'What are you doing tonight? Are you free?' She leaned forward and looked me squarely in the face. 'Me and a few friends are thinking about going to the Student's Union ... they've got a Karaoke night on.' Still, she watched for any signs of refusal.

But that was the last thing in my mind at that moment. I was caught by her eyes ... I felt the room melt into nothing as I just sat there and stared at her eyes ... transfixed by them ... pulled into her by them ... feeling emotions one friend shouldn't be feeling for another.

She didn't back away. Her body leaned half way over the table and she just kept on staring ... waiting ... and if I wasn't mistaken ...

'Excuse me, ladies.'

Was that voice in my head? That rich, deep voice?

Neither Ash or I moved ... or blinked.

A cough.

Then another ... louder ... more insistent.

Ash leaned back into her chair, her face slowly changing from the absorbed look from moments before, to wield a mask of slight confusion, her eyes squinting slightly as she searched my face for answers.

'Ash?' That voice again. 'Have you forgotten our date?'

The sound of brakes screeching to a halt in my chest nearly deafened me. The room seemed to grow terribly small and I grew huge and very exposed. Ash just blinked once and broke our gaze. Her eyes swung around to rest on the person standing next to our table.

'Ben. Hi.' My eyes followed hers, and took in the tall man standing, and slightly leaning towards Ash. And like a female, I digested everything about him. The blonde hair ... green eyes ... the solid build of his body ... the tight fitting t-shirt that left nothing to the imagination. Which kind of fit in nicely with the tightness of his jeans ...

But it wasn't attraction I was feeling ... not by a huge stretch of the imagination.

No.

It was something I wasn't used to. Never experienced before this moment.

It was jealousy. The anger at being interrupted I had felt before. But jealousy? Definitely a new sensation, and to be perfectly honest, I didn't like the way it made me feel.

I sat there and watched him lean over me and kiss Ash on the mouth ... on her lips ... in front of me ... on the lips. The kiss was featherlike, and lasted all of a split second, but I felt it ... and not in a nice way.

Ben still leaned across in front of me, and tried to stroke the side of Ash's face, but I saw her pull back, only slightly, but she did pull back. I felt a smirk flit across my lips and had the urge to stick my tongue out at his back. Either he didn't notice, or he was trying to ignore it.

'This is Lou ... a very good friend of mine. Ben ... say hello.' He turned his head around to look at me ... but his eyes only rested briefly on my face as they travelled slowly down my body, only to rest on my breasts and then travel back up to my face again. I felt like I had been visibly undressed ... almost an optical rape. Whatever did Ash see in a wanker like that?

'Well ... hello there.' What a creep. He stuck his hand into my face and I lifted mine in greeting - I was well trained after all. Then the slimy fucker kissed me on the knuckles. I wanted to backhand right across the mouth. Instead I ripped my hand away from his lips and gave him a look that could pickle testicles.

Ash looked at me, and I'm sure I saw the remnants of a smile flicker across her face, but she didn't say anything.

'Feisty little creature aren't you.' God ... could this bloke be anymore like a twat? 'I like feisty.'

Yes. He could.

'Glad you two have met.' That flicker again. 'I was just asking Lou to join us tonight.' Her face turned to me in question, and I was just about to refuse when I spotted a fleeting look of pleading

swipe across Ash's face.

'I'd love to.'

Where on earth had that come from? I didn't want to spend my evening being leered at by this jerk.

But I did want to spend the evening with Ash.

And that is what it all boils down to isn't it?

The smile she bestowed on me actually illuminated the whole room. Whatever doubts I harboured were all sent whistling into the wind.

Not the experience you were expecting, is it? No. Well I haven't got to that part yet ... give me time.

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We arranged to meet inside the Student's Union at seven thirty, and at seven fifteen, I was nervously waiting outside, plucking up the courage just to go in.

For the tenth time I smoothed down my top and ran my hands along my jeans. For the tenth time I licked my lips bringing them to shine. For the tenth time I tried to make my breathing slow down, as I imitated a cross between an asthma attack and a panic attack.

And a little bit of hyperventilating for good measure.

Finally, I entered the lobby to be greeted by the smell of pot. As it drifted up my nose, images of me sprawled on the floor, after falling off the stage, danced about in my head.

I felt my face burn up. Christ ... it had only been two weeks ago. I hoped no one would remember ...

'Look ... it's Agnetha!'

Shit.

I felt my face burn again, and smiled weakly at the group of lads seated around the stage. The same group of lads who I had landed on two weeks previously.

I think.

I made my way to the bar and tried to hide in the darkest corner. Hopefully my face would return to a more natural sheen after I had been served my coke by the truly inept bartender who was more likely better equipped to serve chips in Mac Donald's ... or not ... as he would definitely



fail the health and hygiene test.

After securing my drink, and pushing drunken students off me, I scanned the room looking for Ash. It was dark and smoky, and my eyes worked hard acclimatising to the gloom, especially because the bar area was bright enough to nearly cause a tan.

I could feel her rather than see her. Feel her eyes on me.

Slowly I turned to look behind me. And there she was ... half standing, as if she had just started to get up from her chair. Her eyes focused straight on me and she looked dazed for some reason. Ben, the dickhead, was next to her, but when he went to grab her hand, she pulled it sharply away from him ... her eyes never leaving mine.

It felt weird. Tingles spread up my spine, and for some reason I was beginning to become uncomfortable. So, I waved at her.

No response.

I waved again.

Still no response.

So I began to walk over, feeling a little self-conscious by this point, but pasting a smile on my face to hide the tumultuous emotions racing around inside. I couldn't understand why my heart was roaring inside my chest so loudly I believed everyone could hear it.

Then I saw her shake her head ... just a little shake ... but a shake nevertheless. Her eyes lost the glassiness and began to squint a little. It was my cue to make contact ... so ... I waved again and did the cheesy 'Hi' thing.

This time her face broke out into a grin and I smiled in return, the uncomfortable feeling disappearing, but it was replaced with a feeling of excitement as I approached the table. Ben was eyeing me up and down and I wanted to tell him to fuck off ... but evidently, I'm too much of a lady.

It wasn't until I actually reached the table that I realised the other people around it were Stephen and Tracy. Shit. I liked Stephen ... but Tracy? Christ ... could my night get any worse.

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It was fun. Well ... for the most part anyway. I enjoyed being in Ash and Stephen's company, but little could be said about the other two. Ben was an out and out wanker ... I couldn't see what Ash saw in him. All he did all night was hit on girls in the bar. Funny thing was, Ash didn't seem to mind! I'd have gone bonkers.

As for Tracy ... well you know my views on her. She is what is commonly known as a

'Twattette', and spent most of the evening glaring in my direction whilst sipping a Pernod and black. How common. She didn't even realise she had red lines up the side of her face (made by the blackcurrant as she drank) making her look like either the Joker or the Count from Sesame Street.

Funny ... nobody could be arsed telling her. She sat there like Lady Muck from Turd Hall thinking she was something she most certainly wasn't, looking for all the world like she would suddenly shout out 'One Pernod and black ahahahah ... Two Pernod and blacks ...' You get the message.

It's a pity she didn't.

And I for one most certainly wasn't going to be the one to tell her. I know ... but honestly ... would you?

It wasn't until the end of the night that the experience happened ... remember ... the one I threatened you with earlier.

I had just gone to the phone booth to call my parents to say I would be leaving in about twenty minutes and would be on the next bus home, when it all kicked off.

I should have seen it coming, but I didn't.

I should have known she would do something, but let's put it down to the innocence of youth ... or just plain stupidity.

And I should have been paying attention instead of rummaging around in my purse looking for change for the bus.

Silly me.

'Think you're so fucking clever don't you?' Tracy. 'I bet you were laughing at me all night?' She came out of the shadows and came closer to me; her face was devoid of blackcurrant by now. 'I'll fucking teach you.'

Smack!

In retrospect I should have ducked. In retrospect ... I should have smacked her back ... but I didn't.

Do you know why?

No?

I didn't smack her back because I didn't have to.

Ash did.

Right in her blackcurrant gobbling mouth.

Now for the embarrassing thing ...

'Why the fuck did you do that? I don't need you to fight my battles!'

Ash looked stunned ... more stunned than Tracy, who was on the floor nursing her face by this point. 'But I ...'

'But you what? Think I can't look after myself?'

The bar had gone completely quiet, and I knew people were staring at us ... at me in particular. Someone came up behind me and I felt my whole body tense. A deep male voice spoke firmly into my ear. 'I think it is time to go, love.'

It was the bouncer. And he didn't sound pleased, and neither was I for that matter. I was getting kicked out for doing absolutely nothing, whilst Tracy was being helped up by a member of staff and Ash just stared at me, her face pale.

'But I didn't do anything ...' My voice sounded whining even to my ears.

'It doesn't matter, love ... it's for the best.'

Ash tried to interrupt and tell them what had happened, but I rounded on her, the tone definitely one of anger.

'Look! However hard it is to believe ... I've grown up, Ash ... I'm not a child anymore for Christ's sake.'

With that, I turned and marched away, but not before I heard Ash mumble something. I don't know what she meant, or even if I heard right, but it sounded like 'I've noticed.'

It's a pity she only figured that out when I had given her a mouthful.

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## **Chapter Ten**

I spent the whole of Saturday kicking myself ... and wishing I was kicking Tracy instead.

I was at work ... the crappiest job this side of the Pennines. I worked as an assistant on Stockport market, serving cooked meats. It wasn't the cooked meats that were disgusting ... it was the smell of the indoor market.

Fuck me. It was gross.

Imagine the smell of curdled milk mixed with the smell of a cow's stomach lining. Yep ... totally disgusting. Inside the market cheese, tripe, eggs, and cooked meats were served to people who obviously had no sense of smell. It always took me at least thirty minutes to acclimatize myself to it, and this was only my second Saturday.

I worked with six other girls and one lad who was solely in charge of the meat slicer. Very glamorous. It was a long day, nine and a half hours on our feet, and we only got half hour for lunch, which we took in pairs.

I got on with most of the girls, but one girl, Sarah, really stood out from the crowd. Strangely enough, she had taken me under her wing, and for the two weeks I had worked there, we had taken our dinner together.

As I said before, I was pissed off, and Sarah noticed. She kept on asking if I was okay ... if I wanted to talk about it. Each time I turned her down ... I was just angry about things ... about Tracy ... about Ash. All this in between serving people whose main concern was how much sliced ham they would need for Sunday tea.

Lunchtime couldn't come quick enough, and I grabbed my sandwich and bottle of orange, and made my way to the locker room to get out of my overall ... which by this time stunk to high heaven of sour milk and fat.

Sarah was right behind me, and neither of us said a word as we made our way into St Mary's churchyard, where we ate our lunch and looked over Stockport.

It was amazing how quiet it was there. We were completely on our own as we munched our lunch and stared over the hills, the rest of the market din was like a distant memory.

'Do you want to talk about it?' Sarah's voice was low, almost non-existent. And if I hadn't be looking at her at the time I would have missed it entirely.

'There's nothing to tell.'

Sarah looked up from her sandwich and into my eyes. She had blue eyes ... a little like Ash's ... but darker. I felt an ache skip across my chest, and without thinking raised my hand to it and rubbed, all the while staring into Sarah's eyes.

I can't tell you how long we just looked at each other ... but it was as if I was transfixed by the blueness.

'Are you free tonight?' A pause before she continued. 'I was wondering if you fancied going to the pictures or something.' I still held her gaze, and nearly a minute went by before ...

'I'd love to.' My voice seemed distant. Almost as distant as the sounds of the market.

A smile broke out on her face and mine followed suit. 'We'd better get back before they send out a search party.'

I nodded, scrunched up my sandwich wrapper before finishing the last dregs of my orange, stood up and waited for Sarah to join me.

I was still annoyed about last night, and I hadn't heard from Ash ... but ... I had a feeling tonight was going to be more interesting.

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I met Sarah outside the pictures at 7 pm. We were going to see *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, which was an 18, and I was only sixteen (nearly seventeen though). Sarah was okay, as she had turned eighteen in July.

There wasn't a problem getting in, as the boy on the desk looked younger than me ... and his acne ... I won't go there in case you're eating.

We made our way into the darkened cinema, the adverts were blaring out Pearl and Dean's memorable tune, as adverts flashed on and off the screen promoting a mixture of crap and shite ... in that order.

I did a double take as Sarah struggled along the back row, past all of the teenagers who were already snogging before the main feature began, but I just followed behind her, whispering 'Excuse mes' and 'Sorrrys' as I tripped over extended legs, trying to duck at the same time. It was not as if they were actually watching the film ... but I felt a little unnerved to say the least.

Finally, Sarah settled into a chair that had a couple of empty chairs around us, and she patted the seat next to her, her blue eyes glowing in reflection of the lights from the screen. I think she knew I was going to sit in the chair that would leave an empty one between us. Don't ask me why ... I just ... felt ... like ... I should for some reason or another.

Before long, the film was underway. And I was not happy. Freddy Krueger frightened the shit out of me ... and not just because of his exceptionally bad taste in stripy tops either. I felt the fear of the characters grip me around the throat, and was scared I was going to fall asleep later and see the melted faced freak coming at me. Sarah seemed cool about all the blood, and asked if I was all right on more than one occasion.

As it approached the end, and nearly all of the characters had copped their lot in one way or another, I could feel the fear climbing up my throat. I had never been one for scary movies, and this was in a class of its own on the fear factor. Seeing the young lad trying to escape something that, to me, seemed inescapable, was playing on my nerves. It took me quite a while to realise I was actually holding Sarah's hand.

The only reason how I realised I was, was the way she smiled at me, and raised an eyebrow

when I turned to see her reaction to a particularly gruesome bit. My face must have showed confusion, as she nodded to where my hand was resting on her thigh, totally ensconced in her own.

I looked back at her and was just about to apologise and pull away, when she smiled at me, moved closer until she was firmly pressed against my side, and began to stroke the back of my hand with her thumb. I should have felt disgusted ... a woman was holding my hand, and not in a way friends would usually hold each other's hands, if you know what I mean.

However, I wasn't disgusted. Far from it in fact. I felt a growing excitement build in my gut ... the same excitement I felt every time I thought of Ash ... and her smile ... and her eyes.

Shit ... I didn't know what this meant. Was I gay then? A lesbian?

But I had never ...

Me? Gay? A lezza? A dyke? A queer?

Nah ... I wasn't one of those ... was I? I had been with lads, not ... erm ... like ... all the way ... you know ... but I did fancy lads ... didn't I?

'Are you all right, Lou?' Sarah's face was close to mine and I had an urge to kiss her ... on her mouth ... her lips ... taste her lipstick ... slip my tongue ... fuck.

'Ahem ... yeah ... yeah ... fine.' My face was incandescent. I could feel the glow race around my body, shouting to all who were listening 'Lou's a lezza! Lou's a lezza!'

'Why are you sitting forward like that? Sit back ... come on ... enjoy it.'

What? Enjoy what? Shit! Did she know? Fuck! Was she a lezza too?

As these thoughts trotted around my mind, going to every corner of that grey matter asking for directions, I could feel Sarah's arm sneaking around my back. I could also feel myself stiffen at her touch.

'Hey, Lou ... it's okay ... it's okay ...' Her voice was soothing ... sweet and soft ... and I drifted back into my seat, with her arm around my shoulders and her hand in mine.

We sat this way until the end credits, which by this stage came all too soon.

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Sarah had her own car, and had passed her test in the summer. It wasn't anything special, just a old Mini, but at least she had transport. When she asked if I would like a lift home, doubt flooded my mind once again.

Did I want to get in the car ... alone ... with her? What if she ... if I ... if we ...

Never mind. To cut a long story short, I got a lift. Sarah was easy to talk to, and we laughed a great deal on the way home. She was a student at Manchester Uni, and she worked two jobs as well ... one on the market, and one in a pub on a Thursday night. My expression must have said it all ... how on earth could she work on a Thursday when she had to get up for Uni?

She explained student life at the higher level was less demanding. More focus was placed on independent learning, and students didn't have to be there all the time.

And the added bonus was ... she never mentioned the hand holding incident ... or the arm around my shoulders. But ... I honestly didn't know my arse from my elbow by the time we reached the top of my road. Not that I usually do ... but still ... I was becoming confused.

She pulled up on the side road, as my house was on a corner, and turned her ignition off. If you had been there I guarantee you would have heard my heart rate build up and up and up. The silence in the car was making screeching noises ... and was finally put in its place by the thudding in my chest ... gut ... and maybe even a little bit lower. The blood gushing in my ears was beginning to become a problem, especially when I had to ask Sarah to repeat what she had just said.

A sheepish smile flittered across her face, and she cast her eyes down to her lap before raising them to meet my own.

'I said ... I've had a lovely night tonight ... and thank you.' The smile danced along the corners of her lips ... not a crooked one ... but still quite charming in its own way.

'Same here ...'

'Could we ... would you ... erm ... like to do it again ... erm ... sometime?' Why was she so nervous, said me, who had an entire butterfly collection fluttering around in my gut?

'I'd love to.' Her face broke out into a grin and she bit her lip whilst bobbing her head up and down ...

'Good ... good ...' I just watched her, transfixed by this woman seated next to me, watching the lights from the street lamps do wonders with her eyes ... making them glisten and sparkle ... although they didn't twinkle ... I had only ever met one person who's eyes twinkled.

But this is not the time to be thinking about her, is it?

I was sat in a car with Sarah. Not Ash. Sarah.

I looked at her, sat there, staring ahead at the quiet road and really digested this girl who was here with me. She was pretty ... very pretty in fact. Her hair was darker in this light, but it was usually a dark brown. Her face had an angelic quality; her skin smooth and clear. Her lips,

although slightly parted, still held a slight plumpness ... and looked soft ... and tender.

Shit. I was a lezza. Why else would I be thinking about how soft and tender her lips were?

Crap. That's all I needed.

But she was so pretty ...

My thoughts were interrupted by a movement ... from Sarah. She had turned herself to face me, and her expression held a question. Obviously, being a wuss, I thought this was the time to make my excuses and leave.

'Well ... I had best get gone. I've really enjoyed myself tonight.'

'Lou?' Her voice stopped my escape, and I turned to look at her once again. 'I've had a lovely time tonight ... really lovely. In fact ...'

At this point, she leaned towards me, and I leaned back on the door, willing it to open and let me out. I saw her come closer and then ... pull back, her face seemed to show the confusion I was feeling. All my senses were in overdrive. I could smell her perfume: it was intoxicating. I could hear my blood whistling through my veins, racing to parts that shall be left unmentioned.

And I could see this situation getting out of hand if I didn't do something ... and quick.

So I did.

I leaned forward and planted my lips to hers, quite clumsily at first, and I think I took her by surprise ... and that made the both of us. I could taste her lipstick in my mouth as I kissed her ... and it tasted so much better than when I tasted it on myself.

When the surprise wore off, I could feel her responding to me, and I followed suit, our mouths moving against each other's in a steady rhythm. I could feel her hand stroking the side of my head, so I lifted my hand and started doing the same. Then she tangled her fingers into my hair and I felt a groan leave my stomach and race upwards to burst out of my mouth and into hers.

She moaned back, and then slipped a very inquisitive tongue into my mouth.

Now this was the first time I had ever kissed a woman. Ever. And I had never thought about kissing another woman. Ever ... or ... had I? This wasn't the time to start questioning what I had or hadn't thought. I was kissing a woman, in the front seat of her car, parked outside my house on a Saturday night ... and I was thoroughly enjoying it.

Her lips were so soft ... softer than I thought they'd be ... and they had looked soft. Her tongue was gently probing inside my mouth and I couldn't help but suck it in. It was getting deeper and deeper. I was falling deeper and deeper into the kiss, the outside world was leaving me behind as I pushed myself into her and felt her do the same.



Sensations bulldozed through me. The feeling of kissing another woman was totally mind blowing and I could feel a definite tingle between my legs; a pooling of want forming there and begged to be assuaged.

Why ... I don't know. All I knew was I was feeling liberation from the inside out ... and I felt completely under its spell. Until ...

Until she moved her free hand and delicately stroked the outside of my breast.

That stopped me.

I pulled back sharply, and looked at her ... her hand was still in my hair ... her eyes closed ... lips slightly parted emitting short pants as she waited ... and waited for me to continue.

'Sarah ... I ...' Blue eyes slipped open and glassily focused on me, and I could see desire burning behind them. 'I ... well ... I ...'

Her fingers left the safety of my hair and she trailed them down my cheek and across my lips. 'Shush ... Lou ... it's okay ... we don't have to do anything you are uncomfortable with.' Her voice was deeper than earlier, almost smoky. I felt the stab in my groin once again and gently kissed one finger, and then another ... then another ... then I slipped one into my mouth and sucked.

The noise she made as I did this was enough to drench my underwear. A low moaning noise seeped from between those soft lips I had just tasted, and I suckled even harder. Her eyes drifted closed again and she leaned her head back exposing her throat.

I was definitely feeling more than confusion by this point ... and it felt strangely good.

After what seemed like hour, but was more like seconds, I let her finger free and she trailed the wetness around my mouth before delicately brushing her lips across mine again.

I breathed in. Quite fiercely, and opened my eyes to look her in the face once again. 'I'd best get in ... I should have been home ages ago.'

Why did I lie? It was only 10:30 and I wasn't expected back before 11:30.

Sarah didn't say a word ... just nodded acceptance and looked kind of sheepish.

'Okay then ... night.' I leaned to open the door and her hand stopped me.

'Can I see you again?' Her voice held a quiet pleading quality that aimed straight at my heart. I nodded and sat back in the seat to scabble around my bag searching for a scrap of paper and something to write with.

After writing my phone number down, I shot out of the car, round the corner and into my front door without as much as a backward glance, and then felt like a right baggage for not even waving to the girl I had just kissed minutes before.

I didn't even wait to see her turn the engine back on ... make sure she was okay ... nothing ... I was like Zola Budd on Speed.

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Jo and my parents were seated around the telly watching a really dodgy black and white horror film on BBC2 - *The Curse of the Mummy* with Boris Karloff,. My only greeting was an eye flicker and a nod from my parents and the finger signal and a grin from Jo, who was sprawled with her legs up the wall and her head hanging off the chair. Perfect film watching position.

As I stood there, I felt totally exposed. It was as if everyone knew I had just made out with a woman mere feet away, although they'd need good eyesight so see through nine-inch brick. This feeling of exposure punctured the excitement I had been feeling, and I could feel it draining away.

'Ash came round looking for you earlier.'

'What?' I wanted to swear, but I doubted my parents would appreciate it. 'When? What time?'

Jo sat up on her chair, looking twisted and very uncomfortable, and turned to face me. 'Erm ... about ... 8:30 ... and then again at about ten.'

'Ten! But it's only 10:40 now!' I don't know why I shouted out the time ... it just felt right for some reason or another. Jo looked confused at my reaction, but just shook her head and laid back down into sprawl position. 'What did she say?' I tried to keep my breathing under control. Ash had been here and I had been out with Sarah ... kissing Sarah just round the corner ... and we would have been there about 10:15.

Shit.

What if Ash saw us in Sarah's car?

Shit.

Me making out with a woman.

Shit. What to do? What to do?

'Just asked if you were in and what time you would be back ... not much else.'

'Where did you say I had gone?'

'Where you went of course. To the flicks with that girl you work with ... Sarah is it?'

I nodded, as I was unable to speak. My throat had dried up big time and I felt the wind leave my sails. I turned and left.

Upstairs in my room, I turned on the record player and aimed the needle half way across the vinyl. Alison Moyet's voice drifted softly around ...

*All I ever needed was the love you gave  
All I needed for another day ...*

I felt depressed. All the new feelings disappeared completely, and I didn't even have the energy to beat myself up about what had happened earlier. All I could think about was I had missed Ash ... twice. And that she might have seen me with another girl.

Kissing.

Crap.

This was not good. What if she got the wrong idea about me? Thought I went around kissing girls?

But I do.

Not all of the time.

And? Your point is?

This was getting me nowhere. I was arguing with myself and I didn't have any answers. My opinions were trite and contradictory and I was getting on my own nerves.

Next thing I knew I was standing in the front room in front of the telly. My parents were not impressed that they were missing the end of the film.

'What else did she say? Does she want me to call her?'

'For God's sake, Lou ...shift!' I sidled to one side, leaving enough room for both my mum and dad to see the telly, but completely blocking it from Jo's view. I heard her tutt before she raised her eyes from the direction of the TV, rolling them for effect.

'Said something about catching you later. Give you a ring tomorrow or you ring her or something.' I think my expression said it all, and she tutted again. 'She'll ring you tomorrow morning ... okay? Now shift your backside.'

A smile lit my face. Ash was going to call me tomorrow. I might even get to see her.

I turned to go to bed, nearly skipping. And then it hit me. What if she had seen me? What would

I say? What about Sarah?

The life of a teenager, eh? Wouldn't trade places for all the tea in China.

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## Chapter Eleven

I lay on top of my bed staring at the ceiling, arms behind my head, my body giving the impression of being relaxed, when inside I was tighter than a drum.

Thoughts flitted through my mind, and I was only given brief glimpses of what it wanted me to concentrate on ... and it was starting to make me feel rather sick. Names and faces zoomed in and out ... in and out ... and I was becoming more perplexed by the minute.

Images of my clinch with Sarah was vying for first place with the image of Ash's gaunt look at the Students Union on Friday night after I had shouted at her.

Ash had come looking for me ... twice. Come round to my house ... twice ... looking for me, whilst I was out getting it on with another woman.

A groan left me ... not a pleasurable groan like what had happened in the car. God no. This one was a groan of pain ... of confusion ... of not being able to grasp what was happening to me. My arm came in front of my face believing it could block out the images my overzealous brain was conjuring up. Hot breath soaked through the material of my shirt and landed on my arm, as my breathing became more and more laboured the more I thought about what I had done.

I didn't like it ... but I did like it ... I didn't ... yet ... I did. I had no concept of what being a lesbian was all about ... and I couldn't classify what it entailed. All I could muster were images of women who dressed like men, acted like men and slept with other women who looked like men, dressed like men and acted like men.

Yep. Totally naïve. I didn't realise then, lesbians didn't have to be categorised into the stereotypical interpretation most people still put on us lady lovers.

Funny thing was, Sarah didn't fit into this 'type' ... she was absolutely stunning ... and all woman. She dressed feminine; spoke feminine, smelled, tasted, felt feminine. God ... was she feminine ...

I felt moisture puddle once again between my legs, as I thought about the kisses we had shared in the front seat of her car.

A thought drifted into my head ... almost like a voice from somewhere else ... from someone else. It was calming, soothing, pliant and nourishing. A thought. An idea. A concept drilled together by want and guilt. Words welded into sense by feeling and desire ... an option than

blanketed the reality of my confusion with a promise of experience versus fantasy.

Being with a woman was a fantasy ... a dream that had been so deeply embedded within me I failed to notice its existence. Until now ... until Sarah.

With a deep breath, I came to some sort of understanding. I would try this discovery ... taste it ... mould it ... feel it and embrace it. If it wasn't for me, it wasn't for me. But I had tried it ... tried Sarah ... tried this new and wonderful gift that had stepped into my path.

Maybe I would understand it more if I held it close to me and nibbled at it ... untied the wrappings with my teeth to find out what was under all the expectation.

A smile graced my lips. A genuine one this time. A smile that made me feel lighter... more in control of the situation.

Yep. Why should I worry about something that may only be a phase? It may go as quickly as it came ... so I should just go with it.

I lifted my arm away from in front of my eyes and stared at the wall straight ahead of me. Cliff Richard stared back. Hundreds of smiles grinning at me, as if he was in on the act. I grinned back, stuck my tongue out, then turned onto my side to see the solitary poster of Madonna gracing the wall, her breasts on display.

I felt the smile slip down my face, as the realisation crashed down on me. Jo had Cliff Richard on her walls, ceiling, draws and stuck all over her headboard. I had one picture of a woman flashing off her tits and pouting for the camera.

Fuck. This was going to be a long phase.

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Sunday morning shouted 'Hello!' too bloody early, like usual. This took the form of my dad whose philosophy in life was 'If I'm up ... Everybody's up.' The grating sounds of Conway Twitty's (make what you will out of the surname ... I can guarantee it will be not far off what Jo and I called him) 'Hello Darling' boomed around the house.

The neighbours must have really hated us ... I hated us ... especially at 8:46 on a Sunday morning. Before ten, I hated everyone.

I had found sleep difficult, to say the least. Every time I had drifted off, images came into my mind ... some good ... some very unnerving. Talk about confused? My body and my brain were finding it damn near impossible to keep up with the stirrings within. At one point I nearly woke Jo up to tell her, leaned over to her bed and everything, but the courage left me as my hand hovered over her exposed arm.

I lay there, listening to my dad ultimately kill a dire song and just thought about what I was

going to do next. The thought of being 'different' to everyone else still played on my mind ... but the excitement ... the taste of her mouth made my insides crawl around and simper. I knew there and then, whatever happened with Sarah, I would be happy to try.

It was not love ... by any stretch of the imagination. Lust ... a little bit. Inquisitiveness ... most definitely. Just wanting to feel what I had felt last night ... maybe a little bit more.

The grin split my face, and I stretched my arms above my head only to make a little whimpering sound.

Amazing. Truly amazing. Conway Twitty, duetting with my dad, couldn't wake Jo, but a whimper ... bam ... her eyes flew open and she stared at me in the only way someone who has just woken up can do.

'Get your arse out of bed, Cliffy lover.'

'Go fuck yourself ... Madonna lover.'

The grin I had been sporting slipped, painfully, from my face. 'What do you mean by that?' The tone screamed 'GUILTY! I'M A LEZZA!' but the volume was low ... deathly low ... menacingly low and I felt myself sit up in a rigid, back sprain kind of way.

Jo seemed non-plussed, and just stretched, yawning widely and loudly, whilst trying to speak and point at the solitary poster on my wall. 'Cw ... iff ... y ...' Hand to her posters, yawn well and truly underway, 'sh ... ll ... apper.' The hand pointed at Madonna pouting from the wall.

My heart rate should have slowed down at the realisation Jo didn't mean anything by what she said, but it didn't. I think it was because it was closer to the truth than I was ready for ... or would ever be ready for.

That thought haunted me for most of the morning. Until I saw Ash again.

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The time was 2:16pm. It was Sunday afternoon. I had just finished the washing up. Yep. I feel like being clipped. Not for long though. It's boring.

As I was saying, it had just turned two o'clock when the doorbell went. Obviously, being a teenager, I had to be told 'three bloody times' to answer the door.

Imagine my surprise when I flung the door back, scowl firmly in place, and Ash stood there looking absolutely breathtaking. Her raven hair was tied loosely into a ponytail, her fringe wisped all over the place, blown by the wind. She stood there, one hand behind her back, one holding her bag, her whole body language screamed submission. I think that was the thing that surprised me the most ... I had never seen her looking this way ... almost vulnerable.

'Can we talk?' The voice of rich velvet crept over my skin and made all the hairs on my arms stand to attention. The newly found knowledge about myself made me acknowledge what I felt every time I looked at Ash.

Desire.

Lust.

Want.

Need.

And love ... I knew I could easily fall into her arms and never want to leave. She was my dream ... my goal ... something I wanted to aspire to again and again and again.

I also knew Ash had a boyfriend ... however much of a wanker he was.

Then I realised I hadn't answered her. She stood there, eyebrow raised ... waiting. 'God ... Ash ... yes ... come in come in. Sorry ... erm come on in ...' I actually saw her lip curl into her crooked grin and my heart went BA BOOM!

My legs felt unsteady, so I gripped the door harder and harder and harder, willing myself to be sensible. Ash stepped forward, and as she did so, she brought the hand that had been hidden behind her back to present me with a bunch of carnations.

BA BOOM!

'Sorry, Lou ... I ... shouldn't ... I need ... well ... erm ... well ... I ... you ... sorry about Friday.' Jesus. The words came out like a band of juggling acrobats, and I had to blink to tidy them into some kind of order so I could process what she had said. Me being half in a daze didn't help much, especially when I tried to take the flowers, but it came out as a lunge instead, and I fell forward and straight into her arms.

Sounds romantic doesn't it? Well it wasn't. She was at the bottom of three steep steps, whilst I had been at the top. The top of my head cracked her in the mouth with quite a force and I heard her jaw click. The carnations were flattened against us both and apart from the cracking of her jaw, I also heard the distinct snap of the stems.

She had her arms about me in a flash, and I didn't actually touch the floor. I honestly think I could feel myself melting there ... into her ... into her warmth ... into her smell. God ... the smell of her filled my senses and made me want to curl up into her and stay there forever.

I looked up into her face, which tilted down to my own, her blue eyes twinkling ... yes ... twinkling.

Heaven. I was in heaven. I was being held by an angel with twinkling blue eyes and ... a little bit

of blood trickling from the corner of her mouth.

Unconsciously, I lifted my hand to wipe it away, my eyes staring at it as if it would suddenly grow wings and fly away, and just as my fingers connected ...

'Lou! Phone! Someone called Sarah!' My eyes shot up to meet Ash's, which seemed so much closer than a moment before. I felt guilty ... standing there in her arms, thinking unnatural thoughts, thoughts I doubted Ash had ever thought I would have about her. And then I was reminded about how different I actually was ... the proof was waiting on the other end of the phone line.

Sarah.

Shouldn't I be feeling something other than guilt right about now? Shouldn't I be racing to the phone and be giddy just about *now*?

What I was feeling wasn't giddiness or excitement ... just plain old guilt ... plain old confusion at my sudden traitorous emotions ... traitorous body.

I felt Ash lower me to the floor, my bare feet hitting the concrete in cold realisation. My arms loosened from around her and I felt hers follow suit. The height difference became apparent, and I looked up at her only to be met by a confused smile. I was captivated.

'Lou! For God sake! Phone!'

'You'd better get it.' Such a sweet voice ... so soft ... so ... so ...

'Lou!'

'Right! For God's sake ... I'm coming!'

Ash's hands left the safety of my waist and I staggered back, smacking the back of my foot of the step, but barely feeling it ... all I was feeling was the loss of her arms.

Then I felt embarrassment, and the blood raced to fill my cheeks ... and then I felt heat devour my body like I had stood in a flame. 'Come in ...' They were the only words I could squeeze out of my mouth.

With that, I turned and bounced (even with a throbbing ankle) up the steps, down the hall, and grabbed the phone from my dad's hand. He was not best pleased to say the least, and I heard him mumbling as he shuffled off back into the living room.

'H-ello.' I had forgotten it was Sarah. Der. How could I forget something so important? I turned to face the door, and there was my reason. Ash stood there, her back leaning against the wall; her face turned towards me, eyes hooded ... lips slightly parted.



I didn't hear Sarah. I couldn't. There was too much noise in my head to hear her. Blood is a very loud substance when it is whipping around inside your head, did you know that?

'Lou? Are you there? Lou?' Reality forced me back to the voice at the end of the line.

'Sarah ... hi ...'

I spoke to Sarah, but my mind, and eyes, were fully on Ash. I could hear a little confusion from the other end of the line, and I did feel bad. That is the reason I agreed to see her again that night. Seven thirty. Here.

I hung up the phone, stuck my hands in my pockets, and then smiled the weakest of smiles at Ash. Inside I felt I had just screamed out 'I'm going out with a woman tonight! On a date!'

Ash leaned forward, and it seemed as if it happened in slow motion. I was mesmerised.

'Are you free tonight?'

'Huh?'

'I said ... are ... you ... free ... tonight?' Her face held a huge smile that aimed straight at my heart, and if truth be known ... a little lower. I just stood there, mouth open ... fish impression firmly in place. 'Tonight. You and me ... do something fun. Are you up for it?'

Fuck. Fuckity fuck fuck fuck.

I didn't say anything. I was stunned ... erm ... maybe stunned is the wrong word here. Guttled was more like it. Yes. I was gutted.

'I can't.' It came out as a whine. I realised I was getting good at whining, especially when I saw the smile slip from her face and know it was because of me. The world had lost sunshine because of me. 'I'd love to ... but ... I've ... just ...' What? Said you'd see your girlfriend tonight.

She isn't my girlfriend.

Really? That's not the impression I got when you had your tongue down her throat.

What don't you just fuck off?

Touchy. Are you ashamed of being a lezza?

Just fuck off!

You are, aren't you? Ashamed ...

Why I am having an internal monologue, which actually consists of two voices? Mine and ...

erm ... mine. Why am I feeling the pinch of coming to terms with a growing confusion of my sexuality? Why am I so upset that I had just made arrangements to see Sarah when all I wanted was to do was sit in Ash's shadow?

And all the while I was deliberating, she waited. Silent. Patient. Content to wait for me to finish the sentence I had started.

'... made arrangements with a friend from work.' Friend as in *girlfriend*. 'Maybe tomorrow?' The hope in my voice was apparent, but it disintegrated as I saw Ash shake her head, and I knew what was coming next.

'Can't make tomorrow.' My heart sank even further, if that is possible. 'But Tuesday's good for me.'

Was I metaphorically skipping? Most definitely.

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## Chapter Twelve

Sarah was on time. I was early. Call it nerves.

Ever since Ash had left, I had been replaying the events from the previous night. Sometimes it was me and Sarah ... and sometimes Sarah was replaced by someone else ... and I don't have to tell you who that was.

She took me to a café in the heart of Manchester. It was trendy, and students from the university surrounded us. Conversation once again came easy, as we talked about what our futures would hold. Sarah wanted to go into Social Work and I was leaning towards that field too, although I also knew I would change my mind many times before settling on a career.

Before we knew it, it was ten o'clock and we were being ushered out of the door. I have to admit it ... I'd had a good time. Relaxed ... casual.

On our way home, I could see Sarah keep sneaking looks over at me. Excitement burred inside my gut at the expectation of kissing her again, although I did feel weird getting my knickers in a twist at the prospect of kissing another woman. Doubt vied for dominance. This wasn't right. Wanting to kiss someone of the same sex wasn't right ... why did I have to be different to everyone else? Why did I have to want something different to everyone else?

Apart from Sarah. A snigger held itself behind my lips and waited to be freed. Not tonight ... that snigger was staying put.

Once again I had missed Sarah asking me a question. I just said the first thing that popped into my mind. 'Whatever.'

And this led to a very interesting evening. A very interesting evening indeed.

Good job I hadn't been listening, right?

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The question must have been 'Would you mind going somewhere else before I drop you off?' I doubt I would have said yes if I had been listening, so ... in retrospect ... I'm glad I have the attention span of a fruit fly.

I watched in fascination as she manoeuvred her car down the dark country lane that led to the Vale, a nature reserve that was reputedly the high spot for couples. Anticipation guided my thoughts as she pulled up underneath a tree that blocked out the last vestiges of light from the night sky.

The car was strangely silent, and I am sure I heard a pin drop somewhere outside. The squeak from her leather seat made me start, and I turned to face her, barely making out her features, just her shape.

I felt her hand take mine, cool, yet slightly shaking. Her thumb brushed over the top in much the same manner as she had done the previous night at the pictures. My breath caught in my throat and I wanted to reach forward and kiss her again.

The moisture in my mouth was beginning to form, just as it was between my legs. I must be gay ... must be. I had been in situations like this with boys and all I felt was boredom ... nothing in comparison to this wild, unchained feeling that decided to make itself known to me tonight.

Her voice whispered to me in the darkness, sending messages to all parts of me that needed to hear it. Soft, smooth, alluring, enticing. The words she said were nothing spectacular just 'You know I really like you, Lou?' But to have a woman say them to me ... phew.

My tongue poked out and wet my lips. She mimicked the action, making me want to do it all over again just to see her repeat it.

She leaned towards me and I followed suit. This was it. The kiss I had been anticipating all afternoon, all night ...

Her lips slipped onto my own as if they had always known the way. And I melted ...

Slow movements at first, but they gradually began to build and build and build. Our breathing was getting heavy, panting, unrestrained. Snuffling noises matched the sloppiness and wetness of two mouths thoroughly engaged in combat. Tongues were slipping in and out ... touching and caressing swollen lips. Hands began to tangle in hair and I felt Sarah pull me into her, and I went willingly.

God I was horny. She was horny. We were both so horny ... so fucking wet. I felt her hand sneak down the side of the seat, and before I knew it, the chair was reclining, taking both of us down.

She was above me, her lips never leaving mine. Her body was hovering slightly over mine and I could feel a rhythm starting within her ... her hips were moving up and down ... up and down, trying to find purchase on something.

And I should know, because I wanted the same thing. God ... the ache building up within me was crazy ... agony ... bliss. I lifted myself up from the seat, a mammoth task in the space provided, and attempted to slip one leg between hers.

Her mouth left mine and began to kiss my face before moving down my throat, her hot tongue tracing a line down the overheated flesh. A groan left my lips, which was shortly followed by a moan from Sarah ... a moan that travelled along my skin, between my breasts, down my stomach and straight into my groin.

Hot lips suckled my neck, and I could feel Sarah's fingers fighting with the buttons of my top. Pop. Pop. Pop. Slip. Stroke. Stroke. Fuck me ... the sensations rattling around were becoming overbearing. Sarah was pushing the suffocating material away to expose my bra, which by now only half covered my breasts. Wetness enveloped my nipple, bringing it to attention even more than it already was. Jesus ... it was ... oh God ...

Sarah's lips were in control. I felt as if my whole body was taken over by a greater being ... a greater need. And I didn't care ... God no.

My breathing was laboured, my heart was working so hard I felt the vestiges of delirium take me. My fingers were in her hair pushing her face into me ... wanting her to eat me whole ... eat me alive. Hips were pumping against legs ... jeans chaffing my need, hoping for something more ... something solid.

A fleeting image of Ash's face flickered in front of me, and I felt a tinge of shame. Whatever would Ash think of me if she could see me now? Surely she would think this was wrong ... this unnatural act between two women. Wouldn't she?

A pause. Only briefly, as I attempted to dispel this emotion. Sarah didn't notice and began to caress the other breast, and I pushed it into her hand in attempt to recapture the magic of seconds before.

However hard I tried, the feeling of shame gripped me. What was I doing? This wasn't right.

My hips stopped, and I gently untangled my fingers from her hair. Sarah started to slow down, as the realisation dawned on her that I wasn't as into it as I had been, and lifted her face to look into my own.

Concerned eyes, darkened by the night, searched my face for some rhyme or reason. I felt my heart crack just a little when she asked, so softly, so beautifully, so tenderly, 'Lou ... are you

okay?' A weak smile trickled onto my face, and I nodded. 'Am I going to fast ... I know ... well ... I think I know ... this ... erm ... is your first time, right?'

I nodded again, and found difficulty looking into her eyes, which I believed had the power to read my mind ... don't ask me why. 'God ... Lou ... I'm sorry ... so sorry.'

With that, she lifted herself up from over me and plonked down back into the driver's seat. She stared straight ahead of her into the blackness. I lay there, sprawled backwards on the seat, my legs spread, my breasts exposed. The cool air whipped around the exposed nipple, causing the wetness to feel like ice, yet dry it off at the same time.

Slowly I sat forward, fumbled at the base of the seat to bring me back to sitting position, before popping my breast back into my bra, and, with unsteady fingers, began to button up my shirt.

It was totally quiet. I honestly believed I could hear the buttons pushing back through the material.

Sarah's fingers were gripping the steering wheel, and I could see her head dropping forward, her eyes scrunching up ... her lips twisting into a grimace.

What if she didn't want to see me again? What if she thought I was frigid?

Panic shot through me. I know, I know ... one minute I was so turned on I didn't think anything could stop me, the next shame, then fear. In hindsight, it was probably the most natural feeling in the world for the newly discovered lesbian ... well ... not even just for lesbians ...

'I'm sorry, Sarah ... '

I didn't get the rest out.

Sarah's head shot around so quickly, I had to refocus my eyes. 'No! I'm sorry Lou ... God ... I really like you ... really like you. I've blown it haven't I?'

Huh?

'Huh?'

Her hand came out and gripped my own, her face panicked. 'I'm sorry ... I don't know what got into me ... God ... I went too fast didn't I?' I tried to say she hadn't, that I wanted what she had wanted, but she didn't give me chance. 'I promise, I won't do it again ... you mean too much to me ... too much. Can I have another chance? Please?' I could hear the pleading tone in her voice.

To say I was startled would be an understatement. To say I was touched would be redundant. So, I did what any right minded girl in my position would do.

I leaned over and kissed her.

Hard.

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An hour later saw me at home, dishevelled and smiling like a Cheshire cat. I didn't even notice that my shirt was buttoned up completely wrong, and only got an inkling when I saw my Mum look down at my now ruffled top.

Good job it hadn't been Jo ... as she wouldn't have been as forgiving. The ultimate twenty questions would have been well underway less than thirty seconds of me closing the front door. Thankfully, she was staying over at 'a friend's house', or as I knew it ... her boyfriend's. But my parents, bless them, were truly ignorant of their children's nocturnal meanderings.

After making them both a cup of tea (with mutterings of 'personal slave'), I feigned tiredness, trundled upstairs, performed my ablutions, and slipped under the covers.

Images of what had transpired between Sarah and I danced about my head. We hadn't progressed past the kissing and breast fondling stage, but boy ... we were both panting before Sarah put the brakes on things.

I just wished she had told my libido that it wasn't getting anything else. My groin was throbbing with unrequited need and I knew sleep would be a long time coming.

Especially if I didn't find some kind of release.

I lay there in the darkness thinking of Sarah's kisses, her smile, her lips, her mouth, her tongue ... on my breast, and I felt a surge of desire scoot southwards. A thin line of sweat formed on my top lip, and I licked it off enjoying the saltiness that greeted me, enjoying the sensation.

God. I was dying here. I was being consumed by a need that far out weighed anything I had ever experienced before. Unconsciously, my backside pressed into the mattress, pushing my wetness into something firmer. It felt good ... not exactly enough, but a start.

Inquisitive fingers slipped underneath my t-shirt and grazed the underside of my breast. Now ... that felt good ... but still not enough.

A little more boldly, I ventured to the centre, only to be stopped by a very aroused and taut nipple standing waiting for some company. With the tips of my nails, I flicked it from side to side, whilst quickly holding the gasp within my mouth. My eyes fluttered closed. This felt good ... really good.

Using my index finger and thumb, I casually rolled the nipple around, causing a fluttering to concentrate in the area, causing a pooling to congregate between my legs. Hips had decided to begin a dance, as I pressed and released my hips from, and into, the mattress. I crossed my legs

and glorified in the contact as I squeezed the limbs together.

Obviously, still not enough.

I needed more. Definitely ... something more.

Using my free hand, I brushed the outside of my shorts, above the throbbing, and stifled a groan. Before I knew it, my hand was inside, fingers combing through the soft downy hair before venturing lower.

Much lower.

A solitary finger dipped between the folds and was greeted by a wetness.

And it felt wonderful.

I pushed down even further, and pulled the lonely digit back up to nestle in the hairs again, sighing at the same time.

A second finger joined the first, and they both slipped, effortlessly, between the folds, straddling my clit, just adding enough pressure to make the tingles turn into sparks of light.

And back up.

And down ...

And up ...

The moisture was becoming thicker and more needy ... or was it me becoming more needy?

I had set a rhythm up ... slow pushes ... slow pulls ... slow pushes ... slow pulls. But this was becoming increasingly more difficult to keep up. The hand fingering my nipple was increasing the tempo, increasing the pressure, so therefore ... harder pushes ... harder pulls ... quicker pushes ... quicker pulls ... hard quick pushes ... hard, almost grasping, pulls. Hips joined in, aiding the pace, the mattress was a good battleground for the fight in my hand ... my increasingly wet hand ... the hand that was becoming progressively more frantic with this growing desire within me ... this raging desire that threatened to knock me unconscious ...

But ... I was loving it ... loving the friction this hand, this mattress, these fingers could inflict on my unspeakable need ... my growing delirium.

Nipples were forgotten as I grasped the whole breast in my hand, and squeezed and rubbed. The hand down my shorts was increasing the pace and I was panting unrestrainedly. I was clenching my legs around my hand ... falling deeper and deeper into this sensation.

In my state, I imagined blue eyes in front of me ... like they were part of this experience. The

image only made me pump harder with both hands ... my breast was loving the attention, but not as much as my wetness. God ... it was *loving* it ... I was loving it ... loving being loved ...

I was staring straight ahead, enraptured and captured by the blue gaze ... the crooked smile ... the twinkling blue gaze ... twinkling ... twinkling ... twinkling ...

'Fu ...uh ...uh ... uh ...ck!' It came out as a hiss, as the orgasm ripped through me, leaving me shaking ... leaving me wanting ... leaving me craving those blue, twinkling eyes.

The eyes of Ashley Richards.

Not Sarah's blue eyes ... as it should have been ... but Ash's.

I turned onto my side feeling an emptiness fold over me like a blanket. I should have been ecstatic. But I wasn't, obviously. I should have felt the droplets of sleep envelop me. But I knew sleep would be a long time coming. I should have been content with what I had with Sarah. But I wasn't.

She wasn't enough for me, although I wished she was. Because the person who could fill this ache didn't think of me that way. And it was something I had to live with.

Ashley Richards.

Now ... she would be enough ...

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## **Chapter Thirteen**

Tuesday night eventually crawled around and stood languidly at my door, saying in an off hand manner 'Whatever.' I must have lost weight, as my appetite plummeted and every thing I put in my mouth tasted, and had the texture of, cardboard.

Sarah had called just before I had left and asked if she could see me that night. I didn't even feel bad when I told her I had made other arrangements, but when I heard the disappointed 'Oh ... right' and then the silence, I suggested Friday. I could hear her smile down the phone. Jo had been watching from the doorway, feigning reading the back of the newspaper, but I knew by her stance she was ear wiggling.

As I placed the receiver back down, her eyes popped over the top of the page and I could see a question forming. But then ... nothing.

It was just that brief look that put me on my guard. I felt exposed all of a sudden, well ... all of the time, and believed everyone could see what I was up to ... how different I was to everyone else. Sadness washed over me so quickly, only to disperse like a sprinkling of water on a summer's day. The urge to tell her rose to the surface, and I had to physically reign it in.



I loved my sister ... still do ... but I didn't know how to tell her I wasn't who she thought I was. Deep down I thought she would be fine, and help me make the right decision. But there was still an area of doubt, which played with my sensibilities. What if she thought I was a freak? What if she disowned me ... told me I was an abomination? I couldn't bear to think of her thinking of me that way ... You could say I always tried to be what she wanted me to be ... whatever that is.

For two days, I had been a bag of nerves. Don't ask me why ... I couldn't tell you ... well apart from the fact I was infatuated with one tall, dark haired beauty who still thought of me as her six year old friend. And apart from the fact I was suppose to be involved with another woman ... a woman ... Jesus ... a woman.

I digress.

I met Ash at Granada Bowling in Belle Vue. Quite out of the way, but definitely worth the trek on the 317 bus with all the people who were going into Manchester for the evening. I did feel a little out of place, sitting on the top deck with all the smokers, watching the world go by. But I didn't care ... I was going to see Ash. And that made me smile like an idiot out of the window.

I had always ... and I mean ALWAYS ... been shite at bowling. I was definitely 'Miss Gutter Ball 1984'. Every well meant lob with the excruciatingly heavy ball (with the sticky holes), ended up rolling complacently down the side and into the gutter. I did manage to scrape a 36 in the first game, which I was quite proud of. I ignored all the well-laid advice Ash told me ... I think it was more out of embarrassment than thinking I knew better.

Eventually I caved. Ash, my saviour, took it upon herself to teach me how to play. Her first move was to change the weight of the ball I had been brandishing about from a 14 to a 10.

Secondly ... and this is the point I liked the most ... she stood behind me, manoeuvring me into position of the arrows. The feeling of her standing so close behind me: her body pressing into my back and side; the smell of her filling my nostrils like an enchantment.

Whatever she said, I can't tell you. Whatever she did is a blur. All I could concentrate on was the feeling of her hands moving over my arms and back ... even the view of the top of her head bewitched me as she knelt down in front of me moving my feet into position. I could see her lips moving but I couldn't hear a word. I was deaf ... and mute by all accounts. I just nodded like the proverbial village idiot and grinned vacantly.

Ash was a good player ... well in comparison to me anyone was. But to put it into some kind of real perspective, she scored 186 in her first game. And I think I put her off ... trying to hold in all that laughter ... yeah ... sounds about right.

Obviously, with all my free tuition, my game escalated to a grand score of 92. To Ash's 179 ... I was getting better and she was *going down*, which I held great delight in ribbing her with. Mutterings of 'I've gone up fifty six and you've lost seven points.'

She just smiled, that crooked smile, but the rest of her face said 'You wait lady.'

But I was flying by this stage. Not because of the score ... not by any stretch of the imagination. It was just being with her ... her and me ... Lou and Ash ... Ash and Lou. My heart was singing, I was floating, and my blood was bubbling like a wild stream rushing down the side of a mountain.

Yep. That corny. But that's how I felt ... corny. My blood was doing Julie Andrews impressions and I was loving it.

Until the third set.

I should have quit whilst I was ahead.

I should have plucked off those freaky stripy shoes, jumped on the 317, and gone home whilst I still had any credibility left.

But no.

I stayed and took it like a man ... woman ... teenager ... whatever.

Ash was relentless in her heckling. I thought she was trying to help me, not make me fuck up more than usual. Just as I was about to throw the ball down the alley, she would cough, sneeze, mutter something obscene (which I quite liked) ... generally, she was out to teach me a lesson.

After the fourth consecutive gutter ball, Ash jumped out of her seat, raced over to me, and as I was nearly fully around, threw her arms around me to deliver a bone-crushing hug. My feet lifted off the floor as she swept me in a circle, the room spinning around me but not because of the movement.

It was the kiss on the cheek that was my undoing. A full smacker right on the left cheek, the onomatopoeic slap on the skin informed me it was slightly wet, as I had no sensation left in any part of my body ... apart from the places where her body encountered mine. Skin pulsed and grew hot under hers and once again, I was totally lost in her ...

I didn't even realise I had done it. I felt such a fool ... but I couldn't help pushing my face into the nape of her neck and inhaling her scent. She smelled perfect ... perfect ... perfect ... and I was lost into her for those brief seconds before she lowered me back onto the ground. I missed the closeness of her, but she didn't let me go straight away. I looked up into her face and a small splodge of air slipped out from my mouth.

Her eyes were slightly hooded, and the cock sure smile she had sported had vanished, only to be replaced by a look of confusion ... of indecision. Lips slightly parted in wonder: the fullness mesmerising. I wanted to stretch up onto my toes and just ... brush my lips across them.

Just the once ... and I would be contented.

Just the once.

But no. Reason gripped me before I made an even bigger fool of myself than I already had, and I pulled out of the encirclement of her arms. I watched them fall limply to her sides and she looked a little dishevelled ... but beautiful.

Obviously.

'Your turn.' Was that my voice? Small and distant? I felt like a ventriloquist's dummy, the mouth moving but the noise coming from another person.

She nodded, but stood there for a few more seconds, before she walked past me, picked up her ball and threw it down the lane without even focusing.

And she still knocked down nine pins.

And I lost ... miserably ... 49 to her 198.

I think it was all the touching ... or the thoughts of touching that made me lose the plot big time.

It was worth it though.

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After the games, we sat in the café area sipping coke in polystyrene cups with straws. What is about drinking coke through a straw that makes you feel like a kid? Or maybe it was sitting with Ash that made me feel like a kid ... who knows?

We chatted as if nothing had happened, although my mind kept on drifting to the feel of her arms, hands, body ... the smell of her ... the longing to taste her however briefly.

What was wrong with me? Couldn't I just have her friendship?

The internal struggle was trying to choke me ... I wasn't concentrating on what she was saying, and before I knew it I was agreeing to bowling lessons every Tuesday. Not that I minded seeing her every Tuesday, but ... bowling? My arm was throbbing as it was ... Jesus ... I'd look like a one armed weight lifter before I even hit the hundred mark.

But I would see Ash ... definitely see Ash ... once a week. I could feel the smile sneak up from a dark place inside me and trickle onto my face.

Now ... that was definitely worth the pain.

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Stephen picked us up from outside the Bowling Alley. It saved me clambering on the bus by myself, as I didn't really fancy travelling back on my own ... buses at night were not the safest of places for a young girl to be. Plus the fact Ash would have been getting on a different one.

And ... this way, I got to spend just that extra bit of time with her.

Thankfully, Tracy was nowhere to be seen. I couldn't deal with her glaring looks ... and no one mentioned her absence, which gave the indication she was still in the bad books.

I felt like gloating.

Ash insisted sitting in the back with me, even though the passenger seat was empty.

Now that was the straw that broke the camel's back.

The smile I sported could definitely be defined as a gloating one.

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## **Chapter Fourteen**

The next few weeks were filled with a seesaw of emotions. On one end of the seesaw was my growing relationship with Sarah, whilst at the other my definite attraction for Ash.

Don't get me wrong; I didn't just see Ash when we went bowling. No. We saw each other quite often at college, had lunch or a coffee, and we did see each other at least one evening over the weekend.

Well ... most weekends anyway.

Every time I saw her, this innate need to be more than what we were would fill me up, and I found it more and more difficult not blurting out how I felt. This led to a rising sexual frustration that could rival any teenage boy's ... that I can guarantee.

Evidently, these hormones, these wild wonderings of my sexually befuddled brain were tantamount to agony, and the only cure I had was Sarah.

Poor Sarah. Poor sweet Sarah. I really liked her ... honestly I did. But she wasn't ... well she wasn't ... Ash.

But being filled with these raging hormones, hormones that needed avenging, what else could I do but to try and get some satisfaction from the only person I could. And that wasn't me ... as I had nearly grown hard patches on my right hand ... my left hand ... my fingers ... you get the drift?

So Sarah it was.

And ...

I did feel bad ...

... but I also felt incredibly horny too.

Evenings with Sarah had developed into something more carnal that I had anticipated from the first night at the cinema. I was still wary about who knew ... and nobody did ... but I was finding the deceit difficult to conceal, especially when I would flush beetroot every time somebody mentioned either of their names, even though I wasn't involved with Ash.

We hadn't had sex as yet, but it wasn't for the want of me trying. Our explorations had increased in pace, but not below the waistband. The upper halves of our bodies were explored thoroughly, with hands fingers, mouth, lips and teeth. But the achingly wet part went without.

Sarah was cautious ... a little too cautious. I think she was still wary about frightening me off, although me trying to shove my hands down her pants should have convinced her otherwise, not to mention my begging her to let me touch her ... for her to touch me.

It was just before Christmas that I got my wish.

After a very sexually frustrating afternoon drooling over my unobtainable friend, I met Sarah nearly panting. She had to physically drag my hands from her groin at one point.

As I sat there breathless, willing my throbbing need to behave, she asked me a very simple, but extremely promising question.

'What are your plans for Saturday night?'

Not much of a question, I hear you say. But I haven't finished yet ...

'Would you like to stay over at my house ... my parents are away for the weekend?'

Now ... I imagine you are thinking I whooped for joy, or jumped her bones, or screamed out 'Yes!' into the darkness.

But no. I sat there and stared at her ... mute ... stupid ... silent ... stunned.

It was here. At last. My chance to relieve this tension, and I couldn't respond. Inside my head I was screaming 'Tell her you idiot ... say yes!'. But on the outside I looked like a statue, completely rigid: emotionless.

Only with Sarah's movement ... her nervous movement ... the slight shaking of her hand ... did I break free from the spell that had befallen me. My eyes moved at first, as I watched her gingerly

take the steering wheel in both her hands and slowly increase the pressure. She was facing forward by this point, her eyes digesting the night sky, trying to appear nonchalant, but coming out pensive instead.

I lifted my hand slowly to her cheek and brushed my fingers down her face, past her jaw, down her throat, until they rested on her collarbone.

Blue eyes dipped to take in her hands before turning their gaze into my own waiting green eyes. It was not until I knew I had her full attention, did I utter those three little words ... softly and tinged with promise.

'T'd love to.'

The smile that rained over her face could have melted the ice caps in the Antarctic.

We had a date.

And my aching need couldn't wait, although my heart wasn't too sure.

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Saturday night came around.

Eventually.

My shattered nerves said 'About bloody time,' as seven thirty arrived, and so did Sarah. And I had only left her two hours before.

My parents didn't say a word about me staying out all night at 'a friend's house'. I hadn't told Jo, as I had only seen her briefly. I had walked in from work, and she had been on her way out to meet her boyfriend at the ice skating rink in Altrincham.

Not that I could have told her anyway ... I couldn't lie to her about what I was up to ... and why I had to stay over at Sarah's house when there was a perfectly good bus service running from her house to mine. And she may have got her boyfriend to pick me up, as they would have to pass Sarah's to get home.

I'm procrastinating aren't I?

Okay ... I'll skip the journey ... the offer of a drink ... the desperate need to use the bathroom every two minutes ... the polite conversation ... every thing up until the part I know you want to hear.

The consummation.

The deed.

The act.

The bountiful display of the beast with two backs.

The event that changed my view on life, love and sex. The event I believed kicked out the last clinging vestiges of heterosexuality.

The event that spliced open the bare longings of a sixteen year old girl in lust.

I knew it was on the cards ... I knew tonight was going to be the night ... I knew I was shitting my pants ...

But I still didn't expect it, if you know what I mean.

We were sat on the sofa listening to an album Sarah's Dad had brought back from his trip to the States. Bruce Springsteen's gravelly voice had just emitted *'Hey little girl is your Daddy home'* when she made her move. Her hand came out and caressed my thigh, and I nearly dropped the glass of wine I was nursing.

*'I got a bad desire'*

Tell me about it Bruce.

Sarah leaned over and gently released the glass from my death-like grip, placing it on the table at the side of the couch.

*'I can take you higher'*

Her face came closer to mine and her lips brushed against my mouth in a butterfly kiss.

I tasted her lipstick, and leaned forward to capture those lips once again. A little harder this time. I could feel her pushing back into me, and slipped backwards onto the sofa, taking Sarah with me.

The kissing was getting more heated now, and my heart was fit to saw through my chest and scream into the night.

*'At night I wake with the sheets soaking wet'*

Like my underwear. Definitely soaked.

My hands were on a mission, and were definitely going under cover.

And as her tongue slipped into my mouth, the last thing I heard was ...

*'Only you can cool my desire  
I'm on fire.'*

Oh yeah ... bring it on.

The kissing was passionate to say the least. All my inhibitions had packed their bags and headed for the airport. I was on a one way trip to Satisfactionville, and Sarah was the driver. And God ... could she drive ...

Drive me to the brink of want ... of need ... of desire. Drive me to the insanity of a yearning to be touched that belied rhyme or reason.

God ... she was hot ... and I was dying ... she was so fucking hot ... and I was squirming underneath her trying to push my hands onto her bare flesh. Her fingers fumbled on the buttons to my shirt, nervous fingers struggling with the smallness of the shiny adornments, trying to force them out of their slits, her lips digging deeper into my own.

Cool fingers slipped underneath my cotton shirt, and tentatively stroked below my nipple, which was already ready and waiting for contact. Her thumb pushed the material down and rubbed the nipple flesh on flesh. But like the impatient child, I pushed my breast into her hand, wanting her to take it all ... move things along.

My hips were pushing upwards, craving to introduce one wet need into something firmer. And then back down. And back up ... down and ... up ... constant ... rhy ... thm ... up ... staying ... and ... pull ... ling back.

The contact of her thigh felt wonderful. The feel of her hand on my breast, divine. The pressure of her mouth on mine ... bliss.

But this wasn't enough. I needed more ... God ... how I needed more. I gripped her backside, such a firm, rounded backside, and pulled her into me.

Still not enough.

One of my hands snaked underneath the base of her bra and cupped her soft breast, and squeezed. Tracing my thumb across the erect bud, almost expert in this field by now.

Her moan filled my mouth, so I squeezed harder. Another groan ... well more like a moan. I broke my lips from hers and rained tiny kisses over her chin and throat. She raised her head to allow me access, which I took gladly, sucking and teasing the skin between my lips, silently begging for her to strip me naked and ravish me.

'Jesus ... Lou ... god ...' I kept on kissing her throat, 'I need ... we need ...' I know ... tell me about it. 'We need to go upstairs ...'

My lips pulled away, realisation dawned on me.



I was just about to go upstairs and have sex. With a woman. First time ... with a woman ... or anyone for that matter.

I didn't know what to do.

Don't get me wrong ... I knew what I wanted to do ... just didn't know how to do it.

My face must have said it all. I actually felt my jaw drop and my face slacken. Sarah pulled herself away from me and ducked her head down to capture my gaze. 'What's up, love?'

I couldn't answer her, but I did close my mouth ... nothing more of a sexual turnoff than a gobsmacked expression.

Sarah looked at me intently, concern radiating from her. She thought I was backing out ... that I didn't want this. 'It's not you ...' more concerned looks, and I hastily added 'I just ... well ... I ...'

Confusion scrambled onto her features, suddenly to be replaced by a growing understanding, then a smile ... a reassuring smile that warmed my belly and made me feel a little more in control. 'Don't worry, honey ... you can leave that up to me.' I didn't know if I liked the sound of that, and my expression said so. 'I mean ... well ... I'll show you ... guide you ... and it's a case of doing what feels right ...'

That was better. I planted a soft kiss on her lips, and nodded my head in acceptance of what was to come.

Without a word, she took my hand and kissed the palm as I curled my fingers around her chin.

And from a distance, I could hear my voice saying 'Let's go.'

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Nervous? You bet. Scared? Granted. Excited? Well ... I think that's a given.

Sarah had led me upstairs to her room, her thumb brushing the back of my hand reassuringly, taking shy looks over her shoulder as we neared the place where I would soon lose my innocence, and hopefully this ache in my gut, chest and groin.

Her room was like any other student's room, but I could tell she had tidied it up for my visit, as the smell of polish still clung in the air. The lamp next to her double bed was on already, and the corner at the top of the duvet was folded back in invite.

I heard the door close behind me and then felt Sarah come up behind. I closed my eyes and waited for her touch.

I didn't have to wait long.

Her hands slipped onto my shoulders, and she gently caressed them. My eyes fluttered ... it felt good. Her body came closer to mine and I could feel her breath hitting my neck in short gasps. Then her lips ... tentative in their quest ... hovered over the nape of my neck, making all the short hairs at its base quiver.

I could feel her push herself into me, her breasts against my back, her hands slipping down my arms in one long stroke only to snake around my waist and up the front, to cup my breasts.

Nipples strained ... I pushed into her hands ... the butterflies in my stomach transforming into something more carnal ... more wanting ... more ... *just* more.

Before I knew what was happening I was naked. Sarah had slipped my clothes from my body ... and I allowed her, completely unresisting under her hands ... her lips ... her mouth ... her tongue. My knees were beginning to weaken, all my energy concentrating on the building up of sensation that was crawling over me like a rash ... a very ... nice ... rash ... a very ... demanding rash ... an erotic rash ... a consuming rash ...

I turned in her arms and cupped her face to stare in her eyes. I don't know what I was looking for, but for a split second I felt the rush of disappointment, as what I had been searching for wasn't there. But ... I carried on anyway. She turned her face and planted a delicate kiss onto my palm, reassuring me with her eyes.

Her lips were moist and inviting. Her flesh was pliant and warm. My hands were nervous ... shaking ... trying to fulfil a need that I knew would kill me or drive me mad.

I undressed her, marvelling at her body; the body of a woman; the body of the woman I was going to sleep with.

Well ... not exactly sleep.

The bed was soft yet firm as I sat on the edge. Sarah sat opposite. Touching. Stroking. Caressing the fears and anxieties from me.

Desire was building and forcing the fear below ... and down ... and away. Mouths sought mouths ... tongues sought tongues. Nipples were licked and nipped. Stomachs were treated to tentative fingers searching southwards. Southwards to the pooling wetness of want that had collected around my now dominant need.

Fingers parted lips and pushed down to the core of this moisture ... this rising flood ... this pit of delight. And like a good student I followed her actions, to be greeted with a short gasp from her parted mouth, the air rushing against my face.

I could feel myself falling backwards ... in slow motion, the movements sure and steady ... a complete juxtaposition to how I was feeling.

A hot body covered my own ... smooth and supple and ripe for the taking. Skin brushed against skin, the sweat mingling in a growing sense of neediness ... the rhythm becoming erratic.

I pushed my thigh between Sarah's leg and she clamped her own around it, capturing our foraging fingers inside, and her hips picked up the tempo, her breathing hoarse and fast ... my breathing keeping pace ... my hand rubbing her clit with growing confidence. I was mimicking her actions ... nothing was truly me ... nothing was what I had thought of myself ... just a copy.

But that didn't stop it from feeling good ... from feeling incredibly good.

I looked into her face ... grimacing with promise ... her teeth biting her bottom lip as she thrust herself into me ... onto me ... her hand becoming more confused. I knew she was close.

'Fuck me, Lou ... for god's sake fuck me!' But ... I thought I was? I was doing everything she was doing ... 'Fingers ... God ... fingers ... inside ... now ...'

Ah!

I lowered my hand to her entrance, and waited outside, revelling in the feel of her juices dripping down before pushing myself into her ... just one finger ... slipping effortlessly ... 'More ...' Just the one word, which was gasped out into my neck, her own hand raging with tension on my craving desire.

A second followed, then a third. I could feel her pushing down and swallowing them inside, the tightening of her walls crushing my fingers. A low keening moan broke free from her. I knew she was cumming ... and I forgot my own want and watched her ... watched her ... mesmerised by the agonisingly rapturous expression distorting her beautiful face as she came ... falling forwards ... her mouth open on my throat ... the wail of her orgasm bouncing off my skin just before she sucked on my flesh.

Then I felt her smile, her lips twisting in the post-coital smile of the satisfied. Teeth nipped my neck and travelled upwards, along my jaw line, until they reached my mouth, where they covered my lips in a wet, contented kiss ... soft and consuming.

Her hand came up to my breast and teased around the edge, slowly, until expert fingers rolled the nipple around, gently pinching at the same time. A spark of adrenaline rushed from all parts of my body to dissect itself and charge to my breast or a more southerly region. Both were ready. Both were willing. Both were stoking a fire of expectation.

'Your turn, love.'

With that, Sarah began her descent ... kissing and nibbling all my exposed skin along the way, building and prepping the fire burning below decks; the once smouldering heat was turning into something a little out of control.

And it felt good. So fucking good.



My smile was weak to say the least, but I don't think Sarah noticed ... just thought I was weak from my climax. She clambered up my body, placing soft, wet kisses along the way, until she reached my mouth. I could taste myself on her lips ... musky ... a little sweet ... different.

And evidence of what I had just done.

But it didn't stop me licking around her lips trying to capture the taste of my traitorous body.

I think Sarah wanted to go at it again, by all the soft stroking, kissing and nuzzling she was doing, but I just couldn't ... not then. My kisses became more chaste, intermittent with shy smiles and tentative strokes, until she finally accepted there was going to be no round two ... well ... not right away.

She slipped to my side and pulled me over to her, my face pressing into the dip of her throat. It felt comfortable lying on my side being held by her. Not fantastic, or that it filled me with peace or completeness ... just comfortable.

Deft fingers stroked my arm, calming me for some reason, lulling my eyes closed ... chasing away the demons of doubt ... allowing me to doze off ...

And that's how the evening ended. Me in Sarah's arms, sleeping the sleep of the exhausted.

Although, the exhaustion came through the depletion of emotions that had ravaged my body, the guilt, the yearning ... the longing for something else ... something different ... *someone* ... different.

And the knowledge that *that* someone could never be mine.

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Dawn found me lying on my side with my back to Sarah. She was spooned up behind me with her arm draped over my stomach, and I could feel her breath on my skin. It was pleasant, but not the all-consuming emotion I had been expecting after making love for the first time.

I liked Sarah. A lot. She had introduced me to the part of me that was so well hidden I would have needed an archaeologist to uncover it. I liked kissing her, touching her ... making love to her. I liked the sensations her mouth, tongue and fingers brought out in me. I enjoyed the orgasm ... the first one I'd experienced with someone else other than myself.

But I didn't like the fact it wasn't Ash.

And I didn't like the fact I had used Sarah to fulfil the constant craving I had for my friend.

What to do?

Did I tell Sarah? Tell Ash? Go without sex? Rely solely on my right hand for comfort and contentment?

Or did I play the game ... accept what I had with Sarah and just carry on.

Thoughts whirled around my head, thoughts of Ash versus Sarah ... and although I really wanted Ash to win, reason made me go with Sarah. The old adage 'Better the Devil you know' was the only thought I could muster.

A sigh escaped, and I felt Sarah's arm tighten around me.

Here goes nothing ... or everything, depending on how you looked at it.

I turned in her embrace and began to kiss her throat. A contented whimper broke loose from her and I could feel her fingers trailing themselves along my spine, down to my arse to cover the flesh with goosebumps.

The fire began once again ... at first a flicker ... then a flame ... and then control was given over as I fell into her and her desire for me. Hungry kisses, touches and whispered words spewed forth into this fire.

I just had to be careful I didn't get burned ... or burn Sarah along the way.

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## **Chapter Fifteen**

Later that day saw me leaving Sarah and making my way home. My heart was heavy, but I was definitely sore in certain places ... a nice kind of sore, if you get my drift.

Jo was waiting for me as I entered the bedroom, and hardly gave me moment to catch my bearings before she bombarded me with questions. Mainly, where had I spent the night.

It was too much. The heaviness in my chest split open and seeped throughout the rest of my body seeking release. I stumbled towards the bed, bag dropping to the floor, and fell into a heap, barely catching myself.

The sob wracked through my body and broke out into the stunned room. A distinct wail ... a howl of agony ... a definite realisation of what I had done. I had had sex with someone for the wrong reasons ... used someone to satiate my own longings. And I was ashamed.

Ashamed.

Ashamed of my own inability to say no. Ashamed because I used that sweet girl. Ashamed because I enjoyed it.

But mainly I was ashamed because I was gay ... and I had held it inside, bottling it all away to fester and become something sordid and freakish. I knew it wasn't ... how can two people loving each other be wrong, whatever sex they are.

The thought of telling anyone made me nauseous ... collected in my throat and physically choked me. Tears rained down my face, and I could feel the heaving sobs rattle and spill onto and into the covers of my bed. Jo was behind me, her smooth comforting hand on my shoulder softly rubbing along the heaving muscles trying to soothe me.

Which, obviously, made things ten times worse and my sobbing increased. I could hear her trying to shush me ... calm me ... comfort me ... words jumbling over each other in an attempt to redeem themselves ... in order to redeem me for some stupid reason.

I felt her lift me, turn me, capture me in her comforting embrace and I buried my face into the safety of her, believing this would be the last time it would happen.

I cried ... and cried ... and cried some more. Jo stroked my face, removing the tears with loving fingers, planting soft sisterly kisses on my head, gently rocking me into a disturbing sense of oblivion.

'Come on, Lou ... it can't be all that bad.' And I was off again, turning my face into her and burying deep, trying to hide my shame. 'If you are crying for what I think you're crying for, then don't. It doesn't bother me who you sleep with.'

I stopped mid sob ... it kind of jammed in my throat in surprise, until I trickled it out, all the power from it evaporating.

I lay there. And ...

... waited.

All I could hear was our breathing (mine definitely more ragged), and the sound of my heart chasing the blood back into the shocked veins in a dire attempt to bring all my senses back to life.

'What do you mean?' It came out small, distant, accusatory.

Jo sucked in a breath. Deep and full. 'I mean ... I don't care who you sleep with ... I'll still love you no matter what.'

I lifted myself up and stared into her face. She couldn't mean what I thought she meant. How on earth would she know about whom I slept with, or whom I wanted to sleep with for that matter?

Hiccupping sobs broke free, sobs of the child who has cried too long and too hard, and I met her eyes full on.

Clear and focused. Truthful. Caring. Open.

Just Jo. My Jo. My sister, Jo.

I felt exposed. All the experiences from the night before came back and played themselves out in my head. I felt my head shake itself from side to side, trying to dispel the image of Sarah between my legs ... my hand on her wet ...

'Lou?'

Reality snapped back and I just stared at her in awe. Once again Jo had shown she loved me ... whatever. And at this moment I needed all the love I could get. But did she really know what, or should I say whom, I was crying about? How would she feel when she realised I had used Sarah? Would she be as forgiving then?

'Tell me ... whatever it is, I will still love you. I'm your sister ... you should know me by now.'

Images of Jo comforting me when my life crashed ten years ago. Sounds of her voice comforting me after bad dreams ... words of advice ... caring messages over the years. The feel of her hugs when I felt low ... the pat on the back when I had done anything good ... the ear I moaned to when I felt like a moan. Her laughter when I told her a funny story ... the tears when I explained why animal testing was cruel ... the jokes ... the friendship ... the always knowing she would be there ...

... no matter what.

And she had been.

Always there ... always there ... for me. In every way, shape or form, she had always been there.

So why would now be any different? She loved me. And I loved her.

The breath I sucked in seemed ice cold in my throat ... like the winds of change. This was it ... I had to tell her what had happened. I had to let her know who I really was ... what I had done.

I sat up, leaned over to my bedside cabinet and snatched a tissue from the box. Jo watched intently as I wiped my eyes, and then blew my nose vigorously. I was shaking inside ... quaking with fear, but I knew this was the right thing to do. I had to come clean ... had to share this secret with someone before it burst from me.

I fiddled about with my top, smoothing the wrinkles to no avail ... wasting time.

Jo still sat there. Silent. Waiting. And I prattled about ... nervous, swallowing rapidly.

I could tell she was just about to say something, but I beat her to it.



'I'm gay.' Short and to the point.

Jo's face didn't change at all. She just stared at me and allowed the simple sentence to be fully digested. I thought I had done the wrong thing, as images of her slapping me ran rampant through my head.

And then she made her move, and I physically shrunk backwards as her hand stretched out towards me.

Her eyes clouded with dismay as she realised what I thought she was going to do, and she gentled her movements before pushing a stray lock of hair behind my ear... cocking her head to the side to stare into my eyes again. Such green eyes ... a little lighter than my own, but filled with ... understanding.

'I know.'

Huh? How did she know? I only found out I had feelings for women a few months back.

'How?'

'Just call it sisterly instinct. Sometimes I know you better than you know yourself.' Relief formed and swirled inside me, but I didn't feel I had control over my feelings yet.

Jo knew. Jo didn't care. Jo still loved me.

It all seemed too much to accept, and I had to quickly swallow the tears back down again as she took my hand and gave it a squeeze. 'It's not the end of the world you know?' I looked up at her, head held in submission. She smiled at me, a soft sweet smile in the hopes to reassure me. Tentatively, she sucked in a breath, bit her lip and asked the million-dollar question.

'Did you stay at Ash's last night?'

'Why would I do that?' At least I think that is what I said.

'Well ... erm...' Cough. 'I thought you ... her ... erm ... well ... you know?'

'Me and Ash! Together!'

Jo leaned backwards, probably to escape the volume of my voice. Her face showed surprise at my shrill tone and look of total disbelief. I drew in a sharp breath and tried to mentally fiddle with the volume settings of my voice box before repeating my previous statements, but now as questions. 'Me and Ash? Together?'

'I thought ... well ... there has always been ... oh never mind.' She looked nervous to say the least, but not as nervous as I felt. I was sitting here, in my bedroom, telling my sister I was gay, and her response was to think I was shagging my childhood friend.

If only.

Yes ... if only.

Sadness welled up inside and began to squirm its way upwards and outwards. I wanted to be with Ash ... God, did I? And what would Jo make of me sleeping with Sarah knowing she wasn't the one I wanted to be sleeping with?

'It's Sarah.'

I could tell Jo didn't know whom I was talking about, as Sarah had never come into the house, she had always met me outside ... and the closest she had been was the front door.

'Sarah ... who I work with ...' A spark of recognition hit home, but then she smiled the smile of someone who is completely without a clue. 'We started seeing each other about three months ago, but ...' Could I actually say it? 'We only ... erm ... slept ... together ... *for the first time last night.*' The last bit was a bit rushed, but at least I got it out, although my face was near incandescent by this stage.

So was Jo's. But there was something else underlying the red glow.

Confusion.

And this made me confused ... even more than I already was.

Seconds turned into minutes, and minutes felt like hours. The air in the room was becoming smothering and I could feel the heat travelling up my body in waves, achingly aware I should say something ... anything.

Expressions such as 'What about United then?' didn't seem the right way to go for some reason.

A little bit more time elapsed, until I put my blonde brain into gear and came out with a well-thought through question.

'What's the matter?' Pure genius, if I say so myself. Short. To the point. Succinct, yet oddly full of possibility. I watched her squirm on the bed, looking at Cliff on the walls as some kind of support. 'For God's sake, Jo, ask me ... or tell me ... just say something.'

Her lips pursed, readying themselves for action and then ... nothing. I stared at her; the nerves rustling around my stomach had mugged off, fed up with the wait to flutter and be all-dramatic. So, I poked her in the ribs, which did bring a much-needed smile to her face, and I felt her physically relax.

'What is it, Jo? Have I disappointed you?'

'Why on earth should you say that?'

'By not being what you wanted me to be ... you know ... straight?'

The next bit surprised even me, and I had known this girl as long as I could remember.

She laughed ... head back laughing ... laughed ... yep ... laughed. I know ... I'm repeating myself, but she ...l-a-u-g-h-e-d.

Not happy.

Not in the slightest.

Here I was, pouring out my innermost secret to the one person who I respected and loved, and she sat here laughing *AFTER* telling me she already knew.

Not a happy camper, by any stretch of the imagination.

Ire niggled inside me, and I wanted to stand up and stamp my foot, in the most adult way possible, obviously. But I didn't. I just sat there and glowered, waiting for her to stop, which she eventually did when she noticed my straight thin lips and firm jaw.

'Sorry ... I'm sorry, Lou. It's just ... just ...'

'What? Just what?' I glared, and she tried to stop the spluttering laugh escaping from her mouth. So, like the injured party, I glared some more.

'You.' Well that made me feel better, that's for sure. 'How on earth could you feel I could ever be disappointed in you, whatever you did.' She put her arm around my shoulder and pulled my stiff body into her arms. 'Maybe we don't always agree on things, or I don't like the things that you do ...' I made a move to interrupt. 'No ... hear me out.' With that she shoved my head firmly underneath her arm, as if holding it in place.

'As I was saying ...' I could feel the words rattling around her chest, echoey, thudding. 'I could never be disappointed in you ... ever. It is all about acceptance ... accepting we are not infallible. Accepting there are times in our life where we say and do things we are not proud of, but accepting we made a mistake and move on.'

Her grip loosened around me and I took the opportunity to look into her face. A weird angle, though, as I could see her face from the chin up, but she was still perfect in my eyes. She was staring straight ahead, totally focused on what she was saying.

'So, Lou. Accept yourself ... accept who and what you are ... what you have done, and what you will do ... faults and all. And if people love you ...' a soft kiss on my forehead, 'whatever it is ... they will eventually accept you. Disappointment is a brief emotion, something we look back and learn from, not something we build our lives upon.'

Wow. What a speech. Now, you already know how much I love my sister, but this took the biscuit. I felt my chest swell with pride for even knowing someone like this.

It was so true. We spend our lives in fear of disappointing others, but we fail to think that within this time we are disappointing ourselves. Something to chew over ... definitely.

We sat there, snuggled up on my bed and just listened to the sounds of each other's breathing. I felt so calm, so at peace, so ... well ... serene in a way, although I knew the feeling wouldn't last.

Then Jo broke the serenity.

'I honestly thought you were shagging Ash ... you go on enough about how bloody fantastic she is.'

I shot up, peace ... tranquillity ... calmness shot to pieces, and my response came out so quickly; I think I nearly gave the game away. 'You must be joking, right? Me and Ash ... as if?' Maybe not the response, but the speed and the fake tone of incredulity made up the guilty parties.

And then she laughed again. A knowing laugh. A cocky laugh that made me wriggle with teenage anger.

'Right. I believe you, but thousands wouldn't.' And then she laughed again.

Bugger.

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## **Chapter Sixteen**

Christmas was just a week away, and college was coming to the end of term. Flyers announced a 'Chrimbo Get Together' at the Students' Union, and promises of cheap drinks, music and 'Lots Lots More', whatever that entailed.

It was to be hosted on the same night as Sarah's Christmas get together at Uni, and she had asked me to go.

But ...

Ash had asked me to go to the one at college.

Decisions ... Decisions ... no decision ... Ash won out.

Sarah was gutted I wouldn't be going with her, as she had planned something 'special' for afterwards. The worst part was I didn't even feel guilty, well ... I did a little ... erm ... okay ... I

did feel guilty ... She looked so lost when I told her I had already made arrangements, and even offered to skip her own shindig and come to mine.

My heart stopped in my chest. No. She couldn't come to my do - Ash would be there, and ... and ... and ...

And what? It's not as if you two are sleeping together is it? Well ... I am sleeping with Sarah. But not Ash ... so where's the harm?

What if Sarah suspects I like Ash?

What if Ash suspects my relationship with Sarah? And is disgusted?

No. I couldn't let that happen. The more distance I could put between those two the better.

Don't get me wrong, they both knew the other existed, but they didn't know what I thought about the other, or what I did with one that I wanted to do with the other.

Yes ... definitely confusing. Imagine how I felt?

Friday night came and I was a bag of nerves for some reason or another. I was to meet Ash, and the rest of them, at 7.30, and my stomach actually got there before I did.

Wizard's '*I Wish it Could be Christmas Everyday*' greeted me as I entered the smoky bar. Students packed the place to the rafters, and all I could see were a sea of red Santa hats.

But I couldn't concentrate on anything but looking for Ash. Santa hats be damned.

It took me fifteen minutes to actually find her, well ... for her to find me.

I had nearly given up hope and just gone to the bar and to grab a drink, when I felt her behind me. When I say felt her, I mean *felt* her ... *felt* her presence. It was like an electric charge scooted up from the base of my spine and into my hairline ... shuddering shocks. Obviously, I didn't know it was her until she touched me.

And it was then I nearly swooned. The charges, or sparks, intensified dramatically, and raced around me looking for appeasement. She had placed her hands on my hips and pulled me backwards towards her ... nothing sexual ... but God ... it felt it to me. Especially when I felt her breasts in my back.

Stranger still, I didn't even know it was her at this stage.

My body was reacting in a way that was beyond my control, and I tensed in her embrace. Ash felt this, and instead of releasing me to fall to my knees, she did the worst thing possible.

She put those beautiful lips close to my ear and whispered 'It's okay, Lou. It's only me.' Her

breath brushed against my skin and made every single hormone in my body sit up and beg. I don't know what got into me. I still can't believe the next thing I did.

It was like I had no control at all left in me to stop myself ... to stop my hands, that covered her own ... to stop my head turning to face her ... to stop my eyes fluttering closed ... lips parting in expectation ... to stop me reaching upwards to meet her divine lips ... to ...

'There you two are!' Stephen. Bugger. Or should I say lifesaver.

My eyes shot open to meet the intense blue stare of Ash, who I think looked even more startled than I did. Funny thing was, I know I had leaned upwards to kiss her, but I don't think I could have actually got that close to her ... she was so close I could feel the tip of my nose touch her cheek. And although our faces were on an angle, it would have been the matter of an inch and a half before my lips would have covered hers.

A paltry inch and a half ... an inch and a half and I could have tasted heaven. An inch and a half and I could have experienced the sensation I had only dreamed about.

An inch and a half and I would have a lot of explaining to do.

Moving away from her seemed like it was performed in slow motion. Our heads moved backwards but the gaze stayed intact, albeit confused. I lifted my hands from hers to release her, but they still lingered on my hips for a few moments more, as if they were stunned and had to have time to recover.

Or was that wishful thinking?

In all this time, Stephen had stood next to us, waiting. He looked slightly self-conscious, and I think if he could have escaped, he would have ... willingly.

I rapidly swallowed, although the dryness in my throat made this task seem like one of the twelve labours of Hercules. But I was trying to kick-start my mouth into action, before the situation became even tenser than it already was.

'Hi, Stephen ... there you are. I was looking for you.' No I wasn't. But what did you expect me to say? That I was looking for your gorgeous sister? Or, why did you interrupt me trying to lay one on Ash? What about ... Thank you for stopping me make a total dick head out of myself? Now that's a good one.

'We're over here.' And with that, he turned and nearly tripped over himself to get away.

Both Ash and I stared after him, fully expecting to actually see Cerberus chasing him.

'Come on. I'll take you back to the table and then get the drinks in.' Her voice wasn't as self-assured as usual, and a seed of worry planted itself in my gut. What if she had realised what I was going to do?

Buggeration.

Double buggeration.

I nearly made my excuses and left ... nearly. But how could I go home and know I could have spent the evening with Ash? There was no way I could have done that ... no way. I just had to be more careful with what I let show ... tighten the reigns on my feelings ... even more tightly than I already was holding them.

And up to five minutes ago, I had held them pretty tightly.

But ... as you can see ... I wasn't very good at reigning these emotions in.

But ... I would have to learn. And quickly.

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The evening was fun. It was loud and garish in a Christmas party kind of way.

You can imagine what it was like. A room full of teenagers, alcohol, and the freedom to act in the way they had not allowed themselves to act for the first few months of term.

We were all relaxed, well to a degree. I was still reeling from the near social faux pas from earlier to allow myself the freedom of going anywhere near the object of my desire. It would have been too tempting to just make a lunge at her, but ... I couldn't do that. She was my friend, and however much I longed for her ... yearned for her ... craved for her touch ... her mouth ... her lips ... However much I needed to feel her in my arms, I couldn't, no ... *wouldn't* do anything that would jeopardise our friendship.

All evening I kept on taking sly looks at her, devouring her with my eyes. She was so beautiful ... so absolutely beautiful. I loved the way she really looked at people when she talked. The way her hands moved when she was chatting ... the way she held a finger up to people when she wanted their attention ... the way she tilted her head to the side ... or threw it back in laughter.

One of the things I found breathtaking was the way she licked her lips, soft caresses from the wet muscle around lips that had been carved from rose petals. And the way she would bite her bottom lip when she was acting coy, or thinking.

I could sit here all night and list everything I loved about her. Could spend eternity spouting her beauty, like Shakespeare's sonnet:

*And yet by heav'n I think my love as rare  
As any she belied with false compare*

Nothing compared to her ... nothing could match the blueness of her eyes, the rose hue of her

lips and cheek, the sound of her voice ... her voice ... her voice. I don't believe I actually listened to the words ... I just got lost in it ... allowed it to swirl over me and consume me.

All this from a few surreptitious looks.

Imagine what I could say if I was allowed to fully digest her?

It was strange, though. Many of the times I stole a look, she would already be looking in my direction. One time, her face was completely lost in thought, her eyes fixed firmly on my face. The previous times I had looked at her and she was looking at me, she had quickly turned away.

But not this time.

This time she just ... stared. Her eyes seemed preoccupied, with what I don't know. They seemed to be looking at my mouth, but I think it was just wishful thinking on my part. Funny how self-conscious you become when someone is looking at your mouth, it is nearly impossible not to lick your lips.

So I did.

And so did she.

It was like she was mimicking the action, those perfect lips were stroked by that perfect tongue, then the bottom lip, once again, was caught between her perfect teeth.

I felt the groan leave my mouth before I had chance to stop it.

I don't know if it was that that made her jump back, as if she had been slapped, the confusion evident on her face. Or maybe it was the reality of the situation.

But I know for definite, for that split second she kept my gaze when she was focused, she must have seen everything I had tried so hard to keep hidden. There is no way she could have missed it. It was there for the taking. All the love that had been so carefully hidden had drifted to the surface for that brief moment ... the brief moment she had looked straight in my face.

I felt exposed ... betrayed by my own inability to hide.

And as well as feeling exposed, I felt ashamed.

After a few minutes, I made my excuses and went to the Ladies ... or pretended to.

Within ten minutes, I was sat in the back of a taxi on my way home.

How could I stay when I knew she knew? How could I face her? How could I?

Exactly.



How could I?

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## Chapter Seventeen

I arrived home a little after eleven. Both my parents were surprised to see me back so early, but I rested their questions with a mumbled excuse about having to get up early for work the next day.

As if I cared about work. Or anything for that matter, except the look on Ash's face when she had seen all there was inside me.

I felt dirty.

Unnatural.

I felt like I should be kept away from anyone half-decent. I should have known being gay wasn't as easy as I thought it would be. I had accepted the fact I was different, and foolishly thought the rest of the world didn't matter ... mainly because they didn't have to know. Really, I thought I could keep this huge, dark secret tucked up inside myself and never tell a soul.

The innocence, or should I say, the stupidity of youth, eh?

Blackness enveloped me as I trudged up the stairs, into the bathroom, into the shower to scrub this 'filth' from me. But it didn't cleanse me like I hoped it would.

How could I have been so stupid? So fucking stupid? So ignorantly fucking ass-wiping dick scraping stupid?

The despair I had been feeling turned into anger ... anger at myself for being who I was ... for being different.

My bedroom was dark when I entered and I couldn't be arsed to turn the light on, just threw myself onto the bed, and screamed into the pillow.

'What's up with you, lezza?' Jo's new nickname for me rang through the air like a punch waiting to happen. I stiffened on top of the bed, the pillow half in my open mouth ... and waited.

The reason I waited is because I knew if I had said anything at that precise moment, I would regret it. 'Oi, Lou! What's the matter?' The jesting had left her voice and I could hear concern coming from her. I could also hear her getting up from her bed and shuffle over to mine.

I could barely see the outline of her as she leaned over me, silhouetted by the light coming through the crack in the curtain. I wanted to tell her to fuck off and let me rot in peace, but I couldn't ... just couldn't.

A warm hand landed in the centre of my back and waited ... no movement, except for my breathing, which was becoming laboured because of the pillow half suffocating me.

Time elapsed. I don't know how much, but it seemed an age. I could feel myself drifting off into a fog filled haze, my long wet hair sticking to my face, arms and neck. Her voice came in through the mist and seemed like a dream of some description, a fantasy ...

'Tell me, Lou. Tell me ...'

I was open to telling her, mainly because I didn't have the capability to stop myself. The words fell from my lips like a confession, maybe because they were.

'I'm in love with Ash.'

Total silence. It actually felt like I had just spoken into the empty air, and I was beginning to believe the sensation of Jo's hand was just that ... a sensation, until she spoke.

'Does she know how you feel?'

'I think so ... I think she's guessed.' A calmness was in my voice I didn't expect; dreamlike once again. It is funny how you can experience one emotion and then juxtapose this with its opposite in the matter of an instant.

'What does she think about it?'

'How the *fuck* should I know? I didn't stick around to get my face slapped, did I?' I turned sharply, releasing the pillow ... releasing the anger that had been welling up unbeknownst to me in the last five minutes...releasing the frustration and hurt and agony and despair that comes with being in love with someone you just ... can't ... have.

'How do you know she would slap your face? You may have been surprised.'

That was it. I was boiling now. How dare she surmise how and what Ash would be feeling. How dare she try to make ... try to make ... try ... to ... make ...

... me feel better.

I was sat upright now, my body invading her space, the stance threatening, but she didn't flinch. Just stared me in the eyes. 'I said, how can you possibly know how Ash would have reacted if you didn't stay around long enough to find out.'

I didn't move: I was stock still, staring.

'I never took you for a coward, Lou.'

Could I possibly answer that? Could I be angry at what she had said, considering it was the truth? I was a coward. Plain and simple. A girl without a spine. And I felt even more ashamed of myself than I already was. I felt the life seep from me once again and I sat back against the headboard and closed my eyes.

'You have to tell her ... let her know how you feel.'

A whispered 'I can't' wisped itself from half closed lips.

'What have you got to lose? You can't go on like this Lou ... I've noticed for a while you weren't happy, ...' I made a half-hearted move to interrupt, but she shushed me. 'No ... this is not about you and Sarah. Even after you told me about you two, you still seemed sad for some reason.'

I shrugged, and muttered 'I'll get over it'.

'But why should you have to get over anything? Why can't you just put your cards on the table and level with the girl ... you may be surprised.'

That was the second time she had said that ... that I'd be surprised. I looked at her, the question evident.

'I don't know ... it's just you two ... well ... even when we were kids there was something I couldn't put my finger on.' She looked sheepish at this. And I looked intrigued.

'Go on.'

'Erm ... you two just ... erm ... well seemed to fit, if you know what I mean?' I shook my head and waited for her to go on. She released a deep breath, shook herself and then looked at me. I knew she felt uncomfortable, but I needed her to say it ... say what my heart wanted to hear.

She coughed, and then coughed again.

'I always felt like a spare part when I was with you two ... always felt like I wasn't needed ... shush Lou, let me speak. I felt you had a connection, something none of us could understand at the time. Didn't you wonder why I didn't hang about with you two?' I nodded. 'It wasn't because I disliked Ash, although I know you thought I did. I just felt ... erm ... out of place somehow.'

The proverbial penny clunked into my head like a two-ton weight. No wonder Jo always said for Ash and me to do our own thing, but always gave the option to join her if I wanted to. Not Ash ... just me. I kind of drifted off for a minute in an attempt to recollect anything that could have given Jo the impression she wasn't wanted ... well ... needed is more the word.

I have to admit I could see her point of view. Even as a kid I had always felt complete with Ash ... like we fitted together in some strange way ... like we were meant to be friends.

Friends.

Friends.

Not lovers ... but friends.

That word stuck in my throat and choked my future. Friends. How could I expect her to want anything more than we had already? I had waited ten years for her to come back into my life and there was no way I was going to bugger it up by making a pass at her.

If all I ever got from her was her friendship, than I would be happy with that, as I couldn't bear not having her again.

But I loved her so much ... so much ... so much... How could I be around her all of the time and not lean forward to capture that perfect mouth with my own? How could I sit close to her and not drown in her eyes?

How could I face her again after tonight?

'Lou?' Jo's voice broke through my reverie in an attempt to bring me back to earth. I faced her with a sad smile and the threat of tears at the back of my eyes. 'You are going to tell her, aren't you?' Slowly and carefully I shook my head in the negative. She frowned at me, pushing her bottom lip out like a child in an attempt to make me laugh. But that was the last emotion I felt like having.

She sighed, shook her head whilst expelling a stream of breath. 'You are a fool, Lou. Tell her ... for fuck's sake ... what have you got to lose?'

I didn't miss a beat with my answer. What was there to consider?

'Everything, Jo. Everything.'

With that I turned onto my side, dismissing her with my back. There was no way I could tell Ash how I felt. In her eyes we were just friends ... friends who barely knew each other after ten years. Imagine what she would do ... say ... if I was to proclaim my undying love for her? She would think I was an idiot ... or a pervert ... or both.

The pain in my chest was clawing at the inside of my rib cage, the heart was attempting to rip out of its nest and scream its agony into the air. But to anyone watching I was still ...rigid.

'Just think about it, okay? Life's too bloody short to hide behind fear. We'll speak tomorrow, right?' I didn't answer ... couldn't. 'I said ... we'll speak tomorrow, all right?' Her voice was firm and brooked no argument. I nodded, as I didn't trust my voice to be in charge of what I was feeling. 'Okay. Now get some sleep.'

A light kiss landed on my head, and I pushed my face in the pillow once again.

A very good way to muffle the sobs that were breaking out. And it saved me wiping the tears that were pouring freely down my cheeks.

Life is a bitch, isn't it?

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Saturday saw me trying to hold down the contents of my stomach once again, as the smells of the indoor market nearly strangled me. That was a mean smell ... Jesus ... everything smelled off. It wasn't just the fact of the market, but the lack of sleep I had had the night before.

Jo's words had danced around my head and made me re evaluate my situation, both with Sarah and with Ash. I had cried on and off all night, especially when I kept envisioning Ash's face the last time I had seen her. The blue eyes ... the startled expression ... her lips wet after she licked them. Emotions inside me were an oxymoron, as they both contributed to the agony of love ... of my love for her.

Funny thing was Sarah looked ten times worse than I did.

I could see she was fighting the smell of the cheeses ... a definite sign of a mega hangover. Her eyes looked dull and lifeless, and her skin had a pallor associated with the dead.

Even when I said hello, all she could muster was a watery smile, but she still gripped my hand as she passed behind the extremely small counter and whispered 'Missed you last night.'

And of course I felt bad, because I had barely given her a thought. I conjured a smile from deep inside and she gazed into my face before saying, 'Jesus, Lou. You look like I feel. Did you drink too much?'

I just nodded. What was I supposed to say? 'Well actually, Sarah. No. I didn't touch a drop. I just spent all night crying about how I love Ashley Richards.' The words 'lead balloon' and 'going down like one' sprang to mind.

The morning passed in its usual blur of activity. Customers queued and queued and queued for what seemed like eternity. I couldn't wait for lunchtime ... the quicker it arrived the better.

Five minutes before I was to go off duty, I felt a sensation creep up my spine and travel through my body like a shock of electricity. I had my back to the counter, but I knew if I turned around I would see the reason why my legs had lost their ability to hold my weight up. I gripped the side, my knuckles going white, and Sarah sidled next to me her face full of concern.

'Are you all right, Lou? You look like shit.' I didn't feel all right. Not by a long stretch of the imagination. A couple of deep breaths ... a couple more ... then a couple more for good measure.

I turned, the action nearly my undoing. And there she was ... like a vision.

She was leaning back on the end of the counter opposite ours, her arms crossed over her chest, her eyes fixed on me, although she couldn't quite see my face. There was no smile ... just the look. Stern and commanding. I was trapped in her gaze like a rabbit in the headlights of a car.

'Who's that?' Sarah's voice sounded distant, and I had difficulty answering her.

'That's Ash.'

'Ash! As in your Ash?'

I wish.

'Yes. My Ash.' My voice sounded dead, lifeless ... defenceless. I watched Ash rearrange herself, pushing her hips forward and trying to get some amount of comfort from the glass cabinet.

'What's she doing here, then?'

I wanted to snap 'How the fuck should I know?' But I didn't. For two reasons. One ... it wouldn't have been fair to take out my frustration on Sarah.

Two ... I knew.

I knew she had come to have a go about last night ... and I was hoping it was just for deserting her and not saying goodnight. Not for catching me drooling over her. Please. If there is a God ... please don't let her know how I feel ... please.

'Right you two. Are you going to lunch now or what?'

Crap.

Double crap.

Crap times infinity.

I always had lunch with Sarah ... always. And there was no way I could face having them both together, not after last night ... not with feeling as rough as what I did. I couldn't cope with Ash having a go at me ... especially if she came right out and said ... you know ... about what I had showed her so clearly last night. What would Sarah do? Would she 'out' me, say that we were sleeping together?

Fuck.

I felt sick to my stomach. My stomach felt sick to my teeth. My teeth had gone numb ... so had my brain, which had broken all ties with my mouth, leaving me mute and stupid.

'Come on, Lou ... it's our turn.'

I followed Sarah down the counter, and from the corner of my eye, I saw Ash push herself away from the counter and start to follow us.

Not good.

'Lou! Lou! Wait up!' I could hear Ash behind me, and it took all the gumption I had to turn and face her, plastering a smile there for the initial contact ... pretending nothing was the matter.

She was racing up to me, pushing people out of the way in an attempt to get there quickly.

'Hey, Ash. I was going to call you later.'

That stopped her in her tracks ... for about two seconds.

'Didn't you see me? I was waiting opposite your stall.'

I could feel Sarah next to me, waiting to be introduced. Ash's eyes flicked to her in acknowledgement, and then came back to rest on mine. 'No ... I didn't see you ... we've been busy.'

Sarah was nearly pushing into the back of me by now, and I could feel my nerves shredding. I could tell Ash didn't believe me, but what else could I do? I couldn't tell her I what had been going through my mind ... I just did the 'running away' thing that I did so well.

'We need to talk,' she looked over my shoulder at Sarah. 'Alone.'

What to do? What to do? It all seems so small and harmless now when I look back, but at the time I was terrified.

I nervously looked at Sarah, my eyes adopting a beseeching look. She looked pissed off, which I didn't blame her for. So I gave her the puppy dog eyes once more, adding a smile into the kitty. I saw the resolve leave her, and she nodded her head in assent, albeit begrudgingly. 'I'll see you later, Sarah, okay?'

She just nodded, turned and walked downstairs to the locker room. I turned back to Ash 'I have to get out of this apron; I'll meet you at St Mary's ... at the back of the churchyard, okay?' I didn't even wait for a reply, just scooted down the steps and into the changing room.

Sarah was brushing her hair and glaring at me in the mirror. I smiled at her reflection, but she just lowered her eyes.

Saying I felt like a prize shit would be redundant at this stage ... I think it is obvious. I walked up behind her and put my hands around her waist, lowering my lips to her tied up hair. 'Sorry, honey

... I ... well ... Ash and I had a bit of an argument last night.' Why was I lying ... again? But I couldn't stop myself. 'I think she wants to talk about it.' Sarah was still tense, so I went one-step further and started to kiss the back of her neck.

Soft, tender kisses, breathy kisses, kisses filled with promise, kisses that said 'I want you.' Her body visibly relaxed, and I could hear her breathing becoming heavy and expectant. She turned in my arms and covered my mouth with her own. A hot kiss ... a wet kiss ... a tongue begging entrance to my mouth, which I allowed. I could feel myself getting lost in her, and the sensations her lips ... her hands ... her fingers were doing to me.

I could feel a pooling forming between my legs ... an ache building ... but they weren't for Sarah. They were for a certain woman who was now waiting for me in the churchyard ... and if things went badly, at least I was in the right place. They could just bury me.

I pulled away from Sarah, a little too quickly, because she gave me a dazed look. 'Got to go ... see you when I get back, yeah?' She nodded, and tried to summon a smile from deep within.

I took off my apron and washed my hands, surreptitiously watching her in the mirror. Her gaze never left mine ... I don't think she even blinked.

'Later, then.'

'Can I see you tonight? My parents are out if you want to come round?'

I was going to say no ... honestly. But her face ... she looked like she would crumble if I turned her down. I couldn't ...

'Okay ... great. We'll sort it out when I get back, yeah?' Her smile swallowed me, and she grabbed me by the hips and planted a kiss on my mouth.

It's such a pity I couldn't return the affection.

With a weak smile, I turned and left her there.

Alone.

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Ash was pacing in the churchyard, and I had only twenty minutes of my lunchtime left. I had tried to think of a plausible explanation about what she 'thought' she had seen written on my face last night. But they all came out lame or an obvious lie.

I had convinced myself that whatever she said I would just deny it. There was no point admitting it ... I needed a spine to do that, and I didn't have one. So I would go for the 'deny' or 'no comment' rule.



She had her back to me, but as I got nearer she turned abruptly ... startled, her face showing confusion for some unaccountable reason.

I smiled at her, hoping to stop the accusations before they even got started. Then once again another lie popped out of my mouth. And I didn't even expect it.

'I'm sorry I didn't say goodnight last night ... I felt really ill ... and I just had to get home.' Well ... it could have been the truth, I did feel ill - but not in a poorly sick and can't eat custard kind of way. The sickness was how I felt about myself, about what I had done; the fact I had shown the one person whom I didn't want to know, exactly how I felt about them.

Ash just looked at me with the same startled expression on her face, her poise was slightly askew, as her shoulders twisted round. She didn't move ... just stood there and waited until I was right up close to her.

I stood and waited for her to answer, or even remark on what I had just said, and I finally realised I didn't think she had heard me so I repeated it.

'Did you feel it?' Huh? 'Did you feel that ... that something?' My face informed her that I didn't have a clue what she was talking about. 'That tingling sensation ...'

I stared at her ... I knew exactly what she was talking about; I had felt it when she had been watching me at work. It was a weird feeling ... almost electrical.

But, me being me, I just shook my head, and I still believe I saw disappointment flash across her face. She lifted her hand and brushed it through her long raven locks, completing its journey with a waggle of her fingers. 'What did you say?'

I had to swallow before I could answer her. 'Erm ... just that I was sorry about last night ... I didn't feel well so just went home.'

Concern flooded onto her face. 'Are you okay now? Should you be at work?' She came towards me and put her hands on my shoulders, her body close to mine, her face closer. 'You look all pale and blotchy all of a sudden ... come ... sit down.' I did feel pale and blotchy, but it wasn't because I felt ill ... more like the sensation she evoked in me. I think all of the blood raced from my face to a more demanding region, but it had left some stragglers behind.

I let her lead me over to the bench and lowered me down to the seat, her arm completely around me. I was in guilty heaven ... I could smell her perfume, so light ... so addictive ... so her. I was entranced.

So entranced I realised I had shut off the listening part of my brain, and tuned in to hear the last part of what she was saying '... and then I came looking for you. It was the doorman who told us you had left in a taxi ten minutes earlier.' She was rubbing my hands between her own, as to get the blood back I think, but take it from me ... the blood was staying exactly where it had shot to

minutes before. The hand rubbing guaranteed that.

But it was her eyes that captivated me ... those deep pools that looked into my face with absolute concern about my welfare; I was so lost in them I didn't even feel bad about staring. All I wanted to do was to lean forward and just ... catch ... those ... perfect lips in my own and drown into her. I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt I loved this woman who was half kneeling half sitting before me. The woman who was holding my hands in hers ... holding my heart in her hands.

I just wanted to take those hands of hers and place them on either side of my face, just to show her ... to show her ... I was hers ... always hers. To show her I would be forever lost in her ... my heart was forever lost.

'... and then I remembered you worked on the market today. So here I am.'

Yes. Here you are.

'Sorry about leaving and not telling anyone.' My voice sounded like my head was under water ... muffled and distorted, but Ash didn't seem to notice. She just flashed me one of those brilliant smiles that lit up the world ... slightly crooked and filled with promise.

'Forget about it. We were just worried about you.' She patted my knee. 'Anyway ... what are your plans for tonight. Fancy you -me - the pictures - there's a good film on. *The Terminator* with Arnold Schwarzenegger.'

I physically felt my face light up, and my heart screamed out 'YES!' but then I remembered. Sarah. I had promised Sarah I would see her tonight.

Fuck.

And then ... fuck ... again.

'I can't ...' Ash's face fell. I saw the expression literally go from ecstatic to depressed in the blink of an eye. 'I've already made plans with ... erm ... Sarah.' She tilted her face to the side, the expression questioning. 'The girl I work with ... we ... erm ... we ... are going to ... erm ...' I couldn't say go to the pictures as Ash would have asked to come along. 'Erm ... going to her friend's eighteenth in Stalybridge.'

All the time I was deliberating with my tale, she watched me. It felt as if she knew I was lying but didn't like to say anything. That made me feel more like the giant shit I had felt earlier. 'But I am free tomorrow ... or Monday ... Tuesday ...' Was I throwing myself at her? Most certainly. All the ideas of avoiding her crumbled into dust and flew into the wind, swirling its way around the stone structure of St Mary's church taking my inhibitions with it.

The smile I so loved about her, trickled its way back onto her chiselled face, spreading like sunshine and making me feel giddy just to be in its presence.

'How about all three?' She cocked her head to the side and waited for my response, which was to allow my jaw to drop and for me to sit there catching flies. A laugh came from deep within her making me snap my mouth closed once again. 'Look ... I miss you. Is that a crime now? Just thought we should see more of each other.' She grinned. 'And by seeing you for three nights on the trot ... well ... let's just say ... it would be my pleasure.'

And mine ... God ... and mine.

'And ... next time I ask you out on a Saturday night, maybe you wouldn't have already made arrangements with someone else. You'd be all mine.'

God ... I wish ... I wish ... I *so* wish I was all yours Ashley Richards. From the bottom of my *booming* heart.

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## Chapter Eighteen

Saturday night saw me with Sarah, but not with her, if you know what I mean. Physically I was there, but my head and my heart were definitely somewhere else ...

Even when she had her head between my legs, fucking me with her mouth, I was elsewhere. All I could do was think of Ash, and wish it was her there sucking and licking and kissing my most intimate place ... wish it was her fingers that were playing with my nipple; her hand that was holding my hip down; her head bobbing up and down.

I didn't even try to stop my thoughts from straying ... I just accepted the fact I was head over heels in love with Ash, and wanted her more than I wanted to breathe. No guilt this time ... nothing ... except a fantastic orgasm that ripped through me and made me scream into the air, whilst thrusting myself onto Sarah's face over and over again ... savouring the jolts spluttering from me ... sweat coating my skin ... cum coating my thighs, her face and mouth.

So as I said. Having illicit thoughts about Ash didn't stop me having an orgasm. In fact ... it definitely helped.

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Christmas came and went, and the majority of my time was spent with Ash now. Sarah, quite rightly, was becoming more and more jealous. Even though I wasn't technically cheating on her - I was. Well ... in my head ... and definitely in my heart ... and I knew I had to stop what I was doing to her.

I did like Sarah ... really like her. She had been my first ... and would always hold that special place in my heart as she had shown me exactly who I was ... and still am. I did feel bad ... I knew her feelings for me ran deep; I could tell every time she looked at me.

And I knew I was actually doing more harm than good being with her, and I had to find the courage from somewhere to do something about it. Deep down, I just wished she would get fed up with me cancelling on her and go and find someone else.

I know ... the true coward's way out. And I agree with you ... I didn't deserve anyone, especially if that is how I was going to treat them.

New Year's Eve arrived resplendent and ready for action. I'd made arrangements to spend the evening with Sarah ... out of guilt I think. Ash had been disappointed when I told her but had accepted it with little fuss, but her eyes had given her away ... and I felt torn.

Bloody hell. Why on earth should I be in this situation? Why couldn't I just be happy with Sarah? Why did I have to always go after the unobtainable?

Life, I suppose ... the little things that are here to drive us slowly mad with longing.

Ah well ...

Anyway. I digress. Per usual.

Ash told me where she would be going, and told me and my 'friends' to pop in if we were passing. Yeah ... I could see that happening ... me and Sarah popping in to see Ash, her brothers, the wonderful Tracy (who was back on the scene again after worming her way back in to Stephen's affections. Twat. Or twatette ...), and all our mates from college meeting in The Plough in Heaton Moor.

Manchester was heaving with people, and Sarah and I had tickets to New York New York, a gay bar, which had a live act on, and a disco. At least we could be natural ... well as natural as I could be being underage and with the wrong woman.

All evening I sat with Sarah, refusing most of the drinks thrust in front of me by everyone and their mother (not really their mother - an expression if you will). As time dragged by I became increasingly depressed, and was constantly clock watching. And like all clock-watchers, I found time fucking about with my sense of reality. What seemed like an hour had been five minutes ... I'm not even going to go into what an hour felt like, but believe me ... it was agony.

Eventually, it was Sarah who couldn't stand it anymore, and broke the silence between us. I heard it smash into smithereens as it hit the wall with force.

'I know you are not happy, Lou. Have I done something to upset you?' Her face was pained, the anguish clearly standing out making her features appear gaunt and deathlike. Her eyes seemed haunted as she waited for my response, and I knew she wanted me to say something that would make this better ... make us better.

What could I do? I could lie and just accept this relationship, or ... I could tell her the truth.

'Of course you haven't ... Sarah ... I ... am happy ...' But just not with you ... just not like this. 'You know I think a lot of you, don't you?' She nodded, her long hair flying around her head as she nodded, her expression waiting for me to end this pain I could see written all over her.

Why am I just about to tell her another lie? Why am I treating her like this? This wasn't fair on her ... she deserved so much more than my half-hearted attempts at a relationship. I knew I would never have a relationship with Ash, but that didn't give me the right to treat Sarah like second best. I had to learn to be on my own for the right reasons ... not with someone because it was convenient.

She was still waiting for me to carry on. Still waiting for me to burst her bubble. Still waiting ... and I could feel her breaking inside ... and I knew exactly what she was going through, because I went through the same thing every time I was with Ash. I also knew that one day she would be me ... sitting there, waiting to get my heart broken.

'I'm in love with someone else.'

I can still remember her face when those words came out ... stunned ... lost and broken all at the same time. Visibly the colour drained from her face, the whiteness stark in the club's lighting. Then slowly, the face began to fold, crumble, fracture, splinter ... rupture. Her hands flew outwards to mine in a vain attempt to capture my hands; a keening sound emanating from the pit of her stung my ears and my chest ached, as I knew it was my fault.

'Please ... no ... Lou ... don't leave me ... *don't ... leave me.* I ... I ... love you ... *love you ...*' the first time she had used those words, and the last. Tears rained down her face and she lunged across the table trying to grab me, but I pulled away, tears rolling from my eyes too. I can't tell you how I felt ... can't tell you what emotions were running through me by now. All I knew is that I had killed something in that girl ... she was devastated ... and it was all my fault, for wanting something, or should I say someone, else.

People were looking over at us, but I didn't care. I knew I should comfort her in some way, but how?

She had leaned back into her chair by now, her hands over her face, trying to stop herself crying, trying to regain some composure.

'Sarah I ... I ... never meant to hurt you, you must know that?' No answer - just muffled sobs. 'I didn't even know myself until after we had started seeing each other ... didn't even know I could have feelings for another woman.'

Her face peeked over the tips of her hands, her mascara smeared all over her cheeks ... and it was all my fault ... all my fault. I watched her swallow rapidly, before she looked me straight in the eyes and said. 'I understand ...' such a soft sweet voice. 'Truly ... Lou ...' She stopped again, swallowed again, looked at me squarely in the eyes ... again. 'Just remember ... I ... love you ... always will.'

And she was gone.

And I was left searching the whole place from top to bottom for thirty minutes, but it was as if she had vanished off the face of the earth.

Finally, I resolved myself to the fact she had left the place, collected my coat and headed towards the exit. Eleven fifteen on New Year's Eve and I was going home. Good place for me, as I felt awful. I'd broken that girl ... not just her heart ... but her. And I doubt even to this day I have ever forgiven myself for it.

If I was heading home, can you please tell me why, at eleven forty, I was pushing open the door to The Plough?

Beats me. But that's where my homing device had taken me. It had taken me home ... home to Ash.

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I could see her standing with her back to me, and she was deep in conversation with some guys from college. I just stood there and watched her. She was so beautiful ... so natural ... such a catch for any guy in here.

And that was the problem ... it was the guys she was interested in ... not girls. Like me.

As I was watching her, I saw her stop in mid sentence and rub the back of her head, the side of her face quizzical, like something had just hit her. I looked around but couldn't see anyone laughing, and more to the point, I hadn't seen anything hit her either.

In slow motion she turned ... and looked straight at me, her face stunned for a split second, before she released the smile that was always ready and waiting. Then ... she screamed out 'LOU! YOU MADE IT!' and hurtled towards me, throwing her arms around and crushing me into her.

I was lost and found in her ... the feel of her ... the scent of her ... just ... her ... all of her. My lips were so close to her neck ... the special place on your neck where the throat meets the shoulder ... the little dip. It was so tempting to just kiss her ... suck in her skin ... taste her. And to tell you the truth, I did have a little brush against it. It was bliss.

She thrust me back, and I thought she had caught me, but her expression said otherwise. 'I am so happy you could make it ... with just over fifteen minutes to spare too.'

Then, dear reader, you know what she did? Do you? Have a guess.

Oh I can't wait around for you, I'll just tell you.

She kissed me. On the mouth. Her mouth on mine. Bam. There ... flesh on flesh ... lips on lips ... her arms around me, kissing me.

About bloody time, I hear you all say. But hold your horses, it wasn't a kissing kind of kiss ... it was a 'Hey ... I'm so excited to see my friend' kind of kiss. But who cares? She kissed me ... on the mouth! And I nearly died ... not of embarrassment ... no way ... of lust. The kiss was perfect, and I even got to sample a little bit of her spit, which I savoured after she pulled away and turned to shout the rest of them over. I pushed my lips into my mouth and sucked, just in case there was a little bit left over lurking outside that I could have missed.

I know ... I'm a sad fucker ... but I bet nearly all of you have done the same thing at one time or another. Go on ... have a think ...

See ... I told you so.

I was hustled forward into the group, where I was met by everyone. I could see Tracy hanging back, trying to calm herself. And I wanted to laugh. I must have really pissed her off. Ash left me for a few minutes but I didn't really get the chance to miss her as everyone was asking me questions about what I had done and why I had finally come to my senses and come.

I tried to answer them all, but Ash was back carrying a glass of something bubbly, a cheeky grin splitting her face.

As I looked at her, I felt a jolt of guilt for what I had done to Sarah pass over me ... albeit fleetingly, but there nevertheless. Ash saw it. Would you believe it? She saw the expression flit across my face and her own reacted to it, roughly mirroring my own. So I smiled at her and she smiled back, slightly at first, and then a full out beaming smile.

'Come on, Lou. Let's get ready for the countdown.' Then she grabbed my hand and pulled me away from the crowd and closer to the DJ, her fingers cool and long in my own sweaty stumpy ones. I allowed myself to be dragged by her, couldn't resist really.

'You're not allowed a sip yet ... you have to wait until midnight, okay?' I nodded and then placed my glass on top of the speaker before leaning back and looking at my friend. She followed suit. Her long frame stretching out as she leaned back, her hips pushing out, her arms flat against the speaker.

When she turned to face me she was nearly on my level, and I felt the air catch in my throat. How on earth am I going to get through tonight without telling her, without touching her, without losing complete control and kissing those faultless lips?

Restraint. And lots of it.

'What are you thinking about?' She was so close, I could just ...

'Not much.' What else could I have said? The truth? I think I'd had enough of being truthful for

one evening, don't you? 'Why?'

'You looked so serious.' I play slapped her in the belly and she pretended I had winded her, and we both laughed, before leaning back onto the speakers, totally comfortable with each other.

When the DJ announced there was only a minute before midnight, I fully expected her to drag me off again to find the others, but she just leaned forward and pulled me into standing position in front of her.

I stood there, like a piece of clay waiting to be moulded into any shape she wanted, totally at her mercy. She placed both her hands on my shoulders and stared at me ... so deeply ... so fully, I actually began to have difficulty swallowing. Then she lifted one hand and grabbed one of mine and placed it on her hip, before she did the same with the other one.

And there we stood. Her hands on my shoulders, mine on her hips ... waiting for the countdown, although my heart was definitely waiting for something else.

'Ten ...' She just gazed into my eyes ... no expression readable. I stared back ... transfixed. I actually missed the next few seconds, as I couldn't concentrate.

'Four ...' People were chanting the numbers now, but I couldn't speak ... I was lost in her eyes ... in her touch.

'Three ...' I licked my lips, nerves or expectation, I don't know.

'Two ...' She licked hers, just a mirroring reaction.

'One ...' I couldn't breathe now ... the thought of what I wanted to happen was eating me alive.

'Happy New Year!' I didn't hear the cheers around me, the people going wild and beginning to sing Auld Lang Syne. I didn't know anything but the most tender kiss I had ever experienced in my life brush against my lips, once ... twice ... three times.

Then she pulled me into her again, leaving me stunned and my blood racing. Her breath was in my hair, her voice muffled, but my nerves made it seem as if she had shouted it. 'Thank you, Lou. For coming back to me ... for coming back to me.'

Did she mean tonight? Or generally?

To tell the truth, I didn't care. I folded into her and just accepted what she was willing to give, losing the last vestiges of control along the way, her presence consuming me, ingesting me ... mind, body and soul.

And there we stood, wrapped in each other's arms for what seemed like a glorious lifetime, and all the while I knew this would probably be the last time I would experience this bliss, this heaven on earth. The first and last time ... as I knew this was only a reaction to seeing me again



after all those years apart.

Stephen interrupted us ... again, shouting his New Year's greeting and expecting hugs and kisses from the both of us. I pulled away first, and I watched her eyes slowly open and focus on mine. They looked dreamy, for some reason. 'Come on you two ... you haven't even toasted the New Year yet.' With that, he thrust my glass into my hand, grabbing me around the waist and planting a sloppy kiss on my mouth, before grabbing his sister and picking her up to jiggle her around.

She threw her head back and laughed that really deep and sexy laugh of hers, and I felt a smile creep along my face. I lifted the glass in toast, and silently mouthed, 'Happy New Year, Ash. And thank *you* for coming back to me.'

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## **Chapter Nineteen**

It was nearly a week before I saw Sarah again. And she looked like crap. I had tried to call her the day after, but she wasn't taking my calls. Although it wasn't actually said, I could sense it in her father's tone of voice when he said she was out.

It was not very welcoming to say the least.

The time I saw her was at work, but not really at work if you know what I mean. She popped by to hand in her apron first thing on the Saturday morning, and it took her all her time to look at me, even after I kept on calling her name.

What did I expect? Hugs and kisses?

I tried to get her on her own, but she wouldn't have any of it, and kept on edging away. Although she looked generally ravaged, it was her eyes that disturbed me the most.

They were sunken and haunted. The sparkle she used to have had completely gone, and I knew it was all my fault. I had broken this girl; shattered her belief in me ... her belief in life. Well that was what it seemed to me.

She only said two words to me ... two words that stopped me in my tracks ... two words that made me step back and away from her.

'Lou ... don't.' It wasn't what she said, it was her face ... her tone, that made leave her alone. It was all too fresh - too open a wound for my inexperienced mumblings to slightly compensate anything she was going through. And although I had caused all this pain, I did actually know when to back off.

That was the day she quit the stall, and left my life. I never saw her again, not even in passing, although I did hear she had met someone else.

The reason for me never seeing her again will become obvious soon enough.

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Ash and I were constantly with each other, and I was in heaven. She was everything one person looked for in a friend - truthful, trusting, honest, witty ... I could go on and talk about her intelligence, beauty and her wicked sense of humour, but I think you will guess I can wax lyrical about this girl.

In a nutshell ... she became my world.

Ben was completely out of the picture (I bet you had wondered about the blonde haired wanker hadn't you ... he had moved on to another victim), so she was all mine ...

... all mine ...

... all mine ...

... in a platonic way of course.

Unfortunately.

We spent nearly every night either at her house or at mine. We still kept up with the bowling, and I was getting better - although not by much. Why would I bother improving if that would mean I wouldn't get the guidance from her? And that amounted to lots of touching and full body contact. My favourite was when she came up behind me and wrapped her arms around my waist to turn me into position. She laughed every time and called me a fruit fly, because I couldn't remember which of the little 'arrowy things' to stand near, and then which position to place my body.

Which of course I remembered. Perfectly, actually. But there was no way on this earth I was going to let her know that, was there? Not a chance.

The weeks flew by, and I was totally smitten with her - everything about her. But I should have known this piece of heaven couldn't last, and it came totally out of the blue. And not what you are expecting either. I didn't balls things up ... profess my undying love for her ... make a pass ... let anything slip. I was completely innocent to the falling and breaking apart of my world.

It was my parents actually.

They told me we were moving.

Away.

Far away.

Far away from Manchester ... from Stockport ... from Ash.

I could tell you how I reacted, but that wouldn't change a thing. I could tell you how I screamed at them, ranted ... threw things ... ignored them ... refused to eat ... But that would be superfluous wouldn't it? You should know me by now to realise my whole life had been tipped over and stamped upon. Everything I knew was crushed. Everything I had would be snatched away from me.

And that 'everything' came from only one thing ... one person actually. But you know that don't you.

I didn't tell her about the move for nearly a week. And then it wasn't me who actually told her.

Once again it was my parents ... my mum in fact.

I still remember her reaction, Ash's reaction that is. Such a simple sentence spewed forth from my mum's mouth ... such simple words ... all ordered together perfectly, but simple nevertheless.

'Didn't Lou tell you we were moving to Norfolk?'

The smile Ash had been sporting froze ... and I witnessed her physically struggle to keep it there, lips twitching, the surrounding area spasming ... until finally it gave up, and slipped ... slowly from her face, leaving her face blank - wiped clean - vacant.

Slowly, she turned to me, the question in her eyes but as yet silent. I watched her lips struggle to collect themselves into some kind of action, fight with the incredulity of the situation, until finally ... 'Lou?' A cry of sorts. The word hovered around in the air expectant, waiting for me to disprove what had been said. But how could I?

I remember leaning forward, my hand outstretched as it had forgotten that it couldn't just reach out and touch her, in case it became carried away and couldn't stop ... couldn't stop ... touching her. I stopped. Drew back the rogue hand and clasped it into a ball, holding the traitor back with its twin.

'I ... I ... was ... erm ...'

'Lou?'

Her voice held so much hurt, almost like I had betrayed it by not telling her.

'I was ... erm ... going to tell you ...'

'When? As you were driving off?' Her tone sounded bitter ... or should I say hurt. I know I would have been hurt if she hadn't told me about something as life changing as this.

'No ... I ... well ... erm ...' My mum watched the interchange with interest; watched me struggle to get the words out; watched Ash, pale and wan; watched me grip my rogue hand tighter.

Watched as my world came tumbling down, like Jack and Jill. But this time it was Lou and Ash.

'Why don't you go up to your room and talk?'

I nodded at mum's suggestion, as words had left me there to fend for myself. I indicated to Ash that she should follow me, and she did.

I walked up the stairs like Orpheus who was valiantly hoping Eurydice was following, but was terrified if he looked back she would be gone. I fully expected the sound of the front door closing to greet my ears, but all I heard was the creaking of the stairs.

Eventually, I was stood in the room with my back to the door, and I heard the sound of it closing behind me. Then ...

Nothing.

Complete silence.

Well except for the booming of my heart, which had decided this moment was as good as any to start performing a drum solo. I knew I had to get this over ... knew I had to act as natural as possible ... knew it would half kill me when I told her.

I turned around and forced my eyes to look at her face, adding a weak smile into the mix for good measure, hoping I wouldn't just curl up at her feet and beg her to love me ... beg her to save me ... beg her to tell me I would be with her, or she would wait until I moved back ... like I promised myself I would as soon as I reached eighteen.

A face completely devoid of colour apart from blue eyes and the blood red lips ... lips I had coveted ... lips I wanted to take and smother and never ever let go.

'Come ... sit on the bed with me.' I turned away again and plonked onto my bed, turning myself onto my side. She just stood there, and stared at me before I saw her leg push down and propel her forward, as if she had been pushed.

It seemed as if it took her forever to get to me, and I watched her every move, albeit surreptitiously. She seemed sluggish ... reticent. I wanted this to be all over as soon as possible; get it all out in the open so I could start mending my aching heart once again.

Sounds dramatic, doesn't it? But ... if you have ever been in love you will know exactly what I mean. The constant longing I felt inside hurt like buggery (to borrow another expression from

my mum's vast list of expressions). No ... I can't say that now, as it would lose the effect of the agony I was going through. I was ... dear reader ... trying to save you from how I was feeling, but I think you deserve to know.

As I was saying, if you have ever been in love you know how it feels. Even if it is reciprocated, there is a longing ... a yearning deep inside ... a fear that at any one moment it could all be taken from you and you would be left gasping like a fish out of water.

And that is how I felt at that exact moment in time. Like a fish out of water. Gasping. Mouth smacking open and closed ... fins flaying ... everything becoming dim ... distant ... detached. All I needed was for Ash to untangle the line and throw me back in, save me in some way, but I doubted that was going to happen.

It was Ash who finally spoke ... thus untangling the line in my mouth and loosening the hook. 'When are you going?' And although the hook was gone, I was still out of the water.

I just shook my head and lifted my face to hers, which was now inches away from mine. I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out. So I tried again.

'I'm not sure ... About six to eight weeks.'

'Six weeks! Six ... weeks!' She shot off the bed so quickly it made me fall back. Then she marched over to the other side of the room and stood facing the wall, her shoulders rising and falling rapidly.

Cliff was watching. It reminded me of Donny all those years ago. The feeling inside was exactly the same, but now I knew why I was totally devastated.

It was because now I knew why I didn't want to leave her, and this time it wasn't just because she was my best friend.

'When were you going to tell me?' Her voice was quiet now, defeated. I just shrugged, and obviously she couldn't see me, so she asked me again, but this time she turned her head to look at me over her shoulder. And this time her voice was sterner ... more forceful ... insistent.

'I only found out last week.'

'You've known for a week and you didn't say anything?' The tone of incredulity again, but there was a hint of bitterness harbouring there too. She turned to face me, hands on her hips, nostrils flaring. 'So when did you think you might get around to telling me, hmm? The night before? On the day?' I couldn't understand why she was so angry. It was so unlike her to react like this. If anyone was going to be angry, it was usually me.

I was stunned, to say the least, which didn't help with the situation. She wanted answers and she wanted them now.

So, me being me, I tried to answer, but it didn't come out the way I thought it would. I opened my mouth to speak, and kind of choked around the enormous lump that had formed in my throat. I felt my face crease up and fold into a wrinkled mess, and tears plopped over my lids in a bid to escape the inner torment inside me. Shuddering sobs tore from within, and eased themselves through my teeth to greet the suffocating air of my bedroom.

She was in front of me in a flash, bending before me on one knee ... oh I wish. Her eyes had lost the coolness from minutes earlier, and now held the warm tenderness of the girl I loved.

'Hey ... sweetheart. Come on ... don't cry.' What a beautiful voice ... so rich, yet soft. And this of course made my crying escalate. 'Hey ... hey ... come here.' Two strong arms folded around me and then pulled me into a very warm and very full chest. I tried to breathe her in, but my crying got in the way. Every time I tried to suck in the scent of her, I shuddered with sobs. It was a perfect opportunity to be close to her ... to feel her next to me ... to be in her arms, and I wasn't getting the benefit.

This thought made me cry even harder. Therefore making her more comforting ... more loving ... more enchanting ... and it also made her hold me tighter, pulling me towards her and into her. I could feel my body responding to her touch ... feel my face turning towards her throat ... feel my lips opening up to kiss her neck ... taste her neck ...

'Lou?' Reality came crashing back, and I tried to pull myself away from her, but she held on tighter, her face pressing against the top of my head.

I mumbled a response into her skin, illicitly enjoying the way my lips felt on her neck, until I felt her body tense around me ... and then it went quiet for a minute ... a bloody long minute at that.

A cough, which I could feel moving up her chest, and then rapid swallowing. 'It won't be the end of us will it? We'll still see each other won't we?' More rapid swallowing, but this time it was from the both of us.

'Of course we will ... I'll be starting Uni next year in Manchester ...' (I hoped) ' ... and then we can be just as we are now ... ' (or closer). 'And you can come and visit any time ...' (all of the time) 'Or I could come and stay with you.' (please)

She gripped me harder, and I returned the gesture. To anybody watching we looked like a pair of star-crossed lovers ... but the only audience we had was Cliff ... and Madonna, and they didn't really count.

Ash pulled back and stared into my eyes ... long and hard ... like she was exacting a promise of sorts from me. It took all the strength I could muster not to just capture her mouth with mine ... not to tell her how I was feeling ... not to look away in absolute terror that I would do the previous two.

'Promise?'

'I promise, Ash. This isn't the end ... just a blip ... we've survived once before, I'm sure to God we can do it again.' I swallowed before I lied. 'And best friends will always be together, right?'

I didn't just want her as my best friend, but I was still playing the 'living in her shadow' phase.

And as I folded myself back into her arms, inhaled her scent, glorified in the feel of her, I truly believed what I had just said.

The innocence of youth, eh? More like the idiocy.

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## ~ Beginnings ~

by Fingersmith

*Disclaimer*

[See Part 1.](#)

### Chapter Twenty

Time seemed to race ahead leaving me gasping and clutching at the metaphorical stitch in my side, but the pain paled in comparison to how I was feeling when I thought of leaving Ash.

The dates had come through for the move and it was to happen three days after my seventeenth birthday. What a present.

My parents had been on countless trips to Norfolk to view properties and had decided on one in Great Yarmouth of all places. It was okay if you liked funfairs and the seaside ... and remember ... this is what I thought as a teenager ... now I can see the true beauty of the sea. But at the time every thing about Yarmouth seemed hateful, as you can imagine, as Yarmouth would take me away.

Every minute I spent with Ash seemed like a gift in some strange way. I devoured moments, savoured seconds, took snapshots in my head of her to keep in my memory after I was gone ... for after I left her. It was a bitter sweet time ... half of me was enjoying being with her more than ever, whilst the other half was screaming inside in agony knowing it would all too soon come to an end.

When I told her what day we were moving, I watched her contain her sadness, almost in the same way I had to contain mine. But then it seemed like an idea had spread itself all over her, and her face beamed, which initially I was quite pissed off about. The selfish part of me wanted her to wallow in misery in pretty much the same way I did.

But then she voiced the reason why. She wanted to make sure I would have a birthday I would always remember.

And I can tell you this ... it most definitely was.

Now ... is this a good thing or a bad thing?

Read on and find out.

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All my belongings were packed up, well except for a few personal things and clothes, and the house had the echoey quality houses have when they are no longer a home.

Jo and I had stuffed most of our things willy-nilly into black bin bags as we couldn't be arsed to sort through things, and we both wanted to go out that night

It was strange really. I knew Jo absolutely idolised her boyfriend, but she didn't seem bothered about the fact we would be moving two hundred miles away. I mean ... she had been seeing him for nearly a year and she wasn't even a patch as upset as I was to be leaving Ash. And Ash was (supposedly) just a friend.

I actually caught her singing when she was packing. Cliff Richard songs. Her singing was bad enough, but to Cliff? Don't get me started... And her singing wasn't *that* bad ... I could be a critic, but I still remember *Waterloo* ...

Before I knew it my birthday was here, but I couldn't get excited about it, as it meant I would be leaving in three days. Ash had called and told me to dress special, as she had booked a table for us for 7:30, but wouldn't tell me where.

I was surprised no one at home commented I was going out with only Ash on my birthday, and I think it was because they had too much else on their minds to wonder what I was getting up to. And if they had seen me in the bathroom ... well ... let's just say I was relieving the tension, so to speak.

God. I needed to. All the upset of moving and my obsessive addiction to my best friend would have driven anyone half mad with desire, and I was no exception.

The shower had become my haven ... the hot water an extra sensation for my body to adjust to. All I could think about was the blueness of her eyes ... the plumpness of those oh so kissable



lips, and it wasn't just the water that made me wet.

I was flooding ... in special places ... hot places ... secret places. And it wasn't long before I felt my hand sneaking between those folds and collecting that special wetness on my fingers and smearing it into me.

One solitary gasp ached from my mouth. My fingers were trying to alleviate the tension in my core, but I knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt, it would take more than my fumbblings to quench this thirst, if ever.

I lifted one leg onto the side of the bath and pushed my shoulders against the slippery cold tile for some kind of support. Two fingers were either side of my clit, pushing and pulling the swollen nub upwards and downwards ... upwards and downwards. I kept on dipping into the pooling wetness and coating the side of my lips, the sensation agonisingly beautiful. I wanted to push my fingers inside myself ... fuck myself ... feel the walls closing in to clasp around the solitary finger, but as yet that prize was still intact. I wanted someone more special than me to take it.

I wanted Ash to take it ... and take it ... and take it.

Water threw itself upon me, suicidal in its journey to the swirling mass circulating around my one foot. Rivulets contorting in the whirlpool, becoming lost in the flow of the movement until freedom and escape were found in the sucking hole of the bath plug. I had visions of being underneath a waterfall in a different place and time; visions of experiencing the same need and fire.

That's how I was feeling. Like I was being sucked in. The want inside me was sucking me in ... making my hand jerk and thrust, pump and thrash against the engorged crux of my longing. My head was tilted back, and wet hair clamoured on the wall, sticking to the tile in insurrection, forgetting to fall backwards ... forgetting to stick to my face.

I could feel the orgasm building as I pushed and rocked my hips in an increasing tempo of desire. I knew I was going to cum ... I knew I was going to cum ... I knew ... I was ... going ... to ...cum ... cum ... cum ... cum ... cum ...

Teeth bit down onto my bottom lip, trying to stop the almost whistled name from tearing from my throat in a plea for her to fuck me ... and fuck me ... and fuck ... me ... as I was cumming ... thinking she was doing exactly that ... pretending it was her fingers pressing into me, onto me, rubbing and eliciting the tiny sparks of an orgasm that blinded me and made me lose all sense of time and reality.

Droplets of water had gathered on my breasts, and I envisioned a perfect mouth opening around an erect nipple. Straight white teeth opened to allow a wet full tongue to snake out a hover over the aching bud. I felt myself lift up, lost in the delicious sense of fantasy, believing she was here with me now. I knew if I leaned forward more she would capture me inside her perfect mouth; knew those hooded blue eyes told me she loved me. And I knew I was going to cum again.

And I did. A wet back slapped against the wall; a wet backside pushed itself up and away, up and away, meeting and greeting frantic fingers. The other hand was busy rolling and flicking a stimulated nipple, alternating between tweaking and pumping the breast.

Until the cumming had passed. And my legs believed they couldn't hold myself up anymore. My fingers were slick with my juices, and I circled the oversensitive wetness, savouring the delight of a second cumming.

I slipped, effortlessly down the wall and slumped into a heap, whilst water cascaded off the top of my head, shoulders and back. My breath was short and ragged; my throat was dry, and I had difficulty swallowing. My eyes were closed, as I initially savoured the moment, until I let way for the feeling of despair to join with the water and wash over me.

Tears spilled over and trickled down my cheeks, blending perfectly with the spray. I felt so alone. So alone. I had experienced something too wonderful and consuming, it seemed hard to comprehend the consuming feeling was really connected with the realisation I would soon be leaving the woman I loved in the matter of days.

I wanted to tell her. Wanted her to know the truth about how I was feeling. But how could I tell her this secret? Being a lesbian is one thing, but being a coward made up who I really was. Being a coward was the only thing stopping me telling her I was a lesbian, if you see what I mean.

I was scared of how she would react. I was scared she would never want to speak to me again. The truth was, I was scared she wouldn't want me as much as I wanted her ... or just *want* me ... full stop.

And there I sat. In the bottom of the bath. Water splashing off me. Curled in a heap, with water splashing off me.

And cried.

And cried.

And cried.

\*\*\*\*\*

The restaurant was perfect. Italian. My favourite.

Ash looked a vision of beauty and raw sexuality, and I had difficulty tearing my eyes from her. Images of me in the shower filtered into my mind and I could feel the heat travel up into my face flooding it with an incandescent glow.

'Are you okay?' I couldn't even answer, just nodded like a prat. She looked at me a little longer before shaking her head from side to side and pushing her way through the door and into the

darkened room that promised the delights of sumptuous food.

As the evening progressed, I was very much aware of two lads from another table desperately trying to get our attention, and I ignored them as best as I could. Ash just grinned at them and mouthed 'Not interested', which obviously made them more eager to snare us. It took a firm 'fuck off' from me to let them know we weren't interested, which I delivered as Ash went to the bathroom.

The usual 'You must be lezzas' left their mouths, as lads tend to do when they are given the knock back. This time they were right ... well ... half right, and by the time Ash had returned they had left. And no ... I did tell them to fuck off again. I wasn't going to let two pimply gits try to intimidate me; it was after a chat with the waiter they left like puppies.

Totally satiated (food wise), we left the restaurant and caught a taxi to the Little Jack Horner, a haunt for the underage drinkers. Ash was okay as she was eighteen, but I was a year short.

The place was full of minors, and I felt quite at home there. Ash told me to find a seat and trundled off to the bar to shortly return with a drink nicknamed 'The Blob'. Mainly because after too many of them that's how you felt. Like a big fat blob who was good for nothing. It had pretty much everything in it and tasted vile ... but I drank it because Ash had picked it for me. And I even drank the second one.

Ash didn't show any effects of even having a sip of a drink, never mind two of the buggers. I could feel myself beginning to squint when she was talking to me and swore the next drink would definitely be a soft one. Then I nearly lost all my bearings as she got up and sauntered over to the jukebox, and it wasn't long before I heard the dulcet tones of Alison Moyet ringing through the pub singing *Only You* ... just for me ... just for Ash ... just for the both of us.

The evening was becoming blurred ... especially the line between reality and fantasy. I was beginning to believe I was on a date with the dark haired object of all my desire.

I was beginning to find it difficult to not touch her knee ... or her arm when we were talking. She even started to do it to me, especially when she really wanted my attention. I was transfixed, and couldn't tear my eyes from any part of her anatomy that happened to land on mine.

Everything felt so right ... so special. I actually forgot I was leaving in three days. I truly believed that if heaven did exist it was here - with her - lurking in the pools of her blue eyes.

Before I knew it, the bartender was ringing his bell and shouting for last orders. A stab of disappointment raced through me, as I knew this fantasy had to come to an end.

Unhurriedly, I put on my coat and then said I had to use the Ladies.

Once inside the bathroom, I rinsed my face with cold water just to get back the feeling of normalcy once again. Tired green eyes stared back at me from the mirror. Well ... not exactly tired ... more like disappointed.

'What did you expect?' My voice sounded rough and despondent. 'Flowers and a profession of undying love?' A snort left my nose and I felt my body slump in the realisation that this was only a birthday night out to Ash. Although it meant a hell of a lot more to me.

I reapplied my lipstick, and headed towards the door. I had to snap out of this obsession, somehow, and accept Ash and I were friends and nothing more.

It's not easy, you know. Having the love of your life waiting on the other side of the door, and knowing you were leaving in three (well two by now) days and not be able to tell her how you feel.

A sigh escaped as I drew the door back, and there she was ... resplendent in all her gorgeous glory, leaning with her back on the wall totally casual and relaxed, her smile splitting her face in two.

And I think I fell in love with her all over again.

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I'm sure you can recollect walking down the street when you were worse for wear on the demon drink. So, I don't have to tell you about the fiasco we had trying to get back to the taxi rank in town. We thought it would be easier to go to the depot instead of waiting for one to turn up.

Erm ... wrong.

It was fun, though, to give it some credit. Fun trying to not stagger about. We weren't blotto, but we definitely knew we had had our fill. Bravely, as pissed people tend to do, we linked arms just to try and steady each other.

This made me far from steady.

The feeling of her next to me ... the firmness of her body next to mine made my head swim with absolute longing just to increase the contact.

So I did. I leaned into her, languishing in the nearness of my heart's deepest wish. I was so caught up in the moment I didn't realise I was holding her hand ... yep ... I had looped my arm across her middle and had pulled those slender digits into my own. The sensation of tangling my fingers with hers was tantamount to insanity ... I was going crazy for her.

Instead of drawing my hand away like I should have ... you know, like I had been burned ... I did the complete opposite.

I froze. And stared at her fingers laced in mine.

She stopped talking, and I could feel her breath tapping on the side on my face ... short sharp

breaths that warmed much more than the skin on my cheek.

It seemed as if it was in slow motion as I lifted my eyes to meet her gaze and was caught in a blueness that had turned nearly violet in the darkness.

I was transfixed. Couldn't blink. Just stared. And she stared back - unblinking too.

I didn't even notice I had moved in closer. It must have been the alcohol, although to this day I still believe I was under the influence of Ash and Ash alone ... the alcohol had dissipated to a distant memory.

We were inches apart ... our breaths were mingling in the cold night's air ... twisting and turning into some unfocused fog ... joining ... connecting like they needed to melt into one to survive.

I could say I did what I did in a last ditch to claim what my heart yearned for. I could even say I did it just to experience all that was Ash. I even could say I did it to quench the thirst I had for her - just the once - to touch those lips - to kiss those lips. To claim them for my own ... just the once.

But ... I can't say any of these things.

Because I didn't know. Still don't know why I did it - why I closed that vacuous gap between us and brushed my needy lips against hers.

If it had been just that - a kiss, however brief, then it all would be okay, and maybe I wouldn't be sat here today writing this. If she hadn't returned the oh so brief brush of the lips with a kiss that was slightly longer ... Once again I wouldn't be sat here ...

But she did.

And I was lost.

Control was a thing of the past ... and I was lost.

My hand lifted to her face and cupped her cheek surrendering in the texture. Soft. Supple. Perfect.

I pulled her head down closer to mine and captured her lips, holding them underneath mine ... holding them still.

And waited.

I was surprised she couldn't feel my heart beating wildly in my mouth, as I waited ... with my lips locked on hers.

Then ... slowly ... I felt hers move, reciprocating what I was feeling in a tender kiss. Expectation

clung to me, as I moved my lips against hers; my hand pushing back into long thick hair to clutch at the nape and bring her face down into mine.

Pressure was building - the kiss became stronger, finding the will to continue ... finding the hope to collect what was rightfully hers. Then ... more ardent. Wetness escaped my mouth and blended with hers - the taste was all I had ever dreamed it would be ... but better.

Lips parted on a silent command, and I could feel a soft wet tongue escape her mouth and beg entrance to mine.

Permission granted.

Her hands were on my hips and she pulled me into her, increasing the pressure. I slipped my free hand around her waist to aid the connection.

Wetness poured from between my legs, as my heart continued to perform cartwheels around my body, leaving the confines of my mouth. Hips began their methodical rocking against each other ...

Ash staggered back slightly, taking me with her. Before I knew it, she was up against the wall with me between her legs. Pushing into her. Kissing her. Claiming her. All my inhibitions were gone.

I nearly came when her hand gripped my backside and pulled me into her, her groan entering my mouth as the kiss deepened into something carnal ... sexually primitive.

It was shit or bust ... shit or bust.

My hand left her waist and snaked inside her coat, inside her shirt ... and hovered for a split second ... at the base of her breast. I could feel the heat of it taunting me - begging me to clutch and clasp and pump.

And who am I to refuse.

'Fuck ... Lou ... *god* ...' Her words shot inside my mouth, as I continued to grind and push and kiss her. I was truly lost ... truly immersed in all that was her.

If this was a dream then please let me sleep forever.

But this wasn't a dream. This was me acting out all my fantasies ... all my fantasies about my best friend ... the friend I loved ... was *in* love with ... The friend I never thought would look at me twice.

I needed to taste her, lick her throat - suck her skin - sample the little crevice where her neck met her shoulder ...

I craved to nurse her nipple in my mouth, rolling it around my tongue. I yearned to slip my hand between her legs and sample the wetness I hoped would be seeping from her.

It was the scenario of the child in the sweetshop. Everything on display ... everything to purchase, but not knowing what to sample first. And like a child I wanted it all ... needed it all. My hands were trying to touch all of her but savour each caress ... a mammoth feat. I was drowning ... seeping ... dissolving into her ... Her lips were on fire, my libido was out of control ... I was losing all sense of reality ...

Her hands slipped their way tentatively underneath my jacket - the shirt - the bra - then ...

*God.*

The feel of those fingers caressing my breast, pinching the erect nipple, becoming firmer and firmer and then ...

Stop.

And.

Freeze.

Pull away. To be shortly followed by her mouth.

Blue eyes were wide with shock; her lips glistened with my saliva, my hand still on her breast.

'I can't ... *can't* ... Lou ... *I can't do this.*' Followed by a shove away, leaving me staggering backwards, and disbelief pouring from me.

And she ran ... leaving me gasping. She ran ... leaving me stunned. She ran ... leaving me there ...

... standing

... with my broken heart in my hands.

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## **Chapter Twenty-One**

Didn't see Ash. Didn't expect to.

Throughout the last three days, I had gone through all the phases, stages, and rites of passage nobody should ever experience.

Guilt. Anger. Frustration. Apathy. Then all of them again.

I couldn't tell you how many times I picked up the phone to call her, but chickened out at the last minute. Nor could I tell you how long I stood outside her house plucking up the courage to just knock. What would I say? What *could* I say, for that matter? So, I just stood there ... watching closed curtains.

I felt raw. Exposed. Tumultuous. Depressed. Manic. I felt everything but wanted. The feelings churning through me never stayed constant.

Loneliness prevailed. Who could I tell? No one ... not even Jo. Why should I? What good would it do?

On the Saturday morning, after all our things had been loaded in the removal van, I felt the end of an era come upon me. The iron doors clanked shut and echoed the sound of the shutters falling into place in my heart. I physically felt it. Slam. Shutters down. Finito. It was a feeble attempt to block out everything and everyone ... almost like an invisible brick wall.

And as my dad laid his hand on my shoulders, in a signal of our departure, I felt the key lock in my chest ... like a knife twisting.

'Time to go, Lou.' His face showed concern as he gently rubbed my shoulder in some attempt to comfort me. 'You'll love it there ... you'll see. It'll be a new start for all of us.'

I just nodded. Words stuck in my throat. Tears collected in my eyes but stayed unspent.

Although I had my belongings jammed into black bin bags in the back of that van, I left everything behind in Stockport that day.

Everything.

My innocence.

My hope.

My heart - broken and wretched.

But most of all I left behind the only person I knew I would ever love.

Now. That is no way to start a new life is it?

I left my home feeling like a shell - empty ... devoid of a future... bereft of a soul.

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## **Part Two**

**2004**

### **Chapter Twenty-Two**

You can tell by the year that time has passed. Too many years to go into detail about ... too many years and events to dissect and analyse.

One thing is certain through it all ... I had spent the last nineteen years growing embittered. Relationship after relationship came and went, and the time in between was spent reflecting on how shit life truly was.

Stop.

Hold your horses. More to the point ... I should hold my literary horses and just try and put you in the picture about a few things. You know ... clarify a few things, and put these things into some kind of perspective ... box them ... undo the files and spill the proverbial beans. How else can you understand me or my life?

Well ... the first few months in Great Yarmouth (whomever thought of Great must have been tripping) were no picnic to say the least. They were, in a word, bollocks. And if you want more than one word they were big fat hairy camel bollocks.

As I said earlier, Jo didn't seem bothered about the move, and after two months in Norfolk, told me why.

She was leaving.

Leaving me there ... on my own.

Logic and reasoning told me this was okay; it was the pain in my chest that argued otherwise. Jo's counter argument was she had only agreed to move to make sure I settled in okay. Very noble and sisterly.

Bollocks to that.

She went on to tell me her life was with Craig, her boyfriend, who had been setting up a flat for the both of them whilst she was babysitting me.

I know ... I know. Years have told me that this is what people do when they love each other. They step aside from family ... not 'fucking desert' them as had I screamed at her. I also know that I was unreasonable ...

To say I blew my stack would be putting it mildly, almost euphemistically. My exact words were

along the lines of 'I don't need you to fucking baby sit me!' and I'm too much of a lady to tell you the rest.

After my tirade, I watched her. Really watched her. Watched her face crumple and the tears well up behind her eyes. Watched her nod her head, sharply. Watched her rapidly swallow and sit back on the bed and wait.

The comments I made were cruel, and like the injured animal after the attack, I withdrew into the corner to lick my wounds, wounds that for the most part I had inflicted on myself.

Emotionally I was a mess. The two people I loved most in the world had deserted me ... left me there to rot and wallow in self-pity. I couldn't see past it ... couldn't see past that point in my life.

It was too black.

The day she went I just gave her a hug, secretly inhaled her scent believing this would be the last time I would ever see her (how dramatic!), and gave a quick wave to her and Craig and then went inside the house, leaving my parents outside to wave the van off. The van that took Jo away from me.

I cried so hard I had a nose bleed. A cracker too. My dad found me curled up on my bedroom floor covered in blood and went into panic mode thinking I had tried to top myself.

Death by nosebleed. Just my luck.

After the initial discovery, and realisation I hadn't sliced open my nasal veins with a penknife, my dad put something cold behind my neck and told me to sit up straight, all the while I was performing those little hiccupping noises that people get when they have cried too long and too hard. Like kids, really.

I fumbled around the back of my head and fingered the ice pack, shuddering sobs escaping, bits of dribble escaping my mouth. I was confused. It didn't feel like ice, crushed or otherwise.

I pulled the pack around and stared at the tea towel that held the cold mystery parcel. He wouldn't ... would he?

He had.

A medium sized bag of frozen peas greeted me, the obnoxious green packaging lying limply after performing its duty.

Well ... that was the icebreaker ... literally. I threw back my head and laughed ... loud and long. Laughed until I felt the dribble of blood trickle down my face once again.

Ah fuck.

Peas to the ready, and I was in position again, little spurts of laughter slipping out.

What a sight! Face smeared with blood and tears, sitting like I had a pole up my arse, clasping a bag of frozen peas to the nape of my neck like my life depended on it.

Maybe in a way it did.

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Weeks blurred. Months flew. Years screamed by. Obviously I still saw Jo ... she ended up moving to Norwich with Craig and their little boy, Simon ... or as his Aunty Lou called him ... Simple Simon.

I went to Uni and I think I shagged half the girls on my course. Don't get me wrong, there weren't that many ... grin ... just enough. As I said before, well ... nearly said ... I couldn't commit to one person. Not wouldn't ... *couldn't*.

You see, there was only one person for me and I hadn't heard a dickie bird from her in years. But I still had her red jumper and book.

Bugger. If anyone actually went in the box in the spare room they would think I had the tendency for paedophilia.

How many people do you know that have a tattered red jumper that hasn't been washed for nearly thirty years hidden away, and with that a tattered children's book? Not many I guess, unless ... nope ... not going to mention Michael Jackson.

And do you also know, that on the days it rains, you know, really rains, I still get that jumper out and hold it close to me.

Images of blue eyes, concerned blue eyes... Ash's twinkling blue eyes ... would fill me and leave my heart breaking all over again. Echoes of '*Here. Put it on ... you'll catch your death ...*' would resonate around my head, making me believe she was actually standing before me.

And if I try hard enough ... believe hard enough ... I can still smell her. Smell her scent enfolded in the fibres of that old red jumper.

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### **Chapter Twenty-Three**

Now you need a very brief description of what I do now. I'm what you call and Educational Psychologist ... or Ed Psyche. My job is to help troubled teens, and, for the most part, try to bring some order to the havoc that the troublesome teens bring to school.

I work mainly for Norfolk County Council, and my job is to go into schools where and when

needed. I enjoy my job most of the time, and like all jobs there is also a shit side to it.

I like talking to teenagers, more so than people of my own age group. I didn't have to pretend to be something I wasn't ... I was just Ms Turner, or Lou, the person that was there to help them through a sticky part of their lives. I wasn't just the person who was gay and single ... the person who was cold and detached ... the person who never spoke about her private life.

These kids were not bad ... on the whole that is, as there is always one bad apple yadda yadda yadda. What they had to go through at home was enough to make anybody weep. Abusive parents ... physically, emotionally and sexually. And not just their parents either. Siblings, 'friends' of the family ... other family members. But there were also other factors to consider ... alcohol and drug abuse for starters, then illness. I've seen kids wail and rant about how unfair life was when they found out someone they loved was terminally ill. One girl actually got home from school and found her mother dead on the stairs ... another witnessed his father OD in front of her.

Now. Whatever people tell you, kids are not as resilient as you may believe. Their problems do not stop at the school gates, however much the teachers would like the lessons to carry on as usual. No. Kids try, for the most part. They have to, as other kids smell the weakness and attack.

True. Have you ever heard kids taunt another one because his mother is dying of cancer?

I have.

So, as I was saying, kids, however much we love them ... can be little shits. Vulnerable little shits ... but little shits all the same.

Consequently, when everything uproots itself ... there I am, and although for the most part my hands are tied, I try.

My ambition was to help kids adapt and accept. I think it stemmed from my own upbringing ... you know ... the broken home thing ... the feeling of displacement ... the not fitting in that made me want to do this job. Divorce and separation were becoming all too common, and as I said before ... kids could only take so much before the dam bursts and their world goes down the pan.

So what do they do?

Loads of things, actually.

They can withdraw, react or attack. Eating disorders are rife ... social phobia, school refusing, sexual promiscuity, drug and alcohol abuse, self-harm, aggression, depression, some even become elective mutes. I could go on ... but then I would detract from what I want to tell you next.

Some of them become evil little fuckers who terrorise, vandalise, steal, antagonise, joyride, drink to excess, take drugs whilst stealing to feed their habit, intimidate and assault people.

One of these gems was Sam Read.

God did I hate that boy.

Hated him with a vengeance unprecedented ... hated him and his cock sure grin ... wanted to slap the little git senseless, which, in my opinion, he didn't have the sense of an earthworm ... and at least earthworms are good for something ...

He had a string of antisocial behaviour writs against him starting from the tender age of nine, and had a curfew, which he was forever breaking ... a curfew that entailed an ankle bracelet that alerted the authorities if he was out of his house after eight o'clock.

Do you think that would stop him? No way. It just egged him on. There wasn't a damned thing the police could do except take him down to the station and give him a warning. He wasn't old enough, and this he played to his advantage.

But I didn't get involved until he took his behaviour through the school gates.

And then that's where I stepped in.

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As I said before, he wasn't a nice boy. Trouble was he thought the world owed him a living and it was my job to show him that it didn't.

He stole, destroyed and terrorised at any given opportunity. Ted Lawrence, his previous Ed Psyche, had washed his hands of him, mainly because of the reign of terror Sam had inflicted. Obscene words had been sprayed along Ted's car, scratches appeared, vulgar messages had been left on his answer phone ... and all this accompanied by the gradual wearing down by stalking him whenever the chance came to pass.

An out and out bastard.

An evil bastard at that.

Fourteen and knew every trick in the book when it came to the systematic breakdown of a human being.

So, after Ted said 'No more', Sam was passed along to me. Whoopee doo. I was not a happy bunny to say the least.

This time the police were involved on a bigger scale. Sam had broken into the school and vandalised everything and anything that got in his way. It was a mess ... the Science labs were complete devastation, the computer room witnessed broken monitors and smashed hard drives.

To put you in the picture, it was thousands of pounds worth of damage. And the police suspected that there were others involved, as there was too much damage for just one little pipsqueak.

The question was ... who? And it was the unknown faces they wanted. Mainly because they had suspects in the pipeline and needed hard-core evidence to get them.

Sam was caught leaving the school premises at 12:36 am on the Sunday morning with a monitor under his arm, and I was called down to the station at 1:45. Pissed off. Big style.

It wasn't the usual thing for me to do. I had only ever been called down to the station on one previous occasion, and that was for possession of a class B drug. Not mine, obviously. A young girl who was in my care had given my details as a point of contact.

So here I was again, and definitely looking worse for wear. I hadn't even met the little ... I'll leave out that word, or replace it with twat. I had only been assigned to his growing case at the beginning of the week, and met his social worker on Wednesday ... and there was no love lost between those two. Or with me for that matter. I didn't understand why I'd been called out in the first place.

The desk sergeant was a man in his early fifties, who had the face of someone who was sick and tired of filling in forms for delinquent teenagers. When I introduced myself, I saw his eyebrows rise to signify he thought I was one of those 'do gooders' who would try and get the kid off.

Now. I had been woken up when I was in the middle of a dream with Jodie Foster ... and we weren't relieving a scene from Panic Room, if you get my drift. It was more like Contact ... but without the aliens ... and without the interest in talking to someone out of this world. It was out of this world; well it could've been if that bloody phone hadn't started ringing.

'Someone will be along to take you down to the cells in a few minutes, Miss Turner.'

Reality came back with the gruff voice of the 'receptionist'.

A few minutes my arse. More like twenty-five minutes. I was just in mid rant about being kept hanging on by people who couldn't find their arse with both hands when I heard my name being called behind me.

Mmmm. I said called didn't I? It was more like a question. Mmmm ... again. Question? Or statement?

'Louise Turner (?)'

I froze. My finger pointing accusatorily at the bloke behind the counter.

'Louise Turner. It's you isn't it?'

My stomach ... my poor stomach didn't know what to do. Mainly because it had been flooded

with my heart. Every single hair on my body stood up to attention, and I could feel a sheen of sweat coat my top lip. I knew I should have turned round and looked into those blue eyes again, but I couldn't. I was paralysed. Struck by Statues Disease ... almost a caricature of Lord Kitchener.

'Miss Turner?' The desk sergeant looked at me with concern, and I probably did look weird, but I didn't care less what anybody thought. 'Detective Inspector Richards is here to see you.'

I know! Well ... I knew it was Ash. My Ash ... my Ash was standing right behind me. But what I didn't know, or expect, was for Ash ... my Ash to *be* standing right behind me ... a Detective Inspector or otherwise.

I turned on the spot like my left foot had been nailed to the floor; my heart had left the safety of my stomach and was now sitting comfortably in my throat waiting for a peek at the person that had abandoned it for so long.

It was like a dream sequence. Everything moved painfully slowly, like when you keep pressing the skip frame button on a DVD player. All movements were jerky and mechanical to point of torture.

And then she was there.

Standing in front of me like a vision. So beautiful ... so goddamn agonisingly beautiful. And still unobtainably Ash.

Her hair danced just below her shoulders, raven and shining. It graced the shoulders of her black suit jacket that hugged her slender body and contrasted with the white of her shirt. Legs were encased in tailor cut black trousers, which were complimented by flat slip on leather shoes.

Serviceable. Good for running, I bet. And that's where my focus stayed until I heard that rich voice once again.

'It is you. I *knew* it.'

My head snapped up so quickly I felt the muscles in the back of my neck ping into place. Blue eyes stared intently into my face, and I saw her customary crooked smile twitch around her lips.

Beauty personified. She was a vision... a vision.

'What's the matter with you? Cat got your tongue?'

My mouth at this point began to open and close, imitating a poor little fish hanging at the end of a line.

The smile slipped from her face, as words failed me, and she looked concerned ... or was it disappointed?

I watched her shake her head, probably trying to clear it, which was shortly followed by an elaborate clearing of her throat. A hand shot out and stopped in front of me... extended in greeting. I just stared at it like a moron.

'Ashley Richards. Detective Inspector Ashley Richards.' The tone was curt and unfamiliar. It had lost that friendly quality of moments before. I lifted my hand to hers and slipped my fingers into hers. I can actually remember closing my eyes ever so briefly as I savoured the contact, before raising my gaze to meet hers.

She was staring at me in expectation, and for a brief moment I felt the anger and pain I had felt when she had rejected me nearly twenty years ago come bubbling up.

I told myself to 'Get a grip. It was nearly twenty years ago.'

But it felt like yesterday.

But it wasn't yesterday.

Shit.

Then from somewhere deep inside I dragged up a smile, and gripped her hand tighter.

'Hello Ash. Long time no see?'

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## **Chapter Twenty-Four**

The journey down to the cells was completed in pained silence. We had performed the expected hellos and doesn't time fly, and then we had just stopped. That's when things started to feel uncomfortable.

So ... without further ado, we silently communicated, mainly with nodding of heads in the direction of the door that now would as good a time as any to go and see Sam. It wasn't until we arrived outside that Ash decided to put me in the picture about a few things ... clearing up the mystery of why she was actually in Norwich in the first place.

She was in charge of the team who were investigating the thugs they believed Sam was involved with, the gang who Sam thought were just like him ... but he didn't have a clue.

Now Sam was a git ... but even he hadn't done a fraction of the things the rest of his gang had. He didn't know it ... well they assumed he didn't, because he would have been singing like a canary if he had the chance.

Petty crimes like vandalising a school with Sam just made him think they were on his side. He



didn't realise they were using him; making him feel like part of them before they showed their true colours. These included dealing, extortion and fraud. And that's what the police knew about. They had never been able to pin it on anyone in the group ... until they had introduced the new member.

Up until now, nothing had happened to allow them to step in and name names ... and they had had time to 'import' some big wig from Manchester Metropolitan Police, as the leader of the band was a Mancunian, Danny Spencer, who had travelled to Norfolk to start a new crime wave. She, DI Richards, had been in Norwich since the beginning of last week, and she was raring to get an arrest.

So, it seemed as if we had been on Sam's tail for about the same length of time, and the police needed me to get Sam to talk. Obviously she wasn't too impressed when I informed her that everything Sam told me would be confidential and couldn't be used in a court of law ... well it could, but we didn't really like to go down that avenue if we could help it. Puts the kids off when they want to confide ... not many of us would open up our soul if we thought the person we were telling would run off shouting it into the wind.

Then I had to remind her that he had to, by law, have an Advocate with him.

'Bollocks.'

'Excuse me?' I couldn't believe she hadn't thought of it before.

Ash leaned closer to me and I could feel her breath on my face. Her eyes were steely blue ... the twinkle absent. 'I said ... bol ... locks.'

I could feel myself cowering lower as her body imposed itself over mine. No wonder she was a DI ... she could frighten the shit out of anyone. I mean ... she was six feet tall and solid. Her face brooked no argument, but in my job this kind of intimation was all par for the course.

Somewhere deep inside me I grabbed hold of an iota of courage and straightened my back, pushing my face close to hers ... close enough to feel her breath skit along my skin and send tremors all up and down my spine. Fuck. She was so beautiful. All I wanted to do was lean forward just another inch ... and capture her soft lips ...

'I said bollocks.'

That was it.

'And I said it that I cannot divulge a client's personal details. It is confidential ... all about trust. And you ...' I stepped back just a little and casually scanned her from head to toe 'should know it wouldn't stand up in a court of law. An Advocate is required ... he's a minor.' I finished with a smug smile, which made her grit her teeth.

I didn't just see her grit them ... I heard it. And it made me smile wider. 'So you see, *Detective* ...

I can't help you. This is a waste of both our time.' Then I turned to go.

Her hand gripped the top of my arm and held me in place like a vice.

'Not so fast, *Miss Turner*.'

'Get your hand off me.' I attempted to prise her hand off me, but she was holding on tight. I was tempted to kick her in the shin and make a run for it, but then I remembered I wasn't thirteen. So I relaxed my body and just gave her a bored expression.

Her face showed she had been expecting the kick, and my relaxing and looking at her like she was pond life completely threw her. That beautiful face creased into thought, and I could tell she didn't exactly know what to do next. Blue eyes shot to her hand, and she creased her face even more before slowly prising her fingers from me, watching them with fascinated intent.

'Thank you.' Short and to the point.

'Sorry ... I ...'

'Apology accepted. Now ... if you'll excuse me, I have a bed calling my name.' I turned to go, but my heart stayed facing her, shouting 'Do you remember me? Do you remember how you left me to curl up and die?'

For some unknown reason, I felt the tears sneak up behind my eyes and threaten to expose me. I began to walk away, hoping beyond hope that I wouldn't embarrass myself.

'Lou ...' It was spoken so softly ... and trickled through my ears and down deep inside me.  
'Please ... Lou ... I'm sorry ... I ...'

I stopped and turned to face her. I wanted to ask her what she was sorry for. Whether it was because she had tried to force me to find out information for her case. Or sorry for breaking my heart ... sorry for fucking up my life ...

Or sorry for making it impossible for me to forget her.

She stepped towards me, and I instinctively stepped back. I could see the hurt on her face, which she quickly masked with a cough and the straightening of her shoulders. Coldness slipped into place, and she once again became the professional.

'Look. I'll be straight with you.' Weren't you always ... that was the problem. 'We need to get the ringleader behind bars. I don't know how long I can stay in Norwich ... so we need information fast. This bloke is a nasty piece of work ... very nasty.'

'Sam?'

'No ... Danny Spencer. He is the new gang leader. The old one found himself slumped over the

steering wheel of his car as he was waiting for the traffic lights to change.' My eyebrows decided to come into action and lifted in surprise. 'And Danny decided a nice get away to Norfolk is exactly what he needed until everything calmed down.'

'Bugger.'

'Exactly. We *know* it was him ... but we also can't prove it. Not that we miss the bloke who he disposed of ... It's just a way to get the little bastard locked up for a long time.'

'And where exactly do I fit into all of this?' I stepped closer to her again, feeling the aura of her body envelop me and my eyes fluttered closed and felt the vestiges of the love I felt for her try and make an appearance.

I coughed. Composed myself. Adopted the countenance of someone who is trying to pay attention.

'You could be the link.'

'Link? How can I be the link? I don't even know Sam ... and he doesn't know me. I was only assigned to his case last week.'

'All the better. Look ...' She reached out to take my arm, and I saw her stop and pull it back to her, securing it in place at her side. 'Look ... Sam is the key. Danny is a bigheaded little fucker and loves to brag about what he's done. But he's not stupid. We have to find out what Sam knows ... and if he doesn't know you, then maybe he will try to show off.'

'I doubt that. He'll close up more than anything.'

'Maybe ... but we have to try.' Her look was softening and a smile played around her lips. I know ... I know ... I should have told her to shove it and walked away. But that smile ... those eyes ... God ...

I was a goner.

And this was the start of something I can only describe as a love hate relationship. Now ... I'm not going to explain that comment. You'll have to read on if you want to find out why I loved to hate Detective Inspector Richards.

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## Chapter Twenty-Five

Being in the cell with that little shit was tantamount to torture. After the initial 'Fuck you, bitch' and other lines of poetry, he settled down to grin a moronic grin intermittent with lascivious leering at my chest.

I honestly don't know how I didn't slap him senseless. Thirty minutes in his company made me feel nauseous, and I could understand why he was disliked by anyone and everyone. Now ... I always try to see some sparkle of good in everybody, but however hard I tried ... nothing ... he was a bad 'un through and through.

Looking at him you could tell he was trouble. A shaved head that left a twattish fringe at the front screamed 'Jailbait!' as well as everything else about him. He must have weighed eight stone wet through, and needed high heels to reach the skirting boards ... but he had a wiry strength which is ten times worse than facing some six foot body builder. Now his eyes ... I still shiver when I think of them ... his eyes were cold. Dead. Totally and utterly without a shred of compassion. Cold grey, but quick and sly. I knew he took in everything that was going on like a predator. This boy missed nothing and used everything to his advantage.

As I said. Trouble. With a capital T.

Trying to be civil to him was agonising.. I used all the textbook approaches, but it didn't wash with him. He was too street smart, and demanded he should have someone there to defend him. The station had tried to contact his parents but there was no answer, either to knocking or phoning. Whether they were purposefully ignoring them, I don't know. They were probably so used to getting call, especially since Sam didn't give two shits about his court curfew or the ankle bracelet he had to wear to alert the authorities when he stepped out of his boundaries.

After thirty minutes I'd had enough. I knew if I didn't get out of there I would pull his grinning waste of space carcass off the bunk and give him a good old-fashioned good hiding. Don't get me wrong, I don't condone violence in any way shape or form ... but come on! He could try the patience of a saint.

Ash was waiting for me as I stepped out and nearly knocked me back inside the cell. I heard Sam shout 'Evening Inspector' from behind me, and grimaced as Ash gave him the look. Cold and hard. Fuck. Even I was scared and it wasn't directed at me.

'You'd better get comfortable, Read, as you're going to be seeing a lot of this place.' The self-assured smirk on his face wavered slightly as Ash stepped forward. 'Get *real* comfortable, mate.' The 'real' came out as a growl rather than a word, her teeth chewing around it.

She made a big deal out of slamming the door closed ... the echo ringing around the basement of the police station.

'Well?'

'Erm ...'

'What did he tell you?'

'Look ... erm ... well you can't expect him to spill his guts on a first meeting.' I didn't know why

I was trying to soften the blow, and, in effect, sign myself up for more of the same. She raised her brow, her lips turning at the edges. I could see her mind working double time and I knew I was going to regret answering the phone earlier that night.

'Well tha...!' She didn't get chance to finish the sentence, as the heavy door at the end of the corridor was thrown back and a woman came tearing through it, hair ruffled and, if I'm not mistaken, her blouse was buttoned up wrong.

'Who's in charge here?' Stern. To the point. Full of authority. I liked her.

'Who the fuck are you?' Ash wasted no time in letting the woman know she was not taking any shit.

The woman stopped inches away from us, and slowly appraised Ash from head to foot. The sneer grew wider as she progressed down the long frame, and when she reached the bottom, she started the journey all the way up to her face again.

Honestly. I could have cut the air with a knife. They just stood there and glared at each other like a couple of kids who were arguing over a toy. To be perfectly truthful ... I was just as bad. Gormless is the word. I just stood looking from one to the other, kind of comparing them in a weird kind of way.

The woman was only an inch or so shorter and her hair was a shade lighter ... but even though she looked like she had literally been hoisted out of bed she was a stunner. And I could feel my mouth beginning to water. But then I looked at Ash and realised that even though I was attracted to Miss No Name ... ah ... you know ... heart and all that.

'Erm ... Louise Turner ... Lou ... Turner.' I didn't even realise I had stepped forward in between the pair and turned my back on Ash to hold out my hand to the stranger. 'Ed Psyche'

Initially I saw a flash of anger sweep over her face, but then it turned into something softer ... more ... let me think... more appreciative. That's the word ... appreciative, but not in 'Oh I'm so glad you introduced yourself' appreciative. More like 'What do we have here?' whilst licking lips appreciative.

I heard a distinct cough come from behind me, and I could feel Ash becoming restless. The woman's eyes flicked over my shoulder and briefly landed on Ash before she gave me all of her attention, her hand slipping effortlessly into my own. 'Gemma ... Gemma Jackson.' And then she closed her hand more firmly around mine. It was almost like a caress.

'Sorry to break up the party girls ...' the sound of Ash's voice sliced through Gemma's and my greeting and I knew she wasn't happy about being left out. 'Detective Inspector Richards.' A pause for effect. 'I'm in charge of the investigation.'

'Really?' Gemma's voice came out cold and full of sarcasm. 'Well ... *Detective*... You wouldn't mind telling me why I only found out Sam Read was here thirty five minutes ago?' That explains

the hair and the shirt. 'Don't you know what you have done is illegal?' Ash didn't answer. 'Under the Child Protection Act, any minor should have an Advocate present at all times.' Her hand was on her hip, and she half-leaned back to glare into Ash's face.

'Really?' Ash's response was more sarcastic in delivery and I was beginning to feel the tell tale signs of one hell of a bitch fight breaking loose.

'Yes ... really. I am within my rights to demand that Sam be released and ...'

'Fuck that. That little shi..'

'Ladies. Ladies. Please.' My tone was coaxing, trying to delay the inevitable blow up. 'This is not helping anyone.' I felt Ash stiffen, even though I didn't see her. Gemma's face looked as if it was etched from stone. So, I tried the oldest trick in the book.

I flirted.

I know. I wasn't even sure if Gemma was gay, but at least it was worth a shot. The smile was on my lips and my hand was smoothing her arm before anyone could say Jack Robinson. 'Look ... Gemma...' Another smile. 'Can't we just grab a coffee and talk about this ... I mean ...' and I looked over my shoulder at a fuming Ash, directing Gemma's gaze there, and then looked at her squarely in the face before contorting my features into the expression that we should pity the Detective ... as she knew not what she did.

'We could just ... you know ...' I stepped forward as if I was bringing her into my confidence, but in the process I eliminated personal body space.

Gemma didn't back away and I could see a smile play along her lips. Just a little more, Turner.

'We could talk about Sam ... and get to know each other a little better.' A pause - then a hurried 'in case we will be working together.' However, the look I gave her said I was interested in anything but work at that moment.

I could see her conscience fighting with her libido. Her fingers came up and played with stray locks of hair and then move with deliberate agitation to the buttons on her shirt ... the ones in all the wrong holes. I could feel a laugh bubbling up inside me, and I had the urge to tell her the buttons were all wrong. But that would have defeated my objective. There would be no way she would agree to anything I wanted if she felt like a prat.

'We could all grab a coffee.' Ash had decided to come into the conversation at last. To be truthful, yet again, I felt relieved. I didn't fancy going for a coffee with Gemma alone ... and to use an old adage ... 'I had bitten off more than I could chew.' I looked at her face, and I knew she wasn't happy about playing along with this woman, but the alternative was Sam Read walking tonight.

And after thirty minutes with him, there is no way I wanted him loose on the streets that night or

for a long time after. Especially because it would fall into my jurisdiction to take care of him. That was the last thing I needed.

Gemma didn't answer, just looked at me and raised her eyebrow.

'Sounds like a plan.' And looked her straight in the face, obscuring Ash's view of me whilst I made a grimacing face and slightly shrugged my shoulders in forced resignation. Even though inside I felt completely different.

Ash sighed behind me, a deep dramatic sigh, that said she knew what face I had pulled and I felt the colour in my face begin to darken to a pinkish hue.

'Shall I lead the way?' With that, she pushed past the both of us and marched to the door, leaving the two of us to stare at each other.

'Is she jealous? Are you two ...'

'No way!' Quite forceful to say the least ... Methinks the lady doth protest too much.

I shot a worried look in Ash's direction. She had the door partly open and was just standing there. I could only see part of her face, and I couldn't read anything ... it was closed off.

Shit.

I don't even know why I wrote shit there. It's just a feeling I had at the time. Whether it's because I felt exposed, or maybe it's the fact I thought it reminded her of the night she kissed me and ran.

'Come on then.' And as I walked towards the exit, I felt a little less cocky than I had five minutes ago.

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## **Chapter Twenty-Six**

Coffee was fine. Gemma wasn't as hard nosed as I had first thought. The only down side was that Ash seemed off ... well ... put out is more the expression. All the time we were discussing Sam Read, she answered briefly and could barely make eye contact with me ... or Gemma ... and kept looking towards the door of the canteen, her mug of coffee gripped tightly in her hand.

Come to think of it, I don't think she actually took a sip.

After twenty minutes, we were all caught up with events. By all accounts, Gemma was no fan of Mr Read and this was definitely not her first visit to the cells on his behalf. Eleven times she had been called out to represent him, twelve including the current one.

She told us a brief history of his crimes and misdemeanours, nothing that would surprise us.

Over the last four and a half years he had been brought to book twenty one times.

Twenty one times!

The only time Ash livened up was when Gemma said she should really go and speak to him. I saw her eyes become animated again, and she tried to hide the fact she was pleased to see the back of her with a question.

'Have you noticed any change in Sam and his behaviour in the last couple of months?'

A simple enough question.

Gemma chewed her lip, her brows furrowing.

'Well ... erm ... actually ... now I come to think of it...' she leaned forward almost conspiratorially. Both Ash and I followed suit and we gathered across the table as if we were planning world domination. 'This last month Sam's crimes have been a little more bizarre ... and his behaviour too.'

'Any chance he could be on drugs?'

Both Gemma and Ash looked at me and then looked away.

'No ... not like drugged bizarre. More like he seems as if he is even cockier than he already was. You know ...' No I didn't. And neither did Ash by the look on her face. Gemma sighed the sigh of someone who is talking to an idiot. A pair of idiots, actually. 'I mean he acts like he doesn't care ... like he is above the law.'

'He's always thought he was above the law, and being caught twenty one times should tell you that.' I couldn't hide the note of sarcasm in my voice. From the corner of my eye I saw Ash grin ... you know ... the crooked one that makes her seem so self-assured.

Gemma didn't notice, or if she did she ignored it. 'Above the law as in he isn't afraid of being caught. Either he is trying to impress someone or he thinks he will get away with it for some strange reason.'

That knocked the grin off Ash's face. 'Has he mentioned anybody ... anyone he is working for, or with?'

'Not that I can remember ... erm ... wait a minute.' And we did. Literally. Whilst she was wracking her brains trying to remember if King Shit had mentioned anyone else. 'There was one person he kept on talking about ... someone called Danny ...' We bolted upright on the chairs. Danny Spencer... it had to be him. 'I'm sure he said Danny ...' Another pause. 'A northerner who has come to Norfolk for a break.'

'Think.' Ash's voice was stern and controlled. 'Are you sure he said Danny? A northerner?'



'I think so ... but I wouldn't stake my life on it.'

The conversation went on pretty much the same until Ash had convinced her to try and find out a bit more about Sam's new friend. Funny thing was she didn't really go into detail ... not like she had for me anyway.

After Gemma left, the silence between us was deafening. I fiddled about with my coffee cup, taking sips of the cold liquid, grimacing behind the cup. Now and again, I stole glances at Ash. She was just sat staring ahead of her, her face unreadable, and those blue eyes half closed as if she was contemplating something.

'If you've finished with me ...' I let the sentence drift off. And drift off it did ... and hung about in the air for a bit. I sat and waited a little longer.

It was weird. Sitting with Ashley Richards after all of this time and not talking non stop. We had never had difficulty talking ... and even if we did stop for breath, it was never uncomfortable. Although, strangely enough, it wasn't uncomfortable now ... just bloody weird.

Twenty years had passed and I was here with the person I had classed as the love of my life ... obviously it was going to be weird. It couldn't be anything else. Too much had happened in my life since the last time I spoke to her. Too much water had flowed under that proverbial bridge for it to be any other way. I was not the naïve seventeen year old from then. Thankfully.

'So will you help us?'

Huh?

Crap. I had done it again. I had missed the beginning of a conversation ... again. I hadn't done that for years, and it was one thing I'd not missed.

'Help you ... do what, exactly?'

She leaned closer. 'Help us put those little fuckers behind bars where they belong.' Her face was mere inches from mine and my heart was hammering against my rib cage. I was definite she could hear it.

'Sure.' Good start, Turner. 'But I'm telling you now, I'm not doing anything that's illegal.'

Ash leaned back in her chair and let out a loud guffaw. Yes ... some people still use the word guffaw. I just sat and stared at her, the anger inside began to bubble. What the fuck was she laughing at? Me? She's better not be or else I ...

'Sorry about that.' She didn't look sorry. 'It's just ... just ... we're the police and ...' and off she went again. I thought this would make me get angrier but I felt a laugh building up in my chest and snaking its way into my throat.

It was good hearing her laugh. It made me feel good to see, and hear, her laugh. I loved the way she looked so relaxed and happy, like the old Ash, you know, instead of the Detective Inspector Richards who had a stick up her arse.

So I joined in, and the more I laughed, the more she did too. A weight seemed to lift from my shoulders for the time we were in a state of uncontrollable hysterics.

Sometimes we forget, as we grow older, that laughter is good for the soul.

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It was nearly five thirty in the morning by the time I turned my key in the lock of my front door. I should have been tired, but I was wide-awake. Too much had happened in the space of the last four hours for me to just strip and climb back into bed in search of Jodie Foster.

Holding a steaming cuppa, I strolled into my spare room that doubled as an office come storeroom, and sat at my desk. Piles of crap surrounded me, and I shuffled through it half-heartedly, holding the beverage in one hand whilst using the other to sift and separate unruly papers. I couldn't concentrate on the job at hand, even burnt my lips twice on the tea. My mind was definitely elsewhere.

Placing the cup down on the desk, I turned my attention to the stack of boxes piled haphazardly in the far corner of the room. I stared at them for a while ... just stared, before I tentatively moved across the room.

Inside my head my inner voice was telling me to just leave it ... go to bed ... now was not the time. But I was on a mission. In for a penny: in for a pound.

Quickly, I moved the top three boxes, as I knew where the object of my desire lay. The top of the box was the only one not sealed, and I pulled back the edges to reveal a tattered children's book. Reverent fingers stroked the rippled and browned surface, across the faces of some badly illustrated characters, before they tentatively grasped the edges as if it would suddenly crumble into dust.

Gently I lifted it, placed a soft kiss on the cover, and laid it to the side. Underneath the book lay Yazoo's *Upstairs at Eric's*, the corners bent out of shape after being thrust into the box on countless occasions. It joined the book.

Next came the ultimate. Red. Woollen. Ash's.

Carefully I lifted the jumper up to my face and brushed it over my lips, eliciting soft kisses along the front. Then I let the material hang limply in my arms before hugging it closely to my chest, like I was hugging a baby, protecting it ... seeking comfort from it.

My heart felt fit to flood ... to burst ... to rip through my shirt and claim the owner of this

jumper.

But that was never to be. The red jumper was the only thing I would ever have of hers.

It was nearly lunchtime when I woke to find the record stuck and repeating Alison Moyet's voice over and over again ... 'you ... you ... you ... you ... you ...' with one crumpled and slightly wet red jumper nearly morphed into my face.

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## **Chapter Twenty- Seven**

By three o'clock Sunday afternoon, I was showered, fed and back at the station. The police could hold Sam for twenty-four hours, but then they had to let him go. They could charge him, which Ash had said they weren't going to do, as it would ruin their chances of getting Spencer. This was going to be used as a 'getting on the right side of Sam' period. And if we were lucky, maybe getting a bit more information from him before he was released back into the community.

A different desk sergeant escorted me down to the cells, and I felt a little disappointed to find Ash absent. Even a little hurt. Stupid, I know.

As the desk sergeant was turning to leave, after unlocking the cell door, the question popped out of my mouth before I had time to stop it.

'Are you expecting Detective Inspector Richards back anytime soon?'

He stopped, and turned to face me fully. 'She didn't say what time she'd be back. Just that she was going to freshen up and eat.' The face said 'is that all' and I just nodded and pushed the door open. It didn't even enter my head that the sergeant should have stayed with me, I was too concerned about other things ... and because of this I wasn't paying attention.

Big mistake.

I was just inside the room when I felt someone grab my hair. The pain was excruciating. I was pulled backwards and slammed into the wall, and Sam was on me like a dog in heat, his face pressed up to mine. The whites of his eyes gave him a manic air and spittle was collecting around his mouth ... spittle that flew into my face as he spat out 'Bitch'.

Momentarily, I was paralysed.

Momentarily.

My knee came up to meet his crown jewels and I felt them crunch into his groin. I would have preferred them to be introducing themselves to his nostrils ...

A puff of air escaped him and I saw the tears well up in his eyes, the only time I had ever seen

him show emotion in them. My right arm came up and caught him under his chin, pushing him backwards and around so he was pinned against the wall by his windpipe. My left went between his legs and grabbed his testicles that were slowly descending to their rightful place.

I knew he wouldn't be able to move, as both my arm and my hand were pushing and squeezing him into submission. I leaned in closer, my face showing him I was not best pleased by his greeting, my eyes flaring anger and resentment, not just at him, but at myself too.

The words I was going to deliver were cut off as the door to the cell was slammed back and Ash came rushing in. Her hair was flying; the panic in her eyes gave her the appearance of someone who had lost all sense of control.

'You ok?'

I nodded. I was too angry to talk, and knew I would burst into tears if I opened my mouth. Sam was sliding down underneath my hand and I looked at his face. Sweat poured from him, and his cocky stance had been well and truly eliminated.

Fuck. What was I doing? I could lose my job ...

It was as if I had been burned. My hands shot from him and he slumped to the floor, rubbing his neck and his crotch at the same time. For a brief moment he looked defeated, and then he looked me in the face. His eyes were full of hatred. And if they could have spoken they would have told me to watch my back.

'Get up!' Ash was standing in front of him; the tone of her voice told me that she was on the verge of doing something worse than I already had. I felt the fight leave me, all the energy seeping from my body and lying in a heap on the floor.

Sam didn't move, just sat there glaring and rubbing. Ash didn't ask him again, she just leaned down and grabbed the shoulder of his shirt and yanked him off the ground in one swift movement. His legs dangled like a puppet as she nearly threw him across the room where he stumbled onto the bed. 'Sort yourself out, Read. I'll be back in ten.'

With that, she turned to face me, her face softening instantly. 'Come on, Lou. Let's wait outside.' I saw her begin to offer her hand to me, stop ... look at what she was doing, then pull back. 'Come on. We'll talk to him later, ok?'

I nodded. The last thing I wanted was to come back into this cell and face Read again. But a little respite was good for a start.

Outside the cell, Ash turned to me her face full of apology. 'I'm sorry you had to experience that. When the desk sergeant told me you were here and on your own ... I panicked.' Panicked? Why panicked? 'I met him as I was coming down ... I'd told them I was ok to see Read on my own, and they took it as he isn't a threat.' She snorted. 'Bloody male egos.'

I could feel the emotion building up inside me once again, and the tears from before were begging for a performance. I tried swallowing rapidly to ease the pressure, but it just incensed them. One lone tear struggled free and trickled it way down my cheek.

'Hey ... come on. You're safe now.'

Another tear chased the previous one. Bugger.

'Oh Lou ... come here.' With that, I found myself in the arms of the woman I had loved all those years ago, my face buried in her chest, the smell of her exactly the same, her arms around me and hands stroking up and down my back.

Obviously, this made me cry even more. Not because of what had just happened, but because I knew this was the place I belonged ...and I knew it was a place I could never hope to be.

This made me cry harder: made Ash hold me tighter ... made this all one big vicious circle.

I knew I should have pulled away and pulled myself together. But instead I guiltily stayed in her arms and pulled myself to pieces instead.

In this life, you have to learn to take every crumb. However much it hurts.

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One very hot and shaky cup of tea later, I had explained to Ash that I had taken martial arts when I had moved to Norfolk, as it seemed like a good place to meet people of my own age. She was quiet the whole time I was telling her about how difficult I had found settling in.

She looked surprised, and made as if to say something, when I told her that Jo had moved back to Manchester so soon after we had moved.

I paused, thinking I should ask her to say what was on her mind, but realised she had settled back into her chair and her face had closed off. This was a definite sign she wasn't up for a major discussion. It would've turned into one, as what else could it have done. The conversation would have moved on to that night ... the night ... the night I had kissed her and she had kissed me.

No way. How could I even consider talking about something I knew she felt uncomfortable with? The past is best left there ... in the past. There was no point dragging it up to analyse and decipher when all it would do was dredge up old wounds. My old wounds at that. Wounds that had never really healed in the first place.

'I spoke to Gemma after you had gone.' Her voice sounded eerily distant, and I looked at her, more than she was doing to me. She was staring at the far side of the canteen watching two uniformed police officers playing cards and laughing.

I didn't respond, just looked back down at the empty mug I was holding fiercely in my hands.

'She seems quite taken with you.'

My eyes shot up and were captured in blue. 'Really?'

'Yes. Really. She was disappointed you didn't wait for her to finish talking to Read. Said it would have been good to *compare notes*.' The last part of the sentence was spoken sarcastically, and quite cutting to say the least. 'She asked me to give you this.' A piece of paper was thrust into my face and I had to pull back to try and focus on it before I could take it. 'Her phone number. She said, and I quote "Tell her to call me *anytime*".'

If I didn't know better I would've bet money on the fact Ash was jealous ... even if it was a teeny bit ... jealous.

Nah. She couldn't be jealous of Gemma ... could she? Why would she be jealous? Was it because I could get inside information and she couldn't?

'Well ... are you going to take it or what?'

The piece of paper was dangling in front of me like the proverbial carrot, and Ash's focus was on my face, which by this time had gone scarlet.

Slowly, my hand raised itself on its own volition to snag the paper between pert fingers. For a split second, I could feel Ash resist the pull, and I looked at her. One eyebrow had raised itself in mock challenge before the grin appeared.

'Oi ... give it up Richards.'

'Give it up! Give what up?' Her grip became firmer, and I tugged again. She pulled it out of my way and then held it above her head. 'Don't know what you're talking about.' Such a cocky grin.

I squinted my eyes at her and mock scowled. 'Give it to me now...'

'Feisty little bit aren't you.' Her eyes were twinkling and I could see the residue of the Ash I had known all those years ago. Beautiful. Happy. Off limits.

Definitely that. Off limits. My heart sank a little further in my chest and I could feel it nudging my stomach awake, which had been snoozing peacefully for a while.

'Was that your stomach?' I blushed. 'Jesus, woman. Have you hidden a monster in there or what?' Could I go any redder? 'Let me feed you and then you can call Miss Jackson.' She stood up and rummaged her hand through her pocket to look for cash. 'Here.'

She threw the piece of paper in front of me and then sauntered off to the Servery, where she leaned on the counter, her gaze fixed on the dishes displayed in front of her.

Tentatively, I picked up the paper and unfolded it. Neat small writing greeted me and two phone numbers - one was her mobile. *'Lovely to meet you. Fancy a coffee or something one day? Call me. Gemma.'*

Shit. I didn't think it would go as far as exchanging numbers. I only wanted to charm her a little bit so I could calm the situation.

Double shit. Now what would Ash think of me. I looked up from the paper to see Ash staring back, her expression seemed odd for a split second, like she was studying me studying the paper. Then as soon as it was there it was gone, and she turned around to pay the woman behind the counter before lifting a tray with a plate of something on it.

I felt guilty. Don't ask me why, but I did. Stupid I know. For one ... I was only looking at the piece of paper. And two ... why should it matter to Ash who I wanted to see ... although it kind of gave the game away about my sexuality. But then again, having me shove my tongue down her throat kind of gave her the idea I was gay in the first place.

Once. Twice. Three times. The paper folded in my hands, before I slipped it into my jacket pocket.

Slam. The tray hit the table with such a force the salt and pepper pots fell backwards in complete submission.

'What the fuc...'

'Lasagne. You like Italian, right?'

Then she was gone. The lasagne was half off the plate and leaning nonchalantly on the tray. What on earth had gotten into her?

I shook my head from side to side. One minute she was playful and the next she was throwing food at me. I couldn't work it out. I looked over to the Servery to see if she'd had an altercation with someone there, but there was only one rotund elderly woman wiping down the glass. She seemed perfectly happy ... although slightly demented if her grinning at her reflection gave any indication.

'Y'all right dear?'

I nodded and looked back at the tray, then around the room. Empty. Even the card sharks had pissed off and left me to my slopped out dinner and own company.

But, as they say, the beast must be fed. I don't know who said it ... maybe it was just me (and my stomach, who decided now was as good a time as any to start whimpering again).

Fork in hand, intention clear. Dinner ... gone.

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## Chapter Twenty-Eight

'Fuck it!'

Once again, Ash let rip with the same two words. This time the two words were accompanied by a violent picking up of a stack of papers and throwing across the room. Well. When I say throwing, what I actually mean is 'attempt' at throwing, as they didn't go more than a foot away from her. The resistance in the air halted their journey and decided to lift them up, swirl them into total chaos and then spew them back down again.

Obviously the same two words came out again, but this time more vehemently than the last, and accompanied by 'Oh for fuck's sake!'

I couldn't help it. I swear. The laugh just popped out, honestly. I would've told Ash this too if I hadn't been pinned by her stare. Jesus! That woman could stare. I think I even felt a little trickle of pee escape into my panties. And like all idiots ... I laughed again, but this time it was out of nerves. Once again - no time to explain ...

'You think this is funny do you? Read is walking in two hours if we don't do something.'

'I thought you were letting him walk anyway?' I took a tissue from my pocket and pretended to wipe my face, but was in fact using it to stop myself laughing again. I decided that I would avoid going down that path.

'It would have been nice if we could've got information from him before he was released.'

I had tried again to talk to Read, but he wasn't haven't any of it. His main concern was trying to intimidate me. And like I was going to be intimidated by that wankstain. Therefore, the gig was up as far as my getting him to squeal. I doubted he would give me the dirt from under his fingernails, and believe me, there was quite a bit there.

'Do you want me to call Gemma?' By this stage, Ash was on the floor gathering her rage. She stopped, and gripped the papers tightly in her hand. I saw them screw up and the knuckles grow white.

'Do what you like. It's your life.' Each word was cut out of stone.

'I know it's my life. But I was thinking about getting her to talk to Read again. He quite likes her ... kept on saying how he'd like to give her one when he got out.'

'Must be contagious then.'

By this time I was getting pissed off with her snide comments about everything and everyone,



especially when they were connected to me, or something I had said.

'Look, Lady Muck. I don't have to be here you know. I'm ...'

'Why don't you go then? You can always see Read when he gets back to school. That is your job after all isn't it?'

The anger I had felt bubbling inside me for the last few minutes was screaming to be released. My hands gripped the table edge and I raised myself up out of the chair.

'You are an ungrateful bitch. Do you know that?' She just stared up at me from her crouched position on the floor, one eyebrow rising into her hairline, her lips curling slightly. No answer, which got my dander up even more. 'I have spent all fucking day trying to help you out and all you can do is pick fault.' Still no answer.

I leaned over the table, my hands taking the weight. When I knew I had her full attention, I was off again. 'What is your problem? What the *fuck* have I done to warrant you being a pain in the arse?'

Ash pushed herself back onto her haunches and then stood up, the papers firmly in her grip. It seemed as if she had grown since she had been down there. The trickle of wee was back.

The shadow from her tall frame hit the table and landed across my chest. 'You want to know what the problem is?' The papers were thrown onto the table, and I followed their journey across the veneer and onto the floor again. 'The problem ...' I looked into her eyes; such cold eyes ... eyes that showed nothing but contempt. 'The problem is *you*.' The last word was spat out. Honestly. I felt the metaphorical wetness hit my face like a slap.

Most people would have shrunk back and crawled into a corner. Unfortunately, I wasn't one of those people. I do wish I was though ... on many occasions, and not just this one.

'*Me?* You weren't saying that at two thirty this morning when you were nearly begging me to help solve your little problem.' I kicked the chair away from me. 'Link my arse.' Bag snatched up from the floor. 'And *you*, can kiss it.' The last sentence was accompanied by a liberal slapping of the aforementioned body part.

Within two minutes my feet were hitting concrete and I was storming away from the station. I could hear her calling after me, but I just lifted my hand and gave her the two-fingered salute and kept walking without even looking back.

If I had, she would have seen the tears glistening on my face. She would have known that she had broken my heart all over again.

Never again. Never ever again. This I would make sure of ... I couldn't handle going through it all again.

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Two days later saw me snug and cosy in my front room with Gemma Jackson. Honestly, I invited her over to talk about Read who, funnily enough, had not been to school since his release. I should have guessed that talking about the case would have been the last thing on her mind. I should have known this from the minute she realised it was me on the phone.

It was amazing how the professional 'I take no shit from anybody' voice changed and wrapped itself around her mouth to fall like velvet covered love letters from silken lips.

Yeah ... corny crap. But that's what it sounded like, or would sound like if you were into all that mushy stuff. In retrospect, I should have worn a chastity belt and swallowed the key. But we are not all gifted with the art of prophecy are we.

It wasn't too bad to start off with. Or should I say she wasn't too bad to start off with? She was quite the lady... even sat on the far end of the settee. She was slick though, I'll give her that. Every gesture or piece of information she thought I should look at was handed to me in such a way that she was steadily getting closer and closer. Me, being me ... and thick as custard, didn't even notice until she was just about to make her move. And even then I had to have it nearly spelled out to me. I know I give the impression I am a bit of a Lady Thriller - I'm not. My motto is 'If it falls on your lap and is willing then go for it.'

I flirt. I am a flirt. But an innocent kind of one. The kind that is shocked when it actually works. The kind that when a woman smiles at me in an empty room, I still look over my shoulder just to make sure. Then look over it again.

So.

The move.

Gemma's plan of attack.

As I said before, she edged her way slowly but surely, very much like a snail on tranquillisers, until she was right next to me. I was reading the court minutes of Read's last hearing ... skimming through it really, when I could feel her eyes on me. Eyes that two minutes ago had seemed a bit further away.

Have you ever noticed that when you feel someone staring at you, you can't help but look at them? It works in kind of the same way as a tractor beam ... you're pinned ... and then get sucked in. That's what happened. I didn't intend it to. It sort of happened in a weird Star Trek way.

It felt as if I was slowly falling forwards and into her. It was millimetres ... honestly ... millimetres until touch down and then ...

'Brrrrrrrrriiiiiiiiiiiiiinnnnng! Brrrrinnng! Brrrrinnng!

'Brrrrrrrrriiiiiiiiiiiiiinnnnng!' Saved by the bell. My eyes, which had been slowly closing by this stage, shot open to reveal Gemma's face up close and personal.

'Ignore it,' slipped softly and effortlessly from her parted lips.

'Brrrrinnng! Brrrrinnng! Brrrrinnng!' Whomever it was, definitely wanted to be let in. And for that I was thankful.

'Just let me ...' I trailed off as I nearly sprinted away. Fuck. What was I doing? Two thoughts rampaged through my head. One was ... 'She's offering herself on a plate! She's hot and willing. Why are you answering the door?' The second one was ...

'Ash.'

There she stood, or slouched, against the wall. One arm languished against the brickwork, whilst the other dangled behind her back. If I hadn't heard her insistent doorbell ringing I would have thought she was as laid back as she pretended to be.

'What are you doing here?'

'Can we talk?' She pushed herself away from the wall in one fluid movement and stood erect, straightening her jacket as she did so. 'Inside.'

I just stood there, paralysed for a moment. She was here. Waiting for me to let her in. Wanting to talk ... not shout or hurl abuse ... to talk.

I stepped aside to let her in, as I was unable to answer her. The biggest and boldest lump in my throat had taken root, a bit like I had swallowed an apple whole. It wasn't until she had put her foot inside the door that I remembered Gemma sitting in the front room.

Shit.

Once again. Why shit?

I don't know ... but it's a good a word as any. To say I knew Ash didn't like Gemma would be saying I knew England's weather is a bit crap. It's redundant. But why get in a tizzy about it? Why resort to toilet language to express this knowledge? The knowledge that Ash didn't like Gemma, and that Gemma knew it.

'Erm .. I'm not alone.' Ash's body stiffened slightly, but forced itself to relax. The eyebrow raised itself and she looked at me as if to say 'go on'. 'Gemma's here.'

The eyebrow was joined by its twin, leaving her eyes wide and her expression open. Obviously shock.

Wait a minute.

Why shock?

Didn't she think I would call Gemma because I knew she didn't like her? Stuff that. I know ... I know ... irrational. But you must remember that every time I saw this woman, rationality flew out if the window.

'If I'm interrupting ...' The voice was cold and reminded me of a slap I had received from a girl at school, who, by the way, had very cold hands.

'Wait!' She had her back to me by this point and was stepping back outside. 'I thought you wanted to talk?' Blue eyes scrutinised me from over her shoulder, her body rigid, her hands clenched for some unknown reason. God. I knew she didn't like her, but this was a little on the extreme side. This wasn't the Ash I had known ... that Ash had been happy and sociable ... even when I knew she didn't like someone. Like Tracy for example - the Goth queen.

'It can wait - it's no biggie.'

Before I knew it, I was outside, my hand clenching her arm, holding her back. I knew I didn't pull her around, I knew she only half-heartedly wanted to walk away, but the relief in my chest when she turned to face me was unbelievable. 'Look. Come inside. Have a coffee ...' I saw doubt flit across her face, 'Tea even ...' Was I begging? 'Orange juice?' The last came out more like a squeak. But it worked. I saw the smile glimmer around her lips, felt the muscles relax in her arm, and throughout her body.

'Ok. Just a cuppa then.' I released the breath I had been holding; a breath I didn't realise I had held captive in my lungs until it hit the air outside with an audible oof.

Gemma's face was a Kodak moment if ever I had seen one when I led a grinning Ash back into the lounge. She had made herself comfortable on the settee ... shoes off ... hands behind her head, the perfect example of, as my mum always says 'Getting your feet under the table.'

Upon spotting Ash, she nearly broke her neck sitting upright, but then stopped, and lounged back again, almost like she was announcing we had been doing something a little risqué.

'Do you mind?' Ash slapped her foot, indicating she wanted to sit down next to her. Another Kodak moment. I would have loved to have filmed it ... sent it off to one of those TV shows where they pay money for people fuck ups. Couple of hundred quid in the bank.

Gemma made a song and dance about getting herself straight. Huffing and puffing her way into a seating position. Ash stared at her for a while before asking, 'Do you work out?' A glare ... from both of them. 'Or is it asthma?'

I saw Gemma open her mouth to respond ... 'Coffee? Tea? Anything?' They both looked in my direction, back at each other, and then back at me.

'Coffee.'

'Tea.'

Spoken at the same time.

I didn't get it. Why did they dislike each other so much? I mean, they both had a job to do, and if they were civil to each other, they could scratch each other's backs, if you know what I mean.

But no. It was like having two hateful teenagers sitting there - sulking. And we all know how teenagers can sulk. Big time.

I took my time in the kitchen. My main thought was 'Leave them to it'. I couldn't be bothered getting involved with petty squabbles and tiffs. For Christ sake, we were all in our thirties. We should have grown out of it by now.

Initially, the next room was quiet. I believe I could even hear the clock ticking... Come to think of it ... I should have known - and I definitely shouldn't have left them alone together.

Raised voices seeped into the room, and I couldn't quite make out what was being said - just knew they weren't talking about the price of bacon. Then Ash's voice came thundering in, blanketing out all other sounds.

'I'm just saying ... don't fuck us about!' Bollocks. At this rate, they would never be able to come to a compromise over Sam Read's case. The shit was definitely hitting the proverbial fan, and the only person to stop it was making the scrappers a cuppa.

I lifted the mugs, took a deep breath, stepped through the doorway and into the hall, just in time to hear Ash's '*Fuck you*' farewell, and then see her storm out of the door.

I stood there. Steaming beverages tightly gripped in each hand, looking all the world like a learner driver gripping the steering wheel. I felt the colour drain from my face (must be test day), but I knew that this situation must be resolved. I would have to work with Gemma again, and Ash ... well ... it was Ash wasn't it?

Cups thrown to the wayside ... or in reality, placed carefully on the sideboard making sure to balance on coasters ... and I was off, tearing down the hallway, out of the front door and down the road.

Her car door was open, and she was just lowering herself into the driver's seat when I finally caught up with her. It sounds like quite a way, but it was only the matters of about thirty metres.

'Where are you going?' I was breathless. Yeah ... I know ... thirty metres and breathless ... it was more from nerves than anything else.

The look she gave me could melt concrete, just before she slammed the door shut in my face.

Not one to be deterred I banged on the window and motioned for her to lower it. I could see her lips moving but couldn't make out the words. So I motioned again.

This time she begrudgingly slapped her hand on the button eliminating the barrier between us, turning her head in my direction in one sharp movement. 'Why are you going? I've made you a cuppa.' Good call, Turner. Any more gems like that one hiding up your sleeve?

I saw her bite her lip before she answered. Saw her try to contain something from bubbling out ... and I knew that for that small mercy, I would be grateful. A couple of swallows ... 'Look. You're busy with ... with ... what's-her-face ... we can chat later without Big Ears listening.'

I should have said okay and walked away. Should have. But no ... Miss High and Mighty came out to play. 'Her name's Gemma ...' Ash glared. 'And I don't think its right you slagging her off behind her back.'

She tried to deny it ... saying she wasn't slagging her off, that she was telling the truth. Gemma did have big ears. But, I was on a roll ... I think it was out of panic or something very much like it. You must have been in the situation where you feel one way and act in the complete opposite. You know ... like when your child nearly gets hit by a car, and you grab him and give him a good telling off, but inside you're thinking 'My baby ... my angel ... I was so scared ...'. The sentences coming out of your mouth resemble someone who had problems stringing a sentence together ... 'Why you little ...' and 'When I get you home you ...'. Disjointed because of the deletion of nouns that should never be spoken to a child.

Obviously, this antagonised her. Obviously. And when I got to the part where I shouted 'What's your problem?' I should have known what was coming next.

Next thing I knew I was half way back to my house, the anger pouring from me with every footstep ... the hand gestures not fit for the faint hearted ... all I could hear were two things. The blood rushing past my ears and the roaring of her car engine as she sped away.

Gemma was waiting for me at the door, coffee cup ensconced in her hand, the look of 'Oh poor you' fixed firmly in place.

Do you know what the first thing I thought when I looked at her? Nope ... not about the kiss ... and where it could lead. Not about how she could help me with my case.

Not even what she and Ash had argued about.

None of the above.

It was one thing that sprinted into my head and jumped up and down.

Fuck. She did have big ears.

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## Chapter Twenty- Nine

What was it with her? Why did she have to be such a ... I don't know... such a pain in the arse? You would think we would be all over each other, in a friendship kind of way, considering we hadn't seen each other in twenty years.

But no. The only thing that was getting any action was my ability to go off on one at any given opportunity. What had happened to the Ash I had known back then? She seemed so cynical and angry all of the time. Where had that happy go lucky girl gone?

Metaphorical head scratching moment methinks.

I hadn't heard from her since that day two weeks ago ... almost. Funny thing was ... I missed her. I know. Twenty years without a word and then 'puff', here she was back in my life again. In the flesh. Looking more beautiful than my heart remembered ... and acting completely differently.

Ah well ...

Work had taken up most of my time, especially since I had taken over Read's case. I had spent my time reading through his files, speaking to teachers at the school, who all thought he was a wanker too, and I even interviewed his mother. Would have liked to speak to his father too, but he was serving four years in Wandsworth for breaking and entering.

Nice to see the family genes didn't stop with good old dad.

His mother was neither use nor ornament. The typical council estate haircut and the skin-tight Lycra leggings found on the extremely rotund, to use a tired old euphemism, were firmly in place, alongside the continuous chain smoking. Maybe her fringe wasn't peroxide after all.

I spent, or more to the point, wasted, over an hour with her. She was trying to hold down a conversation with me, watch some crappy daytime show, and smoke herself stupid. Now, if I believed she could walk and chew gum at the same time, this wouldn't have been a problem. But she couldn't. End of.

Eventually I had decided to call it a day and made arrangements to come back later in the week. Her acknowledgement to this was a brief look in my direction, a nod of the head, and then back to gawp at the talking box in the corner.

It was on my second visit that I saw Ash again.

Bugger.

A younger version of Sam let me into the house, and I could hear voices being raised in the front

room. My stomach forgot all about the smell, as my head and my heart both recognised Ash's voice above the din of the TV. At least it stopped the gagging and retching I had to go through because of the smell of stale chip fat and cigarettes. But then again, there were the butterflies to contend with ... the whole battalion of them inside my gut.

'Can we turn off the TV, madam?' I didn't hear a response, but just thought I'd gone deaf when the house took on an air of eerie stillness.

The scene that greeted me was something you would probably see on a crime prevention poster. Ash stood there in all her six-foot glory, hands on hips, whilst two uniformed policemen flanked her sides. She was looking down at Mrs Read with nothing short of contempt written all over her face.

'I said I don't know where 'e is. He doesn't tell me where 'es going.'

Ash just stared, the eyebrow twitching, needing to lift and help pin the woman even more firmly in her chair. She moved a step forward and lowered herself to her. 'If you know what's good for you you'd better start ...' She stopped, froze in a sudden way, and then raised her eyes to mine. I watched as her mouth dropped just a little ... then snap back in place.

'Detective Inspector. Good to see you again.' I couldn't believe how normal my voice sounded, a little too self-confident, a complete juxtaposition to how I was feeling.

Ash stood up sharply, straightening her jacket with the palm of her hand. The look of shock had completely vanished by this stage, and she looked in control once again, the cocky grin appearing on command. '*Miss Turner*. What a pleasant surprise.'

The two police officers just looked at each other, then me, then Ash. Neither of them said a word. Mrs Read was reaching for her cigs by this stage, apparently believing she was off the hook for the moment. Ash's hand shot out and trapped hers under the gold packet. 'I have already asked you nicely. Don't smoke in front of me. I don't want to breathe in your smoke.'

Mrs Read just nodded, her hand slipping from underneath Ash's to release the cigarette packet, although her eyes never left it, and I could see her lips twitching just to hold the cylindrical cancer stick in her mouth and puff away a few more years of her life.

'I do have an appointment. Four thirty. *Remember*, Mrs Read?' Of course, she didn't remember. I could see it written all over her face. Not a spark of recognition ... not ... a ... spark. Not surprising really, considering she had been watching a re run of Sally Jesse Raphael the last time I was there.

'If you're after Read, he's not here.' Ash's tone was brusque, matter of fact and definitely to the point. If she had just said 'Fuck off' it couldn't have been clearer. 'And we don't know where he is now, do we?' A glare at Mrs Read, who graced both Ash and I with a brief look, before shaking her head and looking surreptitiously back at her cig packet.



'I haven't come to speak to Sam. Just his mother.'

'Do you mind if we sit in?' It should have come out like a pleasant request, but ... I don't know ... it just got my back up for some reason or another.

'Erm .. actually ... I'd like to cover some sensitive areas with Mrs Read today. Mainly to do with Sam's absences from school and...' I caught the expression on Read's mother's face - she was trying to play it cool, but she knew her ticket was up. If a child continually plays truant, then the parents are fined, and it was the first time I had ever gained her attention.

Ash spotted the change in her too, and I knew she wanted to stay ... badly ... and ask questions that she felt, as I did, the mother would be more receptive about answering.

'No can do, Detective. This is a private case. If you want to find out more then you'll have to make an appointment with me.' I smiled to soften the blow. Bollocks did I. I grinned. Full out - teeth - the works. Ash's teeth were grinding together - so I grinned wider. Both officers and Mrs Read were watching me with avid interest by this stage, so I coughed ... coughed again ... and composed myself.

'So ... if you don't mind ...'

'I think it would be wise if we stuck around for a while.'

'Okay.' I saw the smug smile light on her mouth. 'Just make sure you close the door on your way out.' It started to slip. 'We can make arrangements for your appointment when I've finished.' Smile ... completely ... gone.

It wasn't until I saw her back disappearing through the door that I released the breath I'd been holding. I fully expected her to go off on one, as I had been up close and personal to the new Ash's temper tantrums when things weren't going her way.

The fact my heart was begging her to stay was another matter completely. Funny things hearts ... they still recognise their desire even if it has completely changed.

Unfortunately.

I turned in time to see Mrs Read lighting a cigarette, the obvious relief on her face making me want to hurl. I wanted to tell her to put it out, be more assertive, but instead I just placed my briefcase on the floor and bent over to retrieve Sam's file.

To the naked eye, I looked completely on task. But my head was far from the point at hand. It was with my heart, and that lay on the other side of the door.

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As expected, Ash was waiting outside for me. What I didn't expect was for her to act sheepish.

The uniformed officers were nowhere in sight ... it was just her.

'Hey ... you ok?' That tone. It was like a blast from the past. Soft. Caring. The Ash I remembered. I felt my insides do a jig and I felt a sense of home pervade me.

'Fine. Does the term "sing like a canary" mean anything to you?'

'I didn't mean with Fag Ash Lil in there. I meant, are you ok?'

Once again ... surprise. I know her tone was softer, but she actually seemed to want to know how I was feeling.

And, as a woman of few words, I shrugged and mumbled a 'yeah'.

She came towards me, the swagger that had been prevalent all the other times I had seen her was well and truly gone now. Worry radiated from her face, and I couldn't understand why. I had only been in the room with Mrs Read for just over an hour, and I wondered what had happened to make such a change in a person. Did I have a face full of spots? Or look flushed?

I knew I felt fine ... but you know how it is ... when someone asks you if you're ok and look at you like you are at death's door, you kind of feel a little queasy. Stupid questions always gather and rant at the addled brain, begging to be told if the body had been invaded by the germ army.

And this time was no exception. My stomach decided to gurgle and churn and I had the distinct impression my blood was surging up into my ears. Damned overactive imagination. Then, to add insult to injury, I felt my paperwork slip out of my hands and flutter all over the front garden ... not good.

Ash moved so quickly, and chased after errant sheets, slamming her foot down on top of the little buggers, snatching them up until she had them all safe and sound in her hands. Obviously I was dying, so I couldn't help.

'Here you go.' And there she was ... standing directly in front of me offering the papers like a sacrifice. My fingers reached out and clasped the corners of the sheet, as if I would be burned if I touched the places where her hands had been.

I couldn't even say thank you in case I hurled up over her, just raised my eyes to her chin and smiled weakly.

'Look ... Lou ... I ... erm ... Look, I'm sorry for being a twat,' I looked up. 'You know ... earlier.' I faced her fully now, the blue eyes intense. 'I don't know why I acted like that... just under a lot of pressure to catch Spencer ...' Her voice trailed off, and my stomach and nausea calmed down a little, but the butterflies were back ...jigging again. Little tykes.

'No problem ... I understand it must be a lot of pressure to pin anything on him. By the sounds of it he thinks he's covered everything up ...'

'Can we go and grab a coffee or something to eat and talk about everything. I think there are a few things you should know.'

'Like what?' I was intrigued ... to say the least, but just nodded.

It wouldn't hurt would it? Just a coffee ... or a coffee with a bun ... or two?

I didn't even think about the near death experience I had undergone minutes before - my stomach was on the case ... more than my head was at this stage.

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### **Chapter Thirty**

We went to a café bar called The Lounge. Tables were scattered around the room housing couples in deep discussion, couples mainly of the same sex. I'd been here before ... numerous times actually, and it was at my suggestion we were there again. Ash didn't seem bothered about the fact this place was a rendezvous for gay people.

In fact ... she looked very much at home there. Actually knew where the restrooms were without me pointing them out.

'Coffee?' I nodded at her and claimed a table snuggled up in the corner. Within two minutes she was back, slipping her jacket from her shoulders and dangling it from the back of the spare chair.

'Why didn't you pick the sofas? They would have been so much more comfortable.' I looked over into the corner where two sofas were nestled together and noted that one was already occupied by two women in deep discussion.

'This is more private.' Her eyebrow twitched and she sat down in the chair opposite, shuffling it around a little so it was closer to me.

I was at a loss for words ... you know ... she was too close to me ... in my space a little, if you know what I mean. I began to look at the paintings that were sale on the walls, anything but to look into her eyes. Stupid I know ... I couldn't spend the whole time looking away from her ... but I didn't feel capable of controlling this surging in my gut. I think it was her smell ... the smell of her ... the all-consuming smell that tantalised my nostrils and tried to obliterate reason.

'Firstly, I'd like to apologise.' This got my attention and I turned and faced her. She looked so serious, so intent on making me understand what she was going to tell me. 'Not just for today ... for, erm ... the other two times too.' I could see the rapid swallowing of someone who was dying of embarrassment, and knew it had taken a lot for her to apologise. Any one with an ounce of compassion would have said not to worry ... it was ok...

I just stared at her. Silent. Expectant. Wanting her to squirm ...

Our eyes were totally connected and it was such a weird sensation ... almost as if I was being absorbed. Then she blinked ... and blinked again... and then blinked again accompanied by a shake of the head, like reality had just hit her ... like she had just realised where and with whom she was with.

'I ...erm ...well, I honestly don't know what go into me.' If I had been able too, I would have put her out of her misery, but I was a little gobsmacked - not over what she had just said ... but what she hadn't said ... what I had felt coming from her. I felt a clambering of something in her ... something clambering to me ... something wanting to be there with me ... mute ... content ... and I couldn't quite grasp the implications, or the motivations for that matter.

'Just been under so much pressure and I took it out on you.' Her eyes left my face and my skin felt cold. A strong hand reached out started to play with the sugar sachets on the table, and this made my focus drift to those capable digits. 'I was out of order ... but ...' I saw one of the sachets burst underneath her fingers and the sugar fall helplessly onto the table's surface. The grimace on her face was instant, but she tried to cover it up.

'Two coffees and a Chelsea bun?' The waiter's voice broke through and I saw Ash's eyes flick around to take note of the waiter and the tray he was carrying. Her movements were jerky and she looked on edge.

The time from the announcement until the waiter had gone seemed like forever. Sounds of the café took centre stage and I felt uncomfortable being there ... almost felt alone in a room full of people.

Ash had her face turned slightly from mine, and I studied her unnoticed ... until her expression changed and I knew she would be turning back to face me. It seemed like it took forever for her head to swivel round, but by the time it did I was already engaged in the contents of my cup, pulling it towards me like a barrier.

In my head I kept on seeing the open look on her face ... the 'something' that had been there. I felt a seed plant itself inside my gut and stick. Deep down inside I wanted what I had seen to be there to actually have been there ... that want ... the same want I had not as far down.

'Here you go.' Soft. Her voice was so soft.

My eyes lifted slightly and scanned the table to spy her hand holding out the plate with the Chelsea bun perched on there like an offering.

The feeling washing over me was tantamount to agony. And all over a fucking bun at that. It wasn't the fact I had a bun, or that I had actually wanted a bun ... it was the fact she had thought I wanted a bun and got me one ...it's stupid ... the feeling was unreasonable and stupid ... and the deep ache ripping through my chest was testament to this stupidity. I must have been due on my period ... I always turned into a mard arse just before it ... you know ... cry if someone wins

a holiday on some crappy day time show ... the works ...

'Thought you might be hungry.'

And I was off ... straight to the ladies, the motion of gripping my belly to indicate I needed the restroom for a call of nature rather than to release this emotion welling up inside.

Inside the stall, I just leaned my head against the wall and allowed the feeling to consume me. I couldn't grasp the cause of it. It was only a bun for Christ's sake. But then again ... it wasn't. It was the feeling of connection ... the feeling that she and I had connected for however brief a time.

My reaction came from fear ... I know that now. Fear of allowing this feeling of connection to take hold of me, take hold and open up to hurt all over again.

Back at the table, Ash looked up from a small book she was holding in her hands. Her eyes searched out my own, and I could see the lines of worry etched on her face. A smile I didn't know I could conjure, planted itself on my face and I slipped back into my seat with a mumbled 'That's better,' before stretching out and grabbing the cooling coffee.

'You ok?' I flicked my eyes to hers and back to my coffee again before nodding vigorously.

'Much, thanks.'

We sat there in silence for a while, the bun sitting untouched, the coffee becoming cooler and cooler. Ash kept on shuffling around in her seat, crossing and uncrossing her legs. I knew she wanted to say something, and had the distinct feeling I wasn't going to like it.

It was only after we had ordered a second coffee that Ash plucked up the courage to say what she wanted to say. I honestly wished she hadn't bothered. I wished she had kept her mouth shut and just let me live out the rest of my life in ignorance.

'Lou?'

It was something about the tone, I think. Something in that one word ... that one syllable, that forewarned me.

'I've a confession to make.'

'Confession?'

And she did look uncomfortable. My staring at her seemed to put her even more ill at ease, and she semi-stretched her arms out in front of her almost like preparing herself for battle.

'You know you were called to the station to see Read?' I nodded. 'And I ... erm ... acted surprised to see you?' I nodded again, but this time she just stopped and looked down at her

hands whilst I dwelled on the two words 'acted' and 'surprised'.

'Go on.'

'Well ... I told them to call you.'

Huh? Told them to call me? But how did she ...

'I know you're wondering how I knew about you ... well ... erm ... well ... this is the tricky part.'

I leaned forward; my interest was totally piqued by this stage.

'Remember Danny Spencer?'

'What has he to do with anything?' I leaned back, emitting a deep breath as I did so.

'There is no easy way to tell you this ... but ... I think you have a right to know.'

'Know what?' A tinge of anger was coating my tone, maybe because my initial response to her acting surprised was slowly drifting away. And secondly, I had a gut feeling I wasn't going to like what she was going to tell me.

'Well. Erm. Lou? Please don't get mad with me.'

'Just tell me, Ash.'

'Danny Spencer is ...erm ... he's your brother.'

I actually felt my mouth gape. Actually felt the lips part and the slackness take root. I had a white screen inside my head and there was nothing coming onto it. I felt blank. Emotionless. I just sat there, half leaning towards her with my mouth open.

'Well, half-brother.'

That seemed to get some kind of reaction anyway. A jolt of feeling hit me in the gut and made me sit back in the chair, my eyes focused on her face.

'He's ...'

*'Fuck it, Ash! There's no fucking way I'm related to that twat!'* The words were out and they didn't come out quietly. Heads turned in the café and I lowered my voice before continuing through clenched teeth. 'How on earth could he be related to me?'

'Calm down, Lou ... I'm just ...'

'How on earth ...'

'Well if you ...'

I was half leaning over the table by this stage, the adrenaline pumping through me. I felt angry ... and cheated. My head was totally in a spin ... nothing made sense. Danny Spencer? Related? Ash had only contacted me because I was related to Danny Spencer. That was the only reason. That was the reason ... the reason she had called me the link ... not Sam's link, but Danny's.

Now I was angry. Fucking angry. Of all the ...

'Lou ... just calm down ... let me explain.'

'What? What can you explain? That you fucking used me? *Again?*'

I saw her lips move around the word 'again', and she seemed to chew over it, but her expression stayed blank ... well ... more like confused. The shaking of her head seemed slow and out of focus. My eyes were burning and I could feel the coolness envelop me, which was a telltale sign of my up and coming temper. I felt slow and sluggish but wired and primitive at the same time. My forearms tingled as muscles spasmed.

At this point, her eyes looked away ... only for a split second, but they looked away. It was then I knew for sure. Ash had used me to get to Danny Spencer, whoever the fuck he was.

My fingers curled around the edge of the cup that had housed my now cold coffee and I couldn't stop the action of the lift ... tip ... and hurl.

She sat there. Cold coffee all over her face and shirt, her eyelashes flinging back the excess and the once separate hairs collecting into tiny groups. Her mouth opened and stretched, pushing the liquid away. I stood, leaning over the table, the empty cup clenched between my fingers, knuckles whitening.

*'Fuck you Ashley Richards! Get the fuck out of my life. Got it?'*

Then I was gone. I didn't care how she felt. I had to go and see my mother ... had to find out some things. Deep down I knew Ash was telling the truth, but on the surface I just couldn't accept he was any relative of mine. I didn't know anything about him ... not even his age or the colour of his eyes.

The only thing I knew was that he was a nasty piece of work, and the fact Ash claimed he was my half-brother.

I was not happy.

In more ways than one.

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## Chapter Thirty-One

In less than forty-five minutes I was banging on my parents' door. Yarmouth was only twenty-five miles from Norwich, and I floored it to get there in that time. Anger flooded through me. I couldn't distinguish whom I was the angriest with. Ash ... my parents ... or even myself.

Now my anger with Ash linked with the anger I held for myself. I trusted her. Again. I had let my guard down with her ... again. I had been kicked in the teeth and told to keep my perverted feelings to myself ... *again*. Well, not as much told about my feelings the second time as the feeling of being used. I felt she had used me as a way to help her case. Now this was something I doubted I would ever forgive.

My parents were another matter entirely. They must have known Danny Spencer was a relative of some kind ... even though they didn't know I was working a case that linked with him. I should've heard his name mentioned before now. Because if my memory serves me right ... I knew he wasn't the son of my mother.

So that left only one person.

The bastard.

The dirty teenage fucking pregnant getting twat of a bastard. The same bastard I hadn't heard from for over thirty years ... and even then it was too soon. Even when my brothers and sister, Angie, had got married ... he didn't turn up ... or couldn't be contacted. He had shown in more ways than one that he just wasn't father material. Biologically, he could get a woman pregnant - but it takes more than a feisty spot of sperm to make a dad. A hell of a lot more.

'Lou?' The surprise in my dad's voice stopped me in my tracks for a split second. He sounded so happy and pleased to see me, and this was supported by a huge grin as he leaned forward and pulled me into a hug. 'What have we done to get a treat like this?'

Now that was a loaded question. And after five minutes, I think he was sorry he answered the door.

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It is never good to hear how a member of your own family could be so heartless. My father was an out and out bastard. However angry I had been when I had stormed out of The Lounge paled in comparison to how angry I was when my mum told me of what he'd done.

If you cast your memory back to earlier, you may remember I had overheard how he got a seventeen-year-old girl pregnant. Or something like that ... I had been eaves dropping on the conversation between my mother and her sister. The letter ... in his workbag ...



Remember?

Well, as it turned out, he had. Seventeen and pregnant by a man who was in his forties by that stage. Turns your stomach ... to think he slept with a girl who was only a year older than his eldest daughter. Shows you what kind of man he was.

Nine months later (five and a half after my mother had walked out on him), a baby boy was born.

Yep. Daniel Lee Spencer.

Danny Spencer.

*The* Danny Spencer. The one who was at that moment in Norwich trying to gather a bunch of cronies to do his bidding.

It took a few minutes for me to collect myself ... it was the age that had cornered me. I automatically assumed he was in his early twenties at the very most. Don't ask me why ... the only reason I can come up with is the fact he had Sam Read on his books, shall we say.

Why would a man who was in his thirties want to have teenage kids running around him? No mention of Michael Jackson here, please. I mean ... in his thirties and using bits of kids to do his dirty work ... getting them on his side ... pretending he was their friend.

Just the thought of that makes my skin crawl anyway. But still ... that's not normal is it? Then again, it was the perfect age to catch the unsavoury elements of society ... especially if you can sculpt them to be what you want them to be ... the younger the better. And Sam Read would love the fact someone was actually taking him seriously - an adult at that.

Now I come to think of it, it makes perfect sense. They were his protégés ... dispensable ... gullible ... cheap. They could cop the rap if the shit hit the fan, and Spencer would just flit off back to Manchester or whatever rock he had crawled out from underneath.

But why Norwich? Why near me? Did he know I was here? Ash had said she knew where to find me because of him ... but what did that mean? Was he after me? My family? My mum ... for some reason or another?

I sat on the dining room chair. Slumped really, my head resting in my hands completely resigned to the fact my neck couldn't support it at the moment. I could hear my mum's voice trying to get through to me ... trying to tell me she hadn't wanted to hurt me even more than I had already had been. Trying to say I would always be her baby.

Tears trickled through my fingers and plopped effortlessly onto my trousers, the wetness hitting and separating the colour of the material, making patches appear darker than the rest. I was fascinated in a comatose kind of way. I felt like I had been lied to on so many different levels. I understood why my mum hadn't told me, and I honestly didn't care if my father had twenty kids by different mothers.

So what made this hurt so much?

What made the ache inside my chest, you know ... the ache that gripped and pulled and wrenched something inside until I felt like screaming for it to stop?

My parents hadn't lied ... they'd avoided the truth - inadvertently forgot to mention it. But someone had lied. Someone who I thought I could trust with my life ... trust with my all.

Ash.

She hadn't just lied. She had used me. Used me. Used me to get what she wanted. An arrest. Another glowing recommendation of a job well done. Another pat on the back - maybe a promotion. Maybe a bigger and better office with less paperwork and a bigger and better pay packet.

But in the process she had crippled me. The one person who had trusted her implicitly.

And for that I could never forgive her.

Never.

I could smell coffee, could feel the heat of it. My dad was pushing a cup of the stuff underneath my face, and I could see him bending so low he was almost kneeling on the floor. Concern etched his tired face, and I felt my heart fill with love for him all over again.

You know, that sad kind of love. The kind of love that makes you so very aware of what you have and also what you don't.

'Thanks Dad.' My voice was full of the rejection I was feeling, full of the hurt of unrequited love, full of the agony of betrayal. All in those two words.

The room was deathly quiet, and all that could be heard was the clinking of the cups as they hit the saucers and the intermittent sound of liquid being drained from china.

As I sat there, the rejection I had been feeling ebbed away and anger slowly, but surely, began to replace it. Boiling anger. Blood red anger, and it was aimed right at the woman who had instigated so much self pity inside me.

I wasn't a victim, no way. I allowed myself to feel like this. I allowed my feelings to override my reason and make me close up inside and metaphorically stroke the old wound that had been spliced open by a new one.

Fuck this.

There was no way I was going to let this get to me.

Ok. Danny Spencer, however much I hated the fact, was my stepbrother. There was nothing I could do about it ... so why stress myself out.

The next fact.

Ash had used me.

Get used to it.

I sat up straighter in the chair and inhaled deeply ... held it in ... then blew it out in one long breath.

My parents were watching me intently, probably expecting me to crack off again. But I just smiled. I think that freaked them out more than if I had lost my rag and danced a temper tantrum around the house.

'Thanks. I'd best be off.'

My mum made a move to say something, but stopped after the initial goldfish manoeuvre.

I stood, swiped a hand down the front of my trousers, catching the wet patch were my tears had fallen a few minutes before. Handbag in hand, and destination clear, I bade my farewells and left.

I was on a mission. I was out for revenge. I was going to make sure Ashley Richards knew she couldn't mess with me anymore.

The only thing I didn't know was where to find her.

But I would.

By golly ... I would.

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## **Chapter Thirty-Two**

White anger enveloped me. On the outside I looked normal, to that I can guarantee. Everybody I spoke to I did so very coolly, and not once did I have to raise my voice. Even when the station refused to tell me where Ash was staying whilst she was in Norfolk.

It was nearly ten thirty by the time I got back home, still none the wiser. But determined.

I promised myself, as I was unlocking the front door, that tomorrow would bring an address of one tall and very cock sure Detective Inspector. And I would settle the score.

The key was firmly in the lock by the time my body alerted me I was not alone. Someone was watching me.

I turned in the Hammer House Horror kind of way, the hairs on the back of my neck were standing to full attention ... very much in conjunction with the ones on my arms.

Streetlights made shadows on the pavement and they appeared to move. And my hands started to wiggle the arrogant key in the lock a little more frantically. I knew how to handle myself, but I wasn't going to walk into trouble.

I heard a movement come from just behind the hedge and my stomach clawed at my throat in an attempt to flee the scene.

The door fell inwards and I stumbled through, clumsily grabbing at the handle in a last pitch to save me hitting the floor. I would have done it too if my handbag hadn't slipped off my shoulder and landed heavily on my forearm.

I landed awkwardly and tried to scramble more into the house, as I was well and truly spooked by this stage. I could hear someone approaching ... hear a voice saying my name, but panic consumed me and I was trying to kick the door shut.

A hand grabbed my ankle and I let out a yelp ... or should I say scream of terror, and kicked wildly.

'Lou. Lou! It's only me.' I recognised the voice as being Ash's, and instinctively kicked out again wanting to hurt her. Her hand held my foot in a grip I can only describe as vice like, and all that happened was I was scooted backwards along the floor a little further.

Her frame loomed above me and she looked huge. A flitting memory of over thirty years ago came into my mind ... the memory of the first time I'd met her.

'Are you okay?' Almost an echo of the time. And once again, I felt the tears well up in my throat ... the football variety, leading me to thinking I wasn't okay and I would be damned if I was going to admit it to her.

Ash held her hand down towards me to help me up, but instead of a split second of thinking I would refuse help, I slapped her hand away.

'*Fuck you!*' Then proceeded to struggle to my feet. She didn't take no for an answer and grabbed my clammy hand in her cool one. Some things never change. At least mine were a lot cleaner now.

One deft movement later I was in her embrace ... no chance of staggering forward ... just vroom ... into her chest - head first.

And just like all those years ago - she towered above me, dwarfing me with her size and her presence.

A little voice whispered inside my chest 'Stay here', but the gob on display said 'Get your hands off me!' and shoved her away.

Her arms were outstretched in a mime's welcome, and I once again slapped at her.

'What're you doing here, Ash?' I snapped, my hands trying to smooth down my clothes.

'Came to see if you were all right.'

'What the fuck do you think?' My head poked out, birdlike ... hands on hips. 'You shatter my world and then come to see if I'm *all right*?' I blew out a sarcastic breath. 'You're more fucked up than I thought.'

With that, I turned to go. Her hand grabbed my arm and she tried to spin me around. I froze in place ... and so did she. 'Get off me ... I've nothing left to say.'

'Please Lou ... just hear me out.' She had a pleading quality in her voice and I wanted to back down and let her speak, but I was too hurt ... too fragile ... she would only screw me up again.

'I think you've said all you needed to say.' And I yanked my arm free. But she was not to be deterred ... she was insistent and grabbed my arm again.

'I said get your hands off me!' As I tried to shrug her away, she pulled me and I half turned towards her. My name was falling from her lips and I didn't want to see her, never mind hear her ever again.

Then things got a little hazy. I can't exactly remember what happened ... all I remember is I tried to slap her ... my arm pulled back ... my hand flat and ready for connection.

But it never came.

I remember the speed of it ... the power lacing it ... the anger swelling inside it.

But it never reached its destination.

Ash caught it and pulled me towards her. Anger raised its head ... blood red and fighting. She had me pinned. One hand caught ... my other arm held fast. So I kicked her.

Nothing.

Not even a wince of pain.

So I struggled.

But she held me tighter.

So I did the only thing I knew how to do.

I screamed in her face. Loudly. Words of hatred. Words of betrayal. Words I could never repeat.

I saw her flinch ... even felt her grip loosen slightly, but still not enough to release me.

Her lips tightened into a thin line, and I knew she was thinking. Then she pounced.

Those lips were now on mine. Hard and tight, muffling the screams still pouring from me. One hand released mine and pulled me closer to her and I took this opportunity to thump on her arm, pull her hair ... slap her and slap her and slap ... her.

The kiss stayed firm and unwavering ... except for a tiny movement from her lips ... a tiny movement that was building to a little more movement ... then a little more ... then I felt my own move against hers. I hated myself for moving my lips, but I couldn't help it. Rationally, I thought if I could distract her, pretend to be playing along ... then I could lead her into a false sense of security ... make my escape.

But the lips were against each other... more movement ... less pressure ... more intense ... sucking me in ... blurring my reality. Her mouth opened a little ... so did mine ... my hand had stopped hitting her now and was just holding the top of her arm.

I could feel myself falling into her ... bodily falling ... lips and mouths and tongues falling. Fingers began to trace along arms and backs. The kiss deepening ... wetness passing from one mouth to another ... stroking a need ... stoking a fire I thought was dead.

Before I knew it, my fingers were tangling in her hair pulling her closer and into me. Her thigh pushed its way between my legs and rubbed against the want gathering there. A gasp mingled with the spit and tongues and teeth ... mine or hers I don't know ... but it felt wonderful.

Her hand left my arm, swung behind her to hit the door closed, and then she turned me and walked me backwards ... never breaking the contact, her thigh tantalisingly chaffing my groin.

Against the wall. She pinned me against the wall. Her lips left my mouth stranded and began to devour my neck. Hands searched out the hem of my top and cool fingers slipped inside ... strong and sure of purpose ... they cupped the underside of my breasts and caressed them juxtaposing the primitive suckling on my neck. Her fingers were gentle, almost reverent.

God. I wanted her. Wanted her touch. Wanted her mouth. Wanted her to take me and take me and take me forever. My upper body pushed into her; pushed my breasts more firmly into her hands. A thumb broke from the pack and rubbed across my pert nipple. Fuck ... it felt good.

I lifted my leg and wrapped it around her to enable a more definite contact between my legs. My

hips began to grind into her; rhythmically in tune with hers ... and her mouth and her fingers and ... God ... I needed more. Needed her.

Inside my head the thoughts of revenge flitted to the surface only to be replaced by this growing desire coursing through me. I slipped my hands down her back and pushed them beyond the waistband of her trousers, craving the feel of her skin, pushing her into me. I could feel the building of release begging ... cleaving ... gnawing.

In unison, our hands were round the front and fighting with the buttons of our trousers. Pop. Pop. Then the zip. Then the hands inside. Then the first touch of fingers on desire. The wetness more than a gathering ... more than reason ... more than I had ever hoped it would be.

She was wet for me. So fucking wet ... for me.

And I was wet for her.

Slick fingers slipped and tugged and pushed and held. God ... it felt like I'd died and was living out my fantasy. Oblivion was threatening me ... I wanted to remember this moment; the first moment I touched her.

'No.' Her voice hit my skin and I froze on the spot ... my hand down her pants. A surge of anger lifted from my gut and stuck in my throat. I had fallen for her charms again. How could I have been so stupid? How could I have allowed myself to get into this pos ...

'Not here ... upstairs ... properly.' Staggered words broke out and trickled over me ... and I was surprised how the anger dissipated to bliss in just a short space of time.

Lifting me away from the wall was effortless. Turning me in the direction of the stairs was performed in a dance like way. Her hands and fingers were still embedded in my underwear as were mine in hers. Lips were capturing and clashing as I waltzed, staggeringly, towards the stairs with my partner fully attached to me.

At the base we began again. Kissing fervently and trying to continue the coupling started minutes before. I could feel her pulling back, but this time I knew it was because she wanted this to be more than a quickie in the hallway ... I didn't know what she wanted it to be, but by that stage I didn't care.

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My room was dark ... and only the light from the streetlights enabled me to see her. But I didn't have to use my eyes to know her. I had all my other senses wrapping themselves around what was ultimately her ... I could smell her scent, you know ... *her* scent. It was compulsive.

Her arms were around my waist and were rubbing slow circles at the base of my back ... her lips taking and possessing my mouth, like they were taking and possessing me. Trousers slipped effortlessly from skin, down ready thighs to expose dampness on underwear. Fingers slipped

inside, whilst another hand battled with buttons on tops. Shoes were discarded.

The air on my skin promised me something it never thought it would get.

Ash.

Flesh tingled ... expectant. Breasts were discovered with searching fingers. Nipples erect under thumbs.

Her mouth was pure pleasure, as it traced paths up and down my face, throat and shoulders. Her tongue was inquisitive, as was mine, and wanted to taste it all ... wanted to taste all of her.

I pulled her backwards and towards the bed, needing her to take me ... needing those fingers in places that ached for her. The constant throbbing drumming between my legs was becoming unbearable ... I just needed a touch ... a stroke ... a caress.

Movements were swift and sure, and before I knew it, I was on my back, sprawled on the bed with my legs parted in invitation. Ash crawled up my body making excitement quiver and demand attention. The feel of her skin against mine was pure bliss ... no other word could describe it. It felt as if we began to morph into each other on contact ... melt into each other.

Lips met lips in a quest for fulfilment. Hands sought places to worship, tender strokes, which were growing more insistent. The rhythm was steadily increasing and the wetness from me was smearing itself over her leg, making it glide effortlessly over her. Each and every meeting of flesh was exquisite. It felt I couldn't get close enough to her.

She was moving downwards ... lips leaving a fiery trail as they danced along my throat and neck, suckling my breasts, flicking my nipples; her hands were slipping along my sides.

Hair tangled in my fingers, soft silky strands I had only ever dreamed of touching. I could feel the heat of her scalp ... feel the movement of her head as it moved along around and up and down.

Leaving the confines of her hair, my fingernails etched a path down her spine, either side, until they reached her arse. Firm and round ... and grinding. It was perfect, just how I had always dreamed it would be.

I could hear my name on her lips ... feel my name on her lips ... the same lips that were now on my skin and moving towards destiny ... towards hope and expectation.

Hot breath tantalised and agonised over my need and I pushed my hips upwards and closer to her face. Her hands were holding onto my hips and I could feel her push me back onto the bed.

The first touch of her tongue as it parted my folds made me gasp aloud. I have never felt anything more exquisite in all my life. It was slow and searching ... moving upwards to my clit in one stroke, her breath lathing it more fully and blending it into a cocoon of primal need.



Hips jerked of their own volition; I was vulnerable to this need ... vulnerable to her touch. I just wanted more. Blood thundered in my ears making it near impossible to concentrate on anything but her mouth ... her fingers on my hips ... her tongue.

God ... her tongue. It was moving with agonising precision ... up ... and down ... up ... and down. Groans were coming from between my legs, groans of desire. My fingers were back in her hair trying to guide her to my ache ... trying to make her slip her tongue inside ... taste me from the inside out, just as I wanted to taste her ... just as I wanted to love her.

'Take me. Just ... *take me.*' The words came out stunted and breathless, but the intent was clear. I wanted this woman to take me and own me and possess me and love me in any way she wanted. Any way. I was hers, always had been. And whatever happened after this at least I would have experienced being loved by someone I had spent my whole life craving ... spent half my life trying to forget.

A solitary finger circled my entrance ... swirling and teasing. I pushed my hips down trying to capture it inside me, but she just moved it away. I was becoming frustrated. I needed her inside ... I needed her inside ...

In. Deep. Full. Captured. An involuntary jerk of my hips pulled it in more fully and I groaned out her name. The finger stayed put, throbbing inside me - or was I throbbing around it? Whatever ... it felt like I'd come home again.

It slipped out and then in and then out and then in ... slow and sure ... brushing along my walls as it curved and pushed. Another one joined the first and waited inside me. I pushed again and tried to raise myself to look at her. Blue eyes stared intently at me from between my legs, and I felt a spurt of juice shoot from deep inside.

'Kiss me ... *please ... kiss me.*' I had to have those lips on mine ... had to know this wasn't an illusion, a re-creation of the fantasy I had harboured in my chest for years.

Without taking away her fingers, she crawled up me and laid her frame over my own. Her hand was between my legs and an errant thumb began to brush against my clit. I spread my legs wider wanting to suck her inside, and wrapped my leg around her waist, opening myself up even more for her.

Her mouth covered mine and her breathing was ragged. I was so consumed by her ... so enthralled by her ... I wanted this to last forever, but knew I wouldn't take long to climax. Kisses landed on my throat and neck and I could feel her nipping the flesh.

'*God ... Lou .. God ... I want you want you want you ...*' The words tumbled from her mouth and tattooed themselves onto my skin. With every word she pushed inside me, like she was possessing me.

It was becoming more frantic, more animal. She was fucking me ... fucking me ... fucking me

and it was deliriously brazen. My breast was nearly inside her mouth and she suckled it like she was starving. I pulled her head closer and she groaned into me. One of my hands glided around her arse and pulled in sync with her thrusting, jamming her fingers home.

I could feel it coming. I could feel myself cumming. I wanted to cum with her ... for us to cum together. I needed us to cum together ... needed it.

My hand stopped gripping her arse and slipped between us to halt the pounding of her fingers inside me. 'Ash ... let me touch you ... let me ... touch *you*.' She pulled her fingers free and I slipped my leg between her legs and rubbed my thigh along a soaking wet.

'*Oh God ... Lou ... fuck.*' She half bent over me as the sensation ripped through her, my other leg slipping down her calf and stroking the back of hers. Her arm supported her as she leaned back and pounded against my thigh, smearing it with her essence. I sneaked my hand between the gap and through soft pubic hair. Her clit was swollen, and she stopped in mid thrust to allow my fingers access.

Two fingers parted her folds, and a gasp left her mouth. I watched her eyes flicker closed only to reopen with desire raging from them. A soft snort left her mouth and nostrils, indicating there was no turning back for her ... she was close ... as close as I was.

She kneeled and leaned back slightly allowing me to circle her core. Her hand was back and tantalising my opening in rhythm with my ministrations on her. I raised my leg and supported her whilst I slipped two fingers inside, just as she slipped two inside me.

We both growled with hunger. Hips began a dance ... thrusting and pushing and needing to capture and take and own. The need to cum was synonymous to agony and the movements became more forceful, more intense. Both of us were beyond the realm of reality and I could feel her walls clasp around my pulsating fingers, as surely as I could feel my walls spasming.

'Cum for me ... cum for me ...' Her voice was deep, growling and primitive, the words weren't a request they were imperative to her survival.

White and bright and clear and so fucking intense. I was over. Fighting... clawing ... gasping out my cumming into the air to mingle and merge with her sob of release. Uncoordinated coupling, jerky and euphoric, we thrashed and plunged out the last vestiges of delirium before she collapsed on top of me, my fingers sliding effortlessly from within her. Her mouth was wet and soft as she kissed me. It was deep yet gentle, and I felt so much more from that one kiss than I had from everything that had preceded it. Her body moved against me trying to elicit the aftershocks, trying to appease the need to begin all over again.

Trying to satiate the raging inside us both.

But I had waited too long for her... too long for this. I needed to take her again. Fuck her again. Own her again ... Love her until I couldn't move and couldn't think of her anymore.

I knew I would never have enough of her ... never love her enough ...

But I would die trying.

And as I rolled her onto her back I thought, 'This is going to be a long night.'

And an enjoyable one at that.

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### Chapter Thirty-Three

By the morning light we were nearly dazed with exhaustion. The whole night had been spent discovering each other over and over again. It was only through dehydration that we finally stopped and I lay my head on her chest and nuzzled my face underneath her chin. Soft kisses lingered in my hair and I wished I had the strength to lift my head and claim her mouth again.

'I need water. Want some?' The vibrations of her voice rippled through her chest and I snuggled deeper into her. I didn't want to move ... didn't want to break this connection, but I knew I needed liquid.

I nodded slowly, the movement of my face bringing me closer to her chest and I couldn't resist a sly flick of my tongue against a sleeping nipple ... a nipple that shot to attention immediately, giving the impression it was searching for the perpetrator.

Ash slithered from underneath me and slipped her shirt on. 'Won't be a tick.' And she was gone, leaving the room decidedly empty.

I lay back onto the pillows, closed my eyes and sighed. I felt so contented inside ... so at peace at last. This is what should have happened twenty years ago.

My eyelids shot open. 'Fuck!' I sat up. '*Fuck!* What have I done?' Both my hands covered my face and I tried to scramble to a sort of rationalisation if what had taken place. I had just had unbridled sex with Ashley Richards. Ashley Richards.

The Ashley Richards who had dropped me like a stone twenty years ago.

The Ashley Richards who had used me to get closer to Danny Spencer.

The Ashley Richards who now knew I knew about Danny Spencer. And still needed me on her side to get him.

A fleeting emotion of self-pity shot through me, only to be replaced by anger at what I had allowed to happen. I had been such a fool. Again. I had fallen for her charms. Again. It's amazing how many 'agains' there seemed to be when I was with her.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed, slipped on my sleeping shirt and readied myself for her to come back in the room.

Two minutes later, the door opened and she came trotting in, barefoot and naked from the waist down. She grinned at me as she leaned back on the door to push it closed, two glasses of water in her hands.

I sat. Stoic. Glaring at her. The smile froze momentarily, before slipping completely from her face. 'Lou?'

She had the decency to look concerned, but at that time I didn't think of what she would be feeling at this stage. She had gotten what she wanted ... or thought she had gotten it.

'What's up?' Silent footsteps led her closer to the bed.

'You think you're so clever don't you?'

'Huh?'

'You heard.'

'Lou ... I don't know ... What's up?' She moved closer, but the expression on my face warned her to stop. I had the sheet clutched in my hands, the same sheet we had shared minutes before ... the same sheet that reeked of our lovemaking.

'Don't play games, Ash. I know.'

'I haven't a clue what you're talking about.' She set off towards me again. 'Can we just ...'

'Don't come any closer.' I didn't recognise my voice, just buried my head in my hands again trying to stave off the onslaught of emotion welling up inside me. I didn't want the fire to dissipate ... I needed the anger to get me through this.

Silence surrounded the bubbling pit of lava churning in my gut. The same lava that was threatening an appearance, vowing to shatter the silence and take no prisoners ... kill on sight.

My nails dug into my scalp and I grimaced with the pain of it, although it wasn't a patch on what I was feeling inside.

A sob broke the stillness of the room, and that sob didn't come from me. 'Lou?' Her voice was pleading me, saying so much in just that one word. I could feel the ropes around my heart tug and pull, trying to dislodge the bitterness, which was trying to embed itself there.

Hands left my face, and I looked in her direction, not at her face ... I couldn't handle looking at her face. I looked at her hands ... two hands holding water ... water in glasses that was moving

and jittering around inside the vessel as if it was on board a ship.

Splosh.

It hit the stripped wood floor like a brick.

Splosh.

Another thudding in such a quiet room. The tears that had begun to seep out of my eyes and down my face halted ... took stock ... waited.

Splosh.

I looked at her hands. They were trembling, and so were her arms. I could see her stomach quivering too, retching and rolling. But I couldn't hear anything now.

Eyes. I had to see her eyes. I knew her eyes ... knew them ...

Her head was bent and I could only see the top and the bottom half of her face. I waited. Waited for her to look at me.

If I had blinked I would have missed it. That solitary tear that fell from her chin and against her shirt with a muted plop. I just watched the dark patch spread into the size of a penny piece, and then another ... plop. Her shoulders began to move, very slightly. Then her tongue came out and smeared itself over her lips.

'What have I done?' The tone sounded like how I felt. Rejected.

The answer I wanted to spew out seemed lodged somewhere between my throat and the roof of my mouth. I opened my lips to speak but couldn't, just chewed around the words, mouth pursing and relaxing in the style of chewing an elastic band.

'Tell me. What have I done?' A little bolder now, but still full of the same something that was cleaving inside me.

'You used me, Ash.' Short, simple and to the point.

'Used you? How?' Her eyes met mine and I felt my chest tighten. Inside my head two words clambered around, 'Be strong. Be strong...'. But I felt anything but strong at this moment, there ... sitting on my bed with my heart in tatters on the floor. I should have been feeling elation - but I was far from that.

'You fucked me to get what you wanted.' The confession hit the air and hovered over her stunned face.

'Yes I did.'

The pain ripped through me. She admitted it so easily ... so readily ...

'I wanted you. Always have.' Huh? 'For twenty years I've wanted you ... it's always been you.'

Blue eyes met mine and seemed to plead with me, but I was angrier now. How dare she lie about it? How dare she stand in front of me and treat me like an idiot.

'You liar ... you fucking *liar*!' The last bit screamed from deep within, and I was on my feet and over to her, thumping the tops of her arms in temper. Water splashed everywhere, all over the both of us, but it didn't cool me down. 'How *dare* you!'

She just stood there and took it, her fingers gripping onto the glasses more firmly. 'You ran away. Told me you couldn't. You weren't like that ...'

'I never said I wasn't like that ... like you ... like us.' Her eyes flashed, as they looked straight into mine. 'I ran because I thought I'd taken advantage of you.'

'How on ear...'

'You were drunk. Had a few drinks. I kissed you when you were drunk and I felt so ashamed.'

I felt the symbolic punch to my gut. I felt my jaw drop open and snap shut again. I felt like a twat.

But I just stood there in front of her completely at a loss for words. For some reason I was finding it hard to digest what she had said. Especially the bit where she had said she felt ashamed. Why on earth did she feel ashamed? It was me ... my fault.

Ash moved past me and placed the half filled water glasses on my bedside cabinet before sitting on the bed. I turned to look at her and I felt my heart clench. That once so vibrant face was devoid of all colour, her eyes looked dull and lifeless. They were staring ahead like they were being transported through time to that fateful night twenty years ago.

I didn't move straight away, I just let her collect her thoughts. One part of me didn't want to know what she was going to divulge, but the other half ... well the other half thought it would die if she didn't tell me.

She lifted her glass from the side and downed the whole lot, although there was hardly any to drink. I felt the thirst come raging back, but before I could do anything she had my glass held up in front of me inviting me to take it. I think the invitation was for more than that though.

Walking forwards seemed as if it was performed through treacle. Lifting my feet seemed an impenetrable task, but I slipped my hand around the cool glass, brushing my fingers against hers in the process. A jolt soared through me and I tried to contain the visible shudder with the deft movement of glass to mouth, followed by rapid swallowing.

After placing the empty vessel back on the side, I tentatively joined her on the bed. We both sat there in silence before I decided enough was enough. 'What did you mean? About being ashamed?'

I turned and looked at her profile. I could see the swallowing bobbing in her throat, so I lowered my gaze to her clasped hands on her lap. The fingers were tangling and untangling ... fighting the urge to break apart and do something.

'I'd ... erm ... liked you for so long.' She swallowed again. I knew she was feeling pain. I could feel it. I didn't say anything. 'Well before that night. But I never thought you thought of me that way ... thought I was a freak to fancy my best friend.' She rubbed her eyes. 'I honestly thought it was a phase, something I would grow out of. But it never happened. It seemed as if every day I wanted you more.'

At this point she stopped to collect herself, and I continued to wait.

'It's more than that though ... much more. I think it started when we were kids.'

'What?' Now this was freakish.

'I don't mean wanting you ... I mean the connection I'd always had with you. Then when you fell back into my life ...' Fell being the operative word. 'I thought I had found you again and there was no way I was going to let you go.' She actually turned and looked at me at this point. 'It started so innocently ... I was just so happy to have you back. And then I began to look forward to seeing you ... then miss you when you weren't there.'

Her hands tried to clasp again, but I took one into my own and rubbed my thumb along the back of it. This emboldened her, I could see by the way she took a deep breath before continuing. 'It wasn't long before I began to crave you ... you ... everything about you. Your smile .. your smell ... your laugh. The way you wrinkle your nose when you are just about to grin.'

A small smile graced my lips at this, and she smiled back. 'Like that.' A little laugh came out of my mouth and for some unknown reason I felt embarrassed.

She sighed and turned away, her face wistful. 'It was agony being with you, but even worse when I wasn't. I was so frightened of you finding out ... thought you'd be disgusted and tell me to get lost.' I gripped her hand more firmly now ... just a quick squeeze just to make sure I knew this wasn't happening in my head.

Yes. This was real. She was real.

'When I found out you were moving to Norfolk, I thought my world was coming to an end. It seemed like the other side of the world.' She lifted her head and turned to face me. 'I thought I was going to lose you without ever telling you how I felt.'

'But why didn't you tell me. You must have known I had feelings for you.' I placed my hand on the side of her face, cupping her cheek. 'I more than adored you ... I ... loved you, Ash.'

The smile spread over her face like a rash, and like rashes, it was totally contagious. Then her eyebrows dipped at the centre as a frown took its place. 'Loved?'

Shit. Had I gone too far? Said too much?

'You mean you don't now? Love me, that is.' I wanted to lie and say no, thinking that maybe it was too soon to admit what was clambering up my throat wanting to open itself up for confession.

'Never stopped.' There it was. Out in the open, not taking any notice of rational thought or reasoning. Emotion won out. And by the look on Ash's face I believe my heart had made a better decision than my head ever could.

Her arms were around me and I was engulfed into her body, her scent tantalising and teasing, her chest heaving ... breathing ragged. A muffled 'Thank you, God' was repeated into my hair like a catechism. Arms tightened and I could feel her shaking. I knew she was crying, although I had never seen her cry before tonight.

'Hey ... hey ... what's up?' I tried to pull away, wanting to look into her face and reassure her everything was all right, but she just clung to me tighter, and I could feel the moisture seeping into my hair.

I held her in my arms, stroking long languid strokes up and down her spine, and waited for her to stop crying. Arms loosened eventually and she pulled slightly back to reach for a tissue.

After wiping her eyes and blowing her nose, she looked at me and gave me one of the most endearing smiles I had ever seen. She was Ash ... my Ash ... Ash the girl I knew ... Ash the woman she was now.

'Better?'

'Much thanks.'

'You still haven't told me.' One of her eyebrows lifted in question. 'Why?'

'Why what?'

'Why you actually kissed me the night of my birthday? And why you ran?'

'I told you why ... I felt ashamed.' I tilted my head and looked at her straight in the eyes. 'I need a drink.' I raised both my eyebrows. 'I do ... I spilled most of that.' She pointed to the bedroom floor.



'Okay ... you get settled and I'll go and get us both some juice. But you'd better spill when I get back.'

The journey to the kitchen was performed on extremely wobbly legs. I was surprised they had the capability to work at all with all the angst and emotional upheaval they had been through. In less than five minutes, I was pushing the bedroom door closed and padding towards the bed.

Ash was sprawled back, her head and shoulders were propped up with a pile of pillows, and she shifted to make room for me, her hand reaching up for the glass. Two gulps later, it was history and she slammed the glass on the side. 'See? I told you I was thirsty.'

I climbed onto the bed and snuggled next to her, one arm around her waist and my head on her chest. It felt so right to be there with her, so peaceful. I think she thought she'd gotten away with it. 'Spill Richards.' I felt her chest push out as she drew in a deep breath.

'Well ... I erm ... it ... was ...'

'Oh for God's sake, Ash. We've slept together. I've told you I love you ... just tell me!'

The story she came out with filled me with a myriad of emotions. Mainly melancholy. I so wanted to turn the clock back and change the events leading up to her flight that night. I wished I had just told her ... I wished I hadn't had so much to drink that made her feel she had taken advantage of the situation.

When she stopped, after she admitted she'd ran because she was scared at the consequences of her actions, I just stared at her.

'What?'

'You still haven't told me.'

'I have ... I bottled out because I thought you were drunk and would regret it the next day,' she said adamantly.

'That's not what I meant, Ash. Why didn't you bother explaining why you ran? ... You could've said you were drunk too.' I turned and looked up at her. 'You left it twenty years to tell me ... I thought you felt something for me?'

'I didn't leave it twenty years.'

I lifted myself up onto my elbow and looked down at her. 'It's been twenty years, Ash. From that night to the night you showed up ... nearly twenty years.' I looked down at her mouth and then back to her eyes. 'You could have at least said goodbye.'

'I tried ... I came to your house and stood outside I don't know how many times. But I just couldn't face you ... thought if I called you and spoke over the phone it would be easier.'

'So why didn't you?'

'You were cut off.'

It was true. My dad had disconnected the phone the day before we were to move to make sure he'd done it. But then it dawned on me.

'You had my new number. Why didn't you call me in Norfolk?'

'I did.'

'You could have ... *what?* No you didn't. I think I'd remember, Ash'

'Spoke to Jo.'

'You spoke to ... *Jo?*' Shit. 'What did she say? She didn't tell me you'd called.' I looked up at her, and she certainly looked uncomfortable by this stage. I could see her chewing her lip, probably thinking how she could get out of this conversation that appeared more like a confrontation by now. One of those little 'Oh what the hell' sighs came out and I saw the resolve kick in and her mouth purse.

'After we'd had a little chat, I told her I thought it would be best if you didn't know that I'd called.'

I sat up straight on the bed, the warmth of her body completely absent from me. 'You called and said not to tell me?' I couldn't believe it - it must've been soon after we'd moved because Jo moved in with Craig not long after.

Then a thought struck me. 'What did she say?' Ash shook her head saying it didn't matter, but I needed to know. Well ... you would too, wouldn't you? You'd want to know why the sister you thought the absolute world of would betray you like that. She knew how I felt ... she knew I loved Ash ... she knew that I'd kissed her... *shit* ... she didn't know. I hadn't told her.

'What did she say to you, Ash? Please. I need to know.'

Ash looked uncomfortable. 'Jo loves you, Lou.' I just stared, and it seemed that my world had suddenly gone tits up, you know ... when you can't really grasp something ... think it must be wrong ... think the rest of the world has gone crazy and imagined something that you couldn't possibly perceive. 'She was only thinking of you.'

I pulled back even further, as if to try and grasp the bigger picture, but my brain was fucked. Ash held her hand out ... palm upwards as in offering ... fingers extended. I just sat there like a laughing Buddha ornament -frozen to the spot. My eyes just said 'Tell me ... tell me ... tell me ...' over and over again.

She sighed, knowing I wouldn't give in until I knew. 'Come here, baby ... and I'll tell you.'

I resisted for a few seconds and then laid down on top of her, my hand sneaking around her waist pulling her into me.

And then she told me ... word by word what had passed between the two women I loved so much. There had been no tears ... no tantrums ... no shouting. Just an agreement.

It was for the best.

For whom I didn't know. The best for Jo? Ash?

Because it certainly hadn't been the best for me.

And all that crap about making a fresh start and leaving me to get over her and get on with my life.

As I was listening, a maelstrom of emotions whizzed through me. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry ... scream or sob ... rage ... spit ... thump ... demand ... become complacent ... sullen ... too many emotions ... too many.

Eventually my screwed up insides came to a decision. Not consciously. It was only the feeling of wetness on Ash's skin that alerted me that I had been crying ... the tears had seeped unbidden. Surprise released the pent up emotion crackling underneath the surface, and the floodgates opened. I felt cheated. Cheated. *Fucking* cheated. How dare they decide for me.

How dare they think they know what's best.

'How dare you! How fucking dare you!' It was out and there was no going back from this. I was up and off the bed in a flash, the room almost spinning ... it was totally unfocused, a little like the conversation... a little like my brain. 'How could you decide what was the best for me? You didn't even ask me! Didn't 't even get my side of the story.'

'Lou...'

*'Don't "Lou" me!'* Spit flew out ... I was seething. Wait until I got hold of Jo ... wait until ...

The next thing I remember was being in her arms again and she was holding me against her, gripping me, shushing into my hair. I was so angry, but her presence was soothing the ire flooding from me ... soothing it away ... soothing it all ... away.

'Please Lou ... don't be mad.' I attempted a half-hearted wriggle. 'Don't blame Jo ... she was just looking out for you ... like she always has.' I thought of Jo ... thought of how she had always had something against Ash ... Do you remember me saying about distrusting her? Distrusting her after the lemonade incident? Well this certainly wasn't lemonade, and it was more certainly something that couldn't be mopped away.

Soft kisses were in my hair and I was allowing the anger to seep away ... flow away ... drift away. I was still hurt by what they had done, but I needed to speak to Jo about it. Needed to hear her tell me why she had done what she had. Funny thing was, I could understand why Ash had stepped away from it all. She was still reeling from the acknowledgement that she had a crush on her best friend, and felt like a circus freak. So, obviously, she would back down from the situation believing that I would be better off without her.

But Jo knew the truth. She knew I had feelings for Ash. She knew I was in love with Ash, yet she told her to leave me alone. And the only person I wanted to tell me the reason for that was Jo herself ... and I would do that as soon as I could call and make arrangements to see her.

That was the kind of thing that had to be done face to face.

And that could wait until the morning, because I had better things to do ... like concentrate on my future instead of my past.

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#### Chapter Thirty-Four

It was about ten o'clock in the morning when Ash's mobile shrilly brought us both back into the land of the living. She slung herself half off the bed and rummaged around on the floor to retrieve her trousers, in which was hidden the singing beast.

She randomly pressed the keys to accept the call, and when she turned to face me she looked totally exhausted. We had spent a while earlier trying to come to terms to what had happened and eventually agreed it was something that, with time, could find a place where it belonged. In the past.

I watched Ash talking into the phone, her eyes hidden behind heavy lids and knew she was harassed. Work had called her for some reason or another, and I could see the tension mark itself along her mouth. I raised a finger and ran it along the underside of her bottom lip remembering where those lips had been last night.

The smile changed the path of my finger and I looked into the bluest eyes I had ever seen.

And they were twinkling ... for me ... at me.

I mouthed 'I want you' and she grinned and held up a finger as if to say 'one minute'. But I couldn't wait for that.

Fingers moved across her chest and along her collarbone. Ash intermittently bit her lip and tried to keep her voice steady as my fingers crept lower and circled her breast. She shook her head, but it was only half-heartedly.

So the fingers ventured lower, and I lifted myself up and over her. Circles on her belly ... brushing fingertips that were valiantly going lower and lower and ...

'Haaah!' The air escaped her mouth as my fingertips reached her nub ... and it felt wonderful. Eyes pinned on mine and conversation became more staccato, the person on the other end of the phone becoming more confused as the answers were becoming unfocused.

I decided that my mouth should join in, and began to skip along her belly whilst my hand was between her legs. Her voice was becoming curter with the caller, telling whoever it was that she would be there as soon as possible.

Guilt sneaked in as I thought it unfair to lick her belly and stroke her whilst she was trying to take in information, so I pulled back, only to have her hand rest on my head, and guide me back down.

Peeking up to her, I saw the glint flash from her eyes and I knew she was horny. Fingers tangled in my hair and I could feel the pressure increase on my scalp. My lips brushed against her pubic bone and I nuzzled in deeper, glorifying in her scent. Two fingers separated and guarded her clit, opening her wider ... opening her up to my watering mouth.

One flick with my tongue and she gasped, the slamming shut of her mobile seeming to echo around the room. Both of her hands gripped my hair and pushed me down and into her, her hips rising off the bed to allow me full access.

With the flat of my tongue, I eased from her opening and upwards in an agonisingly slow movement, my fingers slipping to the side, up, and over her thigh. I pushed her legs apart and she scooted backwards to spread herself wider. Inside my gut, the muscles clenched and spasmed, and I just wanted to take her roughly ... take her fully ... take her and own her and make her mine.

But I didn't.

I brought my tongue back downwards, using just the tip along her swollen clit until it reached her core once again. Ash's stomach sucked in and I could hear and feel the air being held and released emitting a groan in its wake. I gripped her thighs, one under, and one over, and pulled her towards me as I buried my face into her, breathing her in deeply.

'Jesus, Lou ... *God yes ... Take me ... take me.*' I rubbed my face into her like I was giving her an open mouthed kiss, my lips moving in the motion of speech, miming the words 'I love you', hoping they would be swallowed up inside her, just like I wanted to be.

Another stroke with my tongue upwards ... then down ... up ... then down ... up ... then ...

'I need ... to taste ... you ... need to ...taste you ... too.' Words undulated into the air, but I knew what she wanted. I slipped my hand back between her legs and eased my fingers into the place

my tongue had just left.

Effortlessly, I swung my leg over her middle and scooted backwards until I straddled her face, my fingers never missing a beat. Her hands gripped my hips and eased me downwards until I felt the sensation of her tongue flicking against my nub. Involuntarily, I jerked forwards as a spasm shot along every nerve in me.

A couple more flicks and then a suck and then ... oh god ... it was ecstasy. My eyes closed and I rocked on her tongue, my fingers still pushing and pulling along slick folds. One minute I was rocking, the next my face was once again between those precious thighs and I was delighting in the taste and texture of this woman ... *my* woman ... underneath me ...

Without warning, we entered each other with tongues ready to be lost inside ... tongues ready to caress walls that begged to be loved ... tongues eager to fulfil this quest ... this destiny that was burgeoning on the exquisite.

Or was it exquisite already? Who cared? The intense feeling of an approaching climax was mushrooming and filling and exacting a promise of forever in this ecstasy ... the promise of completeness between one person and another.

Two people seeping into one, becoming complete once again.

Actions were becoming frantic. Mouths were eating. Consuming. Devouring. Sucking. Tongues were dancing and flicking ... hoping and dying to love and be loved. I could barely breath and I could hear Ash's ragged breaths coming from underneath me ... neither of us wanting to stop ... both of us needing to cum ...

I could taste the change in her ... salty yet still as sweet as honey, and I knew she was close ... as close as I was. My hips were trying to escape the confines of her hands, as they wanted to pound into her, but I had to take it out on her clit ... on her opening ...

I delved deeper into her as she delved deeper into me.

Harder and faster. Harder and faster. Hard and fast... hard and fast.

Her cry entered me just as mine entered her. I felt the wetness shoot from inside me and coat her face, my nails were digging into her thighs and I was riding her unabashed. Her hips lifted and floundered in the air as her climax robbed her of all coordination.

My name was inside me. Chanted through parted lips ... lips that were soft and moist and pliable in their weakness.

It was blinding, but I knew at that moment I had never seen so clearly in all my life.

I fell forward and half on top of her, uncaring about how I looked, totally exhausted, both physically and emotionally. Her hand was trying to grip my fingers and pull me towards her, and

I had to force my traitorous body to comply and get me to her ... get me in her arms.

But I made it. Safe. Secure. Wrapped tightly in the arms of the woman who even after twenty years held my heart so easily. The woman who held my everything so easily.

And there we lay. Ensnared. Content to just be, if only for a little while.

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## **Chapter Thirty-Five**

She left thirty minutes later, freshly showered and looking like perfection. I felt the pang of loneliness hit my gut as soon as I shut the front door behind her.

In my head I had so many things I needed to sort and reflect upon. Mainly about what was going to happen next ... and what I was going to do about Jo and the phone call. Events of the past seemed too much to even contemplate at the moment. I had to concentrate on the here and now.

Decision made, I called Jo's number and fiddled with a pen as I waited for her to pick up. Her voice echoed through the phone as I distinctly heard her shouting at her youngest son to 'Leave the bloody gerbil alone.'

'I need to meet with you and have a chat.'

'Lou? What's wrong?'

'I've been talking to an old friend of ours ... or should I say an old friend of mine.'

It went quiet for a few seconds, and then her voice came back distinctly softer. 'Who?'

'Ashley Richards.' I let the two words hang in the air, and waited for a response. And I waited. I knew she was trying to think of something to say, but what could she actually say to me that would stop the fireworks she knew were going to happen?

'When do you want to meet?' She didn't ask why or how I'd met Ash again. Didn't question the fact I'd asked to see her ... or the way I'd asked her. She must have known I knew what she'd done - what they had both done. So I told her, simply, that Ash was down on business and I had met her at the police station. I didn't mention why ... just that we had met again.

It was a strange call, distant. Usually our calls to each other were full of fun and ribbing, but at the moment that was the last thing this could ever be.

We made arrangements to meet later that day in town after she had got rid of the kids. It was a sure fire way of telling her I was angry, as I didn't invite her around to meet at my place. The only thing I thought was strange was that my parents hadn't called her and warned her of my visit

to them yesterday, which made me wonder if she knew about our stepbrother.

I showered, dressed and ate some lunch, knowing I wouldn't feel like it after my confrontation later. The thought of Jo doing anything to hurt me stuck in my throat. How *could* she? She loved me, didn't she? She always said she wanted me to be happy, and look how that turned out.

I was thirty-seven years of age and I hadn't been in a serious relationship in my life ... not since Sarah that is. And thinking about that, was Sarah really serious or just an aside until I could get what I craved for? Ash. Had I been holding out for Ash all of these years, not allowing myself to move on with my life?

But was that Jo's fault? Or mine? Training told me that I was in charge of my own happiness, no one could dictate to me how I should feel, only I could make the decision how others affected me - well - to a degree. After all was said and done, it had been me who had pulled back from any commitment, preferring to keep relationships light, and if the other person wanted something more, I just made my excuses and left.

Time moved so quickly, I found myself rushing to get myself in order before I had to meet Jo. I was rummaging through my bag looking for my mobile, when the doorbell sounded. Fuck. I decided the best thing to do was to answer it on my way out and call Jo to tell her I was going to be late.

A bloody double-glazing bloke stood there, grinning inanely and tried to sell me windows. They are so insistent ... and smarmy. He tried to use his charm on me but I gave him the look that he had a cat in hell's chance of getting me to buy anything from him. I grimaced a smile and tried to tell him I was running late, and like all salesmen, he didn't listen to a word I said.

Keys. Bag. Phone. The only thing I could do was push past him, throw an excuse over my shoulder and make a run for it. But before I could I heard a smashing sound coming from the back of the house.

'What the fuck?' I turned in the doorway, trying to listen to the noises of the house.

'It seems like one of your windows needs replacing.' I looked over my shoulder at the salesman, whose face was full of concern now. 'Do you need a hand, love?'

I frowned at him, but before I could say anything else I heard movement coming from near the kitchen area. Whatever made me step inside the house I will never know. Whatever made me so open and vulnerable like that will never be repeated. I was inside, the salesman behind me, and then someone came out through my kitchen door.

Sam Read. Shit.

I turned to tell the bloke behind me, but he was smiling. Not at me, but past me.

'I'm in, Danny.'



'I know son. Well done.'

Danny? Danny Spencer and Sam Read?

I heard the door slam, and felt my stomach hit my knees. There I was, in my house with two people I would never want to be found alone with.

It's amazing. The smarmy bugger I had spoken to minutes before was completely gone, and in front of me stood a man who looked like trouble. With a capital T. The smiling charmer was laid to rest, and someone sinister had taken root. In short ... I was shitting myself.

'What do you want?' Fear was precedent in my voice. I heard Read laugh behind me, and it was closer than before. I turned my head and looked into those cold grey eyes, turned back and was greeted by green, familiar green. Green like mine ... like Jo's.

'You, sis. I want you.' His lip curled upwards showing the left side of his teeth, almost doglike, and I felt like a small animal that had been cornered.

I gripped my keys more tightly, the metal sticking into my hand ... the other one held my mobile, which I slipped into my jacket pocket. My brain was fucked ... I was fucked if I couldn't get my brain to stop being fucked. Ah shit ... I know ... I'm swearing too much. But I had also lost the capability of stringing a sentence together without the aid of the anti euphemism.

All I knew was I needed to be on the other side of that door. Images of a bloke slumped over a steering wheel in Manchester came skipping into my head. I didn't want a repeat performance. I didn't want to be the star of the show. I didn't want to have my identity found out through dental records.

There was only one thing I could think of doing, and that was to make a run for it. Problem was Spencer was in front and Read was behind ... therefore the front and the back exits were blocked.

Read was snug up behind me now, as I could feel his rancid breath burning my neck. Spencer was grinning a wolfish grin ... a grin of a bloke who was about to get what he wanted.

Not on my shift he wasn't.

'Ok ... What do you want with me?' He was just about to open his mouth to speak when I kicked him in the shin. Hard. Then with the keys half hanging from my hand I thumped him squarely on the bridge of his nose, hearing the satisfying crack as his nose broke underneath it. Read grabbed my hair and I elbowed him, an 'oof' splattering out before I followed through with a backwards punch in the face.

I knew I had seconds; Spencer was smearing the blood and tears around his face, so I punched him again, before stamping on his foot. '*Fucking bitch!*' spewed from his mouth, as he half bent

over. I pushed and ran.

The door loomed ahead and my legs felt like they belonged to someone else. Frantic hands grappled with the lock and panic was another enemy. The cool afternoon air brushed against my face and I was so close to escaping. A strong hand grabbed the back of my jacket and yanked, ultimately pulling the door open with it, exposing the scene to the outside world, my keys flying outside.

'Help me!' Two words. That's all I had chance to scream before the door slammed shut again, and I was face to face with a very angry and bloody Danny Spencer.

He came right up to my face and yelled words I couldn't decipher, and I felt my body cringe backwards as the spit splattered over my face and neck. An arm raised. A hand loomed ...

And then it was goodnight Vienna.

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I felt like crap. My head felt like crap. My lip and cheek felt like shit. Unfocused images played tiggly it with reality and my stomach was playing right alongside.

It was my front room. I was stuffed into the corner of my front room, on the floor ... out of sight. I didn't even know how long I had been out for ... didn't remember getting here.

Bollocks.

Spencer was on the sofa staring at me, a bag of ice pressed to the side of his nose, waiting for me to fully focus on him before he moved. Read was rooting through the drawers of my cabinet and systematically pocketing whatever took his fancy.

'Sit down, Sam.' Spencer's voice was low, and this made matters worse. It had the tone of the controlled, yet uncontrolled, if you know what I mean. He leaned forward placing the ice pack to the side of him, and stared intently into my face, waiting for me to be fully alert.

'So ... there's a family trait lurking there after all.' He gently touched his nose and looked at his fingers to check for blood. Read slouched against the wall and tried out his most sinister leer for size. 'Seems to me we're more alike than I realised.'

'I'm nothing like you.' I spat out. Cheeky fucker. As if.

'I wouldn't say that. You have a mean left hook.' And he smiled ... or tried to smile, but the swelling made him seem deformed. 'Bet you're wondering why I thought I pay you a special visit didn't you?'

The glare I gave him told him I didn't give two fucks why he was here. I had nothing to do with him ... we may be related by the wankstain of a father, but that was where the connection ended.

'You're right. It all stems down to dear old dad.'

'I haven't heard a word from him in thirty years. Why do you think I want to know about him now?'

Spencer sat back on the sofa and eyed me warily, whilst Read looked at his grubby fingernails, methodically cleaning them with his teeth. The room was quiet ... too quiet actually. If I concentrated hard enough I had the distinct impression I could hear the air move.

After a few minutes Spencer leaned forward again, cleared his throat and spoke clearly and slowly. 'Funny you should say that ... I haven't seen the old man for well over twenty years myself.'

'And?'

The look he gave me told me to shut up ... he was speaking, and however much I wanted to tell him what I thought of his little escapade I knew now was not the right time.

'As I was saying...' Read snorted behind him, and Spencer threw him a look over his shoulder that made the young boy's face pale. 'Dear old absent dad.' He stood up and came closer to me, and I felt all the hairs on my neck stand to attention. 'I could say that I missed him, but it'd be a lie. All he ever talked about was his little girls ... his little angels who were taken away from him.'

Now that was a surprise. I had never thought he'd given us a minute ... thought he treated us all as dead or non-existent.

'Imagine. All your life being compared to someone else. How clever they were, how they were a credit to him ... how he missed them.' Claustrophobia clambered around me. Spencer was close, not overly so, but his presence was oppressive. I didn't feel safe. He didn't seem quite with it.

He began to walk away, and I physically felt the fear lift from me. A tingling sensation vibrated at my side and I initially thought it was nerves until the realisation dawned on me.

It was my phone. Vibrating. In my pocket. Thank fuck.

After making sure Spencer and Read were looking away, I slipped my hand inside and pressed a key. Whoever had called would now be expecting me to answer, but instead they would be greeted by either the sound of nothing or the muffled conversation I could make happen in the room.

'For ten years I was told how I wasn't good enough, or bright enough or *anything* enough. He blamed me for him losing his family.' The way he said this was a mixture of pain and anger ... and I could hear the anger winning out. He was slowly losing it, and I didn't want to be here when he did.

'But if you wanted to introduce yourself as my brother, why didn't you just knock on my door instead of imprisoning me in my own home?' I just hoped the person on the other end hadn't hung up the phone, but stuck around and heard the last part.

'Did I say you could speak?' Once again, I prayed whoever had called could hear. This was not the joyous family reunion you saw on daytime TV, unless of course it was Jerry Springer. This could get ugly.

No. There was no 'could' here. This *would* get ugly if someone didn't stop it ... stop him.

He started muttering under his breath, and I couldn't grasp what he was saying, probably because I didn't want to hear it. I wasn't sure he was speaking to anybody apart from himself, and that's what unnerved me. I looked at Read, and he even had the sense to look concerned.

'You know ... I've not been a good boy.' His attention was back to me. 'Even killed someone once.' A smile flitted over his face, and it mingled with his fucked up sense of pride in what he had said. 'Now he was a bad 'un. Poor old Mike.'

A confession. In front of me ... in front of Read ... in front of the person who I hoped was listening in.

'Then I thought I would pay my other family a visit. See if they were all he cracked up them up to be.' Spencer was on the other side of the room by now, standing next to Read. 'It's nice in Norfolk isn't it?' I didn't answer him, just glared. 'I said ... it's nice here isn't it?' Still I didn't answer.

And that was a big mistake.

'Come on now ... you're not giving your little brother the silent treatment are you?' I looked at him.

'What do you expect? You force entry into my house, hit me and throw me in the corner. What did you want? The red carpet?'

The words were no sooner out from my mouth before I felt the sting of a backhander slamming into my face. Now it would have hurt anyway, but my cheek and lip were already swollen from the last time. My hands were up and trying to protect the already sensitive area, but he wasn't having any of it.

He grabbed my wrist and yanked me to my feet, giving me a violent shake on the way. '*A little fucking respect would be a start!*' Another hand on the top of my arm, fingers digging in helping him grip me tighter. 'You think you're so fucking perfect in your *flashy* job and *flashy* life. *You're no fucking better than I am!*'

The punch to the gut completely winded me. The one to the side of my head made everything

black once again.

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## Chapter Thirty-Six

Spencer was sat on the sofa again when I came round, flicking through a magazine and looking bored. The room looked darker, so I gathered the afternoon was ending, as I couldn't see the clock from where I was sitting.

'Ah ... and Sleeping Beauty awakens. Enjoy your nap, sis?' The tone was light-hearted on the verge of jovial. To tell you the truth, that unnerved me more. How could he just sit there and not acknowledge he was the one who put me to sleep?

'Thought you were going to sleep the day away.' He put the magazine down on the coffee table and sat back into the cushions, really making himself at home.

The last time I had come round I had felt like crap ... Now I couldn't even begin to tell you what part of me hurt the most. All I can say is that my toes were okay, although I think that was on the count I couldn't feel them. I was cramping up and my head and stomach were killing me. Breathing was beginning to become a burden.

I heard a noise from upstairs, a thumping on the floor. Read was up there, probably seeing what he could pinch from my bedroom.

'Where are my manners? Would you like a cuppa?' I tried to speak, but my mouth refused to work. I had this novel idea that if he left the room maybe I could make a run for it, although by the feeling - or none feeling - in my legs, I doubted I'd pull it off. But it was worth the risk. So I nodded, and then grimaced as pains shot through my scalp.

'Sam!' Spencer looked towards the ceiling. 'Sam! Get your arse down here and get the kettle on!' Ah fuck. Plan A was out of the window, and the problem with this was I didn't have a plan B.

Read came down the stairs like a baby elephant in ballet shoes holding something in his hands. Something red.

'Guess what I've found?' He came into the room, totally animated. 'This weirdo has kids' clothes in her room.' The red item was thrust into Spencer's face and he shied away from the lad's hands like they were going to hurt him in some way.

Trying to rectify his obvious weakness, the definite flinch, he laughed and rubbed his eyes as if to say he couldn't see it as it was too close. Read gave him the object, but I knew what it was... knew before he had mentioned the fact it was kids' clothing. It was Ash's jumper ... from three boxes down in the office. Read had been busy ... must've really gone to town in the rummaging

department.

Now I know it's just a bit of wool ... just a colourful bit of wool mangled into some kind of shape with needles, but it was all I had of her ... of our life as kids ... of that impenetrable innocence that is childhood. I could feel the anger building up inside, but didn't have the strength to do anything about it.

It was the way they were both handling it, as if it was nothing ... like it was contaminated, when they were the ones contaminating it.

'What do we have here then? A little kid's jumper in the house of someone who works with kids.' Spencer laughed. 'This is priceless.' I know it is, but for different reasons than what he was thinking. 'I wonder what your boss would think about this ... a woman to boot.' Then he threw his head back and laughed.

I collected all the saliva I could into my mouth, just to be able to form a few words. 'It's mine. From when I was a kid.'

'Yeah right ... Why on earth would you keep a jumper from all those years ago?' Spencer sat forward, the smile splitting his face and his body language saying ... 'Go on ... entertain me.'

I swallowed, the tightness in my throat becoming more than uncomfortable. 'It was the last thing my dad ever gave me ... *our* dad.' I watched the smile slip down his face. Watched it disappear and be replaced by a longing so painful, I actually felt sorry for him.

'Go make a brew, Danny.' Read tried to say something. 'Now ... make a brew. Tea for two.' Then the smile was back, not as cocky now, but he was trying to gain some of the credibility he thought he had lost by showing something other than anger. It's a pity he didn't realise he would have gained more respect if he had shown he was human more often.

Read hovered a little longer, wanting to keep on about the red jumper, but I knew he was a little wary of Spencer ... and he had good cause to be. The mood swings he displayed were unnerving. One minute anger: the next cheerful. And the mutterings under his breath were a cause for concern. He was truly fucked up ... and it wasn't anything about my training that told me that. Anyone, even Read, could see Spencer was struggling to actually stick to the plot ... but he was losing the battle.

And I was crapping myself. There was no guessing what he was capable of. He had killed before, by his own admission, and seemed proud of it. But with the mention of *our* father, the unpredictable gene had become well and truly unlocked.

'Erm ... Sam? Tea. *Now*.' Then the attention was back to me. We were alone, unfortunately. For once I wanted Read to stay ... I don't know why, but it seemed better the devil you know in a way.

'So. A present from daddy. More than I ever got.' The atmosphere changed once again, and then

he was on his feet and walking over to the fireplace, the jumper firmly in his hand. He was stroking it in an almost loving way like it was connected to the man himself. I was mesmerised. Especially watching how his shoulders seemed to slump as he leaned over and brought the jumper to his nose and mouth. A smashing sound came from the kitchen, and it looked like Read was having good time breaking up my house. But Spencer didn't bat an eyelid. He was absorbed.

'Beeeeeeeeeeeeeep!' Fuck. My phone. Low battery.

Spencer shot round and glared at me. My hand was already in my pocket, trying to finger the off button, but not managing it.

'Beeeeeeeeeeeeeep!' He was over to me like a shot, his breath on my face, his eyes omitting a spark of madness.

'That had better not be what I think it is.' He was that close, I could see the spit collecting around his lips. 'Give.' I shied away from him, expecting at any moment a fist to come up and knock me into kingdom come again. 'I said *GIVE!*' His hands were trying to get in my pocket, and the more he tried, the more adamant I became.

The struggle was becoming quite violent. Scrap that. It was violent, no question about it. The mobile was clenched in my hand and Spencer was pulling my fingers back one by one to try and get to it. I could see by the LCD the message 'Low Battery' interspersed with the credit amount that always displayed itself after a call. If he got the phone off me, he would know I had used it.

And where did that leave me?

Probably under the patio in a bin bag. Or at the bottom of the Norfolk Broads sporting concrete slippers.

There was only one thing for it. Not let him get it. Simple to say, but painful to carry through. He was nearly breaking my fingers by this point, so I did the only thing I knew how to do.

I bit him. Hard. On the side of his hand.

The yelp that left him lured me into a split second of false sense of security, because the yelp was followed by a crunching backhand that threw me backwards and the phone forwards.

My eyes were glazing. Focusing was becoming an issue once again. I could just make him out scrambling on all fours, hunting out the phone, when the room seemed to shrink and become fantastical once again. An image of a person loomed in the doorway, but it didn't seem like Read ... it seemed taller ... more threatening.

Then it seemed to fly into the air as if it was falling off a precipice. Lurch ... hold ... and fall. Right on the scuttling figure of Spencer, who by the looks of things had just found my phone. The noises I could hear were vicious. Thumping and smashing. Sounds of fists hitting flesh. The sound of air being expelled from stomachs and lungs.

I tried to bring my focus to bear, but everything was too much like hard work ... too hard to just open my eyes and spotlight what was going on. My hearing was perfect though, but everything seemed surreal. Voices blended into the other sounds and nothing made sense. I distinctly heard Spencer tell the other person to get the fuck off him... but I didn't hear the attacker answer.

Then there were other sounds. Footsteps. Lots of footsteps. Shadows and shapes began piling into the room. Voices ... concern ... anger. Everything.

And as I felt that hand on my face, I felt I could finally let go. I knew it was her ... knew it was the one who would always love me.

I knew it was Jo.

Then I allowed the blackness to take me once again.

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I drifted in and out of consciousness, not recognising the passing of time. I knew I had been moved from my house ... felt the open air on my face and neck. Was vaguely aware of the slamming of a door and the feeling of people around me, mumbling. But nothing made sense. It was as if I was wrapped in bubble wrap, and I was insulated from the outside world.

I wish I could have said the same for my head. The pains soaring through it were agony and made my stomach retch. I just wanted to fall into the darkness ... let it envelop me for good ... let this pain go away, but they wouldn't let me rest. They kept on trying to get me to open my eyes ... to wake up ... to listen to their voices. But it seemed too much like hard work. Painfully hard.

At one time I opened my eyes and concentrated on green eyes so like my own and I felt fear race through me... honestly believed it was Spencer, but then the reassuring voice of Jo filtered down to me. Those eyes ... they were softer, had emotion - compassion ... love. They weren't the deranged eyes of my stepbrother. I think the memory of those eyes will haunt me for the rest of my life. I always look at people's eyes ... have to look ... it's the only way I can trust them.

'Don't worry, Lou ... it's only me.' Then her voice drifted over her shoulder and I could hear her talking to someone else whose voice I didn't recognise.

Then I was in a bed. White. Sparse. Clean and clinical. Beeps and clicks and the smell of disinfectant.

Lights in my eyes ... blinding ... retracting ... detracting from reality as sleep once again took me away from the pain ... took me away from the noises and pressure.

Finally ... they let me go.



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The first twenty-four hours in hospital were filled with examinations ... especially my eyes, to check if I had concussion. Which I had. No surprise really, with the amount of blows to my head I'd received. I also had one broken rib and two cracked ones ... five butterfly stitches in my eyebrow, where Spencer's ring had caught. My mouth was a mess, swollen, bruised, and split open on the inside.

But other than that ... I was fine. Back to fighting form ... *ish*. I knew I would heal, as all the wounds were superficial to a degree, well, except for the concussion, which would sort itself out eventually. I hated the cracking sounds inside my head, which, the doctor informed me, was the sound and sensation of my brain aligning itself once again.

Yuck ... I know ... but I thought you'd want to know, considering you've got this far.

I wasn't allowed any visitors for this first twenty-four hours, which was good in a way, because I was too out of it to actually talk to them. But you can guess who was the first through the door on the second day.

Yes. Surrogate mum, Jo.

I know you're thinking 'What about Ash? Where's she?' She came in later, and I had the distinct impression she had let Jo have time alone with me before she made her entrance.

Jo. My Jo. My big sister who loved me and looked out for me. Had always had my best interests at heart ... well ... as she thought. The way she came bustling in, taking control of the situation ... telling people I needed more pillows, more water, less light ... I just smiled at her and waited for her to stop fussing before I demanded to be hugged. Hospitals always make me feel like I need to be molly coddled and made a fuss of.

And then there she was ... hugging me, crying into my hair about how worried she'd been ... how she'd heard me on the phone when she'd called ... heard me trapped with a man ... a man who had hurt me.

She told me of that helplessness she'd felt, how she'd always wanted to protect me and how she could hear him ... hear me ... and could nothing about it. Except take the phone to the police.

Then she lost the ability to speak. Just sobbed and shook, and I held her, trying to be the comforter ... take her role for a change.

It wasn't long before her words came tumbling out once again.

'I thought I'd lost you, Lou. Thought ... thought he'd ... kill you before I co ... could get there.' More shaking and crying, and I could feel my shoulder becoming wetter and wetter. 'I co ... couldn't hang up and call the police .. couldn't turn it off .. had to listen ... Ran to ... to ... the police station.'

'Shush shush shush ...come on, Jo. This can wait ...'

'Need you to know ... need you to know.'

'I know, Jo. Come on. Sit down.' My words were muffled into her hair, but she loosened her grip and sat on the edge of the bed, one arm still about my neck. Her eyes were swollen and red. The look of absolute devastation painted itself over her, and I needed to make her see I was ok ... that she could stop worrying.

'Come on, love. I'm ok ... look.' I dipped my head underneath hers, and smiled. But I should have realised that would make her feel worse ... if the feeling I had in my face gave me any indication.

'Look at your face ... your beautiful face.'

'Hey ... I'll heal ... just a little swelling and bruising.'

She was off again. Head in her hands and sobbing. I tried to calm her by rubbing up and down her back; tried to cajole her into believing I was ok.

The door to the room opened a crack. And then a little more ... and then enough to fit a dark haired head through. A dark haired head attached to a very worried face. A worried face that contained two beautiful blue eyes. Two beautiful blue eyes that were looking at me ... then flicked to Jo and then to me again.

'Come in, Ash.' The smile she sported was a mixture of relief and 'I don't want to intrude'. I just flicked my head backwards as in silent beckoning. The next minute she was in ... closing the door carefully and quietly behind her.

'Hey... how are you?' Ash stood on one side of the bed, the side opposite to where Jo was trying to sort herself out. 'How's the head?' Her hand came out and tentatively touched the side of my face, and I willingly laid my cheek on the palm of her hand, my eyes fluttering closed. A thumb brushed along my bottom lip, taking care not to touch the bruising. It was a feeling of total connection.

I opened my eyes and looked straight into blue. They were so gentle, so full of love and totally absorbed in my own.

Then the sound of a cough. A cough that, for a split second, broke the connection between Ash and I. But that was enough to make me aware that Jo was staring at us with astonishment. And the cough was a means to get our attention, rather than the onset of a cold.

'You two are ... erm ... are ...' She couldn't say it ... couldn't ask whether we were an item. Good job too, because I didn't know if we were. I knew what had happened between us. Knew what I wanted to keep happening between us. But didn't know if that was possible ... we were so

different ... lived in different places.

Ash looked me into the eyes again and then just leaned forward and brushed her lips against mine, as in answer to Jo's unfinished question. Reaffirmation of what had happened between us a couple of days ago ... the day my world began to spin again.

I tried to increase the pressure of the kiss, but my mouth was having none of it, and I winced in pain.

'You ok, baby?' I nodded and touched my mouth expecting to see blood on my fingers. 'And hello, Jo. Sorry I didn't get time to chat the last time I saw you.' I looked from one to the other, my expression asking for clarification. 'Jo came to the station just as we were going to raid Spencer's place. She had your phone and was trying to get the desk sergeant to listen to it. He wasn't very helpful.'

'He was a total wanker ... treated me as if I had lost the plot.'

'Well, in his defence, you weren't making much sense. Every time he tried to take the phone from you, you wouldn't let it go.' She smiled at Jo, trying to take the sting out of the statement. 'It's a good job we were there ... I thought I recognised your voice ... a little older, but it stood out against the Norfolk accents. Then I heard the name Lou.'

At this Jo laughed, shortly followed by Ash. I looked from one to the other and wondered why they were laughing. 'Sorry about that, Jo ... I just needed to get the phone off you.'

'Sorry for slapping you ... didn't realise what was going on. Thought someone was trying to nick it from me.'

'Are you two going to tell me what is going on? I feel a bit left out here.' I sat back on the pillows and pouted my lip, well ... tried to, but I cringed at the sharp pain that ripped through my face.

Ash sat down on the bed and gestured to Jo to tell me her side of events. I was 'all ears'; to use another of my mum's many nonsense phrases. Not literally 'all ears', but you know what I mean.

It had been Jo who had called ... although I guess you gathered that already. She had been worried that I hadn't turned up ... thought I was teaching her a lesson for some reason or another. She'd a good idea why I had wanted to meet and thought I was too pissed off with her to bother turning up.

So, when the phone was answered and she didn't hear my voice, she hadn't thought much about it. ... Just gone into defence mode ... stating her side of events. Then there was still no recognition from me, but she could hear me talking in the background. Heard the words 'imprisoning me in my own home'. Heard a man she didn't recognise bragging about killing someone called Mike.

I saw a glimmer of a smile flicker along Ash's face ... and I knew why. She had the evidence she

needed to put Spencer behind bars for longer than just breaking into my house.

'Will that stand up in court?' Ash shrugged her shoulders, but still looked contented with the fact Spencer had eventually slipped up.

'We checked his place out last night.'

'And?'

'Let's just say he's a very sick man. The things he had stored there ... things I can't really divulge at the moment. We're still collecting evidence.' She grabbed my hand and brought my fingers up to her mouth. Then turned it over and kissed my palm. I stroked her cheek, needing to know if this was really happening or if it was an aftershock of the concussion.

'I would tell you two to get a room, but you already have.' We both looked at Jo. 'I feel like a gooseberry. I'll be outside.' And she was off at a near run, the door slamming her on the arse as she left. As I was just about to slip my hand around Ash's neck, Jo poked her head back around the door. 'By the way... mum and dad are waiting.'

'Tell them to hang on a few more minutes.' She nodded and was gone.

Then I slipped my hand around to the back of Ash's head and pulled her to me, planted a soft kiss on her lips and then guided her head to my chest. I heard a contented sigh as she relaxed into me, and I wrapped my arms about her, as she did to me.

And there we lay. In each other's arms. Oblivious to the world and everyone in it.

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## Chapter Thirty-Seven

The next few days flew by. Jo finished telling me what had actually happened. She had called me and got the scenario with Spencer, but it was the events after she had the attention of one dark haired woman that made my heart swell.

Ash had eventually got the details from Jo ... about what she had heard and what was happening. Jo told me she had never seen such a mixture of emotions lash through one person, and she should've guessed then it wasn't just a working relationship we had going on. But she did say how impressed she'd been watching Ash organise everyone in the station in such a short amount of time.

They had found my keys outside, but they couldn't just walk in ... they didn't know what they were dealing with. Good job too, and I was in there and even I didn't know what was going on. Eventually, they had the house surrounded and Ash had informed them she was going in the back way. Obviously, everyone didn't want her to do it ... said they had specialists lined up to

get in and out of the house. But she insisted ... said it was her case and she would do what she thought best for all parties.

By all accounts, she had been outside the back for less than five minutes, trying to gauge her best course of action. She noticed the smashed kitchen window and was just about to go in when Read arrived ... laughing to himself and rubbing his hands together. He was totally absorbed in being a smug little fucker that he didn't even notice a six-foot woman climbing through a small window. No wonder he always got caught when he was up to something. He was thick.

She came at him from behind, tried to take him down swiftly and quietly, but she didn't allow for the fact he was holding a sugar canister in his hand. She whacked him on the side on the neck and he went down like a sack of spuds ... and so did the glass container.

No reaction from the other room. All she could hear was Spencer shouting at me and demanding for whatever I had in my hand.

After the sound of me being slapped, all rationality went out of the window. She didn't even consider if there were more than two people in the house ... just needed to get to me. When she got to the living room door, there was Spencer on all fours scrabbling around looking for something. Then she went for him. Just leapt over and got him.

The people on the outside, Jo being one of them, heard the commotion and decided it was time they made their move. They used the keys, as they would be quieter and not alert the occupants what was going on. But they could have used a bulldozer and still not have been noticed.

The scene was violent, but Jo said her primary concern was getting to me. I was out of it ... my eyes kept fluttering open, as if I was trying to focus but it just too difficult. When she placed her hand on my face she said I just went ... flaked out. She thought I'd snuffed it and went ballistic.

Ash had contained Spencer and two police officers fixed handcuffs on him.

Then it was Ash who calmed Jo down, took her hand, and squeezed her fingers. It was Ash who gently pulled me forward and into her arms. It was Ash who stroked the side of my head ... tenderly checking the cuts and swelling.

It was Ash who laid me down and smoothed my hair.

The ambulance crew came and took me away just as the coppers were dragging out a raging Spencer. Read came out like a lamb ... handcuffs behind his back ... his eyes completely submissive. He knew this time he wouldn't get away with anything.

After she stopped talking she just looked at her lap, her fingers refusing to sit still. Her eyes flicked up to meet mine, and I knew she wanted to say something else.

'What?' She looked back at her lap again. 'Jo? Tell me.' I leaned forward and grabbed her fingers pulling her hand and arm over to me. 'Whatever it is ... we need to get it out into the open.'

A swallow. A look. A decision. 'I'm sorry, Lou ... so sorry.'

I knew what she was apologising for, but couldn't say anything ... so I nodded. 'I thought it was for the best ... I thought if you made a fresh start - a clean break ... then ... you could get on with your life.'

'But you knew how I felt about her, Jo. You knew how much I loved her.'

She gripped my hand. 'I knew how you felt. Had watched you agonise over Ash for so long, but I never knew she felt the same ... never knew she loved you.' Loved me. Jo said Ash had loved me.

'How do you know that now, but not then?'

'Cos she told me ... yesterday. Said we had been wrong to make a decision that involved you without telling you.' Jo leaned closer to me, fully capturing my attention. 'And then she said she understood why I had done it ... why we had both done it ... because we both loved you ... in different ways.'

'She said that? She said she loved me?'

'And Lou ... I think she still does.'

I didn't hear anything else that she said. I was too absorbed with the words, 'I think she still does'.

My heart was leaping about inside my chest, but my head was saying 'Please let her still love me ... please.'

The next thing I knew, I was buried in my sister's arms and she was crying into my hair. 'I love you, Lou ... I'm so sorry ... so sorry.'

I wanted to tell her it was ok ... it was in the past, but I couldn't. Not because I didn't forgive her ... nope. Because I couldn't breathe.

So, like all good sisters ... I gave her a hug that knocked the wind out of her sails.

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Ash came every day to see me, but nothing was mentioned about ... erm ... anything really. She just chatted about the case and how Jo could stand as a witness to what had happened. They had raided Spencer's place and found quite a bit of evidence, and that was another nail in his coffin.

He had pictures of me and Jo ... of Jo's kids coming out of school ... of my mum and dad. Fucking freaky to say the least. It all pointed to one thing.

When he'd finished with me, he was going after the rest of them.

I can't, with all honesty, hand on heart (and all that jazz), swear that he would have killed me. His main focus was to let me know how angry he was at being second best, never once contemplating that when it came to our father ... we were all second best.

Enough about him ... enough about how fucked up he had made Spencer ... how he had destroyed more than one person's life, and how his actions had nearly cost us our lives. And if I never saw him again for as long as I lived, it would be a day too soon.

I could justify all this and say without him I would never have seen Ash again, but wasn't it his fault in the first place that I was dragged out of bed in the middle of the night, loaded into a taxi with bin bags as a suitcase, and ultimately lost Ash in the first place?

I know. I said 'enough' about him, but sometimes we have to go through the same things in our minds just to try and make some sense of it all. Then again, however many times I went through any event that involved him ... it would never make sense.

Back to Ash. Yes ... you, like me, want to know what is going to happen next. At least you didn't have to wait for the ultimate knock back ... didn't sit with baited breath waiting for the yay or nay. You didn't even have the agony of loving her so much you thought if she walked out of your life you would just curl up and die.

Now. I'm not saying you have never experienced this ... or never will ... just not with Ash ... not my Ash.

I, on the other hand, wasn't as fortunate.

Seeing her come in every day. Feeling the tenderest of kisses on my lips. Looking into those eyes that consumed me. Having her so close to me yet so distant. I wanted to just ask her ... ask her to tell me what would happen next ... or maybe the clichéd 'Where do we go from here?' But I was too scared what the answer would be.

I know you may disagree with me to some extent, but I was no fool. I knew her life was in Manchester. Knew her job ... her home ... her family ... everything was nearly two hundred miles away. And the same for me. Everything I had was here.

But everything I wanted was going away from me ... going back to her life without me in it. And that made my stomach clench and unclench ... not to mention the feelings it had inside my chest.

To say it was agony would be redundant. A euphemism even. I can't put into words how I was feeling; how this situation made me ache.

Six days after being admitted, I was allowed home, and I was escorted by the woman who occupied my every waking moment ... and sleeping ones too. The swelling on my face had gone, and there was just the ghost of bruising on my cheek and inside my mouth. It was the bloody

butterfly stitches that were the bastard ... itched like buggery... if buggery itched, that is.

Standing outside my house, I felt a panic charge through me. I know, completely irrational. The man who had held me prisoner and made me fear for my life was held in the cells at Bethel Street police station. He couldn't hurt me now. But the mind is a funny bugger ... plays tricks and recreates scenarios again and again. Usually the ones you don't want to relive.

'Here. Let me.'

Ash took the key from my hand and swiftly unlocked the door. I stood there ... hesitated momentarily ... then stepped inside.

Total recall.

Me being dragged back inside by an irate Spencer. Me being slammed against the door with his face thrust into my own. Me waking up in the front room facing a stranger who was out to hurt me.

I squinted my eyes trying in vain to dispel the images, straightening my back and shoulders as if that was going to help. Her hand was on my back and she was gently brushing her palm up and down in soothing strokes. I felt the tension begin to disperse and evaporate ... just by a touch.

'Come. Sit down. I'll make us a cuppa.' And I was guided into the front room. The blood began to pound again as my eyes raced around the room seeking evidence of the events from nearly a week ago. But it was clean ... sorted ... in order. All except for one thing that seemed out of place.

One thing that was neatly folded over the arm of the settee.

Something red and small.

Something that seemed so vulnerable and out of place.

Something that ultimately belonged to the woman standing right behind me.

I don't even have to tell you what it was. But as my eyes landed on it, a mixture of emotions charged through me. Pain. Regret. Longing. Hurt. Anger. I think you get the drift.

Then the definitive feeling surged up ... a feeling of being exposed. What would Ash think if she saw the jumper? Would she think I was some kind of freak? I had to get rid of it - and quick.

I think it was this thought that moved me forward and into the room.

Just as my hands slipped around the softness, her voice came clearly from behind.

'I was surprised you had kept that for this long.'



Fuck.

'I doubt I'll fit in that now.'

Double fuck and mashed potatoes.

I mean, what do you say? I'd been caught, red jumper handed, and my face was matching the colour of the wool, if not outdoing it in brightness.

Her body was right behind me now, and I knew she would be looking over my shoulder, if the feeling of her breath on my skin was any indication. It had a lovely cooling quality.

'Do you remember that day, Lou? God ... we were so wet. The rain came from nowhere didn't it?'

Strange. But this was the first time we'd ever discussed that day. We had talked about me leaving in the dead of night, but not that day ... the day that was etched into my memory like an oasis. It was, as I've said before, one of my favourite memories. The day we went to Concroft Park. It was the day I realised Ash was everything I would ever want or need in my life.

And that was still true even now.

I didn't even realise I had lifted the jumper to my face ... didn't realise I was crying into it until I felt her arms around me, turning me, holding me. Being there like she had always been. But unlike that day, now I knew I loved her ... not in a friend loving a friend way ... but loved her ... was *in* love with her.

That hurt even more. Because now I knew she would be leaving me instead of the other way round. And there was nothing I could do.

Was there?

Was there something I could do to stop history partly repeating itself?

I could tell her. Let her know I wanted this forever. Tell her she was my everything. My all. My reason.

But what if she didn't want that? What if the night we had spent together was enough? What if Jo had been wrong and she had loved me then but not now?

Dare I risk it all?

Christ! Any more questions? Fuck.

Why couldn't I just stop sniffing in her arms, look into her eyes, cup her face and tell her ... tell

her ... tell her? What could be so bad? The worst she could do was say no.

And that's what stopped me.

Her saying no. I honestly believed that hearing her utter that single syllable word would be my undoing.

I didn't even realise I was gripping her like a man on a life raft cast out at sea. My face was so far into her neck I had trouble breathing anything else but her, but that's all I wanted to breathe ... her... her scent ... commit it to memory alongside the scent from the red jumper and the smell of the rain.

'Hey, Lou ... you ok?' I nodded into her and gripped onto her even more than the aforementioned clichéd man on a life raft. 'Come on ... sit down. I'll make us a cuppa.'

It surprised me that she didn't to have prise my fingers from her as she pulled away. I think it was a subconscious decision on my part to let go ... and not only now ... but ...

I sat there and waited for her to come back with two steaming mugs, the jumper dangling flaccidly from my hand, resignation apparent. I lifted my gaze to be captured by blue eyes, which surveyed me ... the expression open and raw.

Tentatively she placed the drinks on the table and sat down next to me, turning her whole body to face me. I kept my eyes averted ... couldn't bear the scrutiny ... didn't think I could be strong enough.

'Lou?' I answered her with a weak yes. 'Look at me.' I flicked my eyes to her and then back to looking straight ahead. 'Look at me.' Her hand came and cupped my face, turning it towards her and holding it in place.

'Can I tell you something?' I nodded into her open palm. 'Are you sure you want to hear it?' I paused ... and then nodded again. The butterflies in my stomach were going crazy. 'Sure?' I fixed my eyes onto hers, my breathing hitching, knowing that this 'something' would either make or break me. A nod. She swallowed, but her eyes never left mine. Then it came.

'I love you.'

Three little words. That's all they were. Three little words ... but they were the three little words I had longed for nearly all of my life, but only if they were uttered by the woman who was not just holding my face in her hands, but my heart ... my future ... my reason to be.

'I love you.' There they were again ... palpable ... assured and ... waiting for a response from me instead of wide eyed wonder.

'I ... I ... I...!' The words were jamming in my throat ... not because of nerves or fear, but bloody excitement.

'You don't have to say it back just because I said it.' Her face tried to look non-plussed, but I could see a shadow appear behind her eyes.

'I ... I...!' I was sounding like a retard ... and she was pulling away from me. And I still couldn't get the words out. So I did what any self-respecting person who had swallowed her feet would do. I kissed her. Hard. With everything I had. If I couldn't say it, I had to show her.

Her lips were unreceptive at first, but I carried on. Needed her to know ... needed her to understand I loved her too. I cupped the back of her head and pulled her in, deepening the kiss ... deepening the contact. Her mouth opened a little and my tongue took its chance and slipped inside.

She sucked at it. Caressed it. Loved it. And I felt her falling backwards onto the couch taking me with her. I was sprawled over her body; my mouth devouring her, my hands eagerly stroked her face, her throat and shoulders until I had one on either side of her.

Then I pulled back, pulled away from the kiss and just looked at her underneath me.

'I love you, Ash ... so much ... so much.' The grin spliced her face and she grabbed the back of my head and pulled me back down to capture my mouth with hers again.

I was falling inside her, headlong, unguarded. And I was so happy to finally let go.

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## Chapter Thirty- Eight

How we made it upstairs is beyond me ... but we did. Can't remember undressing ... can't remember lying back ... can only remember the feel of her skin on mine as she lowered herself down on top of me.

The feeling was pure heaven. Skin slipped together like silk... caressing yet smooth. Hands coaxed and guided, worshipped and revered, our bodies sacrosanct. Permission to touch left fingertips awed.

Kisses elicited guttural moans, sucking at ardent lips and throats and shoulders. Breasts rubbed against each other, squirming in their need for contact. Her hand slipped between our bodies and gently pumped the mound of flesh, causing me to moan deeply inside her mouth. Hips rhythmically danced against each other and the pressure was building.

She was between my legs ... the same legs that were clutching her ... one leg around her waist pulling her deeper. I could feel her pubic bone chaffing my need, but I needed to feel all of her ... needed her to possess what belonged to her ... claim it and own it ... take it with her fingers - her mouth - her tongue - her all.

My hand strayed to her arse and stroked it before pulling her in. It was firm and undulating blissfully underneath my fingertips. The whole action was rhythmic and controlled ... an affirmation of the spoken 'I love you's' from earlier. Mouths kissed ... tongues wandered and breathing became laboured. It was perfect ... a perfect connection ... I could almost hear the click of us slotting together.

As she kissed me, I stared at her face willing her eyes to open and allow me to see inside her, and when she did I was lost ... forever lost. The love and depth I discovered there was breathtaking and I physically felt myself draw in a breath in case I needed it.

Her hand came up and cupped my face, the thumb gliding over my lip and chin, the rhythm never breaking. I opened my mouth and snatched at it, capturing it between my lips and sucked it in. Blue eyes flickered closed and then opened again to expose the desire that had been hiding just below the surface ... primitive ... unabashed ... yearning. The same desire that cascaded throughout my body. I thought I was going to lose control.

Her thumb was replaced by her mouth and I wanted to climb inside ... crawl down deep inside her and stay there. Hide up. Camp there inside her chest ... claim squatter's rights ... just needed to be with her ... needed to become a part of her.

Then the lips were gone and my mouth felt robbed of hers ... felt cheated and exposed, until ... there they were ... on my neck ... on my shoulders ... my collarbone and then on to my breasts. My hand threaded itself into her hair, as my other hand left her backside and stroked the small of her back. The movement of her mouth on my nipple was agonisingly wonderful ... short flicks and rolls, followed by sucks and holds.

I just needed her. Needed her. Needed ... her ... any way she wanted ... any way she desired me ... just craved contact ... craved her.

Lips on my belly, sinking into a fully alert belly button. I felt the dip and rise of her head before she moved further down ... down ... down. Her nose nuzzled my pubic hair before she ventured lower, delving into a promise of forever. A firm tongue parted me and stroked along my folds, my legs widening even more to give her access. It was so gentle, so tender, so slow, as it moved downwards towards the pool of wetness that was flooding from me.

She circled ... and circled ... and circled, driving me crazy with the need for her to fill me. Lap lap lap ... then the circling again. I was trying to push down on her ... trying to make her tongue just slip inside. The pounding in my chest was becoming unbearable; my mouth was dry and I kept on licking my lips, sucking in air in the process.

Inside. Just a little. Push. A little more. Push ... and inside fully. The moan shot from my mouth completely unreserved, my fingers digging into her head and pushing her face into me. I could feel the breath hitting my skin and dispersing like ripples in water. Her fingers were digging in the tops of my thighs, trying to ground me - stop me forcing myself upwards.

She waited a little while before she pulled it out, leaving me wanting again.

'Please ... Ash ... please ...' The tone was needy and unashamedly wanton, but I couldn't stand the emptiness ... the void in me the absence of her tongue had left.

Then it was inside me again and I felt the sensation rip all along my spine and travel to my fingers, which were pulling at the tangled locks of her hair. Slow pumping actions ... her head was rhythmic, but my hips were frantically trying to increase the tempo. The feeling of her eating me was divine ... consuming all I had to offer ... and it flooded freely from deep inside to coat and captivate her.

Nothing else mattered. Just her and me ... me and her. Connecting. Her inside me. That was the only thing, the only sensation I was aware of ... and it was building and building and becoming hazy in its quest to fulfil and to deliver the promise of ecstasy.

Have you ever had the experience of having it all, but it not being enough? Experiencing the ultimate connection, but needing more?

That's exactly how I was feeling. I was so close, but there was something missing, a certain something that was stopping me tipping over into the wild blue yonder. I needed more from her. I needed her ... needed to touch her, take her, make her feel what I was feeling. I needed her to share this with me, become one with me, do this together.

I knew we were doing it together, but I wanted her to know everything about me. I wanted to tattoo myself inside her, spoil her for anyone else.

It took everything I had to pull her away from my wetness, pull her up towards my face, feeling her body glide over my sensitive flesh. But the feeling of her mouth covering my own, the taste of me on her lips and tongue ... God ...

And when I slipped my hand between her legs to glide along her folds to feel how soaked she was ... I knew this was what was missing. Our joining. The previous time we had made love paled in comparison to this.

Seconds after I had found her spring of desire she discovered mine once again. And then ecstasy began.

Stoking and caressing. Slipping along and pinching the engorged nub between fingers. Movement of bodies polishing the sweat into each other; breath on skin; lips on mouths; thighs between thighs. The rhythm was getting incensed ... we were getting to the place where reality was fading, and all that mattered were the senses. The taste and touch and smell and sound and sight of each other.

The sheet underneath me was gathering and twisting: we were gathering and twisting. Breathing was becoming more difficult, but I still had to kiss her just as badly as she needed to kiss me. I could feel as well as hear the catching in her throat ... gargling and staccato gasping and I knew

she was on the verge of plummeting off the same edge as I was.

We entered each other at the same time, fingers slipped effortlessly inside to be greeted by the cries of our cumming. Walls spasming and clasping the fingers deep inside; bodies thrusting together and names juggled in the air in long breaths expelled from deep inside ... from a place I never knew existed until this moment.

Perfect. One word. Perfect. This coupling ... this joining ... this connection of two people who have ultimately just become one. Perfect.

My mouth was dry, my tongue rough, my skin soaked. The rest of my body was totally drained and I barely had the strength to glide my tongue over parched lips, trying to gather some moisture from within as I did.

Totally contented. I felt totally contented and whole for the first time in my life. It felt like I this is where I belonged ... where we belonged.

Ash paced a gentle kiss on my mouth before half lying on top of me, her fingers still inside gently pumping, eliciting mini shocks that rippled throughout my near comatose body, her free arm up and underneath my back.

I had one arm over her shoulder and held her to me, believing that if I let go she may vanish. The fingers of my other hand slipped out and rested on her mound, gradually cooling in the night air.

And there we lay ... in each other's arms ... content ... connected and finally at peace.

Sleep came in his quiet wonder and claimed us, taking us down into the realms of his kingdom where I dreamed of a beautiful blue-eyed woman who lay in my arms ... a beautiful woman who I knew loved me.

Loved me.

Loved ... me.

And I loved her.

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## Chapter Thirty-Nine

In the morning, she was gone. We barely had time to talk about anything, and all I knew was she was leaving for Manchester that afternoon taking Spencer with her.

He was wanted mainly for murder, and now they had evidence on him they were taking him back

to be tried there. It didn't stop the charges I had against him though, but that was a different case altogether and he would be tried for that one separately ... and back in Norwich too.

Ash gave the impression that things were not going to be easy for a while. There were many people who wanted Spencer sent down for a very long time, but there were also people who relied on him for their bread and butter.

Dangerous times indeed. Nothing like a frightened criminal to keep you on your toes. And there were going to be many of them. Read was in a detention centre, so I really didn't have any worries on that front. The other gang members from Norfolk had either fled or been picked up for some misdemeanour or another.

However, that didn't stop me worrying about Ash's safety, as she was going into the thick of things.

The kiss she had given me as I stood at the door had been so full and perfect, and I had felt myself sinking inside her. It wasn't hard or passionate ... just ... just ... everything. We held each other, neither of us saying anything, totally content in each other's arms.

As she pulled back and looked down at me her eyes twinkled again, but I saw the difficulty she had in raising a smile. It came out slightly crooked and even more beautiful than usual. I wanted to beg her not to go, to stay here with me, hide up from the rest of the world and responsibilities ... so I could keep her safe and warm and loved.

But once again I didn't say anything, just nodded my head like I had accepted the situation and I was giving her permission to leave.

'I'll call you when I can, ok?' She placed her fingers under my chin and raised my face to hers again. A soft kiss on my lips. 'Ok?'

I croaked out something that resembled a yes.

'It won't be easy for a while, but remember ...' she leaned down and brushed her lips across my ear, 'I love you.' Each letter scattered itself down my spine; each syllable danced on my flesh, and once again my voice failed to make any reasonable noise, but the words were clear as day as they were written all over me.

I love you. Bolder than headlines. Stark. Naked. Exposed and willing to die for the cause.

I grabbed each of her hands and did what I had always wanted to do. I lifted them and placed them on either side of my face, just to show her ... to show her ... I was hers ... always hers. To show her I would be forever lost in her ... my heart was forever lost.

The look in her eyes... God. If I could put that into words, I would be the most gifted writer in the world - past or present. I doubt there were the words to convey what I could see there. I don't think they have been created yet ... doubt there are the letters to craft such words, or the

syllables to give these words voice.

But they were spoken just the same.

A kiss ... then another ... then another ...

Then she was gone ...

... leaving me gasping for the want of her. She left ... leaving me stunned and frozen to the spot. She left ... leaving me there ...

... standing

... with her heart in my hands.

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Two months. *Two* ... months. Seven phones calls in two months.

I know, I know ... it was because of the case. Yes ... that's the rational thing to think. She had said it would be dangerous to keep in contact whilst the case was still going on, and said it was an 'I'll ring you when I can - it's too risky for you to call me' scenario. There were too many angry sidekicks of Spencer's to deal with, and she wanted me to be out of the picture for a while to make sure I didn't get anymore unwelcome visitors. As if that was going to stop Spencer from getting put away for murder anyway. But Ash had said, if they knew I was connected to her, they might try and use me to get to her, as she was the leading witness.

Evidence they had collected in his Norwich apartment had been enough, and Ash had said they doubted they would even need to call Jo to testify to what she had heard ... they wanted to keep that separate for now, you know, get him for one thing then be able to get another sentence on top of that one. If they introduced the evidence about what he had done to me then the case would become muddled ... and the jury might forget things.

It was only on the fourth call that Ash actually admitted the reason for her taking the case in the first place. She had started the case with another Detective at the Met, and was going to help him do some research before she passed over the reigns to him. Then she found out who Spencer actually was ... to say she had been surprised when she had figured out the link between him, Norfolk, and me would be an understatement. Her primary concern was to keep me safe.

And that's why she came.

And that's why I was called.

And that's how she knew me even before I had turned around.

All the things she had said all made sense to me now ... me being the link ... her pretending she



didn't know about the Child Protection Act ... any copper worth their salt would have known about that, never mind a Detective Inspector.

But at the time I was too fucked up to even notice these things. The reappearance of her into my life had completely thrown me for a loop. And then the way she treated me ... she had been such a bitch, and obviously I was no angel ...

She had done that to try and detach herself from me ... from the situation, as she said she would be good for nothing if she let her feelings for me cloud her judgement. And she needed to be on the ball ... Spencer was no fool. Evidence of his earlier scrapes had shown her he had no feelings for anyone. Even his own mother had pressed charges against him when he was fifteen for assault. She had put up with his temper for years, but the final time he had beat her she had said enough was enough.

So, if he would beat up his own mother, what would he be capable of to a sister he had never met? To a family he had never met? And Ash wasn't going to take any chances with my safety, even if it meant me hating her.

I asked her why she just couldn't tell me who he was in the beginning and be done with it. She laughed. I got offended, and then she laughed again. Then I went silent. And she started calling me all lovey dovey names and making kissing noises down the phone. I just said 'Tell me' after each new endearment, until she sighed and told me that if I had known I would have acted completely differently to Read and it would've got back to Spencer ... and then he would have known ... and yadda yadda yadda ... and had I ever seen a cornered rat?

Yep. She was right. I was crap at acting, always had been.

God, I loved this woman.

And God ... how I missed her.

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Work had been hectic at first, especially as I had loads to catch up with after my time off. I signed Sam Read off my books and had to pass him over to some other poor unsuspecting soul, who turned out to be Gemma Jackson.

She was a little off with me at first. I'd never got back to her after the fiasco at my house between her and Ash, even though she had called a couple of times and left messages. But I used the Turner charm on her once again, without being flirty this time, and before long we were actually speaking like two women who get along rather than just want to get into each other's underwear. Well, Gemma trying to get into mine more like it.

Gemma told me that she thought Ash and I had some kind of history, but couldn't get a sensible answer out of either of us. The chemistry was definitely there, in spades, and at times she said she definitely felt like a gooseberry. Like any full-bloodied female, she didn't give up hope

though, especially after I had denied there was anything going on with Ash.

All the time she was talking, I kept on giving her ears a surreptitious look. They seemed bigger, although I knew they weren't. It was the thought of Ash saying they were that made me believe they were. Not a good way to get on the right side of someone if all I could do was stare at her ears. It was something kids usually do. And like a child I wanted to laugh and point at them whilst chanting 'Big ears ... Big ears ...' Very mature, especially because I have just said we were acting like two women. Two grown women at that.

At the end of our meeting I had the distinct impression she was going to ask me out on a date again, but I pipped her at the post and told her that I was seeing someone. Her face fell a little, and I wasn't going to tell her who it was for too many reasons. But when she uttered that single word 'Ash?' so softly, I just nodded and she followed suit, understanding that that was it ...

After a quick hug and a muttered 'you know where I am' she was gone, and I felt relieved for some strange reason.

But when work started to slow down and I had the chance to think about what was going on, you know, I began to allow the feelings I had been suppressing to rise to the surface. I tried to convince myself that she hadn't called for nearly two weeks because of the case ... but why not? I knew the case was coming to a head ... knew the jury were out, and things were extremely tense.

I just missed her.

I had been following the proceedings through the news ... well online versions of the news, as it was classed as a more local story and hadn't really made it to the Nationals. The Manchester Evening News Online followed the events methodically, painting a picture of a man who was caught up in greed and cruelty, him being the cruel one. I caught a snapshot of Spencer being led from court and could just make out the striking figure of Ash hovering around in the background, trying to blend in.

Her face was facing downwards but her eyes were peeking up through the front of her hair, which had fallen forward. I knew she wasn't looking at the camera, knew that she was checking on Spencer, but I felt like she was looking at me for some strange reason. And it fascinated me. Time and time again I would go back to the My Pictures folder and hunt her out. I had edited it so it was just her ... and I would stare at the screen ...

Maybe just trail my finger along the curve of her face, the same face I had held in my hands just before she had left.

Or to try and capture her gaze ... those blue eyes to meet mine.

God. I missed her. Missed her smile, her laugh, her voice. Missed the way her eyes twinkled when she looked at me. Missed the feel of her, the touch of her lips, her mouth, her tongue.

And I wanted to pick up the phone and call her, just to hear her voice and know she was missing me too. But I had promised ... too risky and all that.

It was on the Tuesday morning that I couldn't stand it any longer. I had finished all my paperwork and boredom had settled over me. The server for the internet had gone pear shaped so I couldn't access any of my files, or the internet for that matter.

There was only one thing for it.

A visit to my sister, the dependable, nagging one, who had called me constantly for the last two months to tell me to get my lardy arse over to see her ... or to stay with her, Craig and the kids for a while. We had only seen each other a handful of times since everything had blown up, as I said, I had kept myself busy.

Poor Jo. She knew there was something wrong as soon as she opened the door. Like usual, my sister knew me better than I knew myself.

The kids were sent to their rooms, and like sulking teenagers they stomped up the stairs to attack their CD players and vibrate the house. Two bollockings later, the volume decreasing to a mere thrum and pulse in the living room where I was sat with Jo, Craig having made excuses about tidying the shed.

Bless him. He was the epitome of a brother in law - solid, yet scared shitless of hearing anything that involved me and my relationships.

'What's going on, Lou?' Just like Jo ... always to the point. 'Have you heard from Ash?'

It was bubbling away inside me, fermenting and threatening to spill over like a volcanic blast. All the emotions I had held down were clambering at the back of my throat. I kept swallowing repeatedly, hoping against hope that I could just tell her I missed Ash without all the amateur dramatics I was sure were going to follow.

And that was just from me.

Her face became more concerned as I sat silently, valiantly swallowing, clasping and unclasping my fingers around the handle of my handbag.

I nearly managed it. Honestly. I had just digested the last vestige of misery when she slipped her arm around my shoulders.

Then they were back. Over and out of my mouth in a semi wail and slamming against my sister's chest in their fight for freedom.

She held me, shushing me, stroking my back in her tender way and letting me know without the need for words that she loved me. That she was there. That she would always be there.

I held on to her, gripped her, hung upon her like I was a frightened animal and she would save me. Again. Save me again.

It was a while before I could even contemplate telling her what was the matter, but just like Jo she sat there and held me and waited.

A feeling of peace enveloped me, a calmness I hadn't felt for quite some time, and I just let it wash all over me before I could begin.

'I miss her so much.' There was no need to say whom, and Jo just pulled me closer making me feel like a teenager again. 'I can't even call her.' Then I started to cry again, and splutter how unfair it was that I couldn't see her or speak to her whenever I wanted to ... how it wouldn't hurt just to hear her voice now and again ... like at bed time just to say goodnight.

Jo let me go on and on and on, and she didn't interrupt, just held me and nodded in all the right places. But in the end even she had to ask why I hadn't gone to find her.

'Don't you think I want to do just that?' I sat back and away from her, wiping my face with the back of my hand. 'But I can't ... the case ... too risky.'

'What case?'

Huh? Had my sister finally lost the plot after all these years?

'What case? *What case?*' My tone was incredulous to say the least. '*The case. Spencer case...*'

She interrupted my flow. 'But that's over. It finished in the early hours of this morning.'

The words I was going to say just sat in my mouth. And that same mouth was half open, my tongue hovering near my bottom lip forming the beginning of the word I had just been about to utter. Then it slipped back, the lips closing slowly, my face taking on a semi pout.

When I concentrate, I frown. Can't help it. I couldn't grasp what she was saying, so I leaned forward and frowned more. And Jo moved back ... slightly, but noticeably.

It seemed like ages before the 'What's up, Lou?' sounded.

I frowned more. I think I was stunned, you know, rabbit in the headlights syndrome ...

Jo seemed a little uneasy, and I'm not surprised, I think if I had been in her position I would have been too. 'So ...erm ... why don't you call her?'

That kind of snapped me out of my trance a little, and I lifted my eyebrows dispelling the frown once and for all.

'Call her? *Call her?*' It didn't sound like me. Distant and very reserved. And that was definitely

not what I was feeling. 'Oh ... I can do better than that.'

I stood up sharply and snatched my handbag from the sofa. '*Much* better.' Clipped and ready.

'What're you going to do, Lou?' Jo stood up and placed her hand on my arm, and I just looked down at it and then back to her face. I don't know what my expression said but she took her fingers off me like she had been burned. 'Lou? Tell me.'

'Are you sure the case is over?'

She nodded, and I didn't even ask for any more details, just turned and headed towards the door.

'What are you doing? Lou?' I just kept on walking. 'Lou! *Answer me!*'

I stopped at the front door, turned, and looked her squarely in the face. 'I want to find out why she couldn't be arsed to let me know the case was over.' I grabbed the door handle. 'And also find out what the fuck she's playing at.' Door open.

'You can call her from here if you want.'

'I said I'm not going to call her.' Jo's eyebrows raised into her hairline. 'I'm going to ask her in person. I'm going to Manchester.'

'When?'

I smiled at her, winked and stepped through the open doorway. 'I'll call you when I get there.'

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## **Chapter Forty**

Back home, changed, bag packed, in the car ... and then I was on my way.

The miles were eaten up with mutterings of increasing anger, and by the time I reached Chesterfield I was livid. I couldn't wallow in self-pity - screw that. I was fuming. How dare she? How fucking dare she lead me on and make me believe that we had a future?

'Can't call you ... too risky,' I mimicked in a sarcastic tone. 'I don't want you to be in danger.' Same sarcasm. I can't even tell you how many times I said that as the miles pounded underneath my tyres.

Images of the last time I had seen her danced in my head. The phone calls we had shared replayed themselves and instead of feeling the longing I had previously, the memories only fuelled my anger even more.

It wasn't until I got to Stockport Road that I realised I didn't know her address. The dawning

realisation hit me as I saw the sign for Levenshulme and I closed my eyes and slammed my head on the headrest.

I pulled over into the car park of a local pub and just sat there wondering what I was going to do. I could have called her, but I didn't want to alert her and give her time to think of an excuse. It would have been so much simpler if she was listed in the telephone directory. The only thing I could do was go to her parents' house and ask.

Decision made, I pulled out of the car park and headed for Levenshulme ... a place I hadn't visited in nearly twenty years.

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Well, it certainly wasn't hot and sticky, and promise had long since fled the nest. These days my imagination conjured up images that could be pretty frightening, and a lot of those had actually happened. The once packed streets were empty of people, just cars parked haphazardly - and I doubted children could play tiggy it and kerby, as avoiding cars would be impossible. Noise and pollution were the new black.

It was Levenshulme. Once an affluent part of Manchester, but now filled with students, ethnic minorities and a budding professional sector. The roads leading to Ash's parents seemed so small and winding, and it dawned on me that it wasn't because I was bigger now, because I hadn't grown; it was because I had never driven here before.

As I turned into their road, I felt sick. Nerves sick, I think ... but sick nevertheless. It was weird how the road seemed exactly the same, especially after all the changes I had noted on the way to this spot. I felt sixteen all over again ... like I did the very first time I had been to Ash's after the first time we had been separated.

After I parked the car opposite their house I just sat there and collected myself. I had been driving for nearly four hours, but it felt as if I had just left Norfolk minutes before.

I was still angry. Bloody fuming, actually. I didn't want to knock on their door and start ranting and raving at them for something they probably knew nothing about.

So I sat and waited. Waited for a miracle to come along and make me rational ... and I knew the only way I was going to find any peace was to knock.

So I did.

I got out of the car, walked up to the door and knocked. And then knocked again. Then rang the bell, and as I was just about to ring it again, the door opened.

It was Ash's mum. Older, but still the beautiful woman I remembered ... even though she looked pissed off.

'Why don't you take the bloody door off next time?' And then she stopped and looked me up and down, a growing realisation appearing on her face in the shape of a smile. 'Well I never ... its little Lou Turner isn't it? Well, not so little anymore.'

'In the flesh, Mrs Richards.' It was out before I could stop it.

'Well I never ... how long has it been? Twenty years?' As she was saying it, she was peering into my face just to make sure. I should have known what was coming next, but I wasn't thinking straight.

And after all those years it still hurt like buggery. She gripped my cheeks and gave my head a waggle and I was transported back once again to a time when I had a little bit of chubbiness to keep me safe.

'Where are my manners? Come in, love.' I couldn't answer. So, I just nodded, then sighed with relief as she let go of her death grip on my cheeks.

The house was still the same, and I fully expected to see Ash come bounding down the stairs, and then remembered why I had turned up here in the first place.

'Mrs Richards?' She stopped in front of me and turned. 'Could you give me Ash's address?' I tried to keep my voice light, you know, not let any emotion trickle through.

'No.' I looked at her, surprised to say the least. 'Not until you have a cuppa with me and tell me what you've been up to.' Then she walked through into the kitchen, leaving me a little gobsmacked.

I waited patiently whilst she was pouring the tea ... even laughed and nodded in all the right places, but all I wanted to do was to find Ash. I went through her quick fire round with no problems until she asked 'Are you seeing anyone?'

The teacup seemed huge and clunky as I raised it to my lips to moisten my suddenly dry mouth. She leaned forward, expectant, so I just nodded as I was swallowing, then changed it to a shake of the head.

'Make your mind up ... are you or not?' I could spy a slight smile at the corner of her mouth. The answer I wanted to say was yes, obviously, but with things how they were, how could I? Ash had not contacted me for two weeks and then I found out the case was over ...

'I always hoped you'd become a Richards.'

I looked up from my cup and smiled at her. I remember one of her sons having a bit of a crush on me when we were kids, but that was a long time ago.

'It would have been lovely to have you in the family, but I could tell you weren't interested in Anthony or Stephen ... even though Stephen thought you were the bee's knees.' She sighed and

picked up her cup, and I followed suit taking a good long drink hoping to finish it so I could get away. 'I really hoped you and Ash could've got together.'

The tea shot out of my mouth and nostrils like a water hose, half choking me on the way out. I coughed and spluttered, wheezing a stuttered 'What?' as tears streamed down my face. Mrs Richards came round the table and thumped me on the back ... repeatedly, which did nothing for the coughing ... just increased the tears.

With a final intake of breath, the coughing subsided, my face the colour of beetroot through embarrassment and exertion.

'Are you okay now?' Her face was dangling in front of my own, and all I could muster was a half-hearted nod. 'Sorry about that ... I always thought you two ... ah ... well ... you know.' I looked at her, wiping my eyes, but silently asking her to go on. 'I thought you two were a couple when you were teenagers. And when you left, I thought Ash was going to pine away to nothing.' She lifted the teapot up and gestured ... I nodded as my throat was like sandpaper.

She didn't speak whilst she was pouring, just concentrated on the job at hand. It seemed like forever to fill two small cups ...

'Everyone was really worried about her ... and one day she just walked into the front room, announced she was gay, and walked out the front door. We didn't see her for three days.' She slipped the cup over to me and then concentrated on putting sugar in her own as if what she had just said was completely normal.

'And?'

'And what?'

'What happened? Where did she go?'

Mrs Richards shrugged her shoulders, 'She wouldn't say. We were so worried about her, that by the time she came back, the announcement she'd made didn't seem to matter.' The tea she was stirring was whizzing around the cup, the spoon making a grating noise.

I didn't know how to reply. Just sat there, cup in hand.

'It was just good to see Ash happy again.'

'Why? Did she come back happy?' I felt a little annoyed at this, although I have no idea why. It was twenty years ago after all.

'Not then ... she was still a miserable little bleeder. I mean when she came back from Norfolk.' A greying eyebrow raised itself into nearly grey hair, the smile playing around her lips. Then she took a tentative sip at her tea, and I sat and waited. Again. 'Ah ... that's a lovely brew, if I do say so myself.' Another sip, and I felt like shouting at her to put the bloody cup down and tell me.



But she still had that evil streak running through her, the one I found funny when she was tormenting her sons and husband ... and Ash of course. She was waiting for me to ask her, and I wasn't backwards in coming forwards. I would play her game.

'What do you mean, "When she came back from Norfolk"? About the case?' I leaned forward and gave her a crooked smile whilst inside I wanted her to just tell me what I wanted to hear.

'No. That's not what I meant.' She leaned towards me mirroring the same smile. Then nothing.

Bollocks.

I was getting too old for this.

'Well. Could you tell me what you *do* mean then?'

'Yes.' Another pause.

'Pack it in and tell me.' Patience had gone out of the window and was replaced by definite need to know.

And just like her daughter, she threw her head back and laughed. Laughed until tears pushed themselves over her eyelids and charged willy-nilly down her face. Then I laughed right along with her. Don't know why ... just did. But like laughter in that situation, it wasn't long until I was sobbing into the tablecloth.

Her hand was comforting on my shoulders. Smooth strokes from left to right, sandwiched between a gentle circling motion. A shushing sound was right next to my ear, and I could hear her saying my name over and over again, willing me to 'dry those tears'.

But it had become too much. The anger. The frustration. The needing to know one way or another. And the dam burst. And I was left sobbing my desolation into white linen.

It didn't last for long, just a short burst to alleviate the emotions whirring around inside me. Like usual. All I seemed to do was cry.

When I eventually pulled myself together enough to look up, she was sat down in the chair next to me, her face radiating motherly comfort.

'I'm sorry, Lou. I'm an evil old bugger sometimes ... ask the kids.' I pursed my lips in an attempt to say it didn't matter, but still didn't trust myself enough with my voice. So I shook my head and gave her a watery smile in compensation.

Her hand covered my own and gripped it firmly before she just held it in her own. It was so warm and comforting to just sit there for a while without the burden of words. 'When she came back from Norfolk, she seemed like the Ash we all knew ... the happy Ash. It was like she had

laid the ghosts to rest.'

I kept quiet. Just listened.

'She was busy with the case ... you know ... the Spencer one, so we didn't see her as much as we wanted.' Another squeeze on my hand. 'But when we did, she was full of what had happened in Norfolk ... full of meeting you again.'

The she got up and walked over to the kitchen counter. I could hear her rummaging about in the drawers looking for something, and then she was back. A piece of paper slipped over to me, her aged fingers half covering it. 'This is what you want. Go and ask her yourself, it's not up to me to tell you.'

Tentative fingers tugged at the corner, until I felt it within my hand. It was her address. Heaton Chapel. If I left there right away, I would be standing on her doorstep in just over ten minutes ... less if I floored it.

But I hesitated, just slightly, as I was still mesmerised by the address sitting so innocently in the palm of my hand. It took a nudge and a 'Well ... what are you waiting for?' to kick start me.

'Nothing. Nothing at all.' I leaned forward and pecked her on the cheek, was just about to up and leave when I turned a grabbed her in a fierce hug. 'Thank you ... so much.'

She hugged me back and I could hear the muffled, 'Whatever for?'

'Everything.'

And then I was gone. Door slamming behind me, car starting and crunching into gear and one thought in my mind.

'Heaton Chapel, here I come.'

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I didn't give myself time to think, just tear arsed it down the A6 towards Ash's house. It never occurred to me that she might not be there, and strangely enough, I seemed to have forgotten the fact she hadn't called me.

When I left Ash's mum's, it had been drizzling with rain, and by the time I reached Heaton Chapel it was pouring down. The rain bounced off the bonnet and windscreen in kamikaze pellets. Obviously there was nowhere to park near her house and I had to squeeze into a tiny gap two roads away.

I didn't care.

I didn't care that the rain aimed itself straight at me and soaked me to the bone.

I didn't care that my hair was plastered all over my face, and water was trickling into my mouth.

And the only reason I was running was so I could see Ash again ... because I didn't care about anything else.

It wasn't until I was stood ... poised ... hand over doorbell that the realisation of what I was doing hit me. Why hadn't she called?

Then I grinned ... I could always ask her.

I had to ring the bell three times before I heard the chain on the door clatter and clink, the lock shudder as it was released from its haven. I sucked in a breath and waited to meet those blue eyes once again.

But they were brown. Dark brown. And pretty. And set in an even prettier face; a face surrounded by dark brown hair and attached to a slender neck and slim body.

And those brown eyes were looking at me in wonder, trying to figure out why a complete stranger was standing on their doorstep pissed wet through ... and with her mouth open. A stranger who also had her hand half poised to ring the bell again ... finger erect and frozen.

'Can I help you?' Such a musical voice ... lilting and captivating.

A muffled 'Who is it?' came from inside. The voice, although distant, was definitely Ash's.

'And you are?' The same lilting voice, but this time more quizzical and showing signs of confusion.

'Whoever it is ... get rid of them. There's a bed in here with your name on it.' The brown-eyed woman looked over her shoulder, and when she turned back she was grinning.

'No one ... I'm no one.' That was pretty easy to write, but the actual labour of saying those few words was agony. I felt like a no one ... I felt like a fool. Once again I had been lured by self-promise and hope. I hadn't even questioned what Ash's mother had said. Just thought ... ah ... well you know what thought did.

I could hear footsteps coming from up stairs and saw the base of Ash's legs appear at the top. It was my cue to leave ... to go ... to just fucking go and not come back.

So I did.

I turned and I heard her voice, disbelief riding along the sound waves ... 'Lou?'

And I ran. Rain pelting me. Cold penetrating rain that tried to take my breath away.

'Lou ... come here!' Her voice seemed echoey, distant. I increased my speed, the chill from the rain making me shiver. The coat I had on thin and flimsy against the downpour. But I didn't care.

Her hand grabbed my arm and pulled me to a stop, swinging me around to face her. She was soaked, wearing a cream t-shirt and holding a jacket in her hand. We were both shaking with cold, but mine was laced with anger too. 'Lou?' A smile was on her face ... an uncertain smile. 'Where are you going? Didn't you hear me calling you?'

'Get your fucking hands *off me*.' It was a stuttered growl rather than a command, and I qualified this by trying to tear her fingers from my arm. 'Why ...don't... you ...go ...back to your bird?'

'What bird? I don't understand. Lou?'

She grabbed my other arm and held me fast, and I couldn't even thump her. All I could do was try and wound her with words. '*Her! There! Standing in your doorway! Why didn't you just tell me you were with someone? Why just lead me on?*'

The image of her standing there will forever be etched into my mind, joining all the other images I had. Rain pummelled down on her, but she just stood there, staring right back at me. Her hair was a tangled mess of wetness, clinging to the side of her face, her fringe dripping water into her eyes. The pale cream t-shirt was like a second skin, transparent and heavy; the jacket on the ground by our feet. Rivulets of water raced down her face and collected at the top of her lip.

'Wendy?'

So. That was her name. Wendy. The woman who had what I wanted. The woman I could never compete with. Ash's woman.

Her hands became limp on my arms and her grip all but melted away. 'Wendy?'

'Yes Wendy, for Christ's sake ... *let me go*.'

'But Wendy ...' she released me, but I didn't go ... I was caught up by the look on her face. Confusion studied there, and something else ...

I swallowed deeply. Licked my lips and began. 'You could have just told me, Ash.' My voice seemed controlled. Tick. 'I would have understood.' A big fat lie. 'You could have called me and told me ... and about the case too.' True ... she could have. But I was beginning to have doubts whether the calmness in my voice was going to carry on or this was the calm before the storm. 'Look. I'd better go.'

Her face was still in some kind of shock and there were traces of metamorphosis underlying the wrinkled lip and raised eyebrow.

It wasn't until I turned to go that she stopped me again. 'But Wendy is not my girlfriend . She's ...'

'Your shag?' The bitterness was back again. Laced with anger.

'Don't be stupid.'

And like the adult I was, I gave the perfect answer. 'Whatever.' I felt like sobbing. The rain was making matters worse, as it was steadily increasing in pace and rhythm, making words come out spluttered and deformed. ' "There's a bed here with your name on it" ... ring any bells?'

'But she's just ...'

'No need to explain anything to me, Ash. I think I understand perfectly well what is going on.' And the realisation hit me again, and the tears were over and the choking sobs were out and damned mad. But I couldn't be mad. Spent too much time being mad. Spent too much time hankering after something unobtainable and now it was time to let go.

'Come here.' Her voice was quiet, barely a whisper. Her hands were trying to cup my face, trying to get me to look at her. But I shook her off, desolation taking control. 'Lou. Listen.' She pulled my hands from around my ears as I was trying to stop the sound of her excuses filtering in and down to the aching in my chest. 'I love you ... shush ... listen.' The rain was becoming even angrier now. 'Wendy is not my girlfriend ... or ever likely to be.'

My face was soaked and not just with rain.

'She's Stephen's wife.'

*'You're shagging your brother's wife'*

The laugh came loud, but stopped as suddenly as it started when she saw my face. She was pissed wet through, hair clinging to her neck and cheeks ... her clothes were like she had just stepped out from underneath a waterfall.

'You are joking, *right?*' Both eyebrows drew together as she said this.

'But you said you wanted her in bed.' Was that a whine?

Her head shook from side to side, the grin appearing until it developed into another bout of laughter. She stopped ... tried to answer ... then came out louder.

'No! I'm packing. Bed and all.' My face said 'huh', so she continued. 'Wendy is helping me pack, and you knocked as we were half way through dismantling the bed.'

'Packing?' Did I squeak?

'Packing.'

She stepped closer to me, diminishing the space I had erected between us. 'Upping sticks and moving.' Closer still. 'To be with my woman ... my love ... my everything.'

Her hands were on my face by this point, and I didn't struggle. They felt at home there; they belonged there.

'To be with my reason.' Her thumb trailed itself across my lips. 'And that's you,' followed by a gentle kiss on the place her thumb had just vacated. 'You.' Another kiss ... featherlike. 'Always you.' And then the kiss was deep ... sucking me in ... blinding me to everything and everyone apart from her. The rain melted away.

When she pulled away and looked into my eyes I was lost all over again. So much love. So much ...

'Want to help me pack?'

I nodded, the ability to speak completely deserting me.

'Here.' A jacket was shoved in my direction. My eyes looked into blue, which were clouded with concern. 'Put it on ... you'll catch your death ...'

'But ...'

'But nothing. Put it on ... no arguments.' The scene from over thirty years ago replayed itself in my mind. Ash ... younger ... but still the same. Me ... still an idiot when it came to the weather. I watched her as I pulled the jacket on loving the sight of her as I pulled the thick red material into place.

The jacket was barely on my skin before she grabbed my hand and began to pull me along, then it shifted to around my waist and she held me to her as we battled through the rain.

The front door loomed ahead of us, and I could feel her slowing down. It wasn't until we reached the gate that she stopped, turned to me and pulled me towards her again. Impulsively, I threw my arms around her neck and planted a full kiss on her mouth.

The kiss was an affirmation. A promise of things to come. Lips, tongue and teeth ... melting and mixing with a love that had grown from a seed of friendship.

We held each other ... held each other ... *held* ... each other, and without words told each other that this was forever.

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**And finally ...**

Within two days, Ash and I were back in Norfolk. We discussed the possibility of moving in together but decided we would take one step at a time. Many years had passed between us, and we had to get to know each other once again.

Ash had explained to me the reason why she hadn't told me she was moving ... but it wasn't until I got home that I realised she had called, and I was a just a moron who hadn't checked the answer phone before I had left to go to Manchester.

Some things never change, eh?

Her family had thrown a farewell dinner at her old home and people I hadn't seen for years turned up to say goodbye and good luck. Her parents treated me like I was one of the family, and Ash's mum kept winking and nodding at me all evening. I felt fully accepted.

Ash's father's toast was 'To the future ... to new beginnings.'

And it was ... for the both of us, in some weird way.

I chatted with everyone, even Wendy, although I felt like a dick head. I mean ... I had made a total twat out of myself in front of my girlfriend's sister in law.

My girlfriend.

Mine.

Sigh.

Anyway, where was I? Yeah ...

I chatted with all of them, remembering things from when we were kids ... remembering Tracy the psycho bird who had been jealous of something that was none existent. By all accounts she worked on Customer Complaints at the local supermarket ... had three kids and a husband who spent most of his time trying to get away from her.

Talk about sweet justice ...

And that brings me to Spencer ...

Spencer had been charged with pre-meditated murder and had been sentenced to fifteen years in Strangeways Prison, with recommendation for psychiatric help. But, with the British legal system being what it is, he would be unlucky if he served more than ten.

That's why she had wanted to keep the kidnapping case separate. The evidence and crime had been committed in Norfolk, and Ash had decided to move the case there, transferring from the Met to Norfolk police for the unforeseeable future.

The case was to start in six weeks after she moved, giving her time to collect information and evidence. The only problem was we could not be outwardly seen as having a relationship because that would jeopardise the case, and the jury would think she had coerced me into giving false evidence.

So ... the ray of hope was Jo, of course. She was the real witness in the case, even though it had happened to me; I was useless, as I couldn't really remember all the facts.

And Jo never forgot anything ... apart from the reason why she pissed all over me when we were kids.

But ... hey ... new beginnings, right?

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**Erm ... And finally?**

I know ... I know. I said the last bit was the end, didn't I? Well ... I couldn't really end this story with the last shot of my sister pissing all over my back ... or could I?

Nah.

I should end it with a moral, but that's cliché. What about a summing up? Nope. I think you get the gist of it all.

I could give you some advice. How about that? You would probably tell me to bugger off, so that one is out of the window.

I should really end where I started... you know ...structure and all that.

But why look back? Why live in the past if your future is so bright and beguiling? We learn from our mistakes ... true, but sometimes we don't learn quickly enough. We end up repeating the same ones over and over again like some fucked up groundhog day.

I mean ... some things you learn through age and experience, like don't bother hiding under the bed when police pass your house, whatever your brother's girlfriend says. Or that rabbits don't hurt as much as broken bricks at the back of the head. Even don't fight with your mum when she has Durban and a lit cig ...

But love?

Do we ever learn not to love? Do we ever learn through being in love never to love again?

I know to some people love is the ultimate four letter word ... but do we really ever stop wanting to love and be loved?



Yes. In some cases.

But throughout the heartache and the pain there's another four-letter word waiting in the wings.

Hope.

And I think that through this four-letter word, however well hidden, we can once again achieve the ultimate four-letter word. Battered and bruised ... a little shy and resentful ... sometimes angry and misplaced ... but it's there all the same.

So ... what else to say?

Me. Well I went through stages of wanting it all, to wanting it all to end ... wanting the pain of being in love to stop. Love is an agony of want and desire and rejection - true.

But what if it's the real deal ... you know ... what if she's the one? What if the person you love loves you back?

Do you say 'No thanks. I had some earlier'?

Or do you take love in both your hands and pull it to you... cup it ... support and protect it? Do you nurture it, then watch it grow and grow and grow?

Simply ... yes.

We should take what we can from life and should give back just as much, because if we don't ... what's the point?

Ash and me ... well ... eventually we got there. Took us most of our lives to realise, but I wouldn't go back to when I was a teenager. Both of us are way past all that now. Life has afforded us experience and it has made us stronger ... made us aware of what we have, and to cherish every moment.

And we do.

She has been in Norfolk for eight weeks and I treasure every minute we share. It almost feels as if my life started again when she walked back into my life. In a way it did, but I still have the foundations of my beginnings to build from. That's what makes me who I am today.

We are still living apart, as the case is underway, but we see each other as much as we can. And it is bliss.

I love her, you see?

Love her.

And she loves me right back. I know because we take the time not to just tell each other, but show it too. Little gestures and comments ... looks ... guiding hands and soft kisses.

But I think you've heard enough about me and my life for one sitting, however comfortable you might have been to start off with ... so ...

I will love you and leave you, for now ...

Mainly because I have a gorgeous woman reading over my shoulder and she wants all of my attention.

You don't blame me, do you?

**The End**

Thank you for getting this far. If you liked it, why don't you drop me a line. If you didn't... have a good day J

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