

NATASHA PRESTON
SILENCE



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By Natasha Preston

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Dedication

For my mum, Sharon.

Chapter One

Oakley

Most people have heard the phrase, ‘Silence is golden’; many would agree with it: people with screaming children running wild around the house or working in a noisy office. For me, however, it meant something entirely different. Silence consumed my whole life; it suppressed things I could never express. My silence was responsible for my family’s happiness. Silence was my prison.

“Are you ready to leave, Oakley? Cole is waiting outside,” my mum said softly. She leant against the doorframe of my room and smiled warmly. Through her smile, however, I could see how tired she looked. Dark shadows were now a permanent feature under her eyes. Her smile used to be my favourite part of her. Now it was as false as my own, and it was all because of me.

Every single day I want to tell her what has happened. To have her hold me in her arms and promise me that everything would be all right, but reality stopped me every time. The fantasy I had in my head of how things would turn out was just that; a fantasy. I knew that, he had told me enough times.

Placing my hairbrush on the dresser, I turned to Mum and nodded my head once. With a deep breath, I followed her downstairs.

It wasn’t until we reached the front door that she looked at me again. “Have a good day, okay?” Almost everything she said to me was a question. As the words left her mouth, her eyes widened in the desperate hope that I would reply, and every time I responded with a brief nod, her shoulders would sag.

I grabbed my school bag by the door and swung it over my shoulder as I walked outside.

The morning sun beamed down on me as I turned into the street, making me squint at the brightness. It was the middle of July, and almost time for school to close for the summer holidays.

Cole beeped his car horn even though he was parked right outside my

house. Thanks, Cole might have missed you without that. He grinned through the window as I made my way to his car, his dark blue eyes glistening in the early light.

Cole Benson and I had been friends since we were babies. Mum had pictures of Cole holding my hand as I learned to walk. He was two years older than me, but he certainly didn't act it. My mum and his mum, Jenna, met in high school, and they had been friends ever since.

"Good morning, sunshine," he greeted, with a stretched grin. Unlike Mum's, the smiles I received from him never changed. Grinning back was as natural as breathing. His happiness was infectious; our friendship had always been fun, affectionate, loving, and carefree.

It wasn't always a bed of roses, though. There were times when he would beg and plead with me to tell him what was wrong. He had begged me to talk again. I found that harder than when Mum pleaded with me. As the one person that I could still feel normal with, I hated hurting and disappointing him.

He started the engine and his rusty old car roared to life. It hadn't been long since he passed his driving test, but he was a good driver and I trusted him with my life – still, I gripped the seat as he sped off. We passed his house, which was just two doors away from mine, and I sighed. I hated school with a passion.

Cole talked almost continuously on the drive to school, chatting away about his car and what we would do later. Occasionally I would nod or smile in response to something he said, but apart from that I just sat and listened to him speaking. His voice was smooth and calming. Not talking to him was hard. I desperately wanted to return his quick banter with something smart of my own. But I stayed tongue-tied.

As we pulled into the half-full car park, I started to feel sick. People seemed to whisper to each other whenever I was around. I was used to it, but I still hated being the centre of all the jokes and bitchy comments.

"Oakley?" I jumped and looked up at Cole. He smiled. "You gonna be okay today?" I nodded, grimacing slightly. I hated when we had to go our separate ways, and I wished I was older so we would be in the same year.

"Text me if you need anything," he instructed, kissing me on the cheek, sending little bolts of electricity through my body. Cole knew I wouldn't text him, but he still said the same thing every single day. "See you later," he called as he walked towards the sixth form block next to the high school.

Once he was out of view, I let the smile slip from my face. There was no one to pretend to now. It was almost a relief not to have to pretend I was fine. Walking towards the entrance of school, I pulled my sleeves down over my hands and wrapped my arms around myself. *Just keep your head down. Not long until school is over for six weeks.*

The bell rang, signalling the start of the school day just as I got inside the old red brick building. My form room was at the end of a corridor that seemed to stretch on for miles. I walked quickly to avoid being caught up with the people still loitering around. Taking my usual seat next to Hannah, I rested my arms on the desk.

Mornings were the hardest as there was still so much of the day to get through. Hannah smiled at me, and I returned the gesture. We weren't necessarily friends, but she was the closest thing I had in school. She didn't judge or treat me any differently. I just didn't think she knew how to act around me most of the time. I liked her for trying though.

"School sucks," she grumbled, tucking her dark hair behind her ears. *Completely agreeing with you,* I thought glumly.

"Oakley, what did you do last night?" One of the boys shouted from the back of the classroom. I recognised his voice as Luke Davis, one of the biggest idiots of the school

"Sorry, I didn't quite *hear* you." The room erupted with laughter, and I rolled my eyes. *Original, Luke.*

"Ignore them," Hannah whispered, squeezing my arm sympathetically.

I smiled at her, and then sighed in relief as Mrs Yates walked into the room. With a quick greeting, she flipped the register open and pulled the lid off her pen. Like with everyone else, she called my name but looked up at the same time, knowing she wasn't getting an answer. There was never any pressure from the teachers on me to talk: they made sure everything was as normal as possible wherever it could be.

After the register was called everyone chatted, waiting for the bell to ring for the first lesson. "Ready for maths?" Hannah groaned the question as the bell chimed. *Nope.* My expression mirrored hers. Maths wasn't my favourite subject, and today was a double lesson. "Do you think we'll ever use anything we've learnt in maths in the real world?" she mused.

Most definitely. Although probably not 'Jimmy left the station at nine in the morning, Jenny left at nine-thirty their stations were fifty miles apart, what time do they pass each other?' questions.

I had most lessons with Hannah. We sat together through them all, but she spoke to her two other friends more, unsurprisingly since they actually answered her. That was okay with me though. I preferred to do work to pass the time.

“Good morning,” Mr Spice greeted. “Pass these around and get started.” He handed Georgie, who was sitting at the front, the stack of papers and went to sit down.

The class seemed to drag on forever. For the whole two hours, we all worked from the sheets. It was almost like doing a test. *Boredom is actually going to kill me.* I flipped the worksheet over only to find another one.

Finally, the bell rang, and it was time for the first break of the day. Stuffing my pencil case into my bag, I mentally planned my route to the next class. Helen, Laura, and Tina peered over their shoulders as they walked towards the door, snickering. My heart dropped a little, but I tried not to let them get to me. It wouldn't be long before we would leave school and I wouldn't have to see them again.

Heading straight to my third lesson, I kept my head down, hoping to go unnoticed. I took the longer route to my next lesson because there was usually less people around.

The sun was even brighter than when I left home this morning, and as it shone in my face I cradled my hand over my eyes to create little shade. Suddenly I slammed into someone that was walking around the corner. Gasping, I stumbled back.

“Sorry,” a deep voice said. I looked up and stepped back again. I felt sick as Julian grinned back at me. His smile wasn't a friendly one, more like one from a predator that had just caught its prey. “Oakley,” he said, in what he probably thought was a playful tone. *Not now.*

I gulped and straightened my back to try to look more confident than I was. *Look him in the eye,* I ordered myself.

“Miss me over the weekend?” Julian took a step towards me, and I wanted to run. Running wouldn't help me at all though. I needed to be strong. Raising my head, I continued to stare him right in the eye. I wasn't sure where this was going.

“Miss Farrell, Mr Howard, get to class. Now!” the head teacher, Mr Simmons bellowed. I sagged in relief and scurried off to biology, refusing to look back at Julian. I just wanted to make it through one day without anything bad happening.

At lunchtime, I walked to the exit to eat outside of the school grounds. Just as I was about to reach the front door, an arm shot out, stopping me from going further.

“Oakley,” Laura said with a fake smile. “I’m having a party on Saturday to celebrate the end of the year. You should come. What do ya say?” Laura and her friend burst out laughing. How could they still find that funny? Did they ever get bored of their own stupid, pathetic jokes?

I pushed past her, almost running towards the door. The laughing stopped as soon I was outside. I’d had enough of today already and needed to leave. Blinking the tears back, I walked quickly through the car park. How could people hate me so much for doing absolutely nothing? I swallowed the lump in my throat and willed myself not to cry.

“Oakley?” Cole’s voice called out, making me instantly brighten up. I turned around to see him jogging towards me, his messy hair blowing across his forehead.

I took a shaky breath and smiled. I was not going to let them make me cry again, and I really didn’t want Cole to see me cry either. He strode across the car park and stopped right in front of me.

“Hey. Are you okay?” he asked, scanning my face. I nodded my head in confirmation. Cole raised his right eyebrow. “No, you’re not. Hold on a minute, I’ll come with you and we can talk.”

I grabbed his arm as he went to turn away and shook my head. I didn’t want him to come with me. He didn’t need to be the boy that hung out with the weird girl that didn’t talk. I nudged him in the direction of his waiting friends, telling him to go with them. He looked to his friends for a second before returning to me.

“It’s fine. I’d rather come with you,” he said, reading my actions.

Great, I’m the loser charity case that needs babysitting. I shook my head more fiercely and clenched my jaw in frustration. Of all the people in the world, I did not want him feeling sorry for me. Cole gave a mock-exasperated sigh, his eyes tightening a little.

“Either I’m coming with you, or you’re sitting with us. It’s up to you.” He folded his arms over his chest challengingly.

“Cole, are you coming or not?” his friend, Ben shouted. I had met Ben a few times before but only in passing when Cole was walking to his car with him or something.

“Come on, babe. I’m hungry,” some girl, whose name I didn’t know, called. Babe? Cole mumbled something under his breath, but I couldn’t make it out. Who was she? Was she his girlfriend? She couldn’t be. He would have definitely told me something like that.

My chest felt like a hand had gripped it tightly. I didn’t want them to be together. *Perfect, now you’re jealous.* The thought of him being with someone else made me feel sick and want to gouge the eyes out of the girl.

“I’m going with Oakley,” he shouted back. I slapped his chest and pushed him again, which just made him laugh. *Just go!* “Eating with us it is, then.” He smirked, grabbing my hand and pulling me along with him.

I tugged my arm, trying to get my wrist out of his iron grip, but he was too strong.

“She’s sitting with us,” he explained to his group of friends.

My face flamed in embarrassment. He made me feel like a three-year-old. I was so angry that I refused to look at him. How could he do that? He knew I didn’t like being in a group of people; I felt so out of place. They nodded, and we all walked around the building to the field at the back. Well, I didn’t walk. I was pulled like a rag doll.

The girl that had called Cole ‘babe’ didn’t look happy that I was there at all. She shot me the occasional discreet glare as we walked. I didn’t even want to sit with them in the first place, and I certainly didn’t want to sit with them if he was *with* her. Eventually we sat down, under some trees.

The nameless girl, who looked a little like a Meg from Family Guy but without the glasses, made a real effort to talk to Cole as much as she could. I didn’t blame her. Cole was an amazing guy.

I frowned at the floor and picked at the grass. I was angrier with myself than I was with Cole. I shouldn’t like him as much as I did. I wasn’t good enough for him.

“Oakley, you want?” Cole asked, holding his Pepsi out to me. A shake of my head answered his question and he frowned, putting the can down on the floor. “You’re annoyed with me?” I lowered my eyes and wished I could disappear. We were actually going to have that out in front of everyone?

He sighed, exasperated. “How long are you going to ignore me for?” I shrugged my shoulders, still refusing to look at him. I was close to crying again, and I didn’t want to do that in front of everyone.

“What did you do to piss her off so much?” Ben asked, not even bothering to lower his voice so I wouldn’t hear.

Cole snorted. “Nothing. She’s just being impossible.”

How am I the one being impossible? He didn’t have to make me come over here.

Someone stepped in my light, casting a dark shadow over my lap. Looking up, I shrank back.

“Oakley?” Julian sneered. “Come out with me tomorrow night? What ya say?” He and his friends burst out laughing - too hard for the lame joke. His friends were sheep; they did what he said, followed where he went and laughed at whatever he joked about.

I pressed my fists into my lap and looked away. Just as they made to leave, Cole jumped up and grabbed fistfuls of Julian’s shirt. My eyes widened. *What on earth are you doing?* I screamed at him silently.

“What did you just say to her?” Cole growled, his knuckles turning white as he clenched his fists harder.

“Chill, man. I was only joking,” Julian mumbled, stiffening his back and pulling at his shirt in an effort to try to release it from Cole’s grip.

I couldn’t watch, and I certainly couldn’t let a teacher witness what was looking like turning into a fight, and Cole get into trouble. Jumping to my feet, I pulled at Cole’s arm, but he didn’t move an inch. It was as if he didn’t even see me: so this was what he was like when he was angry.

“Cole, let it go,” Ben demanded. *Please let it go*, I begged with my eyes.

“A joke, was it? Well, I didn’t find it very funny. If you so much as look at her again, I’ll kill you.”

Cole shoved Julian away from us and gently pried my hand from his arm. *Whoa*. As soon as I was no longer touching him, he launched forward and punched Julian in the jaw. I flinched in shock at Cole punching someone.

Julian stumbled backwards, almost falling over his own legs, but managed to correct himself. One of his friend’s hands shot out and grabbed the top of his arm to steady him. For a second Julian glared back at Cole. He looked like he was weighing up his options: start a fight, or leave.

Grabbing my bag, I sprinted towards the school gates. I couldn’t do this; I needed to get away.

“Oakley?” Cole shouted after me.

If I turned around, I would probably burst into tears, so I kept running. I ran out of the gates and towards the park. My legs started to burn as I pushed myself faster. I could feel a stitch forming in my side, but I didn’t slow my

pace, I pushed harder. Why were things so complicated? If I could go to sleep and wake up as someone else, anyone else, I would do it in a heartbeat.

“Hey, Oakley, will you stop?” Cole’s hand circled around my wrist, and he pulled me to a stop. We were both out of breath. I rested my hands on my thighs and tried to catch my breath. As I looked down, I felt a warm tear slide down my cheek and drop to the floor. *Not again!*

“Don’t cry,” he pleaded softly, and crouched down beside me. His finger brushed my cheek, and without thinking or planning it, I leant my head into his hand and closed my eyes.

“He’s not worth it. Just forget about him.” I was suddenly pulled into his strong, safe arms. I breathed him in. His aftershave mixed with his own scent was all I needed to calm down. I regained control over my emotions and smiled against his chest. Being wrapped up in his arms was my favourite place to be.

Cole didn’t care that I no longer spoke. He just cared about me and over the years. I started to feel more for him.

Eventually, after what seemed like hours yet still not long enough, I forced my head up to look at him. He grinned sheepishly: “You wanna ditch the rest of the day? We could go eat our own weight in ice cream.”

That was a tactical move. He knew I loved ice cream and was using it to get himself out of trouble. *Well, you know you’re going to give in!* I smiled and rolled my eyes.

“Good. Come on then, little Miss.”

As we turned and walked through along the path that led into town, Cole grabbed my hand. My heart jumped as his fingers slotted perfectly between mine. The gesture was probably nothing to him, but it made my heart race and made an idiotic smile a permanent feature on my face.

For the entire fifteen-minute walk, Cole’s hand was wound firmly around mine. I didn’t ever want to let go. I felt safe. Nevertheless, I kept my head down, hiding behind Cole as we walked through the small town. I was in my school uniform and didn’t want anyone my parents knew to see me. Dad wouldn’t like it at all.

We finally reached the place that had the best ice cream around, Julie’s Café. Cole and I spent so much time there, it was like a home from home. We would chill in one of the booths and eat our fill of ice cream. It looked like your typical diner-style café, with light blue walls and cream booths and tables. The atmosphere was warm, friendly, and welcoming.

“Oh, there you two are,” Julie yelled across the café. She was in her mid-forties and was one of the sweetest, friendliest, and most caring people I knew. The first thing I noticed about her was her new haircut. It usually fell just below the small of her back but was mostly tied up. Now it sat on her shoulders and flicked under. It made her look younger.

“Take a seat and I’ll bring over your usual.” She ushered us towards a booth by the window. It was the booth we always chose whenever it was free.

“Thanks,” Cole said, laughing as she fussed around, swiping up a crumpled napkin from our table. Everything had to be perfect for her customers: that was just how she was. We had barely sat down when one of the waitresses appeared with a chocolate milkshake and chocolate ice cream for Cole, and a strawberry milkshake and cookie dough ice cream for me.

I was just about to dig into my ice cream when I heard a voice that made me want to throw something: the girl that liked Cole. No-name Meg-lookalike.

“There you are! You didn’t say where you were going!” she exclaimed, throwing her arms up in the air. Ben walked over to our table with her and smiled apologetically. How did they even find us?

“What are you guys doing here?” Cole quizzed them, his carefree expression turning to a frown.

The girl sat down next to Cole. What was her name? I wanted a name to go with the jealous, ridiculous hate. She was pretty enough, but the fact that she liked the guy I liked made her ugly to me. It was totally irrational, but that was how jealousy worked, wasn’t it?

“Just wanted to grab a shake,” she replied in her annoyingly whiny voice. “What would you suggest?” *That you leave!*

“I don’t know, Courtney,” he huffed. Courtney. I didn’t like it. Well, whatever her name had been, I wouldn’t have liked it.

“Can I get a vanilla shake please?” Ben shouted across the room. Julie frowned at him but nodded. She didn’t like when you yelled for her attention, even less if someone clicked their fingers.

I stopped listening to what else Ben was saying when Courtney grabbed Cole’s milkshake and took a long sip from the straw. *What the...?*

“So you’ve known Cole your whole life?” I turned my attention back to Ben, who had asked the question. He was smiling nervously. His lip pulled up in a sort-of a half-smile. I nodded to answer his question.

“You’ll have to tell me some embarrassing stories about—” he stopped

abruptly and looked horrified. “Err, I mean. N-not tell but, err. Oh shit, sorry I didn’t think,” he stuttered, grimacing as he tried to explain himself.

I smiled. There was something about him made it impossible to be offended by him.

“Damn, I really know how to put my foot in it, hey?” He chuckled.

I shrugged and shook my head. It didn’t bother me, actually. Of course, not everyone would know how to act around me. I understood that he didn’t really know what to say, and at least he honest about it.

“Anyway.” He shook his head and frowned as if he was chastising himself in his head. “You should come to my party at the weekend. Cole’s gonna be there.” Was everyone having a party this weekend?

It wasn’t often that I was invited out, but did I want to go? It wouldn’t be much fun for Cole if I were there. I knew he wouldn’t leave my side all night. Maybe it would be fun though? If the other people going were half as cool as Ben, then perhaps I’d have a good time.

After deciding to go for it, I nodded. If Cole looked like he was bored, I could always go home early. All I had to do was get my parents’ approval, but I would be with Cole and they trusted him so it shouldn’t be that hard.

“Great, I’ll save a dance for ya,” he said, winking at me. Whoa. Guys didn’t wink at me all that often. I blushed and shifted in my seat uncomfortably, not liking that kind of attention.

“You ready to leave, Oakley?” Cole snapped. Go already? I hadn’t even finished my milkshake or ice cream. I was about to shake my head until I noticed Cole’s face was tense with irritation. *What did I miss?*

He got up, and I took that as my cue to leave, even though I hadn’t answered him. Cole weaved around the tables quickly and almost jogged away. *What on earth is wrong?* I ran to catch up with him.

As soon as he slowed and we fell into a comfortable pace, I raised my eyebrows at him. He understood what I was asking him.

“It’s nothing.”

Nothing? That was a lie. He shook his head, looking around to avoid me pressing the issue further, and I let it go. We walked on in an uncomfortable silence.

“So, you coming to mine?” he asked as we reached his car in the car park at school. I nodded eagerly; spending some time alone with him was definitely what I wanted, and I loved being in his home. Cole’s parents and sister, Mia treated me like one of the family. I felt so at ease there and

preferred it to being at my own house, no question. Cole smiled at me, his eyes lingering on mine for a little longer than usual. My heart thudded.

“Hey, sweetie,” Cole’s mum, Jenna, welcomed Cole as we walked through his front door. “Oh hi, Oakley,” she gushed, giving me a warm hug. Cole mumbled something that sounded like hi and walked off to his room.

“What’s wrong with him?” she asked, more to herself than to me. I shrugged anyway and smiled back at her. Jenna always smelt of coconut; it was her shampoo. The smell was so comforting.

“You should follow Mr Happy. I’ll call you when dinner’s ready.” She hadn’t even asked me if I wanted to stay for dinner, she just knew I would.

Cole’s room hadn’t changed much since we decorated it when he was fifteen – two years ago. It was still the same shade of blue. He hated it now though, said it looked like a baby’s room. I doubted he would change it any time soon though; he was too lazy. Cole was lying on his bed, his hands behind his head, just staring at the ceiling. His bottom lip was pulled between his teeth, the way it did whenever he was thinking hard. What had happened?

I laid down on my side, propping my head up on my hand, and waited. After a few minutes, I became impatient, so I gently nudged him in the ribs.

“What?” he whispered, still not looking at me. I sighed and rested my head back, no idea what was going on.

“Sorry,” he eventually muttered. But sorry for what? I hated it when he was cryptic. It wasn’t often that he could hide something from me, but when he did it drove me crazy.

We lay beside each other in silence. The sound of his breathing was so soothing that I started feeling tired. Eventually, I gave in and closed my eyes. A few minutes later, Cole grabbed my hand, interlacing our fingers, and then I fell asleep.

Chapter Two

Oakley

I woke up to Cole sitting up off the bed, causing it to dip, and making me roll onto my side.

“Sorry, did I wake you?” he said softly, grimacing.

I shook my head and sat up, rubbing my tired eyes. Cole grinned.

“Liar. Anyway your parents are coming over for dinner, so you don’t have to go home yet. We’re having a barbeque. Again.”

Grinning, I stretched my arms up, unlocking my muscles. I loved sitting out in Cole’s back garden eating barbecue food. Cole’s dad, David, always forgot about the smouldering food and wandered off, so we ended up having to smother it in tomato and BBQ sauce to balance out the taste of burnt charcoal. It had become a tradition though.

“So, that guy at school today, Julian...” Cole said, trailing off. He seemed unsure if he should bring it up or not. *Not*, I thought. I shook my head, not wanting to think about Julian. There was only one day left at school. After that I wouldn’t have to see him again for six weeks.

“Yeah, I know you don’t want to talk about it, but it’s tough. Does he do that a lot?” Cole looked me in the eye. “We’re doing this, Oakley, whether you like it or not. Does he hassle you a lot?”

Closing my eyes, I reluctantly nodded my head once. There was no point in trying to lie and assure him nothing was going on. He would know I was lying.

“I’m gonna kill him,” he growled angrily. His body tensed up.

My eyes snapped open, and I shook my head, desperately pleading with him not to do anything stupid. Couldn’t he see that it would just make things worse?

Cole’s face softened, the angry expression fell from his face.

“I’m sorry, Oakley. I just hate that people give you a hard time,” he said tenderly. “I’ll leave it, I promise. As long as he doesn’t do anything like that again. You tell me if he does, okay?”

Sighing in relief, I laid my head on his shoulder. He immediately

wrapped his arm around me and pulled me closer to his side. My heart started beating wildly as he rubbed circles on my arm with his thumb. I loved his touch. It didn't make me feel sick or scared. It was completely different, and I never wanted him to stop.

"Wanna watch a film until dinner?" he asked as he picked up the remote and flicked through the movie channels. I nodded against his shoulder. I didn't really care what we did. I just wanted to be around him.

We stayed in Cole's room, watching TV until we heard Jenna call us down for dinner. I could have quite happily stayed in his room for the rest of the night, but I knew our parents would want us with them. I gulped as we walked downstairs and prepared myself to act normal.

"Finally. I'm starving," Cole exclaimed.

I allowed myself to smile as he practically ran for the door. I followed him at my own pace. The second I got downstairs my mum greeted me. She pulled me into a hug and rubbed my back. She would often hug me like this when she knew I'd had a rubbish day. It was her way of trying to make everything better. A hug from Mum fixed things when I was really little, but I hadn't felt safe like that in almost eleven years.

"Are you okay, honey? Jenna said you both came home early," Mum whispered, stroking my hair. I pulled back to nod my head and smile, to convince her that I was all right. "Are you sure? Did someone do or say something to you?" she pressed further, her fingers squeezing my arm slightly. I shook my head and rolled my eyes, making her smile.

"Okay. You know you can come to me though, for anything." Again, I smiled to convince her.

"Good. Now, let's eat, eh?" I was pulled through Cole's house by Mum tugging on my hand. Sometimes I thought she still saw me as a little girl. Like she thought I stopped aging when I had stopped talking.

I was ushered down into the seat next to Cole. Cole's dad, David was standing at the barbecue for a change. My brother, Jasper, was talking to Mia, Cole's older sister. Well, he was bickering with her as usual. No doubt it would be something really stupid like 'Which tastes better, bacon or sausages?' He could make an argument out of anything.

Where was Dad?

I glanced over my shoulder, looking around the perfectly manicured back garden. He was nowhere to be seen.

Cole waved his hand in front of my face, snapping me back to reality.

“Hello! You okay?”

I nodded and grabbed a can of coke from the table to have something to do, some distraction.

“About school,” my dad’s voice cut through everyone else’s. I spun my head around, to find him walking over to my side. “You can’t just walk out like that. If someone’s bullying you then you need to let me know, and I will contact the school.” I cracked open the can and nodded, looking down at the table. “I mean it, Oakley,” he added sternly. His tone was harsh, but no one even looked up. To them it was just a concerned father telling his daughter off because he was worried about her.

So I didn’t cause a scene or prolong the discussion, I nodded.

“Good girl. Now grab a plate, I think the food’s ready.” He kissed my forehead and went to take his seat next to Mum.

Thankfully, Cole started talking to me about a class trip the sixth-form students were taking to a theme park, and how he wished I were going too. I threw myself into listening to him and not dwelling on Dad being angry, but I didn’t feel hungry any more. I knew I should eat though: all I’d had today was ice cream, and Mum would start fussing if I didn’t have a proper meal.

David placed a plate of burgers and sausages on the table. I took one of each and grabbed bread rolls. I forced myself to take a bite of my ketchup-smothered, charred hot dog.

“It’s agreed then? Two weeks in Italy,” Jenna exclaimed, clapping her hands together. Italy? What had I missed?

“While you were off in Oakley land, we just planned the holiday,” he explained, reading my confused expression. Oh! That put a smile on my face. I felt my excitement build at the thought of going on holiday. Every year we went away with Cole’s family, and I loved every second of it.

“Italy,” Mum confirmed, her face lighting up. She seemed excited too. I knew she loved spending time in foreign shops with Jenna, or sitting by the pool gossiping.

Everybody else agreed, and I grinned. I couldn’t wait to get away, to relax and hopefully forget everything for a week. Cole winked at me, and I blushed. Oh, God, please say he didn’t see me blush. Quickly looking away, I fiddled with my fingers, feeling embarrassed. I did love the way he made me feel, but I didn’t want him to know. We couldn’t be together. I would never be good enough for him. He was perfect, and I was broken.

Once we finished dinner, Cole and I went back up to his room so I could

watch Hollyoaks. We didn't have Sky because Dad complained that it was a rip off them charging so much, so Cole recorded the latest episode for me every single day. I could have just watched them when they were on, but my gymnastics classes clashed sometimes.

I settled on his bed and laid my head on his chest. His heart was beating steadily. The sound was so calming – like my very own lullaby.

“Whoa, bad move,” Cole called out, shaking his head at the TV. He hated the programme so much that he made up a commentary on what was going on. I laughed at him, enjoying his stupid remarks.

“Oakley,” he warned, glancing down. I pressed my lips together; my mouth ached when I tried to keep a serious face.

I gasped in surprise as he suddenly rolled us over, and moved over me. *Oh, wow.* He was hovering above me, his legs either side of mine as he pinned my hands over my head. I wasn't scared, not at all. There were no feelings of panic or dread. It felt... Right.

“Are you sorry?” He half-smiled and raised his eyebrows. My heart went crazy. I shook my head to play along. “Alright, you asked for it,” he said, with a shrug. His face became mischievous, eyes glistening and his face inched closer to mine.

“Oakley, you're parents said it's time to go,” Mia shouted as she burst into the room. She gasped as she saw the position we were in. Her eyes were on stalks. I groaned internally.

“Actually you know what? Why don't you two finish first?” she grinned. “I'll tell them you'll be a minute!”

Cole pushed himself up off me and reached down the side of the bed for something. He threw one of his trainers at her, but she managed to jump out of the way before it hit her. “Shut up, Mia,” he growled.

Mia laughed and stepped out of the room. I really hoped she wouldn't tell my parents about this. Not that we were even doing anything! I didn't want them to think anything was going on with Cole because they probably wouldn't let us be alone together.

Without looking him in the eye, because my face was flaming in embarrassment, I quickly kissed his cheek and hopped off the bed.

Just as I got out of his door, I heard him sigh.

“Are you ready, sweetheart?” Mum asked, placing a protective arm around my waist as I entered the room. I didn't reply to her question because Dad stepped forward in front of me.

“Let’s get you home. School tomorrow.” He smiled and stroked his hand down the back of my head. I nodded in agreement and slipped past them both, giving a little wave to Cole’s parents as I headed to the front door.

“Thank you for tonight,” Dad said to David and Jenna politely. “You’ll have to come to ours soon.”

“You’re welcome, and you know we’d love to,” Jenna responded.

I took a deep breath and watched them exchange their goodbyes. It looked so normal, just friends thanking each other, making plans and saying goodbye. I was the only one that could see through the façade.

“Why does it take them ten minutes to say bye,” Jasper moaned, appearing at my side. Where had he been? I shrugged. They would say goodbye and then start another conversation. It went on like that for a while.

“We’re leaving,” Jasper called loudly. Mum gave us a little wave of acknowledgment and went back to chatting about Dad’s business, which, judging by the recent hushed phone conversations and his stressed outbursts I guessed was in trouble.

I walked home with Jasper. He hung back and walked at my pace. I could tell by the way he glanced over at me that he wanted me to hurry up, he was probably keen to get home so he could play computer games.

“Shit.” Jasper cursed. “You got a key?”

I sighed in exasperation and shook my head. My key was in my school bag in Cole’s bedroom.

We both turned and looked back at Cole’s house, just as our parents were walking along his path. Mum had my school bag over her shoulder. Thank God, I didn’t have to go back and get it. I wasn’t ready to see Cole again.

Dad unlocked the door and let us in. “Make sure you do any work you missed today, Oakley,” he instructed, nodding his head towards the bag that Mum let slip off her shoulder.

I nodded and took it from her. I felt so tired from an extremely long day, and just needed to be out of the way, so I went straight to my room. Just as I snuggled under my thick puffy covers, my mobile beeped with a text message. I knew it would be from Cole. Not only was he the only person to text me apart from my parents and Jasper, but he also sent me a message every night.

My stomach was fluttering as I opened the message. It said just one word, ‘Night x’ I loved the x. A kiss.

I hit reply and typed, ‘Goodnight x’ but I didn’t send it. I never sent them. Not ever. I saved the message in the outbox with all the others and sighed. My eyes filled with tears. I desperately wanted to reply to him, but I was too scared of where that might lead.

I woke up in the morning to the sunlight streaming through the middle of my curtains and someone gently shaking my arm.

“Oakley, time to get up, sugar,” Mum whispered softly. “Are you feeling okay? I don’t normally have to wake you.”

I rubbed my eyes to try to wake myself up properly. Last day of school today. *Finally*. I pushed myself up and smiled. My head was pounding, and I just wanted to stay in bed, but Dad worked from home on Thursdays and Fridays and I knew he wouldn’t be happy if I missed another day. He would complain about my grades too. It wouldn’t look good for his perfect family image if his daughter’s grades were anything less than As.

“Okay. Well, breakfast will be ready soon. I’m making scrambled egg on toast. You need a good breakfast for your last day at school.”

She left me to get ready and I wasted no time in packing my bag and changing into my uniform. It was far too hot for the school blazer, but the teachers didn’t seem to care about that. I took a deep breath before brushing my teeth: just one more day to get through.

When I got downstairs for breakfast, Cole was already sitting at the table eating scrambled eggs. “Morning, Oaks,” he mumbled, chewing on his food. I hated my name being shortened, and he knew that.

I sat down next to Cole and smiled at Mum, thanking her for the breakfast she just placed in front of me. “So are you two doing anything after school?” Mum asked, grinning at us both. She has a stupid fantasy in her head that Cole and I will get together. Sure, we had been friends for years, but it couldn’t ever be more than that, not now. Cole could do so much better than me.

“Probably get some ice cream or something, right?” He glanced at me and shovelled another forkful of egg in his mouth. I smiled in agreement. That sounded like the perfect way to end the year, unlike some of my classmates who would be at the park downing cider.

“Okay, come on, we’re gonna be late,” Cole mumbled, grabbing my hand and pulling me off the stool. I gasped in surprise but didn’t pull my hand back. It felt too nice.

We parked outside the sixth form building as usual. It hadn’t taken long

to get to school; unfortunately there wasn't a lot of traffic.

"Look, if anyone says anything to you today just come and find me. You know what lessons I have, and if I have a free I'll be in the sixth form block."

The only reason I knew what lessons he had was because he constantly shoved his timetable in my face so I would know where to find him if I needed him. It was sweet but unnecessary.

"You could even text me, you know. I'd come and find you straight away," he added quietly, staring out of the window.

I dropped my gaze to my lap. That couldn't happen. Cole sighed and flopped back into his seat. "Okay, just come and find me then."

I felt so horrible that I just kept staring at the floor. I hated disappointing him. "It's okay," he said reassuringly. "I'll see you later, yeah?"

Finally looking up, I nodded and smiled appreciatively. We both got out of the car, and waved to each other as we went our separate ways. As always, I hugged myself and walked quickly towards my form room. One more day, that was all.

My hope for an uneventful day was nearly crushed when I saw Julian standing just ahead of me, in the middle of the corridor. He was messing around with his friends, pushing and punching each other. Thankfully, there was another way I could go so I wouldn't have to bump into him, yet. Julian's lip looked a little swollen and bruised, but I couldn't see properly from standing so far away, and I certainly wasn't going to get a closer look.

"Hi," Hannah said from behind me, making me jump slightly. I half expected it to be Laura or one of her pathetic little friends. I smiled at Hannah, relaxing my shoulders, and we walked into registration together.

Luckily, the teacher was early today, so no one had a chance to say anything to me. The morning so far was going well, but I wasn't naïve enough to think it would continue that way all day.

The music teacher let us go five minutes early for lunch. I packed everything in my bag slowly so I would be the last one to leave.

"You coming to the canteen?" Hannah asked as she grabbed her bag and swung it over her shoulder. I shook my head and smiled, grateful that she had at least asked.

"Okay, see you later." She waved over her shoulder as she walked out with her friends.

I made my way quickly along the corridor. After lunch, I only had two lessons to get through. The back corridor was deserted; everyone had already

gone to the canteen or outside. Someone grabbed me from behind. I gasped, panic rose inside me. Before I even had the chance to struggle, I was pushed into a classroom.

My lungs stung where I'd held my breath. I felt like a scared little girl again. "Hey, Oakley." I recognised his voice instantly. Julian. I felt only a tiny bit of relief that it was him, but I still needed to get away.

Gulping, I stepped back. My hands shook with fear. What did he want? "I was hoping to find you on your own." he smirked.

I felt sick and dirty. My skin crawled; it felt as if a thousand bugs were running around all over my body. "Come on, don't look so scared. I'm not gonna hurt ya." His breath smelt strongly of tobacco. It almost made me gag.

Julian leant towards me, and I recoiled in horror. Was he trying to kiss me? "I just want to talk," he whispered, tucking my hair behind my ear. *Don't be a victim again, Oakley*, I screamed at myself.

I used every ounce of anger I had built up inside and shoved his chest. He stumbled backwards as I caught him off-guard, and swung his arm out to steady himself.

"Why do you have to be such a little bitch, Oakley. What the hell makes you better than anyone else, huh?" he bellowed and punched the wall.

I jumped back, my eyes widened in shock. *What was that?* Julian looked almost out of it. His eyes were dilated, and he was breathing heavily. He was high. He must be.

The door swung open, and I ran towards it. Mrs Stains, one of the teaching assistants stood in front of me, blocking the way.

"What on earth is going on in here?" she demanded, frowning in anger.

Julian straightened up. "Nothing, we were just talking about a project," he said with a cocky smirk.

"A project on the last day of school?" Mrs Stains asked, raising her eyebrows in doubt.

"Not a school one," Julian shot back.

She shook her head but knew there was nothing she could do, even though it was clear Julian was lying.

"Out. Both of you."

I scurried past her and ran out of the building. It seemed like all I did at school was hide out and run away. I hated myself for that, but I just couldn't take the constant bullying.

As soon as I reached the wooden shelter at the local park, I collapsed to

the ground. Wrapping my arms around my legs, I started sobbing. My head still hurt, and I felt like crap. If they didn't like me, why couldn't they just leave me alone?

I squeezed my eyes closed as I felt my phone vibrating in my pocket. It would be Cole. I really didn't want to see him. Well, I didn't want him to see me like this. I wished I could have been home-schooled by Mum, but she thought as long as I did well in mainstream school then that's where I should be.

My phone had vibrated at least ten times since I'd been sitting on the ground. A few texts and a load of missed calls. I flipped the phone open and started reading the first of Cole's messages. 'Hey where are you? I'm waiting near my car x'. I sighed and scrolled down to read the next one. 'Hurry up I'm starving! x'. The next two were similar, but after that, he must have started to worry. 'Oakley where are you?' The final text message was angry as well as concerned. 'Where the hell are you? Text me back now! I just need to know you're okay'.

Switching the phone off, I laid down on the grass. I felt pathetic. I was pathetic. If the teacher hadn't opened the door when she did, what would Julian have done? I didn't believe he would physically hurt me, but I didn't entirely trust him not to, either.

"Oakley?"

I sat up and wiped my tear-stained face with my hand. How had Cole found me so quickly? I plastered on a fake smile and waited for him to appear around the corner.

Cole let out a sigh of relief when he saw me, and seeing him made me relax. I relied on him too much. It was selfish of me. My relief soured as his expression turned to anger.

"What the hell, Oakley? Do you have any idea how worried I've been?" he shouted, his forehead creased in a deep frown. He looked as mad as he had been at Julian. Cole, Mum, and Jasper were the only three people in the world that I trusted entirely. My shoulders sagged. I felt awful for making him worry.

After a few seconds of complete silence and just looking at each other, he knelt down beside me.

"What happened?" he asked softly, his voice was tight, but he was trying to be calm.

I looked at him and shook my head as I swallowed the lump in my

throat.

“Nothing happened?” he asked doubtfully. Again, I shook my head. “Why didn’t you text back or wait for me before you took off like that? I was really worried about you. You don’t even seem to care!”

I flinched at his words. I did care. *That* was the problem; I cared about him too much.

Cole scratched the back of his neck and groaned.

“You should have *at least* replied. I didn’t know what’d happened to you.”

I looked away, not wanting to see the disappointment and hurt in his eyes.

“Oakley! God, you have no idea do you?”

His sudden outburst made me jump. We had argued and annoyed each other before, but he had never been this angry. He sighed heavily and shook his head.

“Fine. Don’t worry about it. You obviously don’t give a shit about me so just forget it.” He stood up and quickly walked away.

I stared at his back as he left. Tears rolled down my face, dropping down onto my lap. How could he think I didn’t care about him? I felt sick. Was that it now? Did he want nothing to do with me again?

Chapter Three

Oakley

I sat as still as a statue, staring at the space where Cole had been standing just minutes ago. My heart felt like it was breaking in two. What if we never spoke again? I shook my head. I was overreacting, but we had never fought like that before.

At least if he stayed away, he wouldn't get any more comments about him babysitting the 'mute freak'. Cole had never cared what people thought of him, at least that was what he told me, but it must have gotten to him occasionally.

I shouldn't have ever let myself like him as anything more than a friend. We were never going to be anything more. How could we be? I couldn't even talk to him! There were times when he would give me a lingering look that I thought he might just like me a little bit. I was sure I wasn't imagining it but it was hard for me to believe he'd want me.

For the rest of the day, I did nothing but sit inside the shack at the park and stare into space. After a while, I didn't even think about anything, I just existed. As I saw and heard students walk past the park on their way home from school though, I knew I needed to pull myself together and get home.

Walking slowly, I headed home, looking down at the ground to protect my eyes from the sun. Would Mum and Dad still be there? They were attending a charity dinner and had to travel just over a hundred miles, so they were leaving sometime in the afternoon. I prayed that they would have already left.

Sighing in relief as I noticed Dad's car wasn't in the driveway, I walked to the front door feeling a little lighter. At least I wouldn't have their freak out to deal with.

When I pushed the door open, I saw my lazy brother sitting on the sofa playing the PlayStation. His university had finished for summer earlier than my high school, so his summer holiday had started two weeks ago. One day he would have to grow up and get a house and job, but it was hard to imagine it seeing him slobbing around here all the time.

“Hi,” he grunted, with a little nod of his head, not even looking up from the screen. I flopped down on the sofa beside him. School was over for six weeks, but I couldn’t even feel that happy about it. All I could think of was the fight with Cole and that look on his face.

Jasper took a double take of my face and paused his game.

“What happened?”

I smiled and shook my head.

“Where’s Cole?” Jasper’s face hardened, his jaw clenched and eyes narrowed. “What did he do?” he demanded. Again, I shook my head and tried to make out he was reacting over nothing.

“So, if Cole’s not the reason you’re upset, who is?” Jasper asked, frowning doubtfully. Cole was the reason, but it wasn’t his fault. “That idiot at school? The one I beat up last year?” he growled, referring to Julian. Jasper was usually as soft as a pussycat but not when it came to me. He was overprotective and quick to lash out at anyone that he thought was giving me a hard time.

I remembered the incident Jasper was referring to; how could I not? Jasper was still in sixth form. He had caught Julian saying some stuff about me. I still didn’t know what, but it made Jasper punch him a few times. He was suspended from school for a week, and then given a week of lunchtime detentions for refusing to apologise to Julian.

It would seem Cole had fully taken over his role... As a brother? Did Cole see me as a little sister? I ached with disappointment.

I shook my head in answer to Jasper’s question, and he got up and walked into the kitchen. There was no way he had dropped it just like that. I followed him, waiting at the door as he got his phone and started dialling. *Oh, no!* I knew what he was doing. As he raised the phone to his ear, I leapt forward and grabbed it out of his hand. He had started ringing Cole, but the call hadn’t started going through thankfully.

He narrowed his eyes. “Okay, I’m gonna ask you one more time. Was it. Cole?”

I sighed in frustration and shook my head for what seemed like the fifteenth time.

“Good. You’re not gonna tell me what it’s about are you?”

I raised an eyebrow and let out an exasperated noise.

“Yeah didn’t think so, you’re too damn stubborn for your own good! You’re okay though, right?”

I nodded and smiled. Settling on changing the subject and getting my annoying and crazy brother back, I opened the fridge and grabbed two cans of coke and threw one at him.

“Thanks,” he mumbled, aware that I was trying to end the conversation, and opened the can very carefully in case it exploded all over him. It did not, unfortunately.

“Mum and Dad left for that thing already. You’ll need to cook tonight.” He looked away, downing probably half the can at once. I knew exactly what that meant. Mum told him to cook, and he was trying to get out of it.

“What’re you making?” Jasper asked casually, glancing at the oven. I rolled my eyes, picked out two Hawaiian pizzas from the freezer, and threw them to him as I walked up the stairs.

“Oakley?” he shouted after me, but I kept on walking, smiling to myself. He was so lazy; all he had to do was stick it in the oven for fifteen minutes.

As soon as I closed my bedroom door, I practically ripped off my school uniform and chucked it in my washing basket angrily. I hated school and Julian, but most of all, I hated myself.

From our fight earlier, it was clear Cole and I were not going to go out for ice cream, so I got into my most comfortable pyjamas and prepared for a night of boring TV. I should have practiced gymnastics, but I couldn’t be bothered to do anything. I was just going to embrace the mood I was in and sulk.

Marcus, my gym coach, would not be happy if I hadn’t perfected the triple back flip by next practice. I didn’t care though. I hated the thought of moving and going out to the garden. I had been going to gymnastics since I was seven, and I loved it. Whenever I was there it took me away from reality; I didn’t think about anything or anyone. It was as if all of my problems disappeared. My gymnastics team were amazing too; they accepted me for who I was.

Lying back on my bed, I absentmindedly flicked through the TV channels and settled on watching yesterday’s Hollyoaks. Twenty minutes later, I heard Jasper stomping up the stairs. He pushed my door open.

“Dinner! Come and get it, I’m not waiting on your arse!”

I followed him downstairs to get my, probably burnt, pizza. He hadn’t done too badly; only the crust was a little darker than it should have been. I did turn my nose up as Jasper squirted mayonnaise all over his food though. The only thing that belonged with pizza was ketchup.

“I spoke to Cole,” he muttered, chewing his food and giving me a good view of the mashed up pizza in his mouth. Nice. I looked down at the table and just nodded in response. “You left school because of Julian didn’t you?”

That made me look up at him. Was he just guessing or had Cole said that? Did Cole confront Julian? I started to feel a little sick.

“Just tell me,” he demanded, sounding frustrated. “Was it Julian, Oakley?”

I nodded, feeling defeated. He was going to find out anyway. Jasper jumped up, balling his hands into fists.

“Little bastard. I’m gonna kill him!”

I grabbed his arm and shook my head. What was it with the killing Julian thing? Cole and Jasper were both acting like they were in an action movie.

Jasper sighed and sat back down when he saw how worried I was. I’d had enough of it all. It was the holidays anyway, so it didn’t matter any more.

“Fine. But I swear if he comes near you again I *will* kill him.”

I ignored that; it wasn’t worth arguing over. I doubted he would drop it, but he wanted me to believe he had.

“So, is Cole coming over tonight?” he asked, trying to act casual. I could tell he was dying to know what had happened between us that we’d cancelled our plans together after school.

I stood up and grabbed my plate, deciding to eat in my room since Dad wasn’t here and I didn’t want to have the Cole conversation with Jasper. Half past eight was too early to go to bed, but I didn’t want to go downstairs and risk Jasper’s questioning though, so I put on a film and curled up under the covers. Cole kept entering my mind, making it hard to concentrate on the TV. I should go over there, get on my knees and show him my best ‘please forgive me’ face, the one that worked every time, but I was too stubborn and scared. Half an hour later, I was finally feeling tired, so I turned the television off and closed my eyes.

Jasper woke me up by knocking on my door and screaming my name.

“Oakley! Get up, we’re going to Cole’s for lunch,” he yelled, much louder than necessary. Going to Cole’s for lunch? *No*.

I ran to the door and pulled it open, frowning at Jasper for an explanation.

“We’re booking the holiday today remember, so we’re all going over there for a barbecue lunch.” Barbecue again? “Get dressed. We’re leaving in

half an hour.”

My heart sank a little. I half-smiled at my brother, and slammed the door shut behind him. Lunch at Cole’s. That was going to be awkward.

Half an hour later, I was dressed and sitting on my bed, waiting for someone to call me down. After seven minutes, the inevitable happened – Mum shouted my name. I took a deep breath and walked downstairs slowly. Going over there was the last thing I wanted to do. I felt sick with nerves.

“You look nice, honey,” Mum complimented with a smile. I could tell that she was thinking that I had dressed nicely for Cole. I only had on a long white summer dress and yellow ballet shoes. It wasn’t for Cole. It was because of the heat. I didn’t wear make-up, and I hadn’t done anything with my hair. I didn’t think I looked particularly nice.

We all walked to the Benson’s house at Jasper’s pace: the only time he did anything in a hurry was when there was food involved, or girls, so presumably the thought of the barbeque was behind his speediness. I wanted to walk slowly and put off seeing Cole for as long as possible, but my brother clearly had other ideas.

Jasper knocked eagerly at their front door, and within seconds, Jenna greeted us with a hug, and then ushered us through their perfectly kept house to the back garden. My heart sank with every step I took. Part of me hoped he was out, but I knew he wouldn’t be. I did want to see him though. I hated arguing with him, and just wanted everything to go back to how it was.

Cole sat at the end of the wooden table, staring into his glass of coke. He looked sad, really sad. As we approached the table, he looked up and said a quick hello.

Where should I sit now? Would near him be inappropriate? Would he even want me there? Not wanting to make things any more awkward, I sat next to Mia, forcing Jasper to sit near Cole.

Mum handed the brochure to me and Mia so we could see the hotel we were staying in. *Wow*, was all I could think. It looked amazing. The hotel was a beautiful white building, halfway up a mountain. It didn’t look too busy but seemed to have enough to keep everyone entertained. According to the brochure, the harbour was a two-minute walk away and the beach a little further, approximately twenty minutes.

The nightlife was good too, apparently. There were a few bars and clubs nearby. Mia and Jasper would want to go out no doubt. Perhaps I would be allowed to go too? I was almost sixteen and if I was with Cole they’d let me

go, wouldn't they?

I felt Cole's eyes on me, so I glanced to the side and smiled a little awkwardly. My cheeks felt hot. I was probably blushing. He smiled back. Was he forgiving me? Just as I thought he was about to talk to me, David placed a plate of charred chicken kebabs down on the table. Cole grabbed one and started eating. *Please talk to me.*

Throughout lunch, Cole and I exchanged glances.

Mum had noticed things were off between us: she would look at me, then Cole, and then back to me. I prayed that she wouldn't say anything. Should I just leave? Faking sickness and going home sounded like a very good idea right now.

"Oakley?" Cole said as he stood up. He nodded his head, gesturing for me to follow him. I got up immediately and followed him inside. He had made the first move, so there was no way I was passing up the chance to make things right again. The walk up to his room was completely silent. Cole said nothing. I hoped that he would talk when we were safely inside his room and out of the way of everyone else.

Sitting on the end of his bed, I hugged my legs and rested my chin on my knees. He sighed and sat down, facing me. The sun reflected off his face, lightening his deep blue eyes. The smell of his aftershave wrapped around me, and I relaxed. In that moment, I knew I couldn't be without him. I *had* to make up for our fallout and get my best friend back. Not having Cole in my life was not an option.

He took a deep breath and just stared into my eyes for a minute. I felt self-conscious under his intense gaze. It was as if he could see right through me; see the terrified, broken little girl inside. I never wanted him to see that.

"Look, I'm sorry about yesterday. I shouldn't have shouted at you, but you should've text me to let me know you were okay." I nodded and looked down at the bed cover. "Oakley," he whispered, gently lifting my chin up, so I faced him. His fingers lingered on my chin, making my heart race. The feeling of his skin on mine gave me butterflies. It felt so right.

My eyes filled with tears, and I smiled. I'd gotten him back. Grabbing his hand, I squeezed gently in way of an apology. What happened yesterday wasn't his fault at all. Cole had nothing to apologise for. His face lit up as he smiled.

"It's okay," he told me, knowing exactly what that gesture meant. Suddenly, he pulled my hand making me fall forward. I tried to move back,

but he pulled me into a tight hug. It was a little awkward as I was sitting on his lap. It was too intimate, and I wasn't used to intimacy feeling natural and safe. I wanted to run, but at the same time, I never wanted to leave.

I wrapped my arms around him, ignoring the tense knot in my stomach. With every passing second, I felt more comfortable. Cole would never hurt me. I knew that. We stayed in each other's arms for a few minutes, and I was enjoying it. His fingertips were gently tickling up and down my back, giving me goose bumps.

Eventually, we both pulled away, and he seemed as reluctant as I was to let go. My feelings for him grew every day, becoming crazily confusing. Cole looked happy. His eyes were alight and his features soft. Happiness bubbled inside me at seeing him smile properly again.

"We don't fight again. Ever again, okay?" he said seriously, holding both my hands and playing with my fingers. I nodded in agreement. That was the easiest thing I had ever agreed to.

He smiled again, flashing his white teeth.

"Good. So two weeks in Italy, hey? We have to do some water sports and hire a boat."

I raised my eyebrow, making him laugh and shake his head. Hire a boat? Neither of us could sail, and there was no way the first time we tried was going to be alone in a foreign country.

"I guess you're gonna go all girly on me and want to sun bathe?" I nodded and smirked. I was pasty white and definitely wanted to get a tan. "Fine, I'll make you a deal. I'll suffer through that *if* you go diving with me?"

He had been trying to get me to go diving for years, but I hated the idea of it. I'm not a fan of fish and everything in the sea was all slimy, *and* the sea itself was full of sewage. I bit my lip, shaking my head and trying not to smile. The deal didn't matter. He would sun bathe with me anyway. He always did.

Cole sighed heavily, pretending to be annoyed. "Fine but two days sun bathing max, and you have to buy the ice creams." I pursed my lips and nodded. That part also didn't matter because as soon as we were there he would insist on paying.

He laid down and pulled me with him. I almost landed on top of him but managed to move to the side just in time. We laid side-by-side, hand-in-hand, both staring up to the ceiling. I felt happy again.

"We need to get your parents to let you go out at night this time," he

said after a couple minutes of comfortable silence. That was another thing I loved about him – he thought similar things to me. However, that could just be because we spent so much time together.

I turned my head to face him, chewing my lip as I nodded. The last time we were away, I had to be back at the hotel at ten and hang out there for the rest of the evening. We needed to think of some way of convincing my parents that I was more responsible now that I was older.

Suddenly the air felt like it had been sucked from the room. Cole's head inched closer to mine. Was he going to kiss me? I froze. Did I want that? *Yes, you know you do!*

"We'll talk to them about it later." His voice was so quiet that he was almost whispering. The way he was looking at me made gave me butterflies and for a second I stopped breathing.

"Cole? Oakley?" Mia shouted up the stairs.

Cole's whipped his head around. "What?" he growled towards the door. I sat up, putting a little distance between us. My heart was pounding. That was the second time she had interrupted... Something in two days.

Mia walked in seconds later and smiled widely.

"We go in two weeks! Oakley, I'm holiday shopping Monday if you wanted to come?" I nodded and smiled gratefully. I definitely needed to get some new clothes.

"I'm coming too," Cole mumbled, still frowning at his sister. I wanted to laugh at how funny he was when he was annoyed. Did he really want to kiss me as much as I wanted to kiss him? It seemed like he did. It probably wasn't a good idea though. If we got together, I doubted it would work out. It couldn't. In time, my silence would drive him away.

Mia's mouth hung open in shock. "*You* want to come shopping?"

"I need to get some stuff too, but I'm not walking around every damn shop with you two. I'll go off on my own." I rolled my eyes and sat back against the wall. He was impossible when we were shopping.

"Alright, but we're gonna be out *all day*."

He shrugged, "Yeah, whatever."

Mia clapped her hands together in excitement, "I need to go and make a list!" She squealed and ran out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

"How the hell are we related?" he mumbled to himself, shaking his head at the door in disbelief. He really was in a mood. "So you gonna buy a tiny bikini?" Cole asked, wiggling his eyebrows. I frowned. No, definitely not. "I

was joking!” He laughed. I smiled at him, trying to make out that his comment hadn’t affected me.

He sat up against the wall next to me. His side pressed against mine as he reached over and grabbed the television remote. I smiled when he put on yesterday’s Hollyoaks. He had still recorded it for me, even after our argument. Cole gazed at me, but quickly looked away. Was he blushing?

Cole was, without a doubt the sweetest guy in the world, and I was so lucky to have him in my life. I laid my head on his shoulder and held onto his hand as we watched television.

“Well that sucked,” Cole mumbled under his breath as Hollyoaks finished. He quickly changed the channel to some bike racing rubbish. I smiled to myself. He always said something like that when it finished, although he had spent the whole time staring intently at the TV.

To stop the boredom kicking in from the bikes zooming around in a circle, I grabbed Cole’s iPhone and started playing with one of the games I had downloaded. My phone was old and crappy, so I used Cole’s. I had never sent a text message or made a call. The only reason I had a phone was because Mum bought it for me and insisted I used it for emergencies. Mum bought it when I was eleven. The phone had sat in my bag through two years of emergencies before it was over.

After a few minutes of Cole stealing little glances at me, he turned his attention back to the TV. Did that mean he liked me or not? I wanted to know, but at the same time, I was scared to know – it would change everything.

“Do you want to go to Ben’s party?” he asked after a while. “We should leave soon if you do.”

I did want to go, but I had to get my parents’ permission first. Biting my lip, I nodded.

“I’ll go speak to your parents.”

I instantly knew they would say yes. If I was with Cole, they were happy. They trusted him.

He leapt off the bed and bounded out of his room. I smiled and laid back, mentally planning what I should wear. Nothing revealing, not that I had anything revealing anyway. Cole would probably just wear jeans and a t-shirt, so I decided to do the same.

Chapter Four

Oakley

“Cinderella, you shall go to the ball,” Cole announced, doing a little bow from his doorway. I jumped up in excitement, making Cole laugh. “I’ll change quickly then we can drop by yours so you can get ready.” He pulled his top over his head. My head prickled, and I was sure I would be blushing.

Cole didn’t even seem to notice my discomfort. He just continued undressing. I didn’t know where to look. What were the rules? Should I just carry on as normal or keep my eyes down until he had finished?

My heart raced when I heard something heavier than a t-shirt dropping to the floor. His jeans? Heat rushed to my cheeks. Was he only in his boxers? I felt like I should leave, but Cole was between the door and me. When I heard him pick up his keys, I decided it was safe to look up.

“Ready then?” he asked, swinging his keys on his finger. I didn’t acknowledge the question; I just got up and walked past him. We made our way downstairs and found our parents in the kitchen, drinking coffee around the island.

“We’re going now,” Cole told them.

“Okay. You both have a good time. Cole, please look after her and make sure she’s home by eleven,” Dad said, kissing my forehead. Eleven? I usually had to be home a lot earlier than that. What had gotten into him?

I looked up at him with my mouth hanging open. Was he really letting me out that late? He chuckled deeply and ruffled my hair.

“School holidays now and I guess I have to face up to the fact that you’re not my little girl any more.”

His frown deepened towards the end of his little speech. It made me feel uncomfortable; I wrapped my arms around myself.

“You stay with Cole the whole time, and absolutely no alcohol.” Dad’s voice was stern, intimidating. However, no one ever mentioned anything. Maybe he was being normal and just seemed intimidating to me. I nodded in agreement, and pulled on Cole’s arm to get him to leave.

Just as we reached the front door, Jasper’s hand flew out in front of us.

“And where do you think you’re going?” he questioned, raising his eyebrows challengingly.

“We’re eloping to Mexico,” Cole muttered sarcastically, making me smile in amusement.

Jasper glared at Cole blankly.

“If you get her pregnant I will kill you!”

What?! Where on earth did that come from?

Cole burst out laughing and shook his head while I just wanted the ground to open up and swallow me whole.

“Of course not! What’s wrong with you?”

I frowned in hurt. What was that supposed to mean? I didn’t want a baby but why was he so appalled by the idea? Appalled by the idea of being with me maybe? My eyes prickled, and I desperately fought to stop myself crying. I couldn’t blame him for not wanting to be with me.

“You’d better not,” Jasper grumbled. “Look if you two wanna start with the kissing and naked time, I get it, just don’t hurt her.”

I pushed past my idiot brother and speed-walked to Cole’s car. Going to a party was the last thing I wanted to do now. Between Jasper and Cole, I now felt horrible. They didn’t know anything though, so I couldn’t blame them for how I felt.

“Good. Now don’t have her out too late, and for god’s sake wear a condom!” I heard Jasper yell after Cole. I couldn’t stay around while they joked about that stuff.

Cole hopped in the car and started the engine.

“Are you okay? Ignore your brother, he’s an idiot.”

I knew he was, but I just wished he wouldn’t joke about things like that. I nodded and smiled, deciding that I wanted to enjoy the night. I wasn’t going to let anything get in the way of me having some fun.

Cole drove forward and stopped at my house. Smirking at how lazy he was for driving one house over, I opened my door.

As soon as I was in my room, I stripped out of my dress and grabbed a pair of jeans and a nice top. I wondered if now Dad was accepting that I was growing up if he would let me wear make-up. I wanted to wear it, to look older. I didn’t ever want to be seen as a child again.

“Oakley,” Cole shouted up the stairs, making me jump. How long had I been getting ready? It couldn’t have been more than five minutes. Grabbing my black jumper, I ran out of the door.

We arrived at Ben's house and from the loud music and abandoned cars outside; the party was already in full swing. Excitement bubbled up inside me. I was determined to have fun and be a normal teenager for the night.

"Let's go, beautiful," he said, smiling widely. How could he say one thing to make me feel like I was the last person he would ever want to be with, then something else that seemingly contradicted it? I hated that liking someone was so confusing.

Walking side-by-side towards the door, Cole slung his arm over my shoulder. There were so many people crammed into the house; most of them were drinking in the lounge. Empty plastic cups and crumbled pieces of food were already scattered all over the floor.

Cole pulled me through the crowd, saying hello as we walked past some of his friends, and into the kitchen.

"Cole," Ben shouted, dragging Cole's name out for a few seconds. "Hey, Oakley, you came too." Ben almost stumbled on the spot but managed to grab onto the worktop to stop himself falling. "Get yourselves some punch, or there's beer, or punch, and I think some JD. I think I drank it though. I dunno," he rambled, shrugging his shoulders.

"Okay, man." Cole chuckled, tightening his arm around me and guiding me to the fridge. He grabbed us two cokes and handed me one. He wasn't going to have a beer? Before the fridge door closed, I pointed to the bottles of Becks at the bottom. He shook his head.

"I have something very special to chauffeur home later." I rolled my eyes at him. That was just plain cheesy. Cole chuckled and winked at me.

I sipped my coke and watched Cole joking and messing around with his friends. It was nice seeing him play wrestling with Ben and teasing Kerry about her awful luck with men. However, as I watched him wrap his arm around Ben's neck, I couldn't help feeling a little envious.

"Wanna dance?" he asked casually, once he had gotten back to his feet after wrestling Ben to the beer-stained floor. I nodded and threw my empty can in the bin.

I held onto Cole's hand tightly and pressed myself into his back as we pushed our way through the crowd. How did Ben even know that many people? He must have just put an open invitation on Facebook or something. There were way too many people here for the size of the house. I didn't envy Ben for having to clean up in the morning. I didn't really think parties were like the teen ones in movies, but this one certainly conformed to the

stereotype.

No one seemed to even notice I was with Cole, or they just didn't care. I felt light, like I was floating almost. Acceptance meant more to me than it probably should. I'd heard people at school say they didn't care about being accepted, but that was just because they already were.

Cole finally stopped in a tiny bit of space near one of the speakers. I don't think he could have found a worse spot to dance; there was barely room for one person! It meant we were close. My chest was pressed against his, but I still felt comfortable. With growing confidence, I wrapped my arms around his neck. When he didn't push me away, I smiled.

The song changed to Beyoncé's 'Halo'. It was one of my favourite songs and reminded me so much of my relationship with Cole. If it wasn't for him, I honestly didn't know what I would be like or how I would have coped. Without Cole even knowing it, he kept me from falling apart.

Slowly, he bent his head and pressed his forehead to mine. Like every clichéd romance movie, everyone but us seemed to disappear. I wanted him to kiss me so much. All my insecurities of not being good enough for him vanished as his lips parted, just inches from mine.

After what felt like years, his soft lips brushed lightly against mine. I felt like my body was on fire, as if every nerve ending was alight. It was the most incredible feeling, almost overwhelming. His lips moved in time with mine, his hand behind my head, wrapping into my hair.

Suddenly, Cole pulled away. Had I done something wrong? I followed where he was looking. A crowd had gathered around the stereo, which was now silent. I had been so caught up in the kiss that I hadn't even noticed the music had stopped.

Biting my lip, I forced myself to be brave and look up at Cole. He was glaring at the stereo as if he wanted to murder it. I smiled at the thought of him not wanting to end the kiss either.

"Wanna go outside for a bit?" he asked, nodding his head towards the door. I started walking, and he followed. *Okay, act normal: this is Cole.*

Ben's front garden was trashed too. The grass was littered with crisp packets, bottles, cans of alcohol and plastic cups. Spotting a clean space on the floor, I sat down cross-legged and waited for whatever was coming next. Cole laid on his side in front of me, with his head perched on his hand. He didn't say anything, and usually that would be just fine, but this was a different kind of silence.

I picked at the blades of grass just to have something else to focus on. The awkwardness that fell over us was unbearable. The kiss meant so much to me, but it wasn't as important as having him in my life. Recently it seemed like every now and then he wanted more, and other times like he was happy to be friends. I didn't understand why so many girls gushed about liking someone; it was just plain hard work. Lying down beside him, I bit my lip.

"Oakley?" he whispered softly, stroking my hair. His fingertips brushing over my cheek and down my jaw gave me goose bumps. "I can't wait to go on holiday with you." Neither could I, but I thought he was going to talk about what just happened, or were you not supposed to? Internally, I screamed in frustration... Why was all of this so confusing?

"You're sitting with me on the plane, by the way, and I'm stealing you every day." That sounded fine by me. Spending the whole two weeks with him was perfect.

"You want to go back inside and get another drink?" he asked, after being outside for a while. Things were completely back to normal. The kiss hadn't ruined anything, but I wasn't sure if it had changed anything either. I nodded and stood up.

"Cole!" Ben shrieked, stumbling towards us. We had literally just walked through the front door. He must have sobered up slightly; he was steadier on his feet but still had a lopsided smile and glazed over eyes. "Wanna do shots?"

"I told you I wasn't drinking," Cole responded, punching Ben's arm. Was I responsible for Ben losing a drinking partner?

We followed Ben back to the kitchen, and Cole got all three of us a coke, saying Ben needed to sober up more to be ready to clean before his parents arrived home. A red can flew towards me. I only just managed to catch it before it hit my stomach.

Rolling my eyes at Cole, I held the can upright and very still before I dared to open it. I didn't need the embarrassment of having coke explode in my face. Cole laughed and shook his head. Suddenly he grabbed me around my waist and turned me so he could rest his chin on my shoulder. I did a little happy dance in my head.

After only a few seconds, one of his friends pulled me away and scowled at him.

"I'm Kerry," she announced. "I've been waiting for Cole to introduce us, but he's clearly trying to keep you all to himself."

I smiled at her, and she launched into telling me stories of Cole and Ben doing stupid dares at school, making me smile. Kerry's fun, happy personality was infectious. It was impossible not to like her. She spoke to me as if we had been friends for years. There were never any awkward questions, and she didn't try finding out what was wrong. She just accepted who I was and got on with it. She spoke *a lot*, but that was actually perfect. We balanced each other out. I hoped that she wasn't just being polite.

Occasionally her eyes would flick to Ben, and when she saw Mary on his lap, she frowned so slightly that I almost missed it. Over the years, I had gotten used to reading people's expressions more than most. There would always be hushed whispers when I was around, especially from my mum as she tried to figure out what was wrong with me.

Once Kerry's attention was back on me, I raised my eyebrow. She blushed, knowing that I had caught her staring. She definitely liked Ben, and he clearly liked her too.

"I'll get us another drink," she muttered, turning and rushing towards the fridge. I didn't expect her to be shy about something like that; she was so outgoing.

I caught Cole's attention, looked between Kerry and Ben and smiled.

"You want to play cupid?" He pulled me back into his arms. "Good luck with that. You've got to get Mary off him first, and she's like a fucking praying mantis!"

"Wanna go for a walk, Oakley?" Kerry asked, already grabbing my hand and pulling me away from Cole. Whoa, why so keen to get me away?

I followed her out to the back garden and sat down on a bench. No one else was out the back. It was quite big but full of children's ride-on bikes, games and toys. It looked like a toy store had been dumped in the garden.

At first I sat a little stiffly, playing with my fingers because I felt awkward being completely alone with her for the first time. "Okay, so I really, *really* like Ben. He's just so..." she trailed off, sighing. "So sweet, funny, amazing, caring, generous and so gorgeous!"

Her dark green eyes lit up as she spoke about him; it was nice to see. It was probably how I looked whenever I thought about Cole. "I know I should tell him but I just can't. I mean, what if he's not interested? It would be so embarrassing if he turned me down. I should just do it though, right? Oh, maybe I can down a few shots and kiss him! That way if he pushes me off I can just blame it on the drink!" She said, smiling proudly at her plan. I

couldn't imagine him not being interested in her. Not only was she pretty but she was funny and sweet too.

"Okay, so before we go back inside and I can get started on Operation Kiss Ben; we should talk about you and Cole. Are you two together?" Now who was embarrassed? I shook my head. Why did we need to talk about me? "But you want to be! I can see how you two look at each other and seriously he talks about you *all* the time. It's so cute. You want to be with him right?"

He talked about me all the time? All the time? That must mean he liked me, even just a little bit. You didn't think about just anyone all the time.

"Oakley?" Kerry wheedled, looking at me expectantly. Oh, I hadn't answered her question. I gave a little nod of my head, confirming that I did like Cole.

She squealed and grabbed my hand, pulling me up. "Come on then! Let's go get our men!"

I cringed. Go and get our men? Maybe admitting it to her wasn't a good idea after all. Who knows what she had planned. There was no way I was getting drunk and kissing Cole. I would rather wait and let things happen naturally. If anything was going to happen. I didn't think she would say anything to him though.

On the way back into the house, Kerry spoke constantly, and I couldn't have been happier to listen to her gushing about Ben's abs! Having a girl friend that wasn't bitchy was something that I definitely wanted. Hanging out with Kerry, even for such a short period of time, made me realise what I had been missing.

"I'm nervous." She smiled, gritting her teeth, and pushed us through the crowd that had gathered by the door. Cole was still in the same place, leaning against the kitchen counter.

I took a deep breath as we approached them. My heart went wild as his eyes landed on mine. Yep, I was definitely falling for him.

Chapter Five

Oakley

I took Cole's outstretched hand and skipped to him, pressing my side against his. He quickly pulled me round, so I was standing between his legs. That simple gesture was enough to make my heart soar.

"You okay?" Cole whispered in my ear. I swallowed hard as his breath tickled my skin, sending a shiver down my spine. A nod of the head answered his question.

"I'm guessing Kerry's finally making her move on Ben?"

I looked over to where he was looking and saw Kerry with her tongue down Ben's throat. Her plan seemed to be working.

After three cans of coke, I was desperate to go to the toilet. Cole had told me it was upstairs, last door on the right, so I weaved between the drunken guests to go find it. I had just closed the bathroom door when I heard Mary talking to some of her friends about Cole and me. The music was still quite loud upstairs so I could only just about hear, but I got the gist: 'Cole only feels sorry for her. He can do way better than that freak. She'll never make him happy, he'll get bored of her soon enough.'

Walking away from the door, I sat on the edge of the bath, not wanting to hear any more. Was Mary right? The thing what scared me most if we got together was Cole resenting me for not having a proper relationship where we could hold a conversation the traditional way. From the way he kissed me earlier, it didn't seem like any of that bothered him. Was Mary just jealous, or was she right?

I waited a few minutes before I used the bathroom and went back downstairs. I wanted to give them time to leave so I wouldn't have to pass them. Thankfully, they had left by the time I opened the door.

Cole smiled as I walked back in the kitchen. In that moment, I decided not to let Mary get to me. If Cole didn't want to be with me, then he didn't have to be. I walked straight up to him and wrapped my arms around his waist. Immediately feeling embarrassed, I pressed my forehead into his chest. Why did I do that in front of everyone? I probably looked like his stalker

fangirl!

When I loosened my grip on Cole's waist, he pulled away and grabbed my hand, leading me out of Ben's house. We walked along the pavement in silence; he didn't mention going to the park, but we both knew that's where we were going. Why though? He hadn't even said goodbye. Were we going back later?

His face was blank, showing nothing at all. I followed him to the swings, and it was lucky we knew the park as well as the streetlight was out, and it was almost pitch black outside. I sat on the swing, and Cole started pushing me as he'd done a million times before.

"Oakley, can I ask you something?" he said after pushing me for a minute. He stopped the swing and kneeled down in front of me, resting his arms on my legs. His face was serious, no sign of the laidback and playful Cole I was used to. What was going through his head? I hated not knowing.

He took a deep breath as if he was working up the courage first.

"Why don't you text me back?"

That wasn't what I expected at all. I looked away from him, focusing the outline of a patch of mud in the wood chippings below me. That question wasn't a new one. He had asked me that thousands of times before, but it was the way he asked it, with so much hope. He genuinely thought that I might tell him that time.

"Look, I'm sorry, but I don't get it. Why don't you want to communicate with me? Please, is something really wrong? Because if there is, I promise you it'll be okay. I'll help you. You just have to tell me," he pleaded.

I gulped and pressed my lips together to stop myself blurting it out. I wanted to tell him. I wanted to talk to him normally, but I didn't want to hurt him or my family. I didn't want anyone to know how used and dirty I was, especially not him.

"Oakley, you can tell me. You know that, don't you?"

I nodded once. Of course, I knew that, but it was what would happen after that scared me the most. Telling him the truth was not something I could take back. It would be out there forever. Smiling, I looked into his eyes, trying to convince him everything was all right.

"Are you scared to talk again?"

Scared didn't even begin cover it. I was absolutely terrified. Being mute was easier; no one could make me talk, so no one could make me tell the

truth.

Cole looked so sad it made me feel sick. Being responsible for him being unhappy felt horrible. He stroked my cheek with his fingertip.

“Whenever you’re ready you can talk to me, or you can write it down. We all just want to know so we can help. There are treatments specialists can try.”

Frowning in hurt, I looked away from him. Why did I need to speak or write things down? We had managed to have a pretty great friendship for almost sixteen years now, and almost eleven of them I hadn’t said a word for. Was that why he didn’t want anything more than friendship? Did he want me to speak before he would consider anything more?

“Hey, it doesn’t bother me, you know that. I just want you to know I’m here if you need me. I’ll drop it now, okay. I don’t want to upset you.”

I so desperately wanted to ask him if he meant that, and how much he meant it. Cole sighed heavily and stood up.

“Want me to take you home now?”

I shook my head and just prayed he really had dropped it. I knew it would come up again, but for now, I just wanted to enjoy the night.

“Okay, I’m pushing you over the top!” he chuckled and walked behind me.

“You remember that time you insisted on pushing me on the swing?” he asked. “You pushed so hard it swung back fast and knocked you over!”

I turned my head and glared at him, which only made him laugh.

“You yelled at me for making it hit you and cried for ages, you big baby.”

Big Baby! I was only four then, and Cole just six. I still remembered it as if it happened yesterday. I told him it was unfair that he would push me all the time, just because I was a girl, so I pushed him. I hurt my arm when the swing knocked me over, so Cole gave me his chocolate buttons to make me feel better.

He pushed me on the swing until I held my hand up, getting an idea. He immediately stopped, and I jumped off, gesturing for him to sit.

“Oh no, I’m not having you fall again and go all whiny on me!” I frowned sternly and pointed to the swing. Cole chuckled.

“Remember to move when it comes back at you,” he said teasingly.

I rolled my eyes but grinned too. We fell silent while I pushed him on the swing. After what felt like hours – just the two of us in an easy silence –

Cole stopped the motion of the swing, digging his heel into the ground.

“I’m getting hungry. Let’s get my car and go to McDonalds for an ice cream.” I stopped pushing straight away, and he got off the swing. With a little smirk, he added, “And if you’re a good girl, I’ll get you a milkshake too.” *Idiot.*

Once we had finished eating, he threw our empty cartons in the bin and wrapped his arms around me. I was still sitting on the stool, so we were almost the same height. His chest was pressed against mine, and my legs were over his. I liked it too much.

“It’s almost eleven. We need to go soon,” he said quietly, rubbing circles on the small of my back. His fingers brushing against my skin gave me goose bumps. Cole stroked my hair, pushing it behind my ear. With a deep frown, he stood up and held his hand out for me, helping me step over the bench.

I blushed as we walked back to his car. Would we have kissed again? Should I have initiated it? It shouldn’t be him all the time, but I was way too scared to do it myself. What if he didn’t want to though? Was that why he moved away?

Stopping at his car, he turned to me and stared into my eyes. *Just kiss me!* He sighed.

“Let’s get you home before your parents send out a search party.”

I opened the car door and got in feeling deflated. Turning the dial to hot so when he started the car it would start to heat up, I laid back in the seat. The car ride home was strangely awkward.

My heart sank as we pulled up outside my house. The night was over.

“I’ll walk you in,” he said and opened his door.

I practically ran up the path, eager to end the awkwardness. Turning as we approached the front door, I looked up at him. He was standing closer than I imagined he would be. We were just inches apart, and I could practically feel the heat radiating from him.

As I reached out to put the key in the lock, he grabbed my hand and spun me back to face him. Our lips touched, and my body felt boneless.

The kiss only lasted a couple of seconds, but even after he pulled away, I could still feel the pressure of his lips on mine. Cole smiled as he took the key and opened the door while I just stood there like an idiot, gawping after him.

I shook my head in a daze and walked inside. Dad was the only one up, probably waiting for me.

“Hi, sweetheart, did you have a good night?” he asked as he looked up from the screen. I nodded and chewed on my lip.

“Good. Well, I’m going to bed now. You should too, okay? Goodnight, Cole.”

“Night, Max,” Cole replied, and turned to me. “You really had a good time?” he asked, looking unsure of himself. I nodded my head and smiled, my jaw ached from trying not to smile too much.

“Good. I did too... Well, Miss, I should get going. Goodnight,” he said in a fake posh accent, making me grin. He gently kissed my forehead and walked backwards, closing my front door.

I skipped up to my room and stripped out of my clothes, throwing on the first set of pyjamas I saw. Nothing could ruin my mood tonight. I had had my first kiss, and it was with someone I was crazy about.

As I wrapped my cover around myself, my phone beeped, and I knew it was from Cole: ‘Night. X’.

I smiled and typed a reply, ‘Night Cole. X’. As usual though, I didn’t press send.

In the morning, I woke up to Jasper shaking my arm. Could he not just call my name?

“Get up. We’re being forced to go to Aunt Ali’s.” He scowled..

Visiting Ali was something we both dreaded. Ali was great; it was my cousin, Lizzie, who was the problem. Lizzie was one year older than I was and convinced she was going to be the next supermodel. I doubted if anyone had seen her face in years – it was trapped under layers of inch-thick make-up. Her hair was bleached a white blonde and sat just below her shoulder blades.

In Lizzie’s eyes, if you weren’t perfect, you weren’t even worth bothering about. In front of everyone, she was sweet and innocent, but once we were, alone she was bitchy and judgemental. I wasn’t her idea of perfection, and she made me know that. I don’t know why she was like that because as children we got along but when I stopped talking she stopped liking me. I wasn’t sure if she was hurt that I wouldn’t come to her or if she really only cared about image.

I dressed slowly to put off leaving the house for as long as I could. Eventually, though, Mum shouted for me to hurry me up.

It took just under twenty minutes to get to their house. We hadn't even gotten out of the car, and I already wanted to go home. As we made our way towards the house, the front door swung open, and Ali rushed out.

Ali and Mum both jumped into each other's arms and laughed. They were close in age and were like best friends as well as sisters. She gave me, Dad and Jasper a kiss on the cheek and ushered us inside.

Ali's house was really modern. After she divorced Lizzie's dad, five years ago, she had received a lot of money from the settlement, and used it to renovate. The place was decorated with the most expensive everything. The kitchen was stainless steel and looked like it belonged in a swanky restaurant. Every one of the four rooms had en-suite bathrooms and a walk-in closet. If it weren't for Lizzie, I would look forward to going there.

Ali led us into the lounge, where she had laid on sandwiches and cakes. Lizzie was sitting on the sofa, tapping away on her phone with one hand and running her fingers through her hair with the other.

As soon as Lizzie saw us, after a momentary greeting, she launched into chatting about how she was entering a modelling contest that was being held at our local mall, and how she was hoping that would be her big break. Unlikely, but if it got Lizzie away, far away, then I hoped it would be her big break.

After what felt like half an hour of listening to her drone on about her outfit that cost her over a hundred pounds, Ali told Lizzie to take me upstairs and show it to me. Jasper was grinning as I reluctantly got up. Just because I was a girl didn't mean I was going to go all crazy over a dress.

"It's gorgeous, isn't it?" she gushed, running her acrylic nails over the fabric of the dress hanging on the outside of her wardrobe. I nodded in agreement and tried to hide my horror. The neon pink dress must barely cover her butt.

"You should totally enter the contest too. You're not exactly ugly, and you can just, like, nod or something if someone asks you a question. Although you'd need to wear something nice."

I smiled and sat down on my hands, as the urge to slap her grew stronger. I wasn't a violent person at all, but Lizzie really pushed me sometimes.

"Ooh, how's your gorgeous friend? You totally should have brought him with you." Lizzie fluffed up her hair up and smirked at me.

"I decided that I'm definitely gonna be a model, that's why I'm doing

the contest,” she said as if I’d asked. “Modelling is just more glamorous than acting, you know?”

I forced a smile, not that she looked away from the mirror to see my reaction. Thankfully, my phone buzzed as a text message came through, distracting me from wanting to murder my cousin. Cole’s timing was amazing. ‘Heard you’re at Barbie’s! Not killed her yet? Hurry up and come home! X’. I smiled and put the phone back in my pocket.

At seven-thirty in the evening, after a long day of trying to avoid Lizzie as much as possible, Mum finally said it was time to leave. I could have kissed her I was that relieved.

Waving goodbye from the car, my shoulders sagged in relief. Jasper let out a deep sigh and laid his head on the headrest. “Thank God that’s over,” he muttered. I nodded in agreement and closed my eyes for the journey.

As we pulled into our drive, Cole appeared from his front door.

“Mind if I steal her?” he called across our neighbour’s garden.

“Back by eleven, Oakley,” Dad told me sternly.

Cole grinned; the little dimple at the side of his mouth became more pronounced.

“I’ll walk her home just before.”

He grabbed my hand and pulled me along behind him. My heart leapt at the feel of his hand in mine. Cole eagerly pulled me into his house and up the stairs to his room. He pointed to the bed, put a DVD on, and walked back out without a word. He was probably getting drinks and a snack.

I glanced at the movie he had rented sitting on his bed and groaned internally as I read the title *The Hills Have Eyes*. I hated gory films. The site of blood made me feel sick.

I got under his cover and pulled my knees up. If I was going to make it through the film, I needed to be able to hide, so I grabbed his pillow and wedged it between my chest and legs, where I could tuck my head into it if I didn’t want to see/hear what was happening.

Cole laughed as he came back into the room. He sat beside me with the bowl of popcorn on his lap and bottle of coke lying between us.

“It’s not even started, you big baby,” he teased, shuffling closer, so our shoulders were toughing.

“So, was Lizzie her usual charming self?” he asked casually, not looking away from the TV. I nodded again. Cole knew what she was like. I think deep down everyone did, but they never really said anything to her about her

behaviour because she would probably flip out.

“She’s just jealous of you.”

I looked up at him, raising my eyebrows sceptically. Jealous! What on earth did Lizzie have to be jealous of me for?

“I’m serious, Oakley. You’re smart, kind, considerate, thoughtful, and unbelievably beautiful,” he whispered, looking into my eyes. “Don’t ever let anyone make you think otherwise.”

I couldn’t breathe. That was so sweet. No one had ever said anything like that to me before, well except Mum, but that didn’t count – she was my mum.

He closed the distance between us slowly. His eyes locked on my lips for a second, and he tangled his fingers in my hair. My breath caught in my throat as his nose grazed mine and his lips parted. Cole was so close, but it was still too far. His breath blew lightly over my face making any coherent thoughts impossible. Finally, after what seemed like hours, his lips brushed against mine.

He pulled away after a second and looked into my eyes. I felt weightless, like I could just float off. His forehead creased as he frowned in concentration. It was as if he was trying really hard to figure something out. Figure out what he wanted? Trying to decide if it would be worth it? Whatever it was, he must have found the answer because he leant forward again and kissed me. Our lips moved together perfectly. I was scared that I would be a bad kisser, but it wasn’t bad. It felt so natural.

I couldn’t understand what was happening to me. He made my whole body feel hot, like my blood was boiling in my veins. I wanted to be closer to him, but I was scared to get too close. Cole was everything to me, and I trusted him with my life, but I wasn’t sure if I could go any further.

Surrendering to the new and confusing feelings, I dug my fingers into his back and pulled him even closer to me. He ran his hands through my hair, holding my head against his. It was almost as if he was scared that I would run away. Running wasn’t something that I thought I could do even if I wanted too. He made me feel too good.

When his tongue lightly grazed my bottom lip, I froze. It was like an intrusion and no matter how good I felt that scared me to death. Cole pulled back, his eyes wide with worry. “What? Are you okay?”

My stomach was doing flips, but I wasn’t sure if it was in a good way, or bad. I concentrated on him. The way his head was still tilted slightly to the

side, and his deep blue eyes staring at me with so much intensity. *This is Cole!* I scolded myself. He would never hurt me, or go further than I wanted.

I smiled and gripped the back of t-shirt, giving him permission to kiss me again. He didn't need any more encouragement. His lips pressed against mine, and I didn't feel scared anymore. Cole's tongue stayed firmly in his own mouth, realising that I needed to take things a little slower.

I ran my hands up his back until I got to his hair, my fingers knotted in the light brown mess. Cole moaned in response, making my heart leap. He pulled away and smiled. Wow, that was my first proper kiss!

"You okay?" he whispered, in a quiet, husky voice.

His lips were a little red and slightly swollen, but mine probably looked the same. I didn't care. I nodded in response to his question and tried to not to show just how overly happy I was feeling; I would probably just look desperate!

"Do you wanna watch something? We can find one of those crappy chick flicks if you want?" he asked as he bit his lip and nodded his head towards the TV.

We both knew he didn't want to watch anything, but I think he was trying not to push me. I shook my head and smiled, which made him very happy.

Suddenly someone knocked on the door and I jumped up, pressing my back against the wall. Cole laughed at me and shouted for whoever it was to come in. Mia opened the door and walked in with a huge grin on her face. Could she tell?

"Hi," she chirped, smirking in amusement. "So, what are you guys up to?"

From the look on her face, I could tell that knew exactly what we'd been up to. I pressed my lips together, hoping that if they were swollen they didn't look it any more.

"Watching a film," Cole replied, flicking through the movie channels. He was such a bad liar; he couldn't keep a straight face.

"Mmm hmm," she sang. "Of course you were."

Her voice was playful, but my face still burst into flames. Mia made herself comfortable, sat on Cole's bed, and started a conversation. I loved Mia like a sister, but I really wanted to be alone with Cole again. By the time she left, it was time for me to go home. I was not happy about that.

"I'd better walk you back, I guess," Cole grumbled.

I reluctantly stood up and smiled at him. I didn't really like being there and could quite happily stay at Cole's forever.

We both started walking back to my house slowly. Cole wrapped his arm around my shoulder. "Home just in time, Miss Farrell," he said in his mock posh accent and bowed his head. I nudged his shoulder. What would happen now? Would he kiss me again?

The atmosphere became awkward as he stared into my eyes. Was he going to kiss me or not? He took the key, put it in the lock and kissing me on the forehead before he opened the door. I took the key back as he dangled it in front of me and smiled at him appreciatively.

"You're welcome, Oaks. See you tomorrow." He winked at me, jumping back before I hit him for shortening my name again. Shaking my head, I closed the front door, giving him a wave out of the window next to it as he started walking back home.

"Well, well, well. What time do you call this, young lady?" Jasper said dramatically, and frowned. I looked up at the clock and then back to Jasper, raising my eyebrows. I was actually five minutes early. "You and me are gonna have a little chat about you staying out all night with strange men!"

He must have been dropped on his head as a baby.

I walked past him.

"Wait," he called after me, just as I got to the stairs. "Is everything okay?"

I turned to him and nodded, frowning, wondering where he was going.

"You did use protection, didn't you?"

Gasping, I spun away from him and walked upstairs without even acknowledging his stupid comment. Why would he even say that? I could still hear him laughing as I shut my bedroom door. It wasn't funny at all.

The second I got into bed my phone beeped with Cole's usual nightly text, and as always, I typed a reply, and saved it.

Chapter Six

Oakley

That night, I barely slept at all. I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. I really liked him. Too much, probably.

I hoped that he felt the same. His actions suggested that he did, but I was so out of my depth with things like that. If he could be friends with me for nearly eleven years without us saying a word then it wouldn't matter if we were actually together, would it? Sighing in frustration, I turned on my side and squeezed my eyes shut. Second-guessing myself every two seconds was just driving me crazy.

I woke up to my phone alarm bleeping loudly. Quickly turning it off, I forced myself to get out of bed and not hit the snooze button for five more minutes. I was still tired from barely sleeping and felt like crap.

After a long shower, I got dressed and went downstairs for a much-needed hot chocolate. I didn't drink coffee and rarely drank tea; hot chocolate was the drink that turned me into a human in the mornings.

"Good morning, sweetheart," Dad chirped, looking up from behind his paper. Why was he so cheerful? I smiled weakly, waving at him sleepily and grabbed the biggest mug I could find. "Didn't sleep well?" Sleeping well wasn't something I really did any more but last night had been worse: I had something else to consume my thoughts.

I shook my head and sat down opposite him, wrapping my hands around my boiling drink. Dad's eyes were boring into me, but I pretended I didn't notice and focused on flicking through one of Mum's Better Home magazines.

"Hey, Oaks," Cole sang loudly and cheerfully as he walked into the kitchen. I grinned, so grateful he was with me now too. I didn't like being alone with Dad. I could never quite figure out how to predict his behaviour, and therefore how to act.

Cole grinned and sat down beside me, and – grabbing my mug – stole a sip of my hot chocolate. How was he up and out so early? I guess he slept properly last night and hadn't spent hours stressing over what had happened

between us. I frowned and pressed my head against the table, making Dad and Cole laugh.

“Hurry up and finish your drink, Mia said we’re leaving in fifteen minutes.”

Why did I agree to go shopping, again?

Taking two large gulps, I handed the rest to Cole and made myself go and get dressed. Cole started talking to Dad as I walked out of the room.

I had always wondered if Cole would believe me if I ever did manage to tell him everything; or if Dad was right and everyone would believe him. As much as it I wanted to believe Cole would choose to have faith in me, I could never risk it. In just over two years, I would be eighteen and could leave home. There was no point in ripping my family apart and hurting so many people when I would leave soon anyway.

I quickly got ready and sprinted downstairs. Cole stood as he saw me enter the kitchen.

“See you later, Max,” Cole said as he made his way towards me.

“Bye, kids. Have fun,” Dad called after us.

“Ready for this?” Cole asked, scrunching his nose up. I nodded and smiled.

Mia was waiting for us in the car outside my house, tapping the steering wheel impatiently. I jumped in the front seat and stuck my tongue out at Cole. He raised an eyebrow suggestively, which made me blush like crazy.

“Morning,” Mia greeted me, and launched into reciting her shopping list.

Cole followed us into the first two shops, and I could tell that he was already getting bored. As I stopped at the swimwear, he brightened up.

“The little blue one,” he quietly whispered in my ear, discretely pointing to a light blue bikini with a white polka dot pattern.

I smiled shyly and picked it up. Oh, God, I was buying something for a guy! Should I? Was it for him? Yes, but it was different because I wanted to look nice for him. He wasn’t forcing me to wear anything. He had only suggested it.

Avoiding eye contact with him, I stepped to the side to pick out a pair of flip-flops. I also picked up a few little tops, maxi dresses, shorts, and new sunglasses. Cole leant against the wall near the changing room and played with his phone. There were another two men standing near him, all with the

same bored look on their faces.

“Oakley,” Mia squealed, holding up two short halter neck dresses, one in salmon pink and the other yellow, a look of indecision on her face. I pointed to the yellow.

“Thanks,” she shouted, slamming the pink one down on the rail and flicking through the skirts beside it.

We shopped all morning and had got almost everything we needed for the holiday. Throughout the morning, he stroked my hand or the small of my back, making it hard to concentrate on anything else.

“Can we *please* eat now?” he whined for the hundredth time as we walked out of the shop with all our bags.

Mia growled in frustration and pointed to KFC. “If we feed you will you promise to stop the winging?”

Cole grinned. “Yep.”

We made our way into the restaurant, and Cole went up to order, while Mia and I found a table.

“So, what happened last night?” she asked me as soon as we were away from Cole. My mouth went dry. I hadn’t expected her to ask that. How could she tell that something had happened?

She laughed at me and rolled her eyes.

“Don’t look so worried! He hasn’t said a word to me. He was just *really, really* happy, so I figured something happened between you two.”

He was really, really happy? I bit the inside of my mouth to stop myself smiling.

“Oh my God, he was so annoying and wouldn’t tell me anything! He finally told you, then?”

Told me what?

“They’re bringing your burger over, Mia, since your order’s so awkward!” Cole said as he placed a tray of food and drink down in front of us. For the first time ever, I wanted him to go away! Finally told me what? God, he had the worst timing ever! Told me he liked me? It had to be that, right?

Mia laughed and grabbed her chips. She never had mayonnaise or lettuce on her chicken burger, but for some reason it took longer for them to prepare a burger that had less on it. Cole sat down next to me and immediately started stuffing food in his mouth. I ate at a normal speed, and tried to keep a straight face as Cole stroked my knee while having a stupid

argument with Mia. She wanted her on/off boyfriend, Chris, to come on holiday with us, but everyone else hated him. I never got why Mia took Chris back every time he cheated on her, or why he did it in the first place. As they argued, my mind kept flitting back to Mia's words: 'He finally told you, then?'

Cole's hand waving in front of my face made me jump and snap out of my obsessive thoughts.

"Welcome back." He smiled. "Kerry and Ben are going to watch a movie tonight. Do you want to go too?"

I shrugged casually and nodded.

"Yeah? Great. I'll pick you up at seven. We're eating before. We should get going. Mia's waiting at the car."

Waiting at the car? I looked up, and sure enough, we were alone. Whoa, I really had zoned. I stood up and chucked my rubbish on the tray Cole was holding out.

We started to walk out of the building towards the car park, and he put his hand on my back again.

"Oh, we're seeing that new paranormal film by the way."

No way! I stopped and glared at him.

"Sorry, you've already agreed!" He chuckled and wrapped his arm around my shoulder. "You'll be fine. I won't let the *film* attack you."

"There you two are!" Mia exclaimed. "I was about to come find you." She opened the boot so I could shove my bags in. "Let's go, I'm going out with Chris tonight."

You can do better, I wanted to say, but even if I did it wouldn't change anything at all. Mia didn't listen to anyone when it came to Chris.

"You get everything, Oakley?" Cole asked, poking his head between the front seats. Nodding, I turned to him and smiled. In a couple weeks, I would be in Italy, lying on the beach with Cole. Wait, on a beach in my bikini with Cole! I suddenly felt self-conscious. He had seen me wear bikinis a thousand times before, but it was different this time.

I did gymnastics regularly so that kept me fit, but what if it wasn't enough? My body wasn't womanly. I didn't have proper hips, and my breasts were only a B cup. Now he was seeing me differently, would he notice that? Would it even bother him if he did?

Mia stopped outside my house.

"Now get your stuff and go," she joked, making me grin.

Cole helped me get my bags out of the boot and walked them to my house for me. Dad came out of the house just as we had put all my bags down on the floor.

“How long do you think we’re going for?” he teased, shaking his head.

“You should see the amount of crap Mia got then!” Cole replied.

“Women, eh?” Dad picked up all the bags and turned to me. “Come on then, sweetheart, you need to spend some time with me and your mum if you’re out again tonight. We’ve barely seen you!”

How did he know that I was going out? Cole must have asked him before he asked me. I couldn’t wait until the day that I didn’t need to get his permission to do anything.

“See you later.” Cole smiled and headed back to Mia’s car. I waved to them both and went inside.

“Your mum’s making cakes and wants help. I’ll also warn you now that she’s planning your birthday party.” He put the bags down on the sofa and gestured for me to go in the kitchen. When Dad was like that, joking around, it made me hopeful. Perhaps now it was all over we could be a normal family again. I still loved the dad I remembered: I still wanted him to be who he once was. If he could just be that person then everything would be okay; our family would be okay.

Reluctantly, I went in and sat down at the table. A birthday party was the last thing I wanted.

“Oh, I’ve got so many ideas, honey! You want to have it here, or we could hire somewhere? How many people did you want to invite? What colour scheme?” Mum gushed.

I frowned and looked down at the table. Why couldn’t she accept that I wasn’t the popular, social daughter she wanted?

“Come on, love, it’s your sweet sixteen! We have to do something special. Please, please let me organise this party?” Mum pleaded, looking at me hopefully.

Groaning internally, I nodded in agreement. She squealed and leapt forward, squeezing me tight. I couldn’t say no to her. She deserved to throw me a party, especially after all the hurt and guilt I had caused her. Mum blamed herself for me not speaking, and I had heard her crying over me so many times. The very least I could do was give her this.

“It’ll be amazing,” she promised.

Dad chuckled deeply. “You should hear some of her ideas! Chocolate

fountains and candy floss machines. Just remember it's a party for Oakley and not yourself, Sarah."

Mum waved her hand at him dismissively. "Hush. You're a man. The only part of this which concerns you, is when it comes to the payment."

"As in most things," he countered, mixing the butter-cream icing for the cupcakes. I grabbed the chocolate shavings and started sprinkling them over the cakes they had already iced.

After decorating twenty-four cupcakes and listening to Mum go on about my stupid birthday party, I went upstairs to get ready to go out. I froze as I suddenly realised why Cole was so nervous asking me before. This wasn't a normal trip to the cinema; this was a date! Oh God, I how could I not have realised sooner? I was so stupid!

Knowing it was a date made me nervous. So nervous I instantly felt sick. What should I wear? Should I even dress up? Swinging my wardrobe doors open, I frantically searched through my clothes. I chucked aside any skirts or dresses, even though they were long and more casual than dressy, I didn't want to look like I'd tried too hard.

I shook my head after fifteen minutes of looking through my wardrobe. Cole wouldn't care what I wore anyway. I grabbed a nice white top with diamantes scattered over the front and dark wash jeans and put them on before I changed my mind. We were just eating and going to the cinema so casual was better.

When it was ten minutes to seven, I brushed my hair and applied some lip balm. That would be Cole ready to take me on a date! It didn't even seem real.

Minutes later, my bedroom door opened. Cole walked in wearing jeans and a white t-shirt. How could he be dressed so casually but look so incredible?

"Hey," he muttered nervously, rubbing the back of his neck. "You look nice. I mean amazing."

He frowned to himself and shook his head. I reached up and kissed his cheek, making him smile.

"Let's go."

We walked out to his car and just as I was about to get in, he called my name. I turned around to face him and gasped. He was standing right in front of me. My breath caught in my throat as he gently kissed me on the lips.

"You really do look beautiful," he whispered, stroking my arm with his

thumb and reaching to open the car door for me with his other hand. I smiled happily. I couldn't wait to go on the date.

I chewed on my lip nervously as we drove to the restaurant where we were meeting Kerry and Ben. Cole casually gazed at me out of the corner of his eye. He had been doing it a lot ever since we got in the car.

"It's Chinese. That's okay, right?" he asked as we pulled into the car park opposite Golden King Chinese restaurant. *Too late if it wasn't!* Chinese was one of my favourites anyway, so I nodded my head enthusiastically. My stomach suddenly called out for food in a gurgle.

Cole chuckled. "Hungry?" Blushing, I nodded my head.

I opened the car door and saw Kerry and Ben waiting by the entrance. They were talking easily and laughing. I guess there was no awkwardness between them... They turned and smiled as we approached them.

"Hey," Kerry chirped, and immediately started talking at a hundred miles an hour. She grabbed my hand, pulling me ahead of Cole and Ben.

"So how's it going? You two actually together yet? It's so sweet how he looks at you," she whispered so quietly I barely caught any of it. I smiled and shook my head.

"Don't worry, it'll happen soon. Cole's crazy about you." Crazy about me? I could live with that!

Kerry had requested a table in the corner so we could have some privacy.

As I had hoped, Cole sat next to me and grabbed the menu, wasting no time in deciding what to eat.

"You having sweet and sour chicken?" he asked, scanning the menu absentmindedly. It was pointless; we always had the same thing. I nodded and pointed to the egg fried rice too.

"Cool. I'm getting the beef chow mien so we can share."

I was having a great time already, and we hadn't even ordered our drinks yet. Kerry and Ben were so nice, but mostly it was because Cole stroking the back of my hand under the table. I liked it, but at the same time, I couldn't help question, why so secretly? We were with Kerry and Ben, not our parents!

"We need to go to the toilet, Oakley," Kerry announced, and jumped up so fast she almost knocked her chair over and hit a waiter. I frowned. Why we? I had never done the going-to-the-toilet-in-a-pair thing before. Well, except when I was a child and went with Mum.

Kerry ushered me to the toilets, pushing me forward as if we were in a hurry. I wasn't that naïve to think we were actually going to the toilet. She wanted to talk. Great. As soon as the door closed behind us, she turned to me.

"Ben asked me to be his girlfriend! Can you believe that?"

I nodded. Actually, I couldn't believe it took him so long.

She spent the next two minutes revealing the details – how he had bought her flowers – pink roses – and asked her to be his girlfriend, just before we all came out tonight. Every word she spoke rolled into the next as she tried to get the whole story out as quickly as she could. Her excitement was infectious, and I couldn't help smiling with her.

"So," she took a breath, "has Cole asked you yet?" Again, no! She was impatient. I shook my head, and her face fell a little. "Well, what's taking him so long? It's not like he doesn't want to, duh. It's so obvious. Don't worry, he'll do it soon, I can tell," she said confidentially. It really didn't bother me. Well, not too much anyway. I was happy to take things slowly. Rushing into a relationship when I was only just getting used to all these teenage hormones wasn't something I should do.

"Has he kissed you again?"

I flushed and nodded. He had kissed me quite a lot actually. Kerry squealed.

"Aww, it's so cute. OMG we're gonna be friends-in-law!"

What? I grinned in amusement and bit my lip. Friends-in-law. Is that even a thing?

"Anyway, we should get back, come on!"

Again, I was pulled along by Kerry. I couldn't be mad though. I had a feeling she'd got away with a lot as a child. It was impossible to be angry with her.

Cole and Ben were chatting about football when we got back to the table – my least favourite subject.

"You survived then," Cole whispered as I sat down, careful to turn his head so Kerry wouldn't hear. I laughed softly. She wasn't annoying at all. He draped his arm over the back of my chair and kissed the side of my head. His lips against my hair made my heart pound. *Don't grin too wide or you'll look like a desperate idiot.*

After dinner and listening to Kerry talk about the hottest celebs for forty-five minutes, we made our way to the cinema. Cole held my hand as we walked into the cinema and picked up our tickets. I wasn't looking forward to

watching the film, but I was just glad to go out on a double date like a normal teenager.

The cinema was pretty small and old. Since the new chain-cinema opened up in town, this one had become much quieter. It probably wouldn't be long before it closed down entirely. I loved it though: the stained carpet, lingering smell of popcorn and ripped seats felt homely and welcoming.

Cole stroked my knuckles with his thumb to get my attention. "You sure you don't mind seeing this? I'm sure we can find something else."

I shook my head and awkwardly took the ticket he was holding out for me with the hand I was holding my drink with. As stupid as it sounded, I didn't want to let go of his hand.

"Okay." He smiled and nudged me towards the door signed Screen Two.

I could count on one hand the amount of people that were in the cinema, and that included the four of us.

"We're going to the back," Kerry announced, bounding up the stairs.

Cole carried our popcorn, eating some from the box with just his mouth. I grinned as I realised he was doing it because he didn't want to let go of my hand either. When we reached the top of the stairs and walked to the end of the row where Kerry had already settled down, I dropped my hand from his to pull my seat down.

"Scared yet?" he whispered in my ear, three seconds after the film started. I raised an eyebrow, which made him chuckle quietly. About twenty minutes into the film, that music started; the kind where you know something bad is going to happen, but you don't know what or when exactly. Shyness didn't even register with me; I grabbed Cole's hand and gripped hard. I jumped up on the seat as some ghost-like creature popped out from nowhere on the screen. Hugging my legs with the other arm, I hid behind my knees. *Why did I agree to watch this?*

My heart was beating too fast as that music blared out from the speakers again. A door, or something that sounded like a door, slammed in the film, and I jumped. I couldn't watch any more. I picked a spot just below the screen and concentrated on it.

"Wanna do something tomorrow, just us?" he whispered into my ear. I nodded and lifted the armrest that separated us. Leaning against his side, I felt safer. Spending time alone with him was definitely something I wanted. "Cool," he said, smiling happily. He hadn't mentioned what we would be doing, but that didn't really matter.

“That was awesome! I loved the part where she was drowned in the bath!” Kerry exclaimed as we made our way out of the cinema. Oddly enough, that was not my favourite part. “So, where to now, guys?”

Cole frowned for a second. I could tell that he didn’t want to do anything else, well, not with them anyway. Ben must have noticed it too because he nodded once and turned to Kerry, telling her he wanted her all to himself for the rest of the evening. She seemed happy with that and they quickly said their goodbyes.

Cole let out a sigh of relief. “I know they’re my friends, but I just want you,” he whined. I wasn’t sure if he was being serious or not. He had that cheeky half-smile on his face. “Ice cream, Miss Farrell?” Grinning, I fell against his side, pushing him towards the car.

It was too late for the café, so we went to McDonalds again, and sat in his car eating our McFlurries.

“You okay? We can go somewhere else if you’re bored.” I shook my head.

He suddenly chuckled at something, pulling a heaped spoonful of ice cream out of the tub. He wouldn’t, would he? I watched his smile become more pronounced, more mischievous, and I knew what he was about to do.

My eyes widened, and I held my hands up in surrender. I really didn’t want to be all sticky and gross on my first date with the guy I was utterly crazy about. Before I could blink, he flicked the spoon, sending the ice cream flying at me. It landed on my top with a soft thud and fell onto my lap. Gasping, I swung the car door open and hopped out of the car. Oh, you’re going down, Benson!

Cole’s laughter blocked out the sound of a group of teens shouting and messing around outside McDonalds and the couple arguing in a car nearby. After brushing the remains of the freezing cold ice cream from my top and jeans, I scooped up some ice cream and flicked it at him through the door. Surprisingly, despite my rubbish aim, it landed on his chest. He stopped laughing immediately and looked down at the ice cream and chocolate sauce that was running down his t-shirt.

“You need to run,” he warned, slowly putting his ice cream down on the dashboard. I sprinted off, not in any particular direction, just away from him. His footsteps and heavy breathing became louder. My heart danced knowing he had almost caught me and adrenaline pumped through my body. *Faster!*

Pushing my legs harder, I managed to increase my speed. It wasn't enough though. Cole's arm wound around my waist, and we both stumbled and fell to the floor.

"Too slow!" he exclaimed, rolling me over and pinning me to the ground. I couldn't move at all. I wanted to struggle, but at the same time, I didn't. He didn't seem to notice my internal freak out, and I was grateful for that.

"What you gonna do now, huh?" Gulping, I tried to work that out for myself. I didn't like being held down, but I didn't completely hate it with Cole. It was different with him – playful. But it still felt too close to something else, something that wasn't playful. Not playful at all.

"You okay?" He let go of my wrists and sat up. Relief flooded my system as I was freed. *I'm not ready for that yet.*

Sitting up next to him, I smiled reassuringly. Technically he hadn't done anything wrong. He didn't know why I hated being held down. I couldn't be mad at him. He smiled and slowly lowered his head towards mine. His eyes danced with excitement as his lips pressed so gently against mine.

I pulled away when I couldn't take all of the conflicting feelings and crazy hormones anymore. Kissing him felt good, way too good. But as usual the time had got away from us, and we had to get back. The end of the night always left me feeling a little down, but I would see him again in the morning.

Dad was sitting in the lounge watching television when I walked in, waiting up for me again no doubt. I always wondered if he waited up because he was worried about me, or worried that I would have said something to someone, after all this time.

"Did you have a good time?" he asked, switching the TV off with the remote. I nodded and yawned, the day's activities catching up with me.

"Good. Come one, bedtime."

He didn't look me in the eye once. Something was wrong. I felt uneasy, even more than usual when I was alone with him. I followed Dad upstairs and he kissed my forehead before going into his bedroom. *Something's definitely wrong.*

Cole's text arrived just as I got into bed, momentarily taking my mind off Dad.

Chapter Seven

Oakley

In the morning, I woke up feeling happier than I had in a very long time. Things were looking up and I was, for the first time, feeling hopeful for the future. My date with Cole yesterday had put me in a good mood, and we had another date tonight! I felt like nothing could pop my happy little bubble.

As I skipped downstairs, my parents muffled voices became louder until I could hear them clearly. “I don’t get why you’re against this, Max! This might be the thing that works. She might be able to get through to our daughter!” Mum snapped. I held my breath and pressed my back against the wall to try to disappear.

“She won’t go to the doctor though!” Dad replied slowly. “You can’t force her. You saw what that did last time.” Sliding down the wall, I wrapped my arms around my legs. Last time Mum tried taking me to the doctors, I was so scared. Dad was standing behind her, calmly giving me that look; the look that I didn’t ever dare disobey. I completely broke down and couldn’t breathe. I could still remember how tight my chest felt, and those little black spots that blurred my vision right before I passed out.

Mum sighed heavily. “I won’t let her get like that again. Are you coming with me or not?” *Please say no, please say no.*

“I won’t do that to her. I’m not tricking my daughter into this. You remember what the child psychologist said. We shouldn’t push her, and she will ask for help whenever she is ready for it. When Oakley is ready, Sarah, not you.”

“Do you even want her to get better?” Mum snapped angrily. Her voice was sharp and high-pitched. I flinched at how harsh she sounded.

“How can you even ask me that? Of course I do, but I *will not* force her into this. Whatever is going on with her, it will be all right. We’ll deal with it, whatever happens. If that’s her wanting help to speak again or not. She’s our daughter, and if she’s happy then that’s all that matters to me,” he reasoned. I actually believed what he was saying, he was that good at lying. Dad was smooth; well-liked and respected by everyone that knew him. *No one would*

believe you over him.

“I’m sorry.” I heard Mum sigh and everything went quiet. “I just want to find out what’s wrong. It just gets harder the older she gets.”

Her voice was muffled as if she was speaking against something. Dad’s shoulder maybe. “I’m still going to take her... Don’t, Max, if she starts panicking like before we’ll turn around and come straight home. I can’t just sit back and do nothing.”

I wished she would. Every time she tried to help me it would just end up with her crying and me feeling like crap. Taking a deep breath, I pushed myself up off the floor. Sitting there listening to their argument about me was getting too much. I swallowed the lump in my throat and ran my fingers through my hair. As I walked into the kitchen, they both turned and smiled at me.

Mum tried to discreetly wipe the tears from her cheek.

“Morning, sweetheart,” she said warmly. “Hot chocolate?” I nodded and sat down at the table. “Croissants are in the oven, they shouldn’t be long.”

“I’m going to have a shower,” Dad informed us and walked out of the kitchen. He didn’t want to be around us. That was fine by me.

“How was your date last night?” How did she know it was a date? Did Cole tell her? *Of course he didn’t, you idiot!* Perhaps it was just obvious? I frowned and shook my head.

“It wasn’t a date?” Her face fell. “Oh. Well, did you have a nice time anyway?”

Jasper came downstairs, and Mum changed the subject, knowing how protective he could get. I idly wondered how he would react if he knew the truth about what happened to me. Out of everyone I thought Jasper was the most likely to believe me. Although there was a three-year age gap between us and he annoyed the hell out of me, we were close. That also meant that I didn’t ever want him to find out; I wouldn’t be able to cope if he didn’t believe me.

“So, what’s everyone doing today?” Jasper asked, and stuffed a hot croissant fresh from the oven into his mouth. I waited for him to react to the heat and spit it back on his plate but he didn’t. Was his mouth made of steel?

“I’m taking Oakley to gymnastics, and then going food shopping,” Mum replied, smiling at Jasper briefly while she busied herself buttering the croissants. “What about you?”

“Computer,” he mumbled and stuffed more food in his mouth.

“You could look for a part-time job?” Mum suggested.

Jasper scrunched his nose up.

“Or not.”

Lazy boy. It was my parents’ fault though; they had said they would support us while we were still in full-time education. Until Jasper finished college, he wouldn’t have to do anything.

Mum shook her head but didn’t say anything else to him. She turned to me.

“So I was thinking we could go clothes shopping on Thursday? I need some things for the holiday and thought it would be nice for us both to get our nails done.”

So the appointment was on Thursday. I nodded my head and picked at my food, no longer feeling hungry. *How am I going to get myself out of this one?*

“Great,” she beamed. “Now eat up, we’ve got to leave in half an hour.”

Once I had managed to force down half a croissant, I went to get ready for gymnastics. I couldn’t wait to get there and get lost in throwing my body around. Gymnastics was an escape that I longed for every day. I loved how all my thoughts disappeared, and all that was left was a normal, teen-aged me, a version of me that I wanted to be all the time.

We pulled up outside the front door of the gym and Mum kissed me on the cheek.

“Have a good time. I’ll see you when you get home.”

I smiled briefly and got out of the car, shutting the door behind me. Cole was going to pick me up after practice, and we were going somewhere.

Gymnastics was as great as usual. I spent a lot of time practising the beam routine, balancing in positions that had made my eyes water at the very thought of them when I first joined. I flipped off the beam, and flew through the air; a smile pulled at my lips. *I could do this forever*, I thought, landing gracefully on the floor.

“That was amazing, Oakley,” Marcus exclaimed. “You nailed it! Go again.” Nodding, I ran around to the other end of the beam to start again.

I was panting by the end of the class: my muscles ached, but I liked the feeling; it was the feeling of achievement.

“Alright guys, same time Monday,” Marcus shouted, dismissing us all.

I sprinted to the changing rooms and took a quick shower. I didn’t want to be all sweaty for whatever Cole had planned, so I changed into some fresh

clothes and tried to tame my messy hair. Looking in the mirror, I groaned. My hair looked like a bird's nest, sticking out in all different directions.

"Need a hairbrush?" Jade offered, handing hers out to me. I smiled gratefully and dragged it through the unruly blonde mass. When I finished, I placed it down in front of where she was applying her eyeliner and smiled again.

"You're welcome," she mumbled, looking in the mirror with an intense concentration. Giving her a quick wave, I ran out of the door, eager to meet up with Cole.

I saw him immediately. He was leaning up against the wall in the entrance.

"Hey," he said happily and kissed my cheek. "I thought we could have lunch and go bowling now. Then I'll take you home to get ready for tonight."

I bit my lip to try to stop myself grinning too much and looking like a creep.

"I'm not telling you where we're going tonight though," he teased, bumping my shoulder with his. "Just wear something casual."

Cole grabbed my wrist and pulled me towards him. I slammed against his chest and gasped in shock. Before I could think anything, his lips covered mine. I felt dizzy with happiness. He beamed as he abruptly pulled away.

"Come on, I'm starving!"

We drove to the bowling alley in comfortable silence and parked as close to the door as he could get so we wouldn't have to walk too far. We were seated in the restaurant quickly at as barely anyone was eating at two in the afternoon.

"Oakley, your mum told me something yesterday. I'm not meant to say anything, but I don't think I can do that," he said nervously. *Great, so she tells everyone about my appointment except me.* I nodded once for him to continue.

"Err," he started, rubbing the back of his neck. "She's taking you to a doctor."

He spoke carefully, worried about my reaction. When I didn't have any, he frowned.

"You knew about it already?"

I nodded in confirmation.

He thought about it for a minute, chewing on the inside of his mouth.

"Are you going?"

I shrugged my shoulders. What choice did I have? I would go, but it wouldn't achieve anything except wasting Mum's petrol.

"Maybe it would be a good idea to go," he said cautiously.

I clamped my jaw shut in frustration and turned away from him. Why did we have to talk about it? This was supposed to be a good day, yet now I was wishing I had stayed in bed.

"Sorry, I'm ruining this already, aren't I? I just want you to be okay; that's all." He took my hand and interlaced our fingers. The waitress came by so Cole ordered for us.

"Bowling now," he announced and chucked money down to cover the bill.

We played three games of bowling; I won the first game and he won the last two. I have to admit, my concentration wasn't at its best with him around.

Cole drove me home so I could change and get ready for the date, whatever it was. Mum and Dad were out so thankfully I wouldn't have to answer their questions about tonight. "I'll pick you up in an hour." I nodded and ran into the house. One hour to shower, do my hair, and pick out something to wear.

With only minutes to spare, I ran downstairs to wait for Cole to turn up. The doorbell rang just as I grabbed my coat off the hook. I took a second to calm down, and then opened the door. *Stop being so nervous!*

"Hey. Whoa." His eyes raked over me. I pulled at the sleeves of my jumper uncomfortably. The way he was looking at me made me feel self-conscious. "You look hot, Oakley."

Blushing furiously, I smiled half-heartedly, suddenly feeling exposed.

"Ready?"

"Oakley," Jasper shouted from upstairs. I hadn't even seen him since breakfast. No doubt, he was sleeping in all day so he could go clubbing again. He came thudding down the stairs and leant over the bannister.

"Mum called. She's on her way back with party supplies," he warned.

Cole greeted Jasper and quickly added: "We're just leaving."

"Good. Have fun on your, it's-not-a-date-but-it-really-is-a-date-date."

I hurried out of the house. Cole followed behind, chuckling to himself.

"Your brother's weird."

I couldn't agree more.

We drove for ages, and I couldn't figure out where he was taking me. When we turned off at a roundabout, with the sign stating the beach was five

miles away, I grinned. Cole chuckled at my expression.

“Yeah, we’re going to the beach. I’ve got a picnic dinner in the boot.” He smiled sheepishly and bit his lip.

I couldn’t help the excitement that bubbled up inside me.

“Mum suggested the picnic... And made it,” he admitted. *Thank goodness!* There would probably be some homemade cakes and cookies. If it had been down to Cole, there would just be packets of junk food.

We parked in the car park opposite the pier, and I turned to look at him: as casual but as gorgeous as usual. Feeling confident, I leant over and kissed him. I could tell he was surprised by it, as it took him a second to respond and kiss me back.

I felt him smile against my lips before wrapping his arms around my back, pulling me closer to him.

He pulled away and gave a surprised chuckle. I blushed and looked down to hide how embarrassed I was. Cole fingers gently cupped my chin and tilted my head, so I was looking at him again.

“Don’t be embarrassed, Oakley. I want you to feel confident around me. You can kiss me whenever you want. Believe me, I won’t mind,” he said.

I pressed my lips to his again, to make it clear I got the message. We walked hand-in-hand along the shore. Both of us were wrapped up in warm jackets. Even in summer, it was still cold right by the sea. The sky was clear of clouds, so the moon shone down brightly on to the ocean, creating a glistening effect on the surface of the water. It looked beautiful.

As we approached a set of stone stairs, I stopped. I was happy to keep walking if he wanted to, but I had a sudden urge to hit the arcades too. Cole turned to me and frowned, wondering why I’d come to such an abrupt stop.

“Arcades?”

I nodded, and he laughed and feigned despair at me.

“Come on then. Let’s go spend twenty quid trying to get a claw to grab a crappy stuffed toy.”

He kissed my lips quickly, taking me by surprise. I was quickly growing to love how my body reacted to him.

“I’ll kick your arse at air hockey.”

We spent a couple of hours in the arcades, wasting money on slot machines and riding the mechanical motorbikes. Cole won me a fluffy grey teddy bear, and it only took him fourteen tries and three pounds.

“You getting hungry?” he asked, wrapping his arms around me. I leant

into him and nodded. It was almost nine at night, so I was definitely ready to eat. “Okay. We need to go back to the car to get the picnic basket, then beach?”

Nodding eagerly, I pulled out of his arms and dragged him towards the door by his hand.

On the beach, I sat down beside him and opened the basket. We sat under the pier on a blanket and ate Jenna’s famous lemon cake. I looked out to sea and smiled as the water gently lapped at the shore. The wind had died down, so it was calmer out, much more peaceful. After eating, I snuggled closer to his side and laid my head on his shoulder, wishing we could stay at the beach forever.

“You having a good time?” he questioned. I nodded against him. *The best time.*

Eventually, we had to leave as it was almost an hour’s drive back and I didn’t have long before I had to be home.

“We’ll come again soon,” he reassured me.

I hoped so. As we pulled up outside my house, my heart sank. Dad would probably be waiting up for me again. I kissed Cole’s cheek and opened the car door.

“You’re welcome,” he said in response to my thank you kiss. “Glad you had a good night.”

A good night? Understatement of the century!

Chapter Eight

Oakley

The rest of the week passed in a haze of Cole, Cole, and more Cole. We spent practically every minute together just hanging out and messing around. Our relationship, or whatever it was, was getting stronger, and I could feel myself falling hard. It both scared and excited me at the same time. I just kept thinking repeatedly, *something will go wrong*.

On Thursday morning, I sat on my bed, panicking about the stupid doctor's appointment. I had no idea how to get out of it. Mum still hadn't told me, so I assumed she was just going to spring it on me while we were shopping; if we were even going shopping at all.

As I gazed out of the window anxiously, my phone beeped, making me jump. It was a text message from Cole.

"Good luck today. Let me know if you want me to come. X"

Cole was the last person I wanted there. The sentiment made me smile though.

"Oakley, are you ready to go?" Mum called up the stairs. My eyes narrowed at the sound of her voice, and I instantly felt a little guilty. She shouldn't lie to me, but she was just worried after all.

Summoning up the courage, I got off the bed and walked downstairs slowly. Dad sat in front of the TV, watching some construction show. He owned a building company, but it wasn't as big as he wanted anyway. That always bothered him, and he was forever stressing over how to become more successful. I didn't measure success by money and possessions. To me success was all about family. To me, Dad failed to become successful a long time ago.

"Okay, honey," Mum started, blowing out a deep breath. "I need to tell you something, and I need you to know that I'm only doing it because I love you so much."

I nodded for her to continue, knowing exactly what she was about to say.

"We're going to a doctor's appointment, and before you get angry,

please remember I'm just trying to do what's best for you."

Her eyes welled up with tears, making me feel sick. I hated when she was upset.

"Please, please, will you just go in there with me?" she begged, swiping away a tear that rolled down her cheek.

Do it for her, Oakley, you're disappointing her in every other way. I kept my eyes firmly fixed on the floor and nodded. "Thank you," she whispered, and ushered me to the car.

As we pulled up in a parking space outside the doctor's surgery, my stomach turned. I followed Mum to the front desk where she gave the nurse my name.

"Okay, if you'd like to take a seat, the doctor will be with you shortly," the greying woman behind the reception desk told us.

Mum smiled. "Thank you."

This wasn't our normal doctor's surgery; it was on the same complex but in a completely different building. This one was overly white and smelt too clinical. I knew we were seeing a specialist and not just an ordinary doctor.

"Oakley Farrell?" a deep, gruff voice called.

I gulped and looked up. A plump man wearing black trousers and a smart black-and-white stripe shirt looked around the group of patients waiting in the seating area. Mum stood up first and caught his attention. He gave her a smile and gestured for us to follow him.

My palms started to sweat as we walked along the short corridor and into a small room. Mum shook his hand and sat down in one of the blue fabric chairs.

"Well, what can we do for you then, Oakley?" I stared at him blankly. Was he expecting me to answer?

Mum squeezed my hand and started explaining. "Oakley stopped talking when she was just five years old. At first we thought it was a joke. And then we thought it was because she had choked on some food, and maybe she'd damaged her throat somehow... Or maybe she was afraid it would hurt too much if she spoke..."

As Mum reeled off a list of their theories, I found myself gradually shutting out her voice. I wanted to vanish. Suddenly I felt my hand being squeezed.

"I don't know what to do any more." Mum sniffed and pressed my hand

again.

The doctor nodded. “Hmm, I see. Well fear of talking due to previous injury is possible. However, this has been going on for years, so that seems unlikely.”

He leant forwards, resting his forearms on his mahogany desk.

“Oakley, would it be okay with you if I examined your throat?”

My heart stopped. I could feel the panic rising. I tried to breathe, but my lungs felt like they were being crushed in a vice. *No, no, no!* I didn’t want any examinations. If they rule out anything medical, they’ll know it’s not because I can’t talk. I couldn’t have Mum turning all her attention at why I *wouldn’t* talk.

“What kind of examination? What would that involve doing?” Mum questioned.

“Nothing too bad, I can assure you,” he said lightly. “I’ll literally just look down her throat and see if I can see anything, scarring for instance. If there is nothing visibly wrong, and I suspect there won’t be, I’d like to perform a laryngoscopy. The procedure is usually performed under local anaesthetic, but we can do general if needed,” he explained, looking at me.

“We’ll pass the laryngoscope down her throat which will send pictures to a monitor. The procedure itself will take around twenty to thirty minutes.”

My whole body slowly turned cold, and my muscles seized up. Bile rose in my throat, and I swallowed hard. There was no way I was letting him even look inside my mouth let alone stick a camera down my throat. I started breathing heavily as my eyes prickled with tears.

“Sweetheart,” Mum said soothingly. Shaking my head, I jumped up and ran out of the room, sprinting to the surgery’s exit.

I slumped to the floor beside the car and leant against the door for support. Tears rolled down my cheeks, soaking my knees.

“Oakley,” Mum shouted frantically. Within seconds, she was crouching down in front of me. “Honey, please don’t cry. It won’t hurt. Please let him do the procedure, please?”

She sobbed and stroked my hair. I could barely breathe; I was so worked up, I was just gasping raggedly.

“Calm down, it’s okay. It doesn’t have to be today. You get in the car, and I’ll go speak to the doctor quickly. We can look into the procedure a little more and then decide, okay?”

That was the best I was going to get so I nodded, even though I had no

intention of ever going back.

“Okay, here.” She handed me the car keys and helped me up. With shaking hands, I managed to unlock the car and stumble in. By the time Mum came back, I had calmed down a lot more, knowing that it was over for now.

“Home?” she asked softly. I nodded, staring out of the window and hugging my legs to my chest protectively.

“Hey?” Cole greeted me, a questioning look on his face, and stepped aside so I could walk in his front door. “I’d ask how it went, but I think I can guess.”

He nodded towards the stairs, gesturing for me to follow him up to his room.

“So,” he prompted as I crawled onto his bed.

Shaking my head, I felt tears sting me eyes. *Stop all the damn crying!* I screamed silently at myself.

“That bad?” he said, soothingly, then climbed over and pulled me into his arms. As he stroked my hair, I let the tears flow. Why couldn’t everyone just leave it? I was trying to forget and move on, but it was impossible to do that when they were constantly asking what was wrong, or making stupid appointments.

Cole held me until I calmed down. I pulled my head away from his chest and smiled at him apologetically.

“You okay now?”

I shook my head and sat up, wiping my face with my sleeve.

“Did you go in?”

I nodded slowly, and looked up to see his reaction – which was unsurprisingly one of surprise. Last time Mum had tried to get me to go to see a doctor about my ‘condition’, I didn’t even make it out of our front door.

“Did he examine you?”

I shook my head.

“But you got into the room.”

He smiled, looking hopeful. I could tell what he was thinking. I made it into the room so maybe next I would allow them to do an examination.

“Are you supposed to go back?”

I nodded, grimacing. I could feel myself start to sweat at the possibility of having to go through that again.

“I could come with you if you want?” he offered, speaking gently. How important was this to him? Did our being together properly depend upon me

talking again?

I wrapped my arms around myself. The thought of losing Cole felt like someone was stabbing me in the chest.

“Don’t do that.” He pulled my arms apart and kept hold of my hands. “Oakley, it doesn’t matter to me if you never speak again. I’ve told you that a million times so please believe me. I know you better than anyone else does. I know what every little facial expression means and how you’ll react to a situation before it’s even happened. All I want is for you to be happy.”

My eyes filled with tears again, but happy tears. *See, you idiot.*

“I mean it. If you’re happy as you are then that’s all that matters to me. Are you happy?”

Happy, I repeated in my head, testing the word. No, not happy, not with myself anyway. Scared, confused, broken, dirty, and lost – they all seemed to fit better. I nodded, telling him the biggest lie I had ever told.

He smiled. Wow, he bought it. Was I getting better at lying or did he just want to believe I was happy so much that he missed it?

“Okay, I’ll help you tell your mum to back off then.”

That was it? I had just basically told him there was no chance I would ever talk again, and he just breezed past it like I’d just said I wanted to trim my hair.

Someone knocked on Cole’s door. I wiped my eyes again even though they were dry now and smiled.

“Yeah?” Cole called and flicked the TV on with the remote.

Jenna pushed the door open and walked in, with a worried smile on her face. Mum had obviously told her about the doctor’s, then.

“Do you want to stay for dinner, sweetie? We’re having tacos,” she offered, brushing her blonde hair behind her ear. I nodded eagerly. Mexican night at Cole’s was the best. There wouldn’t just be tacos; there would be wedges, salad, tortilla chips, salsa dips, and nachos too. There was also the chilli challenge between Cole and his dad. They would both try to eat the most and see who ‘pussied’ out first.

“Great. Chris is coming too,” she said and frowned. Jenna wasn’t a fan of Chris either. *What are you doing, Mia?* I hoped that one day she would realise she could do so much better than him. Cole mumbled something under his breath. I couldn’t quite make it out, but I could pretty much guess what it was.

“You,” she pointed to Cole, “had better be on your best behaviour, for

your sister's sake.”

“I would be if he wasn't such a fuc—” I jabbed my elbow into his side before he finished his sentence. “Why'd I get hit for that one? It's true!” he exclaimed, frowning at me.

Jenna looked like she was trying not to laugh. “So,” she said with a wide smile and sat on the end of the bed. “You two okay?”

I looked at Cole uncomfortably, and he just rolled his eyes at his mum.

“Not really. I just can't get rid of her,” he said sarcastically, tensing his body as if he was waiting to be slapped. I decided not to as he was expecting it; instead I shrugged and stood up to leave. He grabbed my wrist and pulled me back on the bed, making me fall onto the mattress.

“I'm joking!”

Jenna made an 'aww' sound, which made me want to run away. It was so embarrassing.

“So are you two... you know?”

“Mum!” Cole groaned and pointed to the door.

Jenna giggled like a teenage girl and got up to leave.

“I'm going, I'm going. I think it's great though. Not that we couldn't all see it coming or anything.”

“Mum!” Cole snapped again. Jenna closed the door. Her laughter rang through his room even though she was on the other side of the wall.

I looked at the wall, praying that my face hadn't turned too pink. It would be though, of course. Cole chuckled and brushed his fingers across my cheek.

“Just ignore her,” he said and flopped down on his back. “Let me know when to stop,” he instructed as he flicked through the TV channels.

We laid on his bed all afternoon just watching television, messing around, and kissing each other. Lots of kissing each other, actually. It felt more natural with each time.

“Wanna go swimming tomorrow?” Cole asked casually, breaking the long, comfortable silence. I nodded my head and pressed my back into his chest, so I was even closer to him. His fingers brushed over my hip bone. Everywhere he touched felt as if it was on fire.

Half an hour later, Jenna called us down for dinner. As we walked downstairs, I wondered if my parents had been invited too. I hoped not. Holding my breath, I peered into the kitchen to see. Only David and Jenna were there. I blew out a sigh of relief and sat down in my usual seat.

“Where is *he*?” I heard Cole ask his mum, referring to Chris, no doubt.
“Mia’s room.”

Cole glared in anger.

“Please don’t start, Cole. She’ll realise she deserves better in her own time. If you push her now, you’ll only push her further into his arms.”

When Mia and Chris walked in, the room fell silent. The atmosphere became tense, but I would still rather be with them than at my house. I smiled at the two of them. It couldn’t be easy for Mia knowing that her family hated her boyfriend. Their reason for hating him was valid, but Jenna was right, Mia had to get over him and move on in her own time.

Everyone sat down, and I saw the challenging look between Cole and his dad. I couldn’t grinning as they both reached for a green chilli from the bowl.

Dinner was delicious; I ate until my stomach hurt. The over-full feeling was worth it though. Jenna was an incredible cook.

Cole groaned as we walked back up to his room after helping clear up. He’d eaten three chillis and had been sick.

“Lie with me?” he reached out and grabbed my hand, gently pulling me onto the bed. “I’m never eating that stuff again.”

Yeah, until next time. I pursed my lips. He said that every time.

After chilling in his room for a while, waiting for him to recover a bit, he walked me home. I started to feel sick as I unlocked my front door and pushed it open.

“See you tomorrow, Oaks,” Cole said, kissing me on the top of my head.

“Goodnight Cole,” Mum called after him. I jumped at her voice, not having seen her approach.

“Are you okay, darling?”

I nodded, looking away from her.

“Are we okay?”

I stepped forward and wrapped my arms around her. It wasn’t her fault. None of it was. Mum hugged me back, almost squeezing me to death.

“I love you,” she whispered. I smiled and kissed her cheek, letting her know that I loved her too.

When I stepped back, I could tell from her puffy eyes that she had been crying for a long time. I felt a stab of guilt. *This is not hurting her nearly as much as the truth would*, I reminded myself.

Giving her a quick half-hearted smile, I went upstairs and flopped down on my bed. Everything that happened in the day had exhausted me, and I just wanted to curl up under my quilt and sleep. I couldn't even stay awake long enough to receive Cole's text.

Chapter Nine

Oakley

“Can you sit still for two minutes!” Cole teased and grabbed my coke out of my hand before I spilt it. I was wriggling around in my seat in excitement. Our plane was gliding across the sky to Italy. I was so happy to be going away. I shook my head at him and stuck my tongue out. Cole rolled his eyes.

I had spent every day with him since school broke up and I still wasn't getting bored of his company. In fact, I wanted more time with him. Although we weren't officially together, we may as well have been. And besides, there was no rush to put a name on it.

I was sat between Cole and Jasper, who had been talking about cars constantly. I watched the in-flight movie, *You've got Mail*, to occupy myself.

“Bet I pull more girls than you!” Jasper said to Cole, gaining my attention. For a second I almost had a mini heart attack, until I realised that even if there wasn't something going on between Cole and me, he still wouldn't take up a bet like that. It wasn't his style.

“I know you will, man. I'm not planning on screwing everything with a pulse.” Cole discreetly brushed his leg against mine; reassuring me that he didn't want anyone else.

Jasper looked disappointed.

“You're young, Cole! You should be getting as much as you can, from whoever you can!”

I scrunched my nose in disgust. Why on earth would women sleep with Jasper when it was obvious that he didn't want anything else from them? Unless he led them on.

“You're a pig, you know that?” Cole retorted.

Jasper laughed and nodded. “Yeah, but a sexually frustrated pig I am not! Don't worry, we'll go out and find you a nice blonde.”

As Cole stared blankly at Jasper, I started to find it amusing too. Poor Cole, he wouldn't hear the end of it.

As the plane started to descend, I felt lighter; like my problems had been left

behind in England. I smiled, looking out of the window at the Italian airport.

We retrieved our suitcases quickly and made our way to the hotel. The taxi drove up the mountain and stopped at our gorgeous little hotel. It was set into the mountain, only about one third of the way up. The swimming pool stretched to the very edge of the mountain. I couldn't wait to get in the pool and look out across at the landscape.

A tall, skinny, and very glamorous woman greeted us as we strode into the entrance. She wore high-heeled black sandals and shocking red lipstick: the type of woman that made guys fall at her feet and women sick with envy. Confidence oozed from her perfect, white smile.

"Hello and welcome," she said in a thick Italian accent. "My name is Carmella, and I'm going to be showing you to your rooms." Her English was almost as flawless as her looks.

"Thank you," Dad responded politely, giving her that warm smile that won over absolutely everyone he met. Carmella helped us to check in and handed out our wristbands that showed we were all-inclusive. Mine and Cole's were the only ones with holes punched into them – for people under eighteen. Which clearly irritated Cole. I knew he was hoping to get an adult one.

"Let's unpack and meet by the bar in half an hour?" Mum suggested, once Carmella left us.

Jenna nodded. "Sounds great!" She waved over her shoulder as she ushered David out of Mum and Dad's room – the last room we were shown around.

My room was connected to my parents, but it also had its own entrance, so I could come and go whenever I wanted. I dumped my suitcase on my bed and opened the balcony door. Stepping out into the warm air, I sighed. The view was beautiful. To my right were the mountains. Right at the top they were covered with a dusting of thin, white cloud. To my left was the sea. The sea abroad was so different to the sea in England – always more exotic somehow – but still had the same calming effect on me.

Someone knocked on the door. Reluctantly, I forced myself away from the amazing view and answered the door.

"You're not ready," Cole stated, pointing to the warm England clothes that I was still wearing.

I smiled and ripped the zip of my suitcase open and grabbed a pair of denim shorts and blue tank top. Holding one finger up, I told him to wait and

went into the bathroom to get changed.

Checking my reflection in the mirror, I despaired. My hair was a mess from the sudden change in temperature. *Please don't let my hair be like this for the whole two weeks*, I prayed. Pulling the hairband off my wrist, I tied my hair in a loose bun and got changed.

I yanked the bathroom door open, eager to grab a quick drink with our parents and then get down to the beach. My jaw dropped when my eyes landed on Cole; he was lying on my bed swinging my bikini top around his finger. *Oh, no!* Jumping forward, I swiped it out of his hand and shoved it back inside my suitcase. My face felt like it was on fire. I wanted to kill him!

Cole burst out laughing. "You should have seen your face," he choked out, blocking my arm as I tried to hit him.

"Sorry. Couldn't resist. You ready now?" He pressed his lips together, trying, and failing miserably, to stop himself grinning.

With a deep sigh, I stalked out of my room, trying not to smile myself. Seconds later, he grabbed my hand. "Sorry, but that is one sexy little bikini!" I slapped his chest and closed my eyes, wishing the ground would open up and swallow me whole. I liked when he said things like that because he made me feel normal, but it also made me nervous.

He laughed again, and then I felt his lips press against the side of my head. Looking up, I smiled happily and nudged his shoulder.

"Drink, then sea," he said and pressed the button for the lift.

The beach was beautiful, the water was a clear aquiline blue, and soft golden sands stretched out as far as I could see. There were people dotted around the beach, lying on colourful towels, and children running around, building sand castles. A few people were swimming in the sea and playing with large beach balls. I wished I'd put my bikini on under my clothes so I could go in the water too.

I looked up at Cole and smiled happily.

"I'd ask if you want ice cream, but that's a pretty stupid question, right?" he said teasingly and pulled me towards the ice cream stand. We got the same flavour – Belgian chocolate – and went to sit down on our towels. The sun shone brightly, so I flicked my sunglasses from the top of my head until they were resting on my nose. My vision darkened, and I buried my feet in the sand, feeling it wedge between my toes.

Cole peeled his t-shirt off and spooned ice cream into his mouth. I bit my lip, frowning at the squirming feeling in the pit of my stomach. I was

crazy about him, and scared at how he made me feel.

The best way I could think to describe it was like being set on fire. When he kissed me, looked at me in a certain way, or took his shirt off, it felt like my blood was boiling inside my veins. I assumed that felt good and uncomplicated for normal people, but I wasn't quite that.

Cole sighed, breaking me out of my thoughts and making me jump.

"You okay?" he said quietly, smiling so peacefully it made my heart skip a beat. His eyes seemed a much lighter blue in the sunlight, even through my sunglasses.

I nodded my head and scooted closer to him, so our arms pressed against each other's. The feel of his skin against mine gave me goose bumps. *Calm down!*

After an hour of looking out to sea at nothing in particular, we decided to check out the hotel properly. As we started walking back along the beach, his hand brushed against mine. I stole a sideways glance at him. He was biting the inside of his mouth, deep in thought. Again, his hand brushed mine. Did that mean he wanted to hold it? *Take his hand, Oakley. Stop being such a baby!*

A small smile pulled at the side of Cole's mouth and he wound his hand around mine, intertwining our fingers. It was as if he had heard my thoughts.

"Oh, we're going there," he suddenly said and nodded his head towards a little wooden shack on the beach.

The crafted wooden sign just above where a gorgeous, honey-tanned man stood read 'Water Sports'. Something was also written above it, which I assumed was the same in Italian.

I protested silently, but reluctantly followed him.

"Hi, can we book diving lessons please?" he asked, without looking at the prices.

Tall, dark and gorgeous nodded his head and flashed us a perfect, pearly white smile.

"Sure. I just need to see some ID," he said in an Australian accent and pointed to me.

Cole shook his head. "ID?"

"Yeah, you need to be over sixteen, or accompanied by an adult." I looked at Cole and smiled victoriously.

"Here's my ID. I'm eighteen, so that counts as adult, right?"

I narrowed my eyes at him. He had a fake ID! Cole was still only

seventeen. Gorgeous nodded again and checked the ID. Surely, he would know it was a fake?

“Thanks. You wanna go tomorrow at ten?”

My mouth dropped open. He had accepted the ID.

“Sounds good, thanks.” Cole gave our details and then paid. Diving did actually sound fun, especially in the Italian sea, but I was still worried about the equipment breaking and me drowning.

“You’ll enjoy it,” he promised as he read my worried expression. I gripped his t-shirt. I would enjoy it if my oxygen tank didn’t break.

“You’ll be fine, Oakley. I’m not gonna let the sharks get you!” he joked. I pulled away. That really wasn’t helping. “I’m kidding! Shall we head back to the hotel? I need food.”

I pulled my hand out of his as we reached the hotel, giving him a small apologetic smile. He knew why anyway. As he held the door open for me, I spotted a leaflet for the hotel’s spa. *Hmm, if he’s making me dive, I’m making him get a face pack...*

“Where are you going?” Cole asked as I turned the wrong way for our rooms. He followed behind me as I walked down the stone staircase to the lower floor. Pointing to the spa sign, I grinned.

“No. Way!”

I nodded and walked up to the treatment board beside the reception desk. Two ridiculously beautiful women were sitting behind the desk, looking at the computer screen. Was being stunning a requirement of working here?

“You can’t be serious?” he asked, begging me with his eyes to leave. “Do you want my balls to drop off?”

I grinned wide and cocked my head to the side.

“Let’s just go, yeah?”

Couples massage, I read in my head. Couples. I really wanted to relax together, but was a couples massage jumping the gun a little? Would he see it as a hint? Gathering the courage, I pointed to the massage and waited for his reaction.

“Just that?” he asked with a small smile playing on his lips. Shaking my head, I also pointed to the face pack thing. “You can but there is no way I’m putting any of that shit on my face!”

I scowled at him.

“No. Just, no.” he said defiantly.

“Can I help you?” One of the women asked, grinning in amusement at our little exchange.

“Can we book the couples massage and the rejuvenating face thing for her?” he asked, nodding in my direction. I slapped his arm and decided to go with a different approach. I pouted and fluttered my eyelashes. Cole wasn’t budging.

“Not happening.”

The woman, who looked like she should be a model and not a receptionist, laughed.

“You want him to do both?” she asked me. Her English was slightly better than Carmella’s, but her Italian accent was thicker. I nodded and hoped she wouldn’t ask me anything else. I didn’t want to seem rude. That was always a problem with strangers, not being able to answer them made me look stuck up.

He groaned and turned to the supermodel. “OK. Both please.”

“Of course.” She booked us in for tomorrow afternoon and handed us our appointment card.

Cole tucked the appointment card in the pocket of his shorts and glared at me playfully.

“You owe me!” I raised my eyebrow. *I owe him nothing; I’m diving tomorrow morning!* He chuckled and casually threw his arm over my shoulder as we wandered back through the hotel.

After eating dinner with our families, we walked back along the beach for a while. It was so nice to just go out and do whatever we wanted to do. I loved it just being us. We were given a lot more freedom on holiday, as long as we were sensible and met them at least once a day for a meal. Our parents would be off doing their own thing anyway.

When I started yawning, Cole demanded we go back to the hotel. I wanted to stay longer and watch the nightlife, but there was plenty of time for that.

“Can I stay for a bit?” he asked nervously as we stopped at my room. I nodded, not wanting him to leave. “Sure? I don’t mind if you just want to go to sleep.”

Unlocking the door, I pointed inside the room and raised my eyebrows at him.

“Bossy,” he commented.

We both lay on my bed and stared at the smooth white ceiling.

“You asleep?” he whispered, his soft voice sent a shiver down my spine. I shook my head and rolled onto my side. He really was impossibly good-looking, and impossibly wonderful. *I love you*, I declared privately.

“You think I could stay here tonight? I could sneak out early in the morning.” Biting my lip, I considered it. I wanted him to stay. I would love to spend the night with him, but what if we were caught? My parents would go crazy, although we could just say we fell asleep.

Making my decision, not that it was hard very to make, I nodded my head. He smiled a gorgeous smile and sat up.

“Get ready for bed then!”

I flipped my suitcase open and pulled my shorts and tank top pyjamas out. Was he looking forward to the normality of being a couple going to bed together as much as I was? Although, we weren’t actually a couple. I frowned and went into the bathroom to change and brush my teeth.

Cole had taken his clothes off and was sitting in bed when I got back into the room. Heat flooded to my face. Was he completely naked? My face flamed.

I bit my tongue as I slipped into bed beside him. I was so nervous and a more than a little scared. I couldn’t see if he was wearing boxers. I shuffled down and pulled the cover up to my chin, being careful not to touch him. After a minute, he did the same.

“You look tired.” His breathing became heavier and he kissed me hard, completely taking me by surprise. Nothing mattered as our lips worked together. I didn’t care that I wasn’t good enough for him. I didn’t care that I shouldn’t want him. I loved him, and I wanted him.

He made a soft moaning sound and dug his fingers into my hair, holding my head in place. Suddenly, he rolled over and pinned me to the bed beneath him. I felt the initial panic start to rise, but it disappeared as quickly as it came. Panic was replaced with something else. Something good.

When he pulled away just as quickly after a long and passionate kiss, I sagged in disappointment at the loss of that feeling. Cole smiled and pulled me into his arms. I smiled to myself and laid my head on his chest.

“Night,” he murmured. Wrapping my arm over my chest, I closed my eyes and fell asleep almost instantly.

Chapter Ten

Oakley

I woke up to the bed dipping, making me roll onto my side.

“Sorry,” Cole whispered. “It’s almost six, so I thought I should go. I’ll come back in a couple hours and we can go to breakfast.”

He bent down and kissed me lightly, his lips lingering on mine for a few seconds. I watched him creep out of my room and hoped he would stay with me again tonight. Two hours later, I was dressed and ready for him to knock. I’d heard my parents in the next room, but I didn’t go in to say hi and thankfully they were respecting my space too. Just after eight, almost right on time, there was a knock on my door. Cole smiled as I opened the door.

“Hi.” He leant forward and quickly planted a kiss on my lips. “Ready to go down?”

I nodded and stepped out of my room, just as Mum and Dad walked out of theirs. “Morning honey, Cole,” Mum said and gave me a hug.

“Hungry?” Dad asked.

“Starving,” Cole replied, and nodded towards the lift at the end of the corridor. “You seen anyone else this morning?”

Dad shook his head. “Sarah spoke to your mum. They’re meeting us at breakfast. Not heard from Mia, and I’d imagine Jasper’s elsewhere.” *In some poor girl’s room.* “Did you sleep well, Oakley?”

I nodded, and stepped closer to Cole while we waited for the lift.

“What do you have planned today? Your father and I are going shopping with David and Jenna,” Mum asked me, but waited for the reply from Cole.

“We’re diving at ten.” I raised my eyebrow at him. *Not planning to tell them about the spa?* He said nothing else.

“Is it safe?” Mum questioned, frowning with worry.

Dad chuckled. “Of course it is, Sarah. There’s a qualified instructor, isn’t there?” Cole nodded. “See. They’ll be in safe hands.”

I often wondered if Dad was *cool* about things like this because he felt guilty. I *had* to believe he felt remorse for what he let had Frank do to me. I couldn’t believe that my daddy was a cold, heartless monster.

“Well, you make sure you look after her,” Mum ordered Cole.

He nodded.

“Always.”

Always!

In the end it was only David, Jenna and that Mia joined us for breakfast. Jasper was nowhere to be seen. Not that it was much of a surprise. He now treated holidays, or any days actually, as a chance to sleep with anything with a pulse.

“Have fun and be careful,” Jenna said, as Cole and I got up to leave for the beach. We were diving in one hour.

I walked down to the beach holding Cole’s hand so tightly that I was probably crushing his bones. We had already popped back to our rooms to change for diving.

The Australian guy, who told us his name was Kyle, showed us how to use the equipment. I made sure I listened hard and repeated everything in my head over and over. *Stop being ridiculous; you’re not even going that deep!* I reasoned with myself.

Cole was practically bounding up and down as we walked with our little group of six into the sea. Kyle instructed us in what to do, and then he disappeared beneath the water.

“Ready?” Cole asked, and stuck his oxygen thing in his mouth. *What is that called again? Oh, it doesn’t really matter what it’s called, as long as it works!* Nodding my head, I took one last deep breath and followed him.

Being under the water was incredible. I felt so light and free. *See, you are enjoying yourself.* Cole grabbed my hand and looked towards Kyle. Kyle gestured for us all to follow him, turned, and swam deeper into the sea. Everyone followed, and I wondered how much further we would be going. I knew I wouldn’t be able to stand up and have my head above the water by this point, but I wasn’t sure exactly how deep we were.

As we swam towards the bottom of the ocean, I silently thanked Cole for making me go. Although it was quite dark, I could still make out the tiny fish and weird looking plants. What I enjoyed most though was just floating in the sea and enjoying how peaceful it was.

Once our time was up, Kyle gestured for us to swim back to the surface, and then he led us back to the shore.

“You so enjoyed that, didn’t you!” Cole teased as we walked back to the shack to return the equipment.

I shrugged nonchalantly; a small give-away smile creeping on to my face. He chortled.

“I knew you would. Shower and then I’ll come to your room. Wanna have lunch before the spa crap?” I nodded and nudged him with my shoulder. Like he wouldn’t enjoy a massage!

When it was time to go to the spa, Cole suddenly felt unwell. “Maybe I should just stay here,” he suggested. I shook my head and pushed him towards the stone stairs.

“Welcome. I’m Isabelle. How can I help?” said an equally beautiful woman to the ones who were in the spa yesterday.

“We have some stuff booked. Under the name Benson,” Cole said quietly as if saying it any louder would make it more real.

“Ah yes. Okay, if you’d like to follow me, I’ll show you to your massage room.”

I followed Isabelle with a huge smile. I was feeling giddy with excitement at having a massage with Cole. Isabelle opened a door, and the smell of rose oil hit me. Two white beds were in the middle of the room. A little chest on the far wall, with pink orchids sitting in a large vase on top.

“There are towels on the beds. If you remove all of your clothes and cover yourself, your masseuse will be with you in five minutes.

My eyes widened. Remove *all* of our clothes.

“You can leave your underwear on, just move your bra straps off your shoulders,” Cole suggested. I gulped. “I’ll turn around. I won’t look; I promise.” *Oh God.*

He removed his top and shorts quickly, unashamed.

“I’m not looking, Oakley. Go ahead.” he said with a chuckle as he laid face down on the massage table. He had kept his boxers on.

I quickly took off my dress and pulled my bikini straps down. I was still covered, but not as much as I felt comfortable with. Hopping onto the bed, I laid down on my stomach, making sure the towel covered me.

“Okay, this was a good idea,” he admitted halfway through. Yeah, I bet he thought that with yesterday’s gorgeous model massaging him. We both had a woman doing the massages, thankfully. I hated the thought of a strange man’s hands on my body. Closing my eyes, I concentrated on Elaina’s hands unlocking my muscles.

When our thirty minutes were up, I made a long face and got up to get dressed as Elaina and Cole’s masseuse left the room. Cole turned around

again so I could have some privacy. *Does it really matter if he sees you?* Impulsively, I grabbed the top of his arm and spun him around.

“What...?” he croaked, looking at my half-naked body. I was covered with a bikini; something Cole had seen me in hundreds of times before, so why did it feel different this time? Was it because we were alone that it felt intimate, or was it because we weren’t just friends anymore?

“I can turn... Um, turn around if... Err,” he stuttered, stumbling over his words. Shaking my head, I pulled my bikini straps up, being careful not to flash him!

We dressed in complete silence, both looking at each other. The only sound in the room was the sound of our breathing.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispered, and stepped closer to me once we had finished getting dressed. I blushed, feeling the heat warm my whole body. His eyes didn’t show any signs of lying. My eyes prickled, and I willed myself not to cry. I didn’t feel beautiful, but knowing Cole thought I was meant everything to me.

He smiled and kissed me softly. “Let’s get this face mud crap over with.”

I broke out in a smile and led him back to reception.

We were led into another room, this time bigger, and not private. Cole glared at me as the three young women looked up at us; their faces were smothered in a dark green paste. I tried not to laugh, but I couldn’t help it. Though having enjoyed the diving so much, I did feel back making him go through something he clearly didn’t want to do.

“I thought this was a couple’s thing? As in two people!” *Nope, just the massage!*

For the whole time we were in that room; Cole either frowned or moaned. When he looked over at me with a grey face that looked like he’d fallen in a cement mixer, I wished I had brought my camera with me. Not that the image would ever leave me.

As soon as our facemasks were off, he stood up.

“Lunch and beer time,” he announced. Beer to restore his masculinity? He’d have to hope that Jasper or Mia were around to get him a beer first. He wrapped his arm around my waist as and we made our way to the outside hotel bar. I smiled, loving the feeling of his skin on mine.

The rest of the week flew by too quickly. I hated how fast the holiday was

passing, but I was still having the time of my life. Cole and I hung out at the beach a lot, and I was actually getting a tan. It was a nice change from my usual pasty, ghostly white. We barely saw our parents during the day, except for breakfast and most evenings for dinner. I loved the freedom and couldn't wait until I was old enough to be able to leave home.

Mia spent most of her time with a girl she had met on the second day. She was on holiday with her family too so they were both happy to have found someone their own age to hang around with. And Jasper, well, we saw him around the hotel occasionally. He would get up at around three in the afternoon and chill by the pool bar, have dinner with us and then go out.

Since the dressing incident in the spa, I grew even more comfortable and confident around Cole. We now both thought nothing of changing in front of each other. Every night he would sneak into my room and sleep in my bed. We would just mess around and kiss until we fell asleep.

After dinner towards the end of the holiday, Cole and I decided just to chill in my room and watch a movie. We were going to the water park again, early in the morning so didn't want to be out too late. I had enough issues getting up in the mornings!

I climbed on the bed and hovered above him, my hands beside his face. He instantly smiled, wrapped his hand around the back of my head and pulled me down. As his lips captured mine. Slowly, he rolled us so he was above me.

He chuckled and kissed my forehead. "Oakley?" His voice wobbled nervously. "This is probably really late considering everything but... Well, I was wondering if..." He sighed and shook his head, frowning at himself. "Will you be my girlfriend?"

Breathe, Oakley! His body tensed.

"Is that a no?"

I shook my head, and he frowned.

"It's a yes?"

I nodded and kissed him again.

He pulled away and kissed down my neck. I froze for a second; fighting between wanting more and being terrified by how I might react. Cole moaned as he ran his hand down the side of my body and gripped the bottom of my top. This was that defining moment where I had to decide if I was going to listen to what I actually wanted, or what I should want.

I loved how he made me feel and how natural being with him was. However, after Frank I shouldn't want to be intimate with anyone, should I? Would people think that had been my fault if I slept with someone after? Shaking my head lightly, I told myself off. No one else got to decide what I was ready for or what I wanted.

When I didn't push him away, he pulled it over my head. His lips only left mine for a second while he whipped my top off. My whole body felt like it was on fire. Everywhere he touched made my skin tingle. His hands caressed my stomach and chest with such a gentle touch it almost tickled.

"Maybe we should stop." He made it sound almost like a question. His eyes were alight with love and excitement, definitely showing that he wanted to continue. I wanted to continue too. It was my decision, and I wasn't going to let what they had done to me ruin absolutely everything. Putting my fears to one side, I shook my head.

Cole looked nervous.

"Are you sure?" he whispered. His voice was thick with lust. The sound made my stomach clench. I nodded my head and ran my hand through his soft hair. My heart felt like it was going to pop it was beating so fast.

"Are you scared?"

No, not of being with you.

I shook my head, and he chuckled.

"Don't worry, I'm kinda nervous too." Why was he nervous? "This is my first time too," he admitted, biting his lip. His first time? Cole was a virgin! My mouth dropped open. He raised an eyebrow at me. "Not sure if I should be insulted by that look of shock on your face or not."

I shook my head, trying to make sense of what he said. How could he be a virgin? He'd had a couple of girlfriends before, although they hadn't lasted very long, but still.

"It took so long for me to even consider there might even be a tiny chance that you liked me too. I've never slept with anyone because I've only ever wanted you." he whispered, unashamed. *Wow. Me?*

I felt a warm tear roll down the side of my face, which Cole wiped away with his thumb.

"I love you. Always have. Always will." Closing my eyes, I smiled. Hearing that was almost too much. I didn't deserve him to love me like that.

I felt a gentle pressure on my lips. I kissed him back, showing him how much I loved him too.

Chapter Eleven

Cole

I lay perfectly still so I wouldn't wake her and watched her sleeping in my arms. She was so beautiful, and so out of my league I couldn't believe she agreed to be with me. I was the luckiest bastard alive. As soon as I had admitted I loved her it felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I had been holding it in for so damn long, scared that it would put her off. It was so good to finally say it out loud.

Oakley didn't think that much of herself and I had no idea why. To me, she was perfect. It didn't matter that she wouldn't talk, or our relationship wouldn't be 'normal' because of that: I was in love with *her*.

When she first stopped talking, everyone thought it was a fish bone that she'd choked on. We waited patiently for a few days, and then it became obvious that something else was wrong.

At one point, Jasper thought she was doing it for attention, but that wasn't like her at all. I wanted to help her so badly. I wanted to make it better so she could talk. I wanted to hear her say my name and laugh again. Would she still sound similar? I sighed and kissed the top of her head, hoping that one day she would trust me enough to let me help her.

It was almost six in the morning, and I needed to sneak back to my room soon, but I was too comfortable, even with her sprawled out on my chest. I doubted anyone would be up at this time, but I couldn't risk getting caught and not being able to sleep in her bed again. Waking up next to her was amazing and I only had five more days to do it.

After another ten minutes of just staring at her like a crazy stalker, I gently rolled her over and got out of bed. She sighed deeply as I moved her and settled back into the pillow. *Stop being a creep and leave!* Throwing on my clothes, I took one last look at her and left.

Last night was incredible, without a doubt the best night of my life. I'd had a couple girlfriends before, but nothing serious; it didn't last long with either of them. Every time I got close to a girl, I would pull back, always comparing them to Oakley. Although there was nothing wrong with them,

they were not her. Now I was so glad that I never had sex with them. Oakley being my first meant so much more than it would have with one of my exes.

I got back to my room and headed for the shower. There was no way I could fall back to sleep now so I might as well just get up properly. As I looked at my reflection in the mirror, I froze. Damn it, should I have left a note for her? She would wake up alone. That was what had been happening the whole time, but it was different now. *Idiot!* Glancing at the ceramic clock on the wall, I saw that it was now six-forty-five. Too late to sneak back. *If you hurry up, she might still be asleep when you go back.*

She set her alarm for seven-thirty, so I had to be quick. Rushing around, I had a shower and clumsily got dressed. I was in such a rush I kept stumbling around and shoved my leg through the wrong hole in my shorts. Just calm down, I demanded from myself. I was worse than a pre-teen at a boy band concert!

With just minutes to spare, I was ready. Taking a deep breath, I grabbed my phone and wallet and headed to her room. The problem I had now was that her door was locked, and I didn't have a key. Whatever happened, she would wake up the morning after losing her virginity and be alone. *Nice one, Cole.*

Shaking my head at myself, I knocked on the wooden door and waited. As the seconds crept by, I thought a thousand different things. 'She regrets last night so she's ignoring you. She's mad because you left her. You were crap in the sack and put her off men for life!'

The door swung open, and she smiled shyly.

"Hi," I said, nerves bubbling up so rapidly I felt like a volcano ready to burst. What now? She moved aside for me to come in. I followed her into the room and sat on the bed. I loved that bed. Say something. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. Shit, this was awkward. It shouldn't be awkward! *Seriously say something!*

Gulping, I searched for the right words, not knowing what they even were. "Are you okay? You're not sore or anything?" Biting her lip, she shook her head. "Sure? I mean your first time is meant to hurt, and if you're sore we can get you something," I rambled like an idiot.

Oakley shook her head and stood up, busying herself by getting her bag ready.

"Okay. Good." I frowned. She rarely admitted when she was ill or in pain. I just wanted to look after her though.

When she had finished shoving her camera in her bag, I got up and wrapped my arms around her.

“I love you,” I whispered, running my hands through her soft hair. She stroked my cheek and my heart felt like it had literally stopped beating. Was I going to feel like I was going to explode every time she touched me now?

Reaching up, she pressed her lips against mine. I kissed her back, pulling her tight against my body. I hated that we had to meet our parents for breakfast; I just wanted to take her back to bed for the rest of the day.

Pulling away to catch my breath, I rubbed my nose against hers.

“You ready?” I asked. Her breath seemed to catch in her throat, and it made me feel a thousand feet tall that I had that effect on her. She nodded slowly, not taking her eyes off mine for a second. I kissed her quickly and then we left for the buffet restaurant.

We got into the lift, and she smiled apologetically, pulling her hand out of mine just before we got to the ground floor. Right, so no one saw us together.

“It’s okay,” I assured her. “I want to be able to spend time alone with you too. We can tell everyone we’re together when we get back, right?”

She nodded eagerly, and practically skipped out of the lift as the door opened. Thank God, she wanted to tell them too. I was a little worried that she would want to keep it secret, and I just wanted to tell everyone.

Both our parents, Jasper and Mia were already sitting at the table waiting for us. Thankfully, her parents had relaxed completely and let her go off with me all the time. I loved that they trusted me with her, but I doubted they would let us have that freedom when they found out we were together.

We went up to get our food from the buffet table and sat down to eat. The buffet was my favourite part of the hotel. Well, second to Oakley’s bed now! Jasper and I literally stuffed ourselves until we felt sick. It had become a contest now. As I watched in shock and awe at the piles of toast, sausages, bacon, beans, and mushrooms on his plate, I sighed. Today, I was going to lose.

I moved my leg, so it was brushing against Oakley’s. A smile crept on my face as I saw her blush.

“You two going to the water park today?” Jasper asked, stuffing his face with scrambled eggs.

“Yeah, she wants to go back,” I replied, nodding my head towards my girlfriend. Damn, I loved calling her that!

“Cool, I might come with you.” Out of the corner of my eye I saw Oakley frown. I couldn’t help smile at her wanting it just be us too. If he came then it meant that I couldn’t touch or kiss her all day, and after last night that would be torture. I just nodded my head in response. I didn’t trust myself to talk in case I shouted out ‘no’ or something.

“Right. Well, you four have a lovely day. Oakley, you stay with Cole. Us old four have a boat to catch so we’ll see you for dinner,” Max said as he stood up. “Take care of her,” he told me and kissed Oakley’s forehead.

“I will.” He nodded and held his hand out for Sarah.

I wanted to grab Oakley and run somewhere else so we could spend the day alone, but she was so excited about going back to that damn water park. Suddenly I was regretting making her go in the first place.

“Meet in the lobby in an hour,” Jasper requested and abruptly left the table. *Alright.*

Oakley and I went back to her room to spend the hour together. I was seriously sulking that I had to pretend to just be friends all day. We had only just gotten together, and I wanted to be able to show her off.

Complaining loudly, I flopped down on the bed. “Why do they have to come?”

She smiled in amusement and jumped on the bed. I rolled on to my back, and she crept on top of me. My heart started beating faster at the feel of her body pressed against mine. I ran my hands up her back and fisted her hair as I kissed her.

She pulled away too soon and sat up, smiling at me. I squeezed her thighs and willed myself to calm down. I didn’t want to put any pressure on her, and I didn’t want her to think that I just wanted her for sex.

“You sure you’re okay?” I asked, running my hands up her thighs and gripping her hips. She smiled, nodding her head, and rolled off me. I knew she wouldn’t tell me if she still hurt, and it was driving me crazy. Maybe I should have run her a bath this morning or something? It was all fairly new to me, but I felt like I was messing up all the time.

“So, are you wearing that blue bikini?” I asked, innocently. *Please say yes, please, please,* I begged in my head. A blush swept across her cheeks, and she nodded. This was going to be a good day! I kissed down her neck, gently biting her soft skin.

“I love you,” I murmured against her neck. She kissed the side of my head, letting me know she felt the same.

A knock on the door made me flop back onto the bed, and Oakley laugh. She hopped off the bed and pulled the door open.

“Let’s go,” Jasper said, with a wide smile, practically bouncing on the spot. He was like a three-year-old. I thought we were meeting in the lobby. He was probably eager to stalk some poor, innocent girls. I couldn’t help feeling a little sorry for him. Abby, his ex, had really screwed him up.

When Mia arrived, her mood had changed completely from an hour ago. She was no longer smiling and excited. Her face looked like someone had slapped her. No doubt, she had just spoken to Chris-the-dick.

“I booked a taxi, let’s go,” she said as cheerfully as she could.

We changed at the water park. Jasper and I were first out of the changing rooms, and he immediately ran off towards a group of girls. We probably wouldn’t see him again until we were ready to leave. At least he would be preoccupied, so all we had to do was lose Mia, and we could have some time alone. *Why do women take so long to get changed?* I looked like a pervert waiting outside the ladies changing room.

Finally, I thought as they walked out of the door. I did a double take. My jaw dropped as Oakley emerged. I couldn’t take my eyes off her.

“Swim and then slides?” Mia suggested. *No, go away!*

I forced a smile.

“Sure.”

Mia led the way to the largest pool with the rapids, and I followed with Oakley. She did look a little uncomfortable; her arms were folded over her chest. I knew she didn’t like much attention, but I didn’t want her to not wear what she liked because of that. I wouldn’t let anyone touch her. She stepped closer, her arm pressing against mine as we walked. There were a few guys that looked at her. I couldn’t blame them, but it did give me a twinge of jealousy.

I jumped into the warm water after Oakley. As soon as she was in the pool, she seemed to relax a little. We messed around in the pool and on the slides for a while, and I finally managed to convince her to go on the slides. She made me go down it with her but hell, I wasn’t complaining, it was the perfect excuse to touch her! Every time she looked at me it made my heart hammer against my chest.

“Wanna get some food?” I murmured against her skin as I kissed along her jaw. Mia had gone to the toilet, and god knows what or who Jasper was off doing, so we had a few minutes. Oakley let out a startled breath, and

nodded her head.

“Okay, let’s go.” My voice was embarrassingly urgent. I probably sounded like a dirty old man on one of those sex phone lines. Oakley’s skin broke out in goose bumps as we walked back to the changing rooms to get dressed and go to the restaurant.

“Hey,” I called out to her. She looked up at me immediately. “Love you.”

I watched as a huge smile crept across her perfect face, lighting up her eyes. Yep, definitely the luckiest bastard alive.

The rest of the week passed too quickly, and it was soon time to go home. I stood in the airport feeling like crap and just wanting to go back to the hotel. The holiday had been the best of my life, and every day I became closer to Oakley.

We had decided to wait until after her birthday to tell everyone. She would be sixteen, and they were more likely to be okay with it then. Not that I thought they would hate us being together, but I didn’t want to risk it, in case.

As our plane took off, my heart sank to the pit of my stomach. *This sucks!* As soon as we were able to leave our seats, Jasper was off chatting to some girls he’d met on the holiday who were on the same flight, so I grabbed Oakley’s hand.

“This has been the best two weeks of my life,” I said honestly, squeezing her hand. She nodded and gazed directly into my eyes.

“I love you,” I whispered in her ear. She smiled, biting her lip and snuggled into my side. I sighed happily and laid my head on hers. I wondered if I would ever hear her actually say those three little words? Not that it really mattered though, I knew she felt them, and that was more than enough for me.

Chapter Twelve

Oakley

I felt so sick that we were almost back in England. The holiday was officially over. Cole and I would have to pretend that nothing was going. I had to figure out how Dad would react when we did eventually tell everyone. Would he be okay with me and Cole being together? He had already said that I was growing up, and he did seem to be giving me more freedom. Was he really ready to let me go?

Cole was glancing out of the airplane window with a sad smile. What was he thinking? Usually he was such an open book, but when it came to the two of us, I had no idea. I sat back in my seat and tried to act as if it wasn't driving me crazy.

"I hate the end of holidays," Mia grumbled beside me. "The plane home is the most depressing thing ever."

I couldn't have agreed more. Reality was the worst. I would rather live in that holiday-state, where everything was perfect, forever. Nothing was perfect, though. I knew that. I couldn't even fool myself into believing that I could have anything even close to perfection.

"How'd it go?" Cole asked Jasper, smirking as he sat down on the row of seats beside ours. Jasper had seen a 'smoking hot' girl as we boarded the plane. As soon as we took off, he made it his mission to go find her.

Jasper's eyes lit up.

"I just joined the mile high club!" he boasted.

Just what I wanted to hear! I grimaced and looked past Cole and out of the window.

"Of course you did!" Mia scoffed. Mia and Jasper argued like brother and sister. She hated his womanising but sympathised with the reason behind it. Jasper gave up on his cheating ex; Mia couldn't bring herself to do the same.

"Jealousy doesn't suit you, Mia."

"You think I'm jealous of you screwing some random in a smelly plane toilet? Wow, you really are up your own arse," she argued, shaking her head.

“Firstly, the toilet wasn’t smelly, and secondly, I got her name first, so she wasn’t random. It was one of the best experiences of my life. The girl could sure—”

“Thank you!” Cole snapped. “We don’t need your dirty details!”

I pressed my leg against his and smiled, thanking him for stopping my brother talking. Jasper didn’t seem to have a filter for when he was in the company of people who might not want to hear about his exploits, or any kind of filter, actually.

For the rest of the plane ride, I just looked out of the window. A huge quilt of cloud hid most of the sky, but it was still peaceful. It also provided me with something to do rather than listen to Jasper go on about how many times he had scored on holiday.

Cole listened to him and laughed a few times. I wondered if he wanted to do those things, like having sex outside or on a plane. That wasn’t for me. Cole had made sex feel normal and beautiful, but I didn’t think I would ever be one of those people that had to have it everywhere, all the time. I hoped that I could be enough for him.

The plane landed too soon, and I followed my family down the stairs of the plane and into the airport. My heart sank as we stopped to pick up our suitcases. All I wanted to do was get back on that plane and go back to Italy. Cole seemed to sense my mood and stepped closer to me.

I hoped that we would get to spend some time alone before we told everyone. Everything would change then. We wouldn’t be allowed to be alone in our rooms, and they would be checking up on us all the time. I was worried how people would react. I knew people wouldn’t understand why he would want to be with me. I didn’t either. Would people be weird with him? Try to convince him he can do better?

“It’s gonna be okay,” he whispered smoothly into my ear. I nodded in agreement, although I wasn’t convinced, and grabbed my suitcase from the conveyor belt.

Once everyone had their bags; we walked to the long stay car park, where we had left the cars. “Are you coming with me, Oakley?” Mia asked as she unlocked her car.

I nodded and handed my suitcase to Dad’s outstretched hand. I got in the back with Cole and took one last look at the airport.

“You drive,” Mia shouted, throwing her keys to Jasper. I wanted to

switch cars. Jasper drove like a stereotypical boy racer and it terrified me. How he hadn't crashed already, I had no clue.

"Buckle up, kids," Jasper chirped, smiling with wide eyes. I did buckle my seatbelt, and then double-checked it. Whoever gave him his licence should be fired. Gripping the door handle as Jasper revved the engine, I said a silent prayer and closed my eyes.

By the time we got home, it was getting dark. The sky was a dark moody blue, the shade it usually turns before a storm. It made me miss Italy even more. While everyone fussed around getting the suitcases out of the cars, I wrapped my jacket around myself as I felt all the anxieties and fears inside of me resurface. Back to normal.

"Right, we'd better get inside," Dad ordered, with what felt like a pointed look at me. "We all could do with an early night." That meant I couldn't hang out with Cole any more tonight.

"Yes," Mum agreed, and started saying goodnight to Jenna.

Cole pulled me into his arms. No one even batted an eyelid. They had seen us give each other friendly hugs all the time.

"I'll see you in the morning. I love you," he whispered in my ear.

We smiled at each other as we stated walking in opposite directions to our houses. Mum unlocked the front door and ushered us inside.

"You tired, love?"

I nodded, and she kissed my cheek.

"Okay, off to bed then."

I wasn't going to disagree. Spending the evening with Mum and Dad wasn't something I wanted to do, and Jasper would just play his computer until he collapsed. I changed into my pyjamas and climbed straight into bed. Stretching out my arms and legs like a starfish, I suddenly wished Cole was with me. The bed seemed too big now I was alone.

As soon as I pulled the cover up to my chin and wrapped it around me like a cocoon, my phone beeped. Cole, I thought with a smile.

'I miss you! Doesn't feel right you're not with me. Be ready at 8 tomorrow. I love you. X'

I couldn't wait until eight o'clock, whatever it was for. I clicked reply and contemplated sending: I love you too. How bad could it be to send one text message? Dropping my phone on the bed with a soft thud, I pressed my face into the pillow and started crying silently.

I woke up in the morning and my head was pounding from crying so much. Checking my phone for the time, I squinted my eyes at the sudden light. 9:52am. Wow, I'd slept in late. I pushed myself up and rubbed my eyes. Someone laughed, making me jump. I recognised Cole's laugh immediately.

"And here I was thinking you'd be ready by now," he said, grinning in amusement. "You alright? You look tired." He sat down and tucked my hair behind my ear, frowning in concern as he saw my swollen eyes.

"Have you been crying? Oakley, what's going on? Are you okay?" I nodded. He pulled me close to him. "You want to go out? We don't have to. We can just hang around here if you want?"

I shook my head and got up off the bed. I grabbed some clothes out of my drawer and held a finger up at Cole.

"Yeah, like you'll actually be ready in one minute," he called after me as I ran to the bathroom to shower and get dressed.

A speedy wash later, I walked out of the bathroom door, and straight into Cole. I gasped at how close he was. He looked down at me lovingly. I stepped closer and ran my hands up his chest and around his neck.

Cole swallowed loudly, his arms winding around my back. His head lowered slowly until he was just an inch away from me.

"I love you," he whispered. I squirmed at that intense feeling that was back in the pit of my stomach. It was almost becoming too much, so I pulled away. I loved him, and I wanted him, but I didn't want to want him so much. I felt like I shouldn't.

"Come on. We need to leave. It's gonna take a while to get there."

A while to get where? I thought as I grabbed my jacket and hairband.

I raised my eyebrows at him when we got in the car, asking where we were going.

"We're going to London," he said casually. I blinked hard. London? I stared at him waiting for an explanation.

Cole shrugged. "You always wanted to go to that creepy Madame Tussauds place and on the London Eye."

Wow. He planned a whole day out to London because I had mentioned I wanted to go there. I could barely keep my eyes off him as he drove the two-hour journey to London. He chewed on the inside of his cheek in concentration as he followed the sat-nav's directions. I watched the muscles in his forearms flex as he turned the steering wheel.

The traffic wasn't bad, so we made it in just under two hours. In London

everything was much louder, and faster than the small village I was used to. There were probably more people just in the multi-story car park than in my whole village. I clung to Cole's hand as he led me to the zebra crossing. Cars, vans, and busses whizzed past us, causing my hair to whip around my face.

Cole paid our entrance fee to Madame Tussauds, and we made our way around the museum. It turns out a museum full of wax people is a little creepy. I took pictures of most of the wax celebrities, and even made Cole pose with some. He either looked grumpy or pulled a funny face.

He cheered up once we'd eaten, and headed over to the London Eye. I bounced up and down in the queue as we waited for our turn. Cole had booked us tickets online, so we had an allocated time. Our group was next.

A man with a thick black beard called for us to get on.

Tugging on Cole's hand, I pulled him into the huge glass bubble. *How safe is this?* I wondered, looking up to check that it was attached properly, even though I wouldn't have a clue if it was or not. Cole leant against the glass. I grabbed his arm, pulling him back. "It's perfectly safe, babe," he said with a cheeky grin.

As soon as we started moving, he spun me around and wrapped his arms around my waist, so we were both facing the glass, looking out over London, I could see Buckingham Palace and Big Ben so clearly. *Wow*, I thought, staring in awe. It moved slower than I thought it would, but that was a good thing if I wanted to keep my lunch down. I pressed my back against Cole's chest and sighed happily.

"Enjoying it?" he asked when we reached the top. I nodded and interlaced my fingers between his. We spent the rest of the ride pointing things out to each other. As soon as we got off we had to head home.

"We'll come again when we'll have more time. Maybe for a weekend."

It was already five in the evening, and with the evening traffic, it would probably take longer to get home than it had to get down there. Shaking my head, I yanked his arm, pulling him closer to me. I'd had an incredible day, even if it wouldn't last as long as we both wanted it to. The fact that he had whisked me off to London to do two things I wanted was more than enough.

I gripped Cole's hand as we walked along the street towards the car park. It was getting cooler out, the cold wind bit at my face. My coat was keeping my body warm, but I could feel my lips becoming numb. I couldn't wait to get into the car and turn the heat on. Relief flooded my system when the car park came into view.

Cole started the ignition, and I cranked the heat up, raising my hands to the vents to warm them up. For the whole way home, I stared at Cole. It was getting dark, the orange glow from the dashboard lit up his features.

“You’re staring again,” he sang, with a half-smile. I nodded, unashamed. I was in love with him, and I wasn’t embarrassed by it.

Two hours and fifteen minutes later, we arrived back at my house. Cole walked me to the door and kissed my cheek before I opened it.

“Tomorrow,” he whispered, and walked back to his car. Tomorrow what? I closed the front door behind me in a happy daze.

“There’s my favourite sister,” Jasper said and paused his computer game, suddenly solemn. “I think we should have a chat about Cole.”

I hadn’t expected this.

“So, I know you’re together.” He raised his eyebrows, and I shook my head to deny it. “Oh please, I can see how you two look at each other. What I want to say is that as much as I joke about it I am a little worried,” he admitted, scratching his jaw nervously.

Worried about what? Cole would never hurt me. We both knew that. He took a deep breath.

“Cole’s a good guy, but I just wanted you to know that if he ever does do anything to hurt you, you can come to me. I really would cut his balls off you know.” He laughed awkwardly. “You promise me you’ll be careful?”

I nodded quickly, not wanting him to elaborate.

“By careful you know I mean—” I held my hand up and nodded again. Heat rushed to my face. “Okay good, ’cause if you came home pregnant Mum and Dad would freak, and I’d have to move out and support you. Well, glad we sorted this out. Now, I’ve got a date with Carly.”

Remembered her name. Well done, Jasper. Grabbing his leather jacket he turned to me and said, “You know I love you, right?”

I smiled and nodded.

“Good.” He closed the door behind him and was gone.

I went in the kitchen and answered a few of Mum’s questions, and then went to bed. After reading Cole’s text, I fell asleep smiling.

Chapter Thirteen

Oakley

“Oakley?” I frowned and pressed my face into my pillow to ignore Mum calling me. Why couldn’t she let me sleep? “Oakley,” she repeated. Sighing in defeat, I rolled over. She wasn’t going to go away until she spoke to me, so I decided to get it over with.

“Morning, honey. Sorry to wake you but I just wanted to let you know what Auntie Ali’s going away for the night, so Lizzie’s staying with us. She’ll be here soon, so you need to make some room in your wardrobe for her things, okay. Apparently she’s packed a lot and wants to hang a few things up.”

No, it is not okay! I tried hard not to show the disappointment, but I couldn’t keep a frown from passing across my face.

“Oh, she’s not that bad! Come on, up. Dad’s making pancakes for breakfast.” As if that made it better...

Mum left me to get up, and I flopped back in bed. Lizzie for a whole day and night. Groaning in frustration, I jumped up and stomped around. The second I got downstairs; she walked in the front door. I didn’t even have time to have a hot chocolate and mentally prepare myself.

“Oh I can’t wait for your birthday party, Oakley!” Lizzie gushed and fluffed her hair. *Hello to you too.* “Your mum’s practically invited your whole year!”

I was suddenly filled with dread. Did that mean she’d invited Julian? I couldn’t breathe. I didn’t want to have to face my classmates until I absolutely had to – on the first day back at school. Not a second sooner.

“Pancakes, girls,” Dad announced, poking his head around the kitchen door.

I followed Lizzie to the kitchen table and sat down. *Twenty-four hours, Oakley, you can survive that,* I told myself.

“Hey, look who I found,” Mum said as she walked into the room. Cole smiled, but it quickly faded when he saw Lizzie.

“Hi, Cole,” Lizzie purred.

He frowned and sat beside me.

“Look what I have, sweetheart.” Mum handed me a folder. An A4 piece of paper was taped to the front with typed letters saying, ‘Oakley’s sweet sixteenth’.

Oh God, please say this isn’t happening. I flipped the folder open, and died a little inside. The first page was a list of guests. I slapped it shut, not wanting to know. I would just smile and spend the evening with Cole. I could get through one party to make my mum feel like she had a normal daughter for one evening. I owed her that much.

“I was also thinking we could get one of those chocolate fountains, what do you think?” Mum asked, and held up a magazine cut-out of a giant white chocolate fountain. How many people did she think would come? I would love it if no one turned up. I nodded along with her idea and dug my fork into my cherry pancakes.

“Great,” she said, grabbing her phone and looking at the scrap of paper for the number to call.

“Ice cream?” Cole offered. I knew it was just to get me out of there while Mum was in full party mode, and away from Lizzie. Nodding gratefully, I stood up and took our plates to put in the dishwasher.

“Take Lizzie too,” Mum instructed. I narrowed my eyes at Mum. Cole’s expression mirrored mine.

“Ooo, one minute,” Lizzie sang as she ran off up the stairs to get ready.

“A minute? More like an hour,” Cole grumbled as we sat in the car waiting for her. I shrugged and lay back in the seat. Get comfortable, you could be waiting a while. Finally, ten minutes later, she strutted out of the house wearing a very short denim dress.

We drove in silence, well Cole, and I did. Lizzie sang along with the radio. Her voice wasn’t the worst in the world, but it certainly wasn’t made for the higher notes.

“We’re here,” Cole announced loudly, forcing her to stop singing. My ears were ringing.

“Here?” Lizzie scrunched her nose up as she looked at the quaint little diner style café. What did she expect? We were two teenagers with very little money.

I rolled my eyes and got out of the car. Lizzie followed behind, her heels clicking against the tile floor.

“Do they do low fat milkshakes?” she asked, briefly looking around in bewilderment at the quiet café.

“Yeah, all their milk comes from skinny cows,” Cole said seriously. I bit my lip and pretended to look at the menu.

“Really? I didn’t know they put cows on diets,” she said, her eyes wide in amazement. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see his jaw was clenched tightly shut where he was trying not to laugh.

“I’ll have a banana milkshake then,” she said happily

Cole walked over to the counter to order, and Lizzie didn’t waste any time in digging for information on him the second he was gone.

“Is he seeing anyone?” she asked.

I picked up a plastic coffee stirrer and debated whether I could get away with ramming it into her eye. If I said no, would she ask me, or him, who it was? However, if I said yes, she might try something on with him. I nodded quickly, hoping that would make her stop looking at him as if she wanted to eat him.

“Course he does,” she grumbled and slumped back in her chair.

Cole reappeared, holding a tray with our milkshakes and ice creams.

“So, Cole, what’s your girlfriend like?” Lizzie purred.

“Girlfriend?”

“Yeah, Oakley said you were seeing someone.”

I watched as a knowing smile swept across his face.

“Really?” he asked. “She did, huh?”

“Yeah, so what’s she like?” Lizzie repeated.

“She’s alright,” Cole said casually and shrugged his shoulders. “She incredible in bed,” he added.

What! I choked on my drink and slapped my hand over my mouth.

“You okay, Oakley?” he asked innocently. I nodded and forced myself to smile at him when all I wanted to do was chuck my ice cream over him.

“Yeah? Really?” she asked, leaning her body towards him. “You’re good too then?”

“Not had any complaints,” he said proudly. I wasn’t comfortable with the way this conversation had gone. It wasn’t something I could joke about. I concentrated on my ice cream, swirling the spoon around to soften it up.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Julian and two of his friends walk past the window. *Please don’t come in here, please.* Of course, they did. As soon as they spotted us, they strode up to our table. Cole’s body tensed when

he saw who it was. Not wanting him to cause a scene, I pressed my leg against his to tell him to stay calm.

They all ordered and sat at a table next to ours, even though the cafe was practically empty.

“Hi, Oakley,” Julian said in a friendly manner. I smiled briefly and looked away.

Lizzie fluffed her hair up and smiled at him seductively. *Oh no.*

“Hi, I’m Lizzie. Oakley’s cousin.”

Julian smirked, his eyebrow rising slightly. “Really?”

She nodded and turned round to face him.

“Yeah. So are you going to her party on Saturday?”

He looked straight at me and replied, “Yep.”

“Well make other plans. You’re not invited!” Cole growled.

“Actually, I was,” he retorted smugly. Great, so Mum did invite him.

“Julian, just fuck off,” Cole spat through gritted teeth. Lizzie was watching them with wide eyes. Perfect, now she’s going to be grilling me about this. I’d had enough and just wanted to get away, so I stood up and started walking out. I heard footsteps right behind me, and I knew it was Cole, I also heard Lizzie’s heels clicking unevenly as she hurried after us.

“See you Saturday,” Julian called. Cole turned around and gestured something, but I didn’t look around. I got in the car and slammed the door.

“Don’t worry,” he said, stroking my hand. “We’ll stay away from him. I won’t let him come near you.”

I looked up to the car ceiling, so the tears that were pooling in my eyes wouldn’t fall. The summer holidays were meant to be break from everyone at school. The thought of seeing them all again made me feel physically sick.

“What was that all about?” Lizzie squealed so loud it made both me and Cole jump. She slammed the car door and huffed. “You were so mean to him, and he’s lovely! He called me back and asked me to be his date to your party! Can you believe that? I have no idea what to wear! Oh God, we have to go shopping-” I put my head to my knees in despair. Getting the message, Cole put the key in the ignition and sped home as quickly as was legally possible.

Everyone but Cole and I were downstairs setting up the decorations and moving furniture around to make room for the DJ. It wasn’t my birthday until tomorrow.

“We get to tell everyone soon,” Cole said, smiling happily. That was the

other thing. We had agreed to tell everyone after my birthday, but the closer that got the more I realised I wasn't ready for everyone to know. Cole was really excited about it, but all I kept thinking was how much everything was going to change.

"You don't want to tell them, do you?" Cole asked quietly, his face fell. *Do I tell the truth or just go along with what we had originally planned for his sake?* "Oakley?" he prompted. Sighing, I nodded, choosing the second option.

"You don't mean that. You worried about what they'll all say." I nodded. "They'll be happy for us, you know they will. Things will calm down after a week or two when it's old news."

So he knew they were going to be watching us like crazy too.

"We can wait longer if you want."

He said the words, but I know he didn't want to. I shook my head and kissed him quickly in case someone walked in. I missed being able to be physically affectionate with him. I missed being that intimate with someone I trusted with my life, someone I knew would never hurt me.

Two hours later, I was dressed and ready for the party. My nerves grew with every step I took downstairs. I was thankful that Cole, Kerry, and Ben would be with me. At least I could just spend the evening with them.

Some of my family had already arrived and were standing around drinking and talking. My grandparents from both sides of the family were sitting on the sofa, drinking wine. I didn't see Dad's parents often; they lived quite far away so only visited on birthdays and at Christmas.

The doorbell rang, and I took a deep breath, looking at Cole to stop myself freaking out. He smiled and mouthed, 'Love you' which made me forget everything, and everyone else.

"Happy Birthday, Oakley," Julian shouted from across the room.

Cole glared at Julian, and if looks could kill, Julian would have been a goner by now. Why did he even come if he hated me so much? It made no sense. Did he just enjoy making my life a misery? Cole tugged on my arm and led me into the kitchen, away from Julian.

The whole house was covered in decorations. Pink decorations. You could barely move around all the balloons, banners, streamers, and enormous pink feathers! Feathers? What was I, eight! It was probably what Mum wanted for her sixteenth. My grandparents didn't have much money so she never really had a big party

My mouth dropped open in shock as I saw what was on the kitchen counter. What on earth?! Blinking in disbelief, I stepped closer to the giant ice sculpture. It was of a girl doing a cartwheel. Me, doing a cartwheel.

“Honey, here.” Mum gave me a plastic cup of punch, and one to Cole too. Forcing my lips to twitch in a brief smile, I turned pretending to look at something different so she wouldn’t see how much I hated all of it. She still saw me as a little girl. *Just a few hours, for her*, I reasoned with myself, again.

“Well, this is all very pink,” Cole commented, stating the obvious. “She knows your favourite colour is yellow, right?” He knew that? “Come on, I need to tip some of that vodka in this before I hang myself.”

As we made a move, Kerry hopped in front of me and laughed as I jumped.

“Sorry. Happy birthday! This party’s awesome, by the way.” *Is it?*

“I’m guessing you like pink,” Ben said sarcastically and threw his arm over Cole’s shoulder. I stared at him flatly.

“She doesn’t like pink. Her mum organised everything,” Cole explained.

“Ah. Ouch.” Ben winced in sympathy.

Kerry waved her hand. “Don’t worry, Oakley, you have us to save you now.”

She pulled me into the living room. Her grip was tight, and she strode confidently through the small crowd that had gathered by the doorway. I wished I could be more like her.

“Sit,” she ordered, pointing to the smaller sofa that had been pushed into the corner of the room. Cole and Ben joined us, both sitting on the arms of the chair.

“This is our corner. If anyone tries to take it, kill. Okay?” Kerry looked at us sternly. I grinned in amusement and sat back in the sofa. *Maybe this party won’t be too bad after all.*

Occasionally I saw Mum chatting happily and laughing with Ali and other family members. That was why I was putting up with the stupid party. *She deserves this.*

Jasper knelt down in front of me and leered towards someone. I thought he had gone out for the evening.

“The blonde girl over there.”

He gestured towards Jennifer from my class, the girl he’d just been leeching at. She was talking to her friends by the kitchen door.

“She over sixteen?” I nodded, confused. Jasper rubbed his hands together. “Fair game then,” he joked.

Suddenly I caught sight of Julian, dancing with Lizzie. I noticed how he moved her closer to where we were sitting, so they ended up right in front of us. I didn’t know how Lizzie could touch him. I would rather die than get that close to him.

With a sick feeling in my stomach, I turned back to Cole and our friends.

“She’s not pregnant, she’s just put weight on,” Kerry announced, looking at someone in the room. *Okay, what have I missed?*

I walked upstairs to go to the bathroom. After six cups of punch, my bladder felt like it was going to burst. Just as I was about to open the door, I heard someone giggle from inside my room. *Oh, heck no!* Did I want to go in there? No, but I didn’t want whoever was in there to do whatever they were going to do in there either.

Maybe I should go get Cole to do it. No, I relied on him way too much already. Pushing the door open quickly, with the thought that ripping the plaster off was always the better option, my stomach turned.

Lizzie and Julian were lying on *my* bed, all over each other, and now I was going to have to burn the sheets. Lizzie gasped and looked up at me shocked as if it wasn’t my room! What on earth was wrong with her? Glaring at her furiously, I pointed to the door. Lizzie immediately ran out, sneering at me as she shot past me. *Sorry I stopped you making a huge mistake with a complete jerk...*

“Well, well, well. Looks like we’re alone now, huh,” Julian sang. I stood my ground as he slowly moved off my bed and took one step towards me. *Don’t let him intimidate you.* Straightening my back to try to make myself appear taller, I stared him in the eye.

He stopped a couple inches in front of me and my stomach tightened. What was he going to do? Everything inside me was screaming to run away, but I refused to do that.

“Sorry you had to see that. She wasn’t taking no for an answer.”

I stared at him blankly. I couldn’t really care less what he did with Lizzie. I just didn’t want it in my room, or my house for that matter.

He cocked his head to the side. The way he was looking at me was as if he was trying to solve an A level maths problem or something.

“Stop playing hard to get, Oakley” he finally said and took another step closer. Playing hard to get? What did that even mean? I wasn’t playing anything.

“You think I don’t see how you look at me?”

My jaw dropped open in shock. *He’s drunk. That’s the only explanation.*

“Don’t look at me like that,” he growled. “I’ve had two years of you ignoring me and pretending you don’t give a shit! I have to fucking insult you just to get you to acknowledge me,” he shouted, stepping forward one more time. He was so close now. Far too close.

Adrenaline was pulsing through my veins as his arms reached out to touch me. All I could think about was stopping him. His arms stretched nearer, I balled my hand into a fist and punched him as hard as I could. We both stumbled back in shock. *Oh God.* The sound – like a thud – rang through my ears. Julian’s hand shot to his mouth, and he groaned in pain. My hand immediately started throbbing. I shook my hand and winced. Punching someone didn’t look like it hurt in the movies.

Julian stood up straight and looked at me. His eyes were tight with anger. Blood started to seep through a small slit on his lip. I did that!

“Stop being such a bitch,” he spat. I took a step backwards, and very slowly turned and walked out of my room. I half expected him to follow me, but he didn’t. Taking the stairs two at a time, I flew to the bottom.

“Whoa,” Cole cried as I slammed into him. “You okay?”

Yes, actually. Cole glared, and I spun around to see at what. Julian was standing at the top of the stairs. He turned and walked off when he saw Cole.

“What happened? Was he bleeding?”

I smiled and held my slightly swollen hand up. Cole’s jaw dropped, and eyes widened.

“Did *you* punch him?” I nodded, and watched his face slowly turn from shock to pride. “You’re amazing,” he said and stroked my sore hand gently. “But you need to get that seen to.” Shaking his head he guided me to the downstairs bathroom.

After Cole made me keep my hand under cold water for a few minutes it was starting to feel better, but that could just be because it was turning numb! He kissed my temple and then wrapped my hand in a towel to dry it. “Let’s go get you a couple pills for the pain.” I threw the towel in the washing basket and reached for the door handle.

Cole grabbed my good hand and spun me around. “Have I told you how

beautiful you look in that dress?” he whispered. Blushing, I reached up and kissed his lips.

He made me sit back down with Kerry and Ben while he went to get me some pills. Julian still hadn't left like I thought he would. Why would he stay? He leant against the living room door as Lizzie pressed her body against his seductively.

“Here you go.” Cole handed me two paracetamol and a glass of water, which I downed gratefully, and hoped the throbbing pain would go away soon..

“So,” Cole said a little nervously and scratched his jaw. “You wanna dance?” *Finally!* I nodded my head and grabbed his hand. We didn't move very far from the sofa. Just enough so we were at the edge of the imaginary dance floor.

When I was in Cole's arms, the party didn't seem that bad at all. Nothing did. *This is going to end badly*, a nagging little voice in the back of my head said. Pushing away my inner worries, I stepped closer to him, but still kept a reasonable distance to avoid arousing anyone's suspicions.

We continued dancing, changing our rhythm to match the song but always fitting with each other. A few times, I noticed Julian watching us, but I tried to ignore him. He was just trying to intimidate me. I was tired of being intimidated and scared. The only thing I cared about was the way Cole was looking at me, with so much love and adoration in his eyes.

Just as thought I could start properly relaxing and actually enjoy the party, the music was cut, and Mum tapped a microphone. My stomach dropped. She was going to make a speech.

Chapter Fourteen

Cole

I felt her body stiffen under my arms as Sarah stopped the music. Surely, she knew all that fuss wasn't her thing? Why the hell were they drawing more attention to her? She pressed her side into my chest, looking so uncomfortable that I just wanted to grab her and run.

"Hello everyone," Sarah said cheerfully, and smiled at Oakley, seemingly oblivious to the fact that she was hating this. "Sorry to interrupt but I'll only keep you for a few minutes. I just want to say a few words about my beautiful daughter." Oakley cringed and shrank back into me, so she was half-hidden.

I was pissed off with Sarah. Throughout the whole speech, Oakley stared at the floor uncomfortably, not daring to look at anyone, not even me. The things Sarah said about her were nice and all, but she really didn't need that stress on top of a huge party.

"So, please say a very big happy sweet sixteen to Oakley. Happy birthday, honey," Sarah cheered, raising her glass. The crowd joined in, with the exception of me, Kerry and Ben, who seemed to know her a shit load more than her own family.

"You okay?" I asked her, as soon as her Sarah handed the microphone back to the DJ. She nodded, still looking at the floor. Her cheeks flushed a deep pink in embarrassment. I groaned and grabbed her hand, pulling her through the kitchen and out to the back garden. Thankfully, we were alone.

"Sorry. You hated that, right?" I stroked her cheek, and she smiled. Finally, she looked up at me and nodded, biting on her lip. My pulse raced at the loving way she was looking at me. "Wanna sit out here for a while?" She didn't answer me but did sit down on the bench beside the fence, so I knew it was a yes.

We stayed outside for a bit and tried to decide on the best way of telling everyone about us. It took me a while to realise that we were both playing with each other's fingers as I came up with ideas and she dismissed them. How could something be so natural? It was as if she was made for me.

I turned her slightly swollen hand over to get a better look at it. Oakley had never hit anyone before in her life, well apart from me, but that was playfully. I was actually extremely proud of her for sticking up for herself, and the fact that it was Julian was just a bonus. We were going to need to talk about her punching technique though...

“What did Julian do? Did he try kissing you again?”

She looked a little taken back at my timing, but not surprised that I asked the question.

“Oakley?” I prompted. She sighed and half-nodded her head but looked a little unsure. What did that mean? He wanted to? He came on to her but didn’t try kissing her? I gritted my teeth together. *What the hell is wrong with him?*

“Sorry,” I said a little sheepishly. “No fighting. I promise. Think I’ll leave that up to you now anyway! You okay to go back inside now?” I rubbed her arms, feeling the bumps on her arms from the cool air.

As soon as we got back into the lounge, I noticed Julian. He smirked and grabbed the microphone. I tensed. Shit.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he slurred. How did he get that drunk? Max and Dad were supposed to be checking everyone’s drinks... “I would also like to say something about the birthday girl. Firstly, she isn’t as sweet and innocent as you all think.”

He waved his arm around, spilling his drink on the floor.

“She’s a real little tease, gets you all worked up then runs away, hey Oakley?” he shouted, with a lopsided smile.

Oakley backed up. Tears filled her eyes, and she ran to the stairs. My blood was boiling. Not only did she not want this party, but also one of the dickhead guests had just embarrassed her in front of everyone.

“Secondly, she’s screwing her so called ‘best friend’.”

I froze and looked at Oakley. She was standing deathly still on the stairs. I started to feel sick. Max had grabbed Julian by his shirt and thrown him roughly out of their now open front door.

“Stay the hell away from my daughter,” he bellowed after Julian.

As he slammed the door, an eerily silence fell upon the room. Sarah finally broke it seconds later.

“Is that true?”

Oakley looked so scared. I wanted to wrap my arms around her and proudly tell everyone that we were together, but deny that anything physical

had happened. We really didn't need the whole world knowing we'd slept together. That was private. The look on her face stopped me admitting anything though.

"No, it's not true," I stated confidently. Oakley let out a deep breath as soon as I denied it. "Why would he say that then?" Max asked, raising his eyebrows.

"Cause he's a *psycho!*" Jasper shouted psycho towards the door where Max threw Julian out. "He's the one that's been giving her a hard time. Me and Cole have punched him a few times," he said, with a shrug and a proud smile.

Sarah sighed, her shoulder sagged in disappointment.

"I think it's time everyone left."

It was an order, and one that everyone obeyed. The whispering stopped as people gathered their things to leave.

Max stepped forward and switched the main light on.

"Thank you for coming everyone but the party's over," he said loudly, looking around the room as everyone filtered out.

Jasper was standing by the door, saying bye to everyone in several different languages and giving some girls his card. Yes, he had business cards. The idiot didn't even have a job.

My parents stayed back. Oakley came downstairs and stood middle of the lounge with me.

"Are you okay, sweetheart?" Sarah asked her and brushed her hair out of her face. Oakley nodded but didn't smile. Her jaw was tight, and I could tell that she was angry with Sarah for making her have the party in the first place. So was I. Everyone would be gossiping about it for ages. It was only going to make it harder for her when we had to go back to school.

"Why don't you two go upstairs and watch a movie or something? We'll sort everything out down here," Max suggested and ushered us towards the stairs. Wow, he really did believe nothing happened, or he would never have let us go upstairs on our own.

"That went well," I said sarcastically as we both flopped down on her bed. She ran her hands through her hair, fighting a smile. "So..." I wasn't actually sure what I wanted to say, or how to word it. "You really didn't want them to know?"

She shook her head. "Is that because of the way they would have found out?" I asked nervously, biting the inside of my mouth in anticipation. She

lay down and stretched out. A nod gave me her answer.

“Okay. Good. You know it’s gonna be harder to tell them now though. They’re gonna know we lied.” I frowned as I thought about how we were going to deal with this now. We came out of one awkward situation and were thrown straight into another one.

Oakley sighed and laid her head on my chest, playing with the buttons on my shirt. I tried to focus on the latest problem, and not how my body was reacting to her touching me. So I wouldn’t pounce on her I grabbed the remote and turned the TV on for a distraction.

“I think we should still tell them on Tuesday.” She did something I didn’t think she would. She nodded in agreement. I smiled and kissed the top of her head. “Okay, Tuesday we’ll tell them we’re together, but nothing’s happened?”

She nodded again, a little more enthusiastically. I knew she wouldn’t want to tell them the details of our relationship anyway. I hoped that everyone would take it well.

“Can I give you your present now? It’s after midnight.”

She sat straight up, making me jump at how fast she’d moved. Her huge smile lit up her eyes. Her smile was infectious. I chuckled and reached for the bag that I had left in her room earlier.

I passed her the yellow gift bag and laughed at her bouncing up and down on the mattress.

“Happy Birthday,” I said, and kissed her lips. She grinned and reached into the bag, pulling out the card.

“So, what’s going on in here then?” Jasper asked, walking into her room without knocking. “You can’t open them now!” he screeched like a thirteen-year-old girl.

“Jasper, shut up! Technically it’s her birthday now,” I said, pointing to the clock.

Jasper ran over to her, grabbing her in a big bear hug. Oakley made a ‘help me!’ face and pushed him away.

“Happy Birthday, baby sis! Oww, you’re so grown up now. I can still remember when you were all little and carried that little blanket around everywhere with you,” he cooed, probably trying to embarrass her, but she just pointed to the door.

“Fine, fine. I’ll go. I’ll let you two get back to *unwrapping presents*,” he said, doing those air quotes and winking.

Oakley shook her head and pulled the card out of the envelope. She smiled and kissed me before putting the card on her bedside table and reaching into the bag again. I watched a little frown appear on her face as she pulled out another birthday card.

“Just open it,” I said, gesturing towards the card. She practically pounced on me when she opened it. I laughed and hugged her back. Well at least I knew she liked it! I had bought her two cards, a normal one that I would usually buy her, and another one with ‘girlfriend’ on it.

“I really wanted to get you a proper card, but I knew you couldn’t just put it up with the rest, so I got two,” I said.

After a few more minutes, I pulled away while I still had some self-control left. We couldn’t risk Jasper walking in again, which was likely.

“You need to open the presents,” I whispered. I’d bought her all of her favourite things. A ‘Me to You’ teddy bear, the kind she collects, Haribo sweets, chocolate buttons, some biography of a gymnast she was looking at when we were shopping. A crazy bright purple nail polish that she liked, and that made me look like an idiot when I bought it. And finally, a white gold necklace with a little heart pendant and a diamond set into it.

I got a little nervous as she opened the necklace. What if she didn’t like it? I could always take it back, and we could change it for something else if she didn’t. She gasped as she opened the box, her eyes filling with tears. At first, I was scared that she hated it until that beautiful little smile crept over her face. *Thank God she likes it*, I thought, sighing in relief.

She pulled it out of the box and ran her hand over the heart, smiling at it lovingly. Finally, she looked up at me and moved the bag of presents to the side as she shuffled forward. We sat an inch away from each other, neither of us moved, and I didn’t say a word. It was strange how total silence could mean so much.

After a minute, she intertwined our fingers and kissed me. I had a hard time breathing when we kissed.

“You like it then?” I whispered, smiling at her rosy pink cheeks. She nodded, kissing me again as thanks for her presents.

Once she had finished looking at her gifts for the tenth time, we decided to put a movie on. About halfway through, I felt her head getting heavier on my chest. She was falling asleep. I wasn’t going to move her until I had to, so I stayed still and watched the rest of the movie, even though I was totally lost.

“She’s a lightweight.” I jumped a little at Max’s voice. Looking up, I

saw him leaning against the doorframe, smiling at Oakley.

“Yeah, I know!”

“So, about tonight.” He started, walking over to her desk and sitting on her computer chair. “You would tell me if anything has happened between you two, wouldn’t you?”

Oakley would freak if I said anything, and there was no way I wanted to tell my girlfriend’s dad that we’d had sex...

I nodded, feeling crappy for lying to him.

“Nothing has.”

I didn’t like lying, especially to her parents. I didn’t want to lose the trust they had in me when it came to her. Oakley came first though, and she didn’t want to say anything just yet.

“Okay. Wake her up before you leave, she won’t want to sleep in her dress,” he instructed and walked out. The fact that he believed me so easily made me feel worse, but we needed to do this right.

“Oakley,” I whispered, stroking her hair once the film finished. She shook her head and threw her arm over my lap, not wanting to move. The odds of her parents letting me sleep here were not great, especially after tonight, so, as much as I didn’t want to, I had to go home.

I gently rolled her onto her back and tried not to laugh as she frowned.

“Do you want your pyjamas?”

She shook her head and then nodded. What was that supposed to mean?

“Oakley, which one?” She shook her head again and buried her head in the pillow, ignoring me. Okay, that was a no. I kissed the side of her head.

“Night, baby,” I whispered against her hair. She smiled sleepily.

Mum and Dad had already left by the time I got downstairs, so I said goodbye to Oakley’s parents and Jasper – who was currently eating the chocolate out of the fountain with a ladle – and went home. As soon as I got to my room, I stripped and climbed into bed and texted Oakley. I knew I wouldn’t get a reply, but I always sent the message, and I always would.

I woke up in the morning to Mia shaking my arm.

“What?” I mumbled in a grumpy tone.

She sighed and sat down on my bed. The dip made me roll a little.

“We need to talk about Chris, and how you treat him when he comes over, but I don’t like arguing.”

“I don’t like that dick cheating on you,” I shot back, raising my

eyebrows. The light stung my tired eyes. *Can't we do this later?*

"Cole, please don't. I love him."

I rolled my eyes. That was a crappy reason to let someone walk all over you. "Would you cheat on him?"

"No! Of course I wouldn't!"

"Why?"

"Because I love him," she snapped, frowning at me angrily.

"There you go, Mia. You wouldn't cheat on him because you love him. He cheats on you all the time. Just think about that for a minute."

Seeing the tears in her eyes made me feel like the worst brother in the world, but she needed to hear it. She could do so much better than him.

"Look, I'm sorry, but you need to see the truth."

She sniffled and wiped a tear away with the back of her hand. "And what if you were in my position? What if it was Oakley cheating on you?"

"Oakley would never do that."

She lowered her head, knowing I was right. I would never have to worry about that. I trusted Oakley, and I knew she would never cheat. It didn't pass me by that I had basically just admitted I was with Oakley, but Mia pretty much knew that anyway, Jasper too.

"I guess I'm just not strong enough. I can't do it," she whispered, defeated.

Chris-the-dick had done a real good job on her. She had no confidence and didn't think she could get anyone else, so now he could just screw around and knew she would take him back.

"I'm trying. I just wish you would too, for my sake."

She walked out and closed my door without another word. I sighed in frustration and lay back down.

After breakfast at Oakley's, we drove to the mall to do some birthday shopping. She had received a lot of money from her family that she wanted to spend. Luckily, it was a Sunday so the shops wouldn't be open too late. Hopefully, that would mean I wouldn't get to that point where I would just rather die than step in another clothes shop. We also had to be back for cake at four o'clock.

By the time she had spent most of her money and we'd had lunch, it was two o'clock, and we were heading back to my house. *That wasn't too bad.* Although, after her going back to the shop we started in, I did want to jump out of a second floor window!

My parents were out, and Mia was at Chris' house so we would have the place to ourselves.

"You want a drink?" I asked her as we walked into the house. She shook her head and grabbed my hand, leading me upstairs. *Wow.*

I laid her down on the bed and slowly peeled her clothes off, kissing her soft skin all over.

"I love you," I whispered as I held her in my arms. She kissed my chest. We spent the next half an hour messing around and then got dressed to go back to her house for the cake.

"Oakley," Mum called, and jumped off the sofa as we walked through her front door. I took a quick look around the room and was thankful that Mia hadn't brought Chris-the-dick with her.

Max walked into the room, carrying a two-tier cake, covered in pink icing with Oakley's name and the number sixteen piped onto it. He started to sing 'Happy Birthday', and everyone joined in. I smiled at the embarrassed blush on her face and started singing too. I was determined to enjoy tonight and give her a good birthday. On Tuesday, when we announced that we were together, things would undoubtedly get so much harder.

On Tuesday, I woke up to Oakley shaking my arm.

"Morning," I mumbled, grabbing her hand and pulling her down on the bed with me. She smiled and laid her head on my chest. The smile wasn't entirely genuine though – she seemed too tense, probably worrying about what we'd agreed to do today.

"It's gonna be alright, Oaks," I said knowing I was getting a slap for calling her that. Her hand slammed down on my chest with a thud, though it didn't hurt at all. I laughed and grabbed her hand.

She looked like she was going to fall asleep.

"Nice try," I teased, gently nudging her. She frowned and looked up at me. "If you fall asleep, you're just putting off telling everyone."

I tried not to laugh as she sighed and sat up, pouting.

"We should just get this over with. I'm gonna shower then we'll tell them, okay?"

She nodded, biting on her bottom lip nervously. I got out of bed and kissed the top of her head.

"It'll be fine, I promise." I really hoped I could make it okay after telling

her that, I didn't ever want to let her down.

After taking the quickest shower I had ever had, I threw on some clothes, and we made our way downstairs. Her parents were over, drinking coffee and looking through pictures from the holiday. That was good, at least we could just tell them all at once.

"Hey guys, can we talk to you for a minute?" I said as Oakley and I sat down on the small sofa opposite them.

Jasper looked up from the floor where he was sitting and a huge grin spread across his face. Oh great.

"Why yes you can," he said enthusiastically, throwing down the pictures he was holding. Well he obviously knew what was going on, and judging by Mia's smirk, so did she. Why were both our parents so oblivious?

Sarah shook her head at Jasper, grinning slightly at his weirdness. "What's going on?" she asked, looking away from Jasper.

Oakley visibly tensed beside me, and I took a deep breath. *Please take this well.*

"Me and Oakley. We're... We're together," I said, confidently as I could, and unashamed.

Everyone fell silent. Jasper gasped theatrically and slapped his hand over his mouth. He looked between his parents and then back at us. *Idiot.*

"Would you believe it?" he said, shaking his head. I glared at him, which did nothing but make him laugh.

"And how long have you been together?" Sarah asked, looking at Oakley who was chewing on her lip. Max looked angry, and my parents looked happy. Well, that was two out of the four at least.

"Since the holiday," I replied honestly.

Max stood up, his face hard and his eyes tight with anger. He looked like he was about to murder me.

"So it is true?" he spat through gritted teeth.

Oakley looked lost, and tears welled up in her eyes. She grabbed my hand squeezing tightly for support.

"No, it's not. We are together, but nothing like that has happened," I said smoothly, hoping they would believe the lie. Jasper raised his eyebrows. *Say something, Jasper, and I swear you will lose your balls.*

Max started pacing the room, deep in thought, obviously trying to figure out if he should believe me or not. "She's fifteen!"

"Max, calm down. She's sixteen now," Mum said soothingly.

“Not when they first got together,” he growled. Oakley shrank back in the sofa, pressing the side of her body against mine.

Sarah knelt in front of Oakley.

“Are you sure this is what you want, honey?”

Oakley nodded at the same time I shouted, “What the hell does that mean? You think I’d take advantage of her or something?”

I actually felt sick that they would think that. I would die before I let anything happen to her.

My parents jumped in to defend me while Sarah tried calming everyone down. The room was buzzing with tension.

Max glared at me.

“You’re seventeen, Cole! What on earth do you want with her anyway? You know how she is!” he shouted, making everyone flinch.

I felt my blood boil; I wanted to punch him so badly. ‘How she is.’ What the hell was that supposed to mean? Oakley jumped up and ran. Damn it.

I turned to follow her, but my dad held me back.

“Let him go,” he said in my ear as Jasper ran after her. “You need to sort this out, Cole.”

“I didn’t take advantage of her,” I whispered to Dad.

“I know you didn’t, and deep down so does Max.”

He pulled me back around and I locked eyes with Max again. He still looked angry. Sarah was holding his arm, sobbing quietly.

I shook my head. “You know I would never hurt her.”

He took a deep breath and nodded.

“I know, but she’s not like other sixteen-year-old girls though, is she?”

There’s nothing wrong with her!

“Why her?”

That one was easy.

“I love her,” I answered simply. I wanted to be with her, and I wanted to make her happy. “She’s not a little girl any more. Just because she doesn’t speak that doesn’t mean she’s a child! There are plenty of mute people out there that have everything everyone else has,” I reasoned.

I was so angry. Angry at Max’s reaction and angry at myself for promising her it would be okay. Max laughed humourlessly and shook his head. Sarah let go of his arm and wiped away the tears that were falling freely down her cheeks.

“If you love her could you not wait until she’s got everything sorted

out?” Sarah asked.

“What do you mean?” I asked, frowning.

“Well,” she started, sitting down on the sofa. “I think maybe you should wait until we’ve sorted out her speech problem.”

“Sorted out her speech problem? When are you all gonna realise there’s nothing wrong with her not speaking! If she wants to talk, she will, but until then, back off!” I ranted, tensing my muscles so much they started to ache.

I was so pissed off with everyone thinking that she had to be fixed somehow. As if she was a broken doll that needed a spare part to make her whole again. Of course I would love her to speak, but if she never did then it wouldn’t change a thing in my eyes.

“And you say you love her!” Sarah scoffed, shaking her head at me.

“You know what? I think I might be the only one that does. You don’t see her how you used to, do you? She’s not your *perfect* daughter any more!”

Sarah started crying harder. “I love her.”

“That’s not what I asked, Sarah.” Her face suddenly fell, and she gasped. I spun around and saw Oakley standing by the door, looking at her Mum with the most heart-breaking expression. Tears poured down her cheeks. *No!* She’d had heard everything.

Sarah shook her head. “No, Honey...I...”

Oakley’s eyes flicked to me, and I made the few steps over to her, and wrapped my arms around her waist. She gripped my t-shirt and started pulling me backwards, trying to get out of the house. Jasper glared at his parents hatefully. This was such a huge mess, worse than I ever imagined. Everyone was crying and trying to tell Oakley that she had misunderstood, but she hadn’t, Sarah had left it too late to deny it.

She tugged my shirt harder, and I knew I needed to get her out. We should probably stay and talk so Sarah could explain, but Oakley clearly just needed to leave.

“We’ll talk tomorrow,” I said over my shoulder as I slammed the door behind us. I led her to my car, and we got in quickly. I locked the doors. Sarah ran outside just in time to see us drive off.

Oakley’s body shook as she cried silently. Her feet were up on the seat and her head buried in her knees.

“I’m so sorry, baby,” I whispered, stroking her arm. What the hell had I done? “We’ll go to a hotel tonight, okay? We’ll sort all this out tomorrow. Everyone was upset and saying things they don’t mean.”

She didn't look up or make any gesture to suggest she was even hearing what I was saying, but I didn't stop. I had to make her feel better.

"What I said about your mum isn't true. I shouldn't have said that and I'm sorry, but they were talking about you not speaking, and I just kinda lost it. Oakley, it's not true. Your parents love you the way you are."

She sniffed and shook her head, placing her hands behind her neck, with her elbows drawn together in front of her chest.

"Sorry," I said quietly, knowing she didn't want to hear about it.

It was just after eleven in the morning when we arrived at a small B&B by the coast. We were allowed straight into our room, but since we had nothing with us, we decided to take a walk along the beach. My phone hadn't stopped ringing since we left, so I turned it to silent after sending a text to Jasper.

She had barely looked at me, and I was starting to worry.

"Oakley, please," I begged, stopping to turn her to face me. "Can you forgive me?"

I held my breath, absolutely terrified that she was going to shake her head. She looked at me confused and nodded.

I let out a sigh of relief and kissed her forehead.

"Thank you."

She pressed her petite body against mine, and we held each other. The strong wind whipping up from the sea, stinging my skin. If I was cold, then she really would be.

"I really didn't think they would react like that. I knew they would be angry about us keeping it from them, but I didn't ever expect that. It's gonna be okay though. They all just need a little time." She nodded. Should I have said that? Was I just promising her more things that I didn't know if I could deliver?

"Let's forget it for now and get something to eat." She pulled away and smiled weakly. I would never forgive myself for saying all that in front of her. It was true though, Sarah didn't see the same girl, and she did want to fix her. Perhaps that was just a normal 'parent' reaction though.

We got some chips and sat on the bench that was facing the dull, fierce sea.

"Whatever happens with the parents, I love you, and we'll be fine," I said, kissing the top of her head. That much, I knew I could promise her.

Chapter Fifteen

Oakley

As we sat outside in the unusually cold August air, I tried to pretend what Mum said hadn't bothered me, but I wasn't doing a very good job. Cole kept giving me side-glances and sad smiles. I always knew she thought of me as almost a child still, but I didn't know she felt like I was a stranger, a different person. *You are a different person*, an annoying voice inside my head reminded me. I wasn't her perfect little girl any more; I was damaged. Could I convince Cole to stay at the B&B longer than one night?

"You wanna go back now? You look frozen!" Cole said, rubbing his hand up and down my arm to try to warm me up. I nodded and stood up at the same time his phone started to vibrate, again. With a deep, irritated sigh, he pulled it out of his pocket and answered. "Hey."

I heard Jasper's muffled voice on the other end.

"I'll tell you as long as you keep it to yourself. Oakley needs some time."

Cole's eyes narrowed. What had Jasper said?

"Well they can fuck off, she's sixteen now so can make up her own mind."

Cole hung up and looked at me.

"Jasper's telling them where we are, but not where we're staying. He's coming tonight and bringing pizza."

I gave Cole my best 'what the heck' face.

"He wants to join the party" He grinned. "He's also bringing Haribo and some girl he met at a party." I was actually a little relieved. Thank God, he's not getting back with Abby.

We walked back to the B&B hand-in-hand. The dull, moody weather made me in even more of a hurry to get inside. I wanted a hot chocolate and to wrap a quilt around myself to warm up. Cole opened the front door of the quaint mid-terrace town house and gestured for me to go in first. Sighing, I placed my hands over the radiator in the entrance hall. I wanted to kiss the owner for having the heating on in August.

All too soon, Cole walked up the stairs, and I had to leave the warmth behind. Where had summer gone? Thankfully, our room was hot, and I crawled into the old-fashioned bed. My feet were practically numb from the cold, so I wrapped the cover around myself and waited to warm up.

“It’s not that bad.” Maybe not for you! Why were men so much more immune to the cold? Or did they feel it the same but were too worried about not seeming macho to complain?

Cole flopped down on the bed beside me and rolled over, laying his head on my lap. *Make yourself comfortable!* “We have a couple hours before your annoying brother gets here. What do you wanna do?” he asked.

I shrugged, and he kissed me.

We collapsed on the bed and I snuggled closer to his side, laying my head on his chest. His breathing was slowly returning to normal, but his heart was flying in his chest. I smiled as I listened to it, loving knowing that I was the cause. His fingers gently pressed down on my bare back and he started tracing random shapes on my skin.

After an hour and a half of lying in bed in comfortable silence, Cole kissed the top of my head and got up. I followed his lead and got up.

“He’ll be here soon,” he said.

There was a knock at the door just after we had finished getting dressed and opened a window. Jasper was early? Jasper was never early! Cole glared at the door before going to open it. Jasper strolled past him with a huge grin on his face. A pretty, petite girl followed him and smiled warmly at me. She looked a little younger than him but not much.

“Hey, Bonnie and Clyde,” Jasper joked, putting the seven pizza boxes down on the side table. *Are we feeding all the guests in the B&B?* “Guys, this is Casey. Casey, this is my baby sister, Oakley, and her corrupting boyfriend, Cole.” *Don’t worry about remembering her name,* I thought sarcastically.

“Hey,” Cole said to Casey. I smiled at Casey and moved over so we would all be able to sit comfortably on the bed.

“So what have you two been doing then?” Jasper asked a little too enthusiastically. I blushed tomato red and looked out of the window. “You’d better not knock her up.”

“Shut up, Jasper,” Cole snapped, and reached over, grabbing the pizza off the side. “How many people were you planning on feeding anyway?”

Jasper suddenly gasped and hopped off the bed, making all of us jump at

his sudden movement. *What now?* “Am I sitting on your sex sweat?” he yelled like a little girl, frantically wiping his bum with his hand, then wiping his hand down the wall. I started choking on nothing. *What!* Cole just shook his head, discouraged, while Casey looked scared. Clearly, she hadn’t known my brother long. Perhaps he really did want a girlfriend, but his colourful personality was putting them off.

After Jasper’s inappropriate freak out, we all sat back on the bed and ate. The TV was on in the background, but no one really watched it. I didn’t even know what was on – some old film. Everything Jasper said was either gross or stupid. He raged about how chocolate bars used to be bigger, and it should be illegal to reduce their size. Why every weird meat tasted like chicken, and my personal favourite, what was the point of belly buttons?

I looked over at a slightly scared looking Casey. *I bet you’re glad you agreed to go out with him, huh?* I spoke in my head. As crazy and unpredictable as he was, I wouldn’t change him for the world because I knew he wouldn’t change me either. Along with Cole, Jasper was the only person that accepted me for who I was now. That meant a lot.

“Effing hell,” Jasper said, sighing heavily and shaking his head as soon as Casey went to the toilet. *If she comes back, I’ll eat my hat!*

“What’s wrong with this one?” Cole asked, sounding bored.

“When I picked her up she made me go in her house!” No, I thought sarcastically. I raised my eyebrows, waiting for him to explain what was so wrong with that. “Her *parents* were there! I’ve only met the girl once! Once! I had an actual conversation with her Dad *and* ate friggin’ cake with them all! Jesus, it was a first date not an anniversary!”

“How awful,” Cole agreed, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

“You haven’t heard the worse part yet. Talking to the parents, I could just about handle but the cake had banana on it!” Cole burst out laughing, and I smiled so wide my jaw started aching instantly. “Chocolate belongs on cake, banana does not!” Cole continued laughing, clutching his stomach. “I’m serious, dude! Who the hell puts banana on a *cake?*”

“Casey’s parents,” Cole choked out and laughed some more.

“Whatever. Back me up, Oakley. That’s weird right?” I nodded. He was right, but it wasn’t exactly what you’d call a deal breaker.

“Thank you! At least she doesn’t live that close,” he quickly whispered, as the room door opened. “We need more coke,” Jasper announced, getting off the bed. “Come help me, Oakley.” He almost made it sound like a

question but was already pulling my arm, almost making me fall off the bed.

We left the B&B to go to the corner shop opposite.

“You know Mum didn’t mean it, don’t you?” *So that’s why you wanted me to come along.* I nodded and smiled. “You don’t seem that convinced.” I rolled my eyes and nodded again. She did kind of mean it. I knew she would change me in an instant if she could, and part of me wished she could do it too. I would give anything to not be locked inside myself any more, anything but Mum and Jasper’s happiness.

“Good. Look, none of us really care if you never talk again. Well, obviously, we do but you get what I mean. You’re fine just as you are,” he said, scratching the back of his neck a little uncomfortably.

“You know I’ll always be there for you, and so will Cole,” he added. Maybe I didn’t have the most understanding parents, but I did have the best brother and boyfriend anyone could ever want.

As we walked back to the B&B with two bottles of coke, Jasper changed the subject to Casey and how he was going to ditch her. I really didn’t think that would be an issue after tonight though. I couldn’t believe she was still with us! I felt tired after my conversation with Jasper and everything that had happened already today. I just wanted to sleep.

Jasper slammed one of the bottles down on the side and unscrewed the lid of the other. *Pour it into glasses, don’t drink from the bottle!* I almost fell over as he separated the plastic cups and started to pour coke in each one. Was he becoming civilised? *Mark this date on a calendar,* I joked to myself.

I climbed back on the bed and snuggled into Cole’s side, laying my head on his shoulder.

The rest of the evening passed in the same way. Jasper would be an idiot, and we would laugh at him. At ten o’clock Casey began yawning. Well done for sticking it out for that long! “I should get home,” she said, hiding another yawn behind her hand.

Jasper nodded and stood up. “Sure. I’ll see you guys tomorrow, right?”

“We’ll be back in the morning.”

“Look after her,” he demanded, nodding his head at me. Cole nodded and started gathering the empty pizza boxes up. We had managed to eat five of them, and the rest were going to be Jasper’s breakfast.

The second they closed the door; I peeled my clothes off and dived under the soft, puffy quilt. “You don’t have to be shy in front of me.” *I can’t help it.* “I’ll just take the boxes out, won’t be a minute.” I nodded, curling up

underneath the cover and closing my eyes. I briefly woke up when I felt the bed dip. Cole's arm flopped over my ribs, and he kissed the side of my head.

"Oakley, wake up, babe," Cole whispered, and softly pressed his lips to my forehead. I frowned and shook my head. I didn't want to get up.

Whatever time it was it was too early. The events from yesterday came flooding back, and I didn't have the energy to deal with it all again. He pulled the cover off me. I gasped and covered up my naked belly where my top had ridden up. Cole frowned.

"Don't hide from me. You're beautiful, and I've seen it all before." He winked and walked off out of the room, probably to use the bathroom.

Ten minutes later, we had paid the room bill and were making our way to a café for breakfast. Cole's phone rang. He had taken it off silent first thing, deciding we couldn't ignore everyone forever. He pulled his phone out of his pocket as we sat down on a white, plastic looking table. He mouthed 'your dad' before answering.

"Hello. She's fine," he said, his voice short and snippy. "In an hour, we're just having breakfast. Yep... Bye."

His frown faded as he looked up at me.

"He just wanted to know when we'll be home. I think they just want to sort it all out now."

I looked at him carefully to see if he was just saying that to make me feel better. His face remained straight, and I knew he wasn't lying to make it seem better.

"Pancakes?" he asked, looking up at me over the tatty menu. I nodded, feeling my empty stomach begging for food.

Throughout breakfast I couldn't help thinking how this was probably the last time we would be properly alone for a while. Why couldn't I be eighteen already?

Breakfast ended too soon and we got our things together and checked out. Cole opened the car door for me, with a little bow. I smiled at how stupidly cute he was.

"Oakley?" He paused and took a deep breath. I didn't like where this was going already. He was all serious again.

"I don't want to be the reason you're fighting with your parents, I know you hate that. I will completely understand if it's too much and you don't think I'm worth the trouble." The blood drained from my face. What the heck was he saying?

He reached over and took my hand.

“I don’t want to, believe me, but I don’t want you to fall out with them. If you wanted to just be friends again. If it’s too much, then we can. It would hurt like hell and suck so bad, but I just want you to be happy.”

I felt sick, actually sick. He really had no clue just how much he meant to me.

“So, do you still want to be together?” he asked quietly. He had never looked so vulnerable or scared before. I squeezed his hand and nodded my head, which made him relax.

“Okay, good. I was really scared you’d want to, and I’d have to pretend like it wasn’t killing me every time I saw you.” I tried to control the tears that were seriously threatening to spill over.

“Don’t cry! God, you’re such a girl,” he said teasingly, making me smile. “Oh, just so you know, that offer was forever. Since you said you don’t want to go back to being friends you no longer hold the right to.” He laughed. “And yeah, I’m aware of how much of a psycho I sounded just then!”

We pulled up outside my house, and I sagged into the seat. Going home always dampened my mood. The front door flew open before Cole had even turned the engine off. Mum ran towards us with Dad just behind her. Cole’s parents also saw us arrive as they both came out of his house. Mia and Jasper were nowhere to be seen, probably choosing to stay away from the drama.

Cole jumped out and walked around to my side. I got out of the car and stood beside him. I relaxed a little as I felt Cole’s hand rest on the small of my back.

“I’m so sorry,” Mum mumbled and pulled me into a long hug. Her body shook with tears. After a few seconds, I hugged her back. *She loves you. She just wants the best for you.*

When she let me go, Dad wrapped his arms around me. I let him and hugged him back but forced up an emotional barrier in my mind. Having him touch me made me feel nauseous but I couldn’t not do it, or it would look odd.

“I’m sorry too, sweetheart. And to you, Cole.” He released me, and I backed up straight away. “Let’s go in. We all need to talk.”

Everyone followed behind Dad. They all seemed to do whatever he said without question.

I sat down next to Cole on the sofa and pressed against his side.

“Calm down and breathe,” Cole whispered as Mum put down a tray of tea, coffee, hot chocolate and biscuits. I took a deep breath. My lungs burned from holding my breath.

Dad cleared his throat and sat forward in the chair.

“Yesterday, everything got out of hand, and we all said some things that we didn’t mean. I didn’t think this would happen yet. Not until you were older, Oakley.” I almost choked in disbelief. How could he even sit there and pretend my age mattered? I felt sick to my stomach.

Mum reached across from the sofa beside ours and grabbed my hand. “I need you to understand that as your mother, of course I want you to talk again, but it isn’t everything. I don’t love you any less. Nothing could make me love you any less.”

I can think of one thing, I thought bitterly, holding in the tears that threatened to burst out.

“I’m sorry for what I said, but you have to understand that you will always be my little girl, no matter what. However, I really am happy for you both. Just make sure you look after her,” Mum added.

He smiled and threw his arm over the back of the sofa.

“Always.”

We all sat around talking for a while, and drinking our hot drinks. I didn’t dare look at Dad again. I hated him so much, but I still loved him. I wanted to him to go to prison, but I wanted him to stay and change back to how he was. I wanted him to be my dad again. I hadn’t seen Frank in almost three years so I knew it was over but I didn’t understand why things couldn’t be the way they were when I was a child. Well I did know why but I desperately wanted to be carefree and have a happy family again. God I was so messed up.

After Cole left, and had arranged to come back for dinner, I sat in my room with Mum. She had apologised a million times for what happened and was trying to think of ways she could make it up to me.

“Oh, what about a spa day? That would be lovely,” she suggested.

I did like the spa in Italy. I nodded. She was making an effort. I could do the same.

She lay back against my hard wooden headboard and smiled like a teenage girl.

“So, how are things going with Cole? You two do make a lovely couple, I’ve always thought that.” *I know you have, so why the freak out?* Because

knowing we were together forced her to realise she still saw me as a child?

I bit my lip, feeling the heat rise to my cheeks.

“It’s so good to see you happy, love.”

It was good to feel happy.

Chapter Sixteen

Cole

The summer had passed so bloody quickly, and school started again on Monday. I had just two more days off. At least this was my last year at sixth form and then I could concentrate on university. Now uni was something I couldn't wait for. Studying something that interested me – structural engineering. I wanted to be the one figuring out how a big fuck-off building wouldn't fall on top of people.

“Cole, will you hurry up! You take longer to get ready than my sister,” Jasper screamed. I winced as his high-pitched, pretending-to-be-a-girl voice cut right through me.

“Jesus, Jasper! I'm standing right next to you! I'm ready.”

I grabbed my wallet, slipping it into my pocket, and sprayed some aftershave on my neck. It was Oakley's favourite, and the one she bought for Christmas for the last few years. I loved it.

Tonight, I was going out with Jasper and Ben. Oakley was having a girl's night in with Sarah, Mia, my mum and Kerry. She seemed pretty excited to spend the evening pampering herself with that muddy-looking crap you put on your face. That I had once put on my face. *Never again!*

“Cole,” Jasper whined. “You're wasting valuable drinking time.”

“I'm coming!”

Jasper chuckled. “I thought you looked a bit funny.” I pushed past him. What a loser. Mum and Mia had already gone over to Oakley's with a bottle of wine, chocolates and neon nail polish.

The past few weeks had been perfect. Oakley's parents were doing their best to accept that we were together and to be happy for us. We weren't allowed to sleep over each other's any more, as we had anticipated, but that didn't bother me. It didn't help that Jasper always seemed to have a stupid teen pregnancy joke ready.

“Alright man, I'm gonna bet you right now that I get more phone numbers tonight,” he said, slapping me on the back as we walked out to wait for the taxi.

Are we really doing this?

“I’m not getting any phone numbers tonight. I’m with your sister, remember?”

“So you fold? I win?”

I sighed in defeat. “Yes, Jasper, you win.”

The black taxi pulled up outside my house. Jasper stopped and looked at his reflection in the window, messing his hair up.

“Do I look okay?”

“What are you, a woman?”

“Hey, I have insecurities the same as everyone else. I may be so close to perfect it’s scary but—”

“You look fine, Jasper!” I said, cutting him off. It was generally much easier to agree with him and just go along with it.

“Yeah? You don’t think I should have gone with the blue shirt?”

I shook my head, taking a deep breath. “Are we really doing this?” He nodded, looking deadly serious. *This is going to be a very long night.*

“No, you shouldn’t have gone with the blue shirt.” I shoved him in the back of the taxi. “What you’re wearing looks good. So does your hair.”

He laughed and scooted over so I could get in too. I gave the driver Ben’s address, and we went to pick him up too.

“I’m flattered, man, I really am, but you’re with my sister, and if I’m honest, man bits just don’t do it for me.”

Why didn’t I drink before I left the house? A whole evening with Jasper, I must be mad. Ben was waiting by his front door as we pulled up.

“Hey.” He greeted us with an excited smile. “Ready to get shit faced?”

I laughed. “Oh yeah!”

It had been a while since I’d had a night out with the lads and I was looking forward to it. Most of my time was spent with Oakley now and I was more than happy with that, but it was good to do separate things too. We both needed time with our friends.

The queue into the club was short, and we barely had to wait two minutes before making it to the front. The built to hell bouncer shot his muscular arm out, stopping us just as we were about to go in. He must be eating ten pounds of steak and raw eggs every day or taking steroids. The veins in his neck were popping through his skin, and the material of his black top was stretched around his shape.

“ID,” he demanded of Jasper.

I watched with a smile as Jasper's face fell and he pulled his driving licence out of his wallet. The bouncer studied it for a second and handed it back, nodding for us to go inside. We made our way through the crowd of barely dressed girls to the bar.

"I'm fucking older than you!" Jasper exclaimed, waving his hand in mine and Ben's direction.

"Well, clearly you don't look it." *Or act it.* He grumbled something under his breath and turned to get the bartenders attention.

Just as the barman got to us, Jasper turned to his side.

"Well hello, ladies," he purred. *Oh my God!* I ordered three JD's and cokes and three shots of tequila.. Ben and I sat down on a stool and got comfortable, ready to watch Jasper make an arse out of himself.

"You wanna dance?" he asked the blonde and scooted a little close to her. *Give her some personal space, Jasper.* Watching him chat up women was like watching a car crash.

"I have a boyfriend," she responded, raising her eyebrows, but not actually looking too bothered about the fact.

Without saying a word, he turned away from her. It was as if she had just told him she had murdered a litter of kittens.

"Wanna dance?" he asked her friend, who was standing right next to her! Ben burst out laughing, and I just watched open-mouthed. You would at least try a different group of girls! Unless, of course, you were Jasper.

The blonde's friend snorted. "Are you serious? Do I look like a backup or something?" Jasper's face turned thoughtful. He was taking way too long to respond. *Say no!*

He shrugged. "Sorry, I like her more."

I chocked on my drink, my eyes widening in shock. Did he really just say that? The girls face reddened. She slapped his cheek, and the sound made me flinch. That had to hurt. It didn't seem to faze Jasper. I had a feeling that wasn't the first time he had been slapped.

"No need to be all touchy, love, I was just being honest!" he shouted after her as she stormed off with her friends.

"We've only been in here five minutes, and you've been slapped already. That must be some sort of a record," Ben praised, slapping him on the back. Jasper smiled proudly and downed his shot.

Halfway through the night, Jasper ditched us for a group of Thai girls, here for a holiday. He was in his own little idea of heaven. I sat back at the

bar with Ben, downing drinks.

“So it’s never awkward or anything?” he questioned, referring to Oakley and me.

“Nope.” Shaking my head, I explained, “I know what she’s thinking pretty much all of the time, so I don’t really need her to say it.”

He nodded along. “Wow. I have no idea what Kerry thinks, and she doesn’t shut up!” They were different ends of the extreme, one never talking, and one always talking. No wonder they got along so well. They balanced each other out perfectly.

“Do you ever wish she would talk though? I mean, doesn’t it bother you that you’ll never hear her say she loves you? And what about the future? When you get married? She won’t be able to say the vows and shit.”

That was something I had thought about, but surely we could get married without her actually saying the words? It wasn’t something we needed to worry about for a long time yet, but I definitely wanted to marry her some day.

“Of course, I wish she would talk, but I don’t really care. And she does say she loves me, she just doesn’t say it.”

Ben’s black eyebrows knitted together in confusion. I couldn’t help laughing at him.

“I’ll get the next round,” I said, pulling a tenner out of my wallet.

Jasper appeared back at the bar, not to talk to me and Ben, but for the redhead standing just along from us.

“This should be good,” Ben muttered. I moved slightly closer, making sure I left a reasonable amount of space between me and the stranger I was standing next to, so I couldn’t be accused of being a pervert.

“Hotel room,” I heard Jasper say. Wow, he got straight to the point. A song with a lot of bass started playing, making it harder to hear. The next thing out of his mouth was, “Hitler.”

I looked at Ben in horror. What the hell was he doing? Why was he talking about Hitler? The girl frowned and started to look a little scared.

“Some good ideas. I love blondes...” I wanted to make a quick exit, but there was something about the train wreck that I just couldn’t look away from. The girl, not a blonde, glared.

Sure enough, she threw her drink in his face, and then slapped his cheek before storming off. I stood frozen. Did he really just say that? He raised his hands in celebration, looking around the club. *Please don’t see me, please.*

“Damn it,” I muttered as he turned around and grinned in our direction.

“Cole! Man, did you see that?” he asked, still grinning as he walking over to us. The front of his shirt was soaking wet. I shook my head at him. “Right in my face,” he exclaimed proudly, wiping the strong smelling wine from his chin.

I shook my head and asked the million-dollar question, “Why were you talking about Hitler?”

He shrugged and leant on the bar. “Worked didn’t it? I tried everything else, so I thought I’d bring a little dictator into the mix and bam, drink all over me!” He pulled at his soaking shirt for emphasis. What could he have possibly tried for that to be his last option? I stopped myself before I asked, deciding it was probably best to just not know.

Chapter Seventeen

Oakley

Sighing, I picked out my uniform and started getting dressed. Today was the first day back at school. Not only was it going to be a bad day, but also in the evening, we had Mum's friend over for dinner: a psychiatric doctor.

Mum was going for casual now since I refused to go to a doctor surgery or hospital. Had she never thought that there was a very good reason for that? I knew she was desperate to help me. I could see it every time she looked at me, every painful conversation I'd overheard, and every time I heard her crying at night, but I'd had enough. What she felt now was nothing compared to how she would feel if she found out the truth.

Once I was ready, I crept downstairs to get some breakfast.

"You ready for today?" Cole asked, making me jump at how close he was. Why hadn't I seen him? Probably because I was concentrating too hard on eavesdropping. I felt sick at the thought of going back to school; I definitely didn't appreciate his reminder.

I sighed and nodded, resisting the urge to get back in bed and pretend I was ill.

"It's gonna be okay. If Julian says or does anything then just come and get me. I'll meet you at break and give you my timetable so you'll know where I'll be if you need me."

I rolled my eyes and pulled out of his arms, feeling like a helpless little child that couldn't stand up for herself. I knew he was only saying it because he cared and wanted to protect me, but I couldn't help feeling like his little sister when he did.

He grabbed my hand and spun me around, so I was facing him again.

"You can chuck it in your bag and never look at it if you want. Just take it for me?" he pleaded, widening his eyes. It wasn't often that he used that face on me, but it worked. Giving up, I wrapped my arms around his waist again..

"Thank you," he whispered into my hair, sending that familiar shiver right through me.

We managed to stay away from my parents and eat breakfast in peace as they excused themselves and went upstairs, to talk about how to handle the visit from the psychiatrist tonight no doubt. I didn't want Mum fussing around me anyway.

Jasper walked in as we were eating our toast. My mouth dropped open. It was before nine. Was he sick or something? Wait, he was wearing the same clothes as yesterday.

"Well good morning, baby sister," he chirped, ruffling my hair and laughing as I slapped his hand away.

"Good night?" Cole questioned.

He grinned like an idiot and winked.

"A gentleman never tells."

"Gentleman!" Cole scoffed. "Anyway, thankfully we don't have time for the gruesome details. We've gotta go."

I stood up with Cole and gave Jasper a little wave goodbye.

On the way to school, I watched the time on Cole's dashboard. That was supposed to make time pass slower, it didn't. The illuminated orange numbers flicked by too quickly, and before I knew it, Cole had parked outside the sixth form block.

"I would give you the whole 'it'll be fine and come get me if you need me' speech again but my arm's starting to bruise!" he said teasingly, rubbing his arm where I had hit him earlier.

I nodded and smiled at him as confidently as I could so he wouldn't worry. It didn't seem to work, he gave me a sad smile in reply. Sometimes I hated how well he could see through my fake happiness.

I got out of the car when I couldn't waste any more time, and grabbed my bag from the back seat. Cole walked around to my side of the car and wrapped me in his arms. I felt so safe and protected with him. Hugging him closer, I closed my eyes and pretended we were back in Italy.

Someone behind us gagged loudly. Julian. Cole's grip tightened around me possessively as he glared at Julian, but quickly turned back to me, ignoring Julian, which seemed to make him angry. Why angry? Did he want a confrontation? No doubt.

"I'll meet you here for lunch? I'll buy you ice cream," Cole offered.

My throat went dry. How could he make me feel so... Alive, all the time? I loved him so much, and I wanted him so much. It was hard; I felt like I shouldn't ever want another man near me, but with Cole everything was so

much different. I needed to learn to let myself feel something without second-guessing it or thinking it was wrong.

I gripped Cole's t-shirt in my fist and pulled him closer, so there was no space between us at all. He brushed his lips against mine teasingly. Usually I wouldn't be comfortable kissing him in front of hundreds of people, but in that moment, I didn't care. I crashed my lips to his.

"Nice show," a deep voice shouted. I jumped back, embarrassed. Kerry and Ben stood just by Cole's car, grinning at us. I immediately started blushing like crazy. Keeping the kissing in private was certainly a good idea in the future.

"Thank you," Cole replied sarcastically.

I finally left Cole and his friends when the bell rang. Taking a deep breath, I made my way to my classroom. The familiar faded, dull blue walls matched my mood. Home time couldn't come soon enough. When I walked into my form room, the teacher was already sitting at her desk, thankfully. Hannah smiled as I took my seat next to her. Everyone sat in the same seat, even though they weren't assigned to us.

Once the register was taken, we were given our timetables for the year. I had double maths, then English and biology, and after lunch, it was double business studies. Double maths on the first day back was harsh.

I made my way to maths, this time without Hannah as she was now in a higher set to me; she was a whiz at maths. I wasn't bad at it, but I hated it so I didn't put much effort into the class.

I sat one row from the front, next to someone new. He was quite petite and looked painfully shy and nervous. I smiled at him, which he returned without saying a word. I pointed to my name written neatly at the top of my notepad.

"I'm Kyle," he whispered. "Oakley's a weird name." His eyes widened. "I didn't mean weird. I mean... Unusual. Sorry."

Holding my hand up, I shook my head and smiled. It was kind of weird. I didn't think it really suited me. I should have had a more common name that no one would bat an eyelid at. Oakley made me stand out too much.

About five minutes into the lesson, just when everyone had settled down to work out some equations to 'get us back in the swing of things', the door opened, and Julian came strutting in as if he owned the place. I did envy how much confidence he had. It was just misplaced. Great, so I had him in all my

maths classes for the year.

“Sorry I’m late,” he mumbled, ignoring Mr Jones telling him off for arriving late and disrupting the class.

“Julian, I saved you a seat,” Leanne whined, looking at him through her eyelashes.

“Get back to it, all of you,” Mr Jones barked as everyone had used Julian’s entrance as an excuse to start talking. Julian chuckled and sat down on the opposite side of me. What the heck was he doing? I picked an equation and stared at it, desperate not to make any eye contact with him. Why did he sit with me and not his friends?

“Oakley,” he whispered, leaning a little closer to me. My heart beat faster. I was worried. What was he up to? He sighed in defeat. “Oakley, please?”

He actually sounded... Sad? Something was going on. He had been in my company for over five minutes and hadn’t made a dig or a nasty remark.

I took a deep breath and forced myself to look at him. His thin lips pulled up at the sides into a real smile. A real smile for me? Why? He was acting as if we were friends and he hadn’t been a jerk to me for years.

“Look I’m sorry, okay. Sorry about your party, and everything else.” He shifted in his seat nervously. He didn’t make apologies often. That much was clear from how uncomfortable he looked. “I know I’ve been a dick to you, and I don’t deserve anything, but I’d like to be friends,” he said quickly. “I really am sorry. Can you forgive me?”

If I had been standing up, I think I would have fainted. Julian apologising and wanting to be friends. *What on earth happened to him over the summer holidays to make him nice?* I wasn’t sure if I could trust him, or if I even wanted him as a friend in the first place.

He grimaced. “So, can you forget—”

“Enough!” I jumped at the sound of the teacher shouting, cutting Julian off. “I told you I wanted silence! Detention, both of you this lunch time.”

Did I just get detention for talking? I stared open mouthed at him. Could he not see the irony here? The guy had been my maths teacher for the past two years, so it wasn’t as if he didn’t know me.

Julian mumbled a string of swear words under his breath and started his work. This sucked so much. Detention on my first day back, because of talking! Julian was an idiot. After a couple seconds, he nudged me and nodded to the paper in front of him. I reluctantly looked down to see what

he'd written: sorry.

How about stop doing things to be sorry for? I smiled half-heartedly just to get him to leave me alone so I could concentrate.

At lunch, I made my way to the detention room. I didn't even have enough time to see Cole first so he would be waiting for me by the front doors. Frowning in anger, I plopped down on the closest seat and pulled a book out of my bag.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Julian smile sheepishly from across the room. I ignored him and started to read. About ten minutes later, I saw Cole looking through the door. His face was filled with amusement. *Oh yeah, this is hilarious!* There was nothing even remotely funny about this.

"I've just got to pop to the office for one minute. Don't move," Mr Jones ordered in his monotone voice and left the room.

The second the door closed, Julian got up and walked over to me. I sighed as he sat on the chair beside me, pulling the chair out and getting comfortable.

"Leanne's having a party on Friday, you wanna go?" he asked, swinging one leg onto the table.

He knew I was with Cole, so either he was delusional or had a selective memory. "I'm trying here, Oakley."

That was true. He was trying. I just wasn't sure it was enough. I didn't understand why he wanted to be friends now. I shook my head but smiled gratefully, or I tried to anyway. It was very hard to act normal with him, especially after what he'd done at my party. And no matter how hard we tried to be civil, I would never forget how he had made my life hell for years.

The door swung open, making us both jump.

"Get lost," Cole growled, glaring at Julian as he slipped into the room. Julian glared and stuck his middle finger up to Cole, before returning to his seat.

"What?" Cole said innocently me innocently, surprised at my look of reproach. I smiled and shook my head.

"So, detention, huh?"

"We got it for *talking*." Julian interrupted.

Cole frowned at Julian angrily.

"Are you trying to be funny?"

I grabbed his hand and shook my head.

“Wait, you really got detention for talking?” he asked in disbelief, and started laughing. I sat back in the chair with my arms crossed over my chest and waited for him to get over it.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, shaking his head. “Just pretty ironic.”

You’re telling me!

Without warning, Cole leant over the table and pressed his lips to mine. Every kiss from him made me melt. My heart soared, and I kissed him back. He pulled away just a few seconds later and walked out of the room with the biggest, cheekiest grin I had ever seen. I couldn’t help smiling to myself.

Thankfully, Mr Jones didn’t get back from whatever he was doing until after Cole had left. I did briefly worry that Julian would tell him, but he didn’t. He didn’t do anything actually. Just stared at his phone and frowned.

When detention was over, I made my way to the bench outside the front of the school to quickly eat my sandwich before my afternoon class started.

“Oakley?” a female voice called. I looked up to see Abby jogging towards me. *What on earth is she doing here?* The last I had heard she was studying teaching at University in London. Does Jasper know she was back?

“Hey.” She smiled warmly and sat down. “Isn’t this great, I managed to get my work placement here! I’m so glad I get to see you again. I’ll be helping out in some of your English lessons so we can catch up,” she gushed, practically bouncing on the spot.

I smiled sarcastically. Did she really expect me to be happy about this? She was the reason my brother had cried – Jasper never cried. She was the reason why he couldn’t trust women any more and behaved like such a jackass. I hated her for hurting him so much. *This day just keeps getting better and better*, I thought sarcastically. This wasn’t even the worst part. I still had dinner with the doctor to get through yet.

Chapter Eighteen

Oakley

I sat awkwardly at the dinner table. Jasper sat beside me and glared at Mum's doctor friend, Sadie. The atmosphere around the table was tense. We all knew why she was really here, although no one said anything.

"So, Oakley, how are gymnastics going? Your mum told me your instructor thinks you could be Olympic material."

I sighed. Marcus had said that, but I would have to put in a lot more time and to me, gymnastics wasn't about winning trophies. The escape and my love for it was all I was doing it for.

"Don't be shy, sweetheart. You're so talented." *Shut up, Mum!*

"Why is it called cottage pie anyway? I mean I get the shepherd's one for the lamb, but what's cottage and beef got in common?" Jasper mused, staring at the large oven dish in the middle of the table. Grinning in amusement, I poked at my carrots. It only took one look from Mum to make Jasper sit back and eat quietly. I appreciated him trying to take the attention off me though.

Sadie's casual questions kept coming. What classes did I like at school? Did I have a nice time on holiday? Who were my favourite football team? She never asked me anything directly, but I knew what she was doing.

When the conversation turned to my childhood, I knew I didn't have long left before the more personal questions were asked. Mum had gotten her photo albums from the bookshelf; she had a separate one for every year of our life.

"You remember this, Oakley?" Mum asked, pointing to a picture of me on my fifth birthday. I was wearing a hideous pink dress and eating chocolate cake. There was pink icing all over my face and hair from having a cake fight with Jasper, Cole, and Mia. I smiled at the memory.

Once we'd finished the food fight, they crammed us all into the same bath and sprayed us clean with the shower head. The water was gross and pink, with little bits of wet cake floating around in it, but we had fun.

That was one of the last times I was a carefree child. I nodded and looked away, not wanting to dwell on it too much. That part of my life was

over a long time ago.

“And what did you do for your sixth birthday?” Sadie asked me casually, flicking through the photos. I gave her a flat look and pushed the photo album labelled ‘Oakley Six’ towards her. She forced a smile and started looking through it even though I could tell she had no interest in seeing them at all. I got the impression that she didn’t like failing and wanted to be able to fix me.

Sadie sat up straight, flicked her straggly hair behind her shoulder, and asked, “What do you want to do after school?”

I shrugged, and she pursed her lips. Dinner was going to be a constant battle with her. She wanted to be the magical one that gave my mum all the answers, and I couldn’t let her.

After dinner, we moved into the lounge. Mum made it clear that I was to sit with them too, even though Jasper was allowed to sneak off. Sadie’s questions kept coming. She switched back to asking mostly yes or no answer questions, but she occasionally threw one in that required a proper answer. The whole time I could feel Dad’s eyes burning into the side of my head. He played along, following Mum’s lead with questions to Sadie. Not even the high paid specialist could see through him. Seriously, what chance did I have of getting anyone to believe me?

At ten o’clock, it was getting late enough for me to have to go to bed. Mum and Sadie’s frustration was clear. They really believed that tonight everything would be fixed. I left the room to get a glass of water and wasn’t at all surprised when Sadie followed me. Turning off the tap, I placed the glass on the counter and waited.

“Can we talk?” I sighed heavily and nodded. “So, you were five when you stopped talking?” I nodded, furrowing my eyebrows. *Just leave it!* “And you didn’t have any problems talking before that?”

Problems?

“Any anxiety about speaking to people?” Shaking my head, I looked at the floor.

“Did you say something wrong, or overhear something you shouldn’t have? Anyone tease you for saying something they thought was silly?” She pressed.

I felt sick. My stomach churned. Why couldn’t she just understand I didn’t want to talk to anyone about it?

“Is everything okay?” Dad asked as he walked into the room.

“Everything’s fine,” Sadie replied, frowning at the interruption.

I faked a yawn and grabbed my glass.

“You’re tired, darling, go to bed,” Dad instructed. With a little polite wave to Sadie, I went up to bed.

I walked up to my room, opened and closed the door, so it sounded like I’d gone to bed and then went back to the top of the stairs. Sitting down against the wall, I wrapped my arms around myself. My heart was beating out of my chest in anticipation.

For a minute or two, they talked about Sadie’s job, but the conversation soon turned to me.

“So...you know what’s wrong with her?” Mum asked nervously. I couldn’t see her from where I was, but I knew she would be playing with her fingers or tapping her foot.

“It’s psychological,” she said simply. “Oakley can talk but for whatever reason, she won’t.” I bit my lip at the painfully long pause. Did she know? Had she guessed? I really wished I could see my parents’ faces, just to get a glimpse of what they were thinking. The longer I waited the more nervous I felt.

“But what does that mean? How can we help her? I don’t even know what’s wrong with my baby,” Mum said and took a deep shaky breath. *Don’t cry.*

“She’s very strong-willed. I don’t think you’ll be able to just find out, not until Oakley wants you too anyway.”

“But...” Mum trailed off. I heard silence and then strangled sobs as she broke down. Hugging my knees to my chest, I closed my eyes. *I’m sorry, Mum. I’m so, so sorry.*

“I know it’s distressing, but you have to remain positive and let her come to you,” Sadie said. “I would suggest that you don’t keep pushing it. Talk to her and treat her as if nothing’s out of the ordinary. The more pressure you put her under, the more she’ll shut you out. Therapy will help, but only when she is ready.”

“So you’re saying we do nothing?” Dad cut in. His voice was laced with anger. Fake anger.

“I think for now that’s all you can do. It’s never taken me longer than two hours to get someone to at least admit to me there was a problem, even if they wouldn’t say what. Oakley’s given me nothing that I didn’t already know.”

A metallic taste filled my mouth, making me gag. Pressing my hand to my mouth, I pulled it away and saw blood. As soon as I saw it, my lip began to sting. I stayed perfectly still as they spoke some more and then said goodbye, letting Sadie out.

“Oh God, I need to speak to her.” Mum’s voice made me jump up. She was coming up here.

“No, wait,” Dad called. “You need to calm down first, if you go up there in the state you’re in, you’ll push her further away. You heard what Sadie said. We need to do this properly, Sarah.”

“Okay,” Mum whispered, backing down and bursting into tears. I let out a big breath, sighing in relief.

“Something bad happened to her, didn’t it?” She cried harder, and I felt my heart breaking. *You have no idea, Mum.* I swiped away a tear with the back of my hands and got up to go back in my room. Jumping as I turned and came face-to-face with Jasper, I dropped my gaze to the floor.

“Whatever’s wrong, I’m here,” he whispered. He looked scared for me. His jacket on and keys were in his hand. Where the heck was he going? I raised my eyebrows and looked at his keys.

“Err, I’m going to see Abby,” he mumbled quickly. “Do you think I’m crazy?”

It almost sounded like he was embarrassed. I shook my head. Jasper wasn’t crazy. They hadn’t properly spoken about what happened and they needed to. Hopefully then he would be to move on and have a relationship rather than meaningless one night stands.

“Want me to stay here?” he asked, and wiped a tear from my cheek. I shook my head and gave him a little shove towards the stairs. “See you later then.” He kissed the top of my head and walked downstairs.

As soon as I was in bed, I curled up in a ball and buried my head in my pillow. What the heck was I going to do now?

“Oakley,” someone whispered, making me jump awake. Cole chuckled quietly and sat on the bed. I raised my eyebrows. What was he doing back here? There was no way my parents would have let him in at this time. He scratched the back of his neck, “Jasper just came over, said you were upset, and gave me his back door key so I could sneak in.” Damn interfering brother!

I rolled my eyes and pulled the quilt back. As I hoped, he got straight

into bed and wrapped his arms around me. “Are you okay?” he murmured against my forehead. I snuggled closer, loving how perfectly I fit against him. I nodded and started to drift off, happy that I was now safe in Cole’s arms.

“I love you,” he whispered sleepily.

Jasper sat down on the end of my bed, and I sighed. I heard him come home in the early hours of the morning, just after Cole snuck out. We were now all back in my room after having a BBQ dinner. Oh well, I could find out all about it now. I nudged Cole lightly, prompting him to ask. “Ouch,” Cole shouted dramatically.

“Oakley, stop beating up your girlfriend,” Jasper teased. I grinned and pushed myself up, so I was facing Jasper. Cole rolled his eyes and sat up, pulling me onto his lap.

“What happened with Abby?” Cole asked bluntly. I gave him a flat look; he was supposed to do that a little more tactfully.

Jasper frowned and looked... Shy?

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “She wants to get back together. Part of me wants that too, but I don’t know if I can trust her.”

I couldn’t blame him for that. I doubt I would be able to trust someone after they let me down. I didn’t trust Dad anymore, and I couldn’t see me trusting him ever again.

“What did she say? Did she explain?”

Jasper nodded for a long time, lost in his own thoughts.

“Yeah,” he finally said. “She told me that after our argument, she went to the party and drank too much. She was hurt and angry, and just wanted to get wasted with her friends. She ended up in his room, and they... You know.”

He looked down, his face twisted in pain. *My poor brother.*

“I keep thinking that maybe we can try again, but is there really any point if I’m constantly thinking she’s screwing someone else?”

I shook my head.

“You just hate her!” Jasper said. I hated her less than I did since she properly apologised to him, but I could still remember how heartbroken he was, so I hadn’t forgiven her.

He shrugged. “In the end we decided just to try and be friends and see what happens. I don’t know if we can be friends or not, but I don’t want to be angry and keep hating her all the time, you know what I mean?”

I knew exactly what he meant. That why I was letting Julian into my life, sort of.

“Anyway, I’m not sitting around here moping all day. I have a date with a cute little brunette tonight. Later,” he called, looking over his shoulder as he walked out of my room. I smiled. Jasper was back.

“Your brother’s weird, babe.” Cole laughed, shaking his head. He was weird, but he was the best brother ever.

Cole pushed me down on the bed, taking me by surprise, and started peppering little kisses across my cheek and along my jaw. I wrapped my arms around his back.

After Cole left, Dad knocked on my half-open door. I nodded for him to come in, not that he wouldn’t anyway. I pushed myself up and pressed my back against the wall as he sat down on my bed.

I bit down my lip.

“How are you, sweetheart? Okay?”

I nodded, wondering where this was going. He never just popped in for a chat. “Good.” He turned his body, so he was facing me more. Over the past year, he had aged so much. Grey hairs dominated the previously light brown ones at the side of his head. The lines around his eyes had multiplied and deepened. Every day he looked more and more like a middle-aged man. I wondered if he felt that too. That he was losing his good looks and possibly his charm with it.

“I’ve been thinking about us taking another little trip.”

My blood ran cold and drained from my face. I clenched my hands into fists to stop them shaking. *No, not this. Not again.* Tears sprang to my eyes, welling up and making my vision blurry.

He held his hands up.

“No, sweetheart. I want us to go. To reconnect. Just us, I promise.”

My heart rate slowed slightly, but I still couldn’t relax. I didn’t want to go anywhere with him.

“Do you remember when you were younger, and you would ride around on my back, laughing as I bucked you off onto the sofa? Or when I would come home from work, and you would run out of the front door to greet me?”

Yes, I remember, but that was in a different life. Nodding my head slowly, I forced myself to take deep, even breaths. Thoughts of Frank and his overbearing frame looming over me filled my head. I could still smell his whisky tainted breath and feel his rough stubble scratching against my skin.

My lungs burned as I tried unsuccessfully to get enough air.

“I know things have been hard, but I want to change that.”

Hard? Hard didn't even begin to cover it. No word was big enough to describe what he had done. How badly he had let me down and betrayed me. I'd trusted him. He was my hero. I looked up to him and loved him so much. He ruined that. He ripped apart my faith in him and ended my childhood.

“Oakley, I want that relationship back. I want us to do things together, watch a movie, or go to for a bike ride. I want us to do normal father–daughter things. Most of all, I want my little girl back.”

I swallowed a sob and wrapped my arms around myself. *Don't trust him*, a voice niggled in my head. But I wanted to. I wanted all those things. I wanted to be one of the girls I used to see dragging their dads around shops. I wanted him to be that dad too. I didn't want my dad to just be a monster.

Could he change though? I wanted him to so bad it hurt. *Give him a chance*, another voice reasoned. Peering up into his eyes I saw how broken he looked. Real emotion or fake? I could usually tell, but I wasn't sure this time. He looked genuine, but maybe I just wanted him to be so much that I was missing the trap.

“Oakley, my business isn't doing well at the minute. I'm afraid it will fail. I don't want to fail at another thing in my life. I don't want to look at us as a failure anymore. Let me make it up to you. Let's draw a line in the sand, put the past behind us, and be a proper family. You, me, your mother and Jasper. I want us to be a happy family again.”

I wanted that too.

“Please give this a chance. Let us get to know each other again.”

Searching his muddy green eyes for any hint of a lie, I sagged. My heart jumped in my chest and hope filled my system. A normal happy family.

Gulping, I nodded my head, and he smiled.

“Thank you,” he whispered. “Get some sleep, sweetheart, it's late.”

As he walked out of my room and closed the door, I ducked under my covers. Confused by my own conflicting feelings for my dad, I fell into a restless sleep.

Chapter Nineteen

Cole

I reluctantly went back to my house. I hated that part of the night, the part where I had to leave her. Max and Sarah had said that I couldn't stay with her until she was eighteen. I knew they would say that when they found out about us, but it didn't make me hate the rules any less.

Mum and Dad had gone out, and Mia was probably with Chris-the-dick, so the house was dark and deserted when I got in. I liked the peace though and couldn't wait for Uni when I could really have my own space.

I sent Oakley a text, telling her that I loved her, and I would pick her up for school in the morning. At least it was Friday tomorrow so we could spend a little more time together in the evening. The weekend was going to suck though; she was going fishing with her dad again. Jasper went with them a few times but lost interest quickly and almost drowned once. Max should have never let him go in the first place. Jasper was a nightmare.

I had been a couple times too, and I wanted to go this weekend, but I think they need time alone. She was going out with her mum, so it was only fair that Max got to spend time with her too. At least it was only for one night though.

Mia strolled into my room without knocking.

"Do just walk in," I said sarcastically. When did she get home anyway? Was I too out of it thinking about Oakley to have noticed.

"I need to talk to you, and you can't get mad, and you have to let me finish, okay?" Mia rambled, waving her hands around in the air. *Well, this sounds good!* "Promise me, Cole."

"Alright, I promise!"

She sat down and blew out a huge breath. "Me and Chris broke up.

"Well hal-le-fucking-lu-jah," I called out, throwing my arms up in celebration.

"And I'm pregnant," she added quickly.

My heart stopped. Did she just say...?

"I'm sorry, you're what?"

“Pregnant. With child. Knocked up. Have a bun in the oven.”

I jumped up, feeling mad as hell. Chris-the-dick knocked her up and left her!

“What? That bastard got you pregnant and ditched you?” I was going to kill him, plain and simple. I knew he was a useless waste of space, but I didn’t think he would go that low. This was his child for God sake!

“Wait,” she shouted, holding her hands up and frowning at me. “I told you to let me finish!”

“Shouldn’t have agreed to that,” I grumbled, sitting back on the bed. As soon as she was finished, I was going to his house.

She took a deep, calming breath and continued.

“I found out a couple days ago that I’m pregnant. It’s made me look at everything differently you know. My relationship with Chris is...well let’s face it, it’s crap. I don’t think we’ve ever gone a few days without arguing, and then there are the other women. I don’t want my baby growing up around all that.”

She touched her flat stomach tenderly.

“This baby is the most important thing now, and I know I have to be away from Chris to be the best mum I can be.”

A huge grin slowly crept across my face. I was so proud of her for finally ditching his cheating arse. Oh my God, I was going to be an uncle!

“That’s great, Mia. You and the baby deserve so much more than him. What did he say?”

“Said I’ll go back to him soon enough. He shouted a bit, said I’d tricked him into getting pregnant,” she explained. “I don’t care what he thinks though, I didn’t get pregnant on my own, and I certainly didn’t plan it! Not sure how much involvement he’ll want, but I won’t stop him seeing her if he wants.”

“Her?” Can you find out this early? There was no way, right? It would just be a weird blob looking thing still.

Mia shrugged, smiling. I hadn’t seen one of those smiles in a long time, the ones that lit up her whole face.

“I don’t mind what it is, but I have a feeling it’s a girl.”

“Hopefully he’ll do the right thing by the baby, but if not you know you’re not gonna be alone, right? He or she will have their Uncle Cole.”

Wow, she was gonna have a baby. Mia threw her arms around me, almost knocking me back and squeezed the life out of me. Was this good for

the kid?

“Alright, but you know you’re squishing the baby right now,” I teased breathlessly as she tightened her vice like arms.

“Thank you, Cole,” she whispered emotionally. “And she’ll have her Auntie Oakley!”

I chuckled and ran my hand through my hair. “Yeah.”

I really should marry that girl one day. We’d have to wait two years before she’s even legal to get married though, well unless we had her parents’ permission, but that was unlikely. Sure, they were happy we were together, but I don’t think they would want her getting married. I smiled to myself, maybe if I proposed on her eighteenth, or maybe we could get married on her birthday? *Stop thinking about it, there’s no rush, you weirdo!*

“Cole,” Mia snapped, waving her hand in front of my face.

I shook my head, clearing my thoughts. “Sorry.”

“Thinking about her?” she teased.

Narrowing my eyes, I sat back on the bed. “Maybe.”

“Aww, you’re so cute,” she gushed, reaching out to pinch my cheeks but I batted her hand away before she could.

“So when are you telling Mum and Dad?” I questioned, wanting to change the subject from my ‘cuteness’. “They’ll freak, you know that?”

Her face dropped. Mia was almost twenty, but Dad still thought of her as his little girl. He would definitely not be happy. Well, not at first at least. I know he would love that little baby to death once he had gotten his head around it.

“In a minute actually. I am *not* looking forward to it, and thanks for you overwhelming words of encouragement.”

“You’re welcome! It’ll be fine though.”

“Thanks for being supportive, it means a lot.” She stood up to go tell our parents. “Oh, and if you hear shouting, come save me!”

“Good luck, Mia. Was nice knowing ya.” She rolled her eyes and walked out of my room slowly, groaning to herself.

I stripped out of my clothes and slipped into bed. The house was silent. I wasn’t sure of that was a good thing or not. Suddenly, Dad erupted. I couldn’t hear his words as they were mumbled and mixed into one long yelling mass of noise. Poor Mia.

I should have gone down there, but they needed to talk it out between them. If it got worse, or if I heard Mia cry, then I would. After a minute,

everything settled down. I imagine Mum would have told Dad how ridiculous he was being, or Mia just said she ended it with Chris-the-dick, and they were celebrating.

School had passed painfully slowly, but thankfully it was over, and I was waiting for Oakley by my car. Kerry and Ben loitered around with my, flirting with each other and play fighting. Just what I wanted to see!

“You wanna tag along with us tomorrow? You know, so you don’t look so pathetic being alone on a Saturday night!” Ben said.

“Hmm, do I want to be a third wheel on your date? No thanks. I think I’d rather be pathetic.” The thought of watching them sticking their tongues down each other’s throats all night made me feel ill.

Kerry rolled her eyes and grabbed Ben’s hand.

“Fine, loser,” she chirped and pulled on Ben’s hand. “Come on, take me home.”

Ben waved over his shoulder, and I nodded my head.

I leant against my car and contemplated whether I should get my phone out in the usual, yeah I’m alone, but I’m on my phone, therefore, I’m not a loser thing. Just as I was about to reach in my pocket, I saw her walking out of the building with Hannah and some other guy, who was looking at her for slightly too long. If he valued his eyeballs he was gonna need to look away real soon. *Wow, violently jealous now. Nice one, Cole, you’ve reached a new level of pathetic.*

Oakley smiled as she saw me and I couldn’t help smiling back.

“Bye, Oakley,” Hannah said, giving her a little wave, which she returned.

I held my arms out for her, and she gripped hold of me so tight, it took me by surprise. It was as if she was scared I would run away or something crazy like that.

“I’ll miss you this weekend too,” I whispered in her ear, predicting that was her problem. She nuzzled my neck, confirming my guess.

The weekend was going to go so slowly. I definitely needed to go out and do something to make the time pass faster. Jasper was talking about going out so maybe I should go with him. It would be much better than being a third wheel on Kerry and Ben’s date. I could also stop Jasper from getting too drunk and calling Abby again to shout about how she broke his heart, and that she was an evil witch for making him still love her. Or maybe I

shouldn't, that was funny!

I took Oakley for ice cream after school. With all the stupid drama recently, we hadn't been there in a while. We took our usual seat in the booth by the window, and Julie called to say she would bring our order over, knowing what we would have.

"So you're leaving at eight tomorrow morning and will be back at three in the afternoon on Sunday?" I questioned, making sure I remembered right. I was planning to pick her up at four on Sunday so she could have some time to shower and change, and then I was taking her back to the arcades and dinner.

We hadn't slept together in what seemed like years, and I was seriously having withdrawal symptoms not being able to touch her. I missed being that close to her so much. She seemed to understand what I was thinking, probably because I was staring like a dirty old man, and raised her eyebrows. I laughed, unashamed.

"Hey, if we can't get the house to ourselves soon we could always take my car in the woods or something," I suggested, only half joking. A light pink blush crept over her cheeks, and she flicked her straw at me. Ice cold milkshake hit me in the face. *Oh, you're going down!* I dipped my fingers in my drink and she took off, running towards the door. I jumped out of my seat, laughing as I sprinted after her.

Oakley could run pretty damn fast when she wanted to, but I soon caught up to her and grabbed her around the waist. With a low, deep chuckle, I ran my index finger down her cheek, leaving behind a trail of chocolate milkshake.

"Love you," I mumbled against her neck and tightened my arms. I always thought men were pathetic for being so under the thumb and thinking about their girlfriends twenty-four-seven. Now I was one of them, and I couldn't have been happier.

Groaning as my phone started making a hideous sound; I pushed myself up and turned the damn thing off. Getting up at half-past seven on a Saturday should be illegal. There was a reason for me getting up so early though. I wanted to say goodbye before Oakley and Max went off for the night. I dressed in record time and ran over to her house just as Max was loading their tents and fishing equipment in the car.

"She's inside," he said, laughing at how eager I was.

I smiled sheepishly. “Thanks.”

Oakley was hugging her mum, who was telling her to have a good time and not get too close to the lake! I mentally rolled my eyes, as if she was going to fall in. She wasn't Jasper! Max would be there anyway, and he would never let anything happen to her.

“I'll let you say bye,” Sarah said, nodding towards me. Oakley turned around looking confused. She smiled as she saw me, like always. My heart raced.

I walked up to her and placed my hands on her slim hips.

“Hi.” She smiled wider and pushed herself up on tiptoes to kiss me. My body reacted immediately. I kissed her back passionately, my body bursting into flames.

Pulling away when I felt my self-control slipping, I pressed my forehead against hers.

“You have a good time, and I'll see you in thirty-two and a half hours.”

The corner of her lip turned up. Yep, I had worked out the hours. Cole Benson was now a pathetic, whipped, lucky bastard. And proud.

“I'm gonna miss you so much. I love you.”

She gripped my hair and kissed me hard. I was finding it really hard to stay in control. *If you throw her down on the sofa and have your wicked way with her Max will cut your balls off. You like your balls*, I told myself. The way she was kissing me was driving me wild, and I didn't want to stop, but we had to.

She was the one that pulled away that time, her breathing heavy and laboured, and sexy! *Get a grip, you idiot, it's just one night!* She sighed heavily and pulled me outside. With one last quick kiss, she got in the car.

I watched the road until the car disappeared around the corner. The start of my sucky weekend had officially begun.

For the entire morning, I was unintentionally annoying my parents and Mia. Apparently, I was intolerable when I was away from Oakley, but I couldn't help it. Mia had entertained me for a couple hours, talking about the baby and her plans. She was doing amazingly well getting over her relationship with Chris. This baby was the best thing that could have happened to her. She seemed so happy – finally.

I eventually decided that I was going to go out with Jasper, so we arranged to call a taxi and go on a pub-crawl. Getting off my face would pass the time.

Just as I was about to start actually tidying my room to have something to do - yes, it had gotten that bad- my phone started ringing. I froze. It was playing 'The Most Beautiful Girl In The World' by Prince. Sweat broke out all over my body. I had never heard that song being played on my phone before. That was the ringtone I had set for Oakley, but she never called.

Reaching out with a shaky hand, I grabbed the phone and pressed answer. Immediately I heard quiet sobs. I felt sick. Why was she crying? "Cole," she whispered in a scratchy little voice that actually sounded like it hurt. "Help me."

My world stopped spinning.

Chapter Twenty

Cole

I swallowed hard, my heart beating so loud I was sure the whole neighbourhood would hear it.

“Oakley?” I mumbled in disbelief. She said my name. I definitely didn’t dream that. She definitely spoke.

“Cole,” she repeated. Her voice was quiet and broken. I had always wondered what her voice would sound like now. Would I recognise it from how she used to sound? My eyes started to sting. *Oh God, don’t cry, you girl!*

She coughed. “Help me.” Those two words sent my heart plummeting.

I snapped into action, no longer completely fixed on the fact that she had spoken.

“What’s wrong? Where are you?” I questioned, and frantically searched for my keys. “Oakley, where are you?” I repeated sternly. *Please just tell me!*

“Um,” she whispered, trying to catch her breath as she sobbed. It took her a minute to explain to me where she was. She kept coughing and clearing her throat. It must hurt her to use her voice after she hadn’t for over a decade...

I kept her on the phone and sprinted downstairs and out to my car.

“Cole?” Mum shouted, jumping up as I ran past her and Dad on the sofa.

A journey that should have taken thirty minutes didn’t even take twenty. I slammed my breaks on and pulled over at the side of the road, where she thought she was. Jumping out of my car, I shouted, “Oakley? Oakley?” She appeared from behind a couple trees, stumbling on the uneven ground as she made her way to me. She was hiding? God, what had happened! I closed the distance between us quickly and wrapped my arms around her.

“What’s wrong?” I mumbled against the side of her head. Her whole body was trembling, and she gasped for air. “Oakley, calm down.” She gasped and gripped hold of me so hard her nails cut into my back.

She was scaring me to death. I was terrified of finding out what was wrong. I continued stroking her hair and whispering in her ear until she calmed down and her breathing steadied.

“I need you to tell me what’s wrong, okay?” She nodded against my shoulder. I tried pulling back to see her, but she clung to me tighter and whimpered. “What is it?”

“I– I don’t want you to look at me,” she whispered, her voice cracking and body shaking with silent sobs.

My stomach twisted with unease.

“Why wouldn’t you want me to look at you?”

She was quiet for a minute. I was sick with worry. What the hell was she about to say?

“I can’t. Can’t do it again.”

“What? What can’t you do?”

She shook her head and dug her fingers in my back harder. My back stung, but I didn’t care.

“You can tell me anything, you know that. Why is this so hard for you to tell me?” I asked her, terrified. “Oakley, please, what can’t you do?”

I was getting desperate, and I just needed to know what was wrong so I could fix it.

“Why are you alone?” Where the hell was Max?

“I thought it s-stopped.” She took a ragged breath and continued, “It stopped when I was thirteen, but he’s... he’s ba-back.”

“Who’s back? What stopped?” I shook my head, trying to make sense of what she was trying to say. Something stopped when she was thirteen, but someone’s back? It didn’t make sense. Who was back? No one left when she was thirteen.

“F-Frank,” she stuttered, sobbing harder. Her legs gave way, and she slumped against my chest.

“Who’s Frank? I don’t know anyone called Frank.”

I had to wait until she calmed down again. Those two minutes were the longest and most painful of my life.

“You met him at the Christmas party at that hotel.”

Hotel? Oh, her dad’s work Christmas party. That was years ago. I didn’t really remember anyone. Oakley took a deep breath.

“He’s the man who hurt me.” Her voice was quiet as she confessed, so quiet I barely heard her.

“Hurt you,” I repeated. “How did he hurt–”

I froze mid-sentence as I realised what she was trying to tell me.

“Hurt you. He... Touched you?” I couldn’t say the words. She didn’t

need to confirm it. Her reaction did. She burst into fresh tears, crying hysterically. I had no strength left; her confession knocked everything out of me. We both fell to the floor with her in my lap.

I gripped hold of her and buried my face in her hair. My lungs burned from where I was holding my breath for so long. Every single muscle in my body was aching. Someone had hurt her. I squeezed my eyes closed and held her tighter as if that would magically fix everything. As if it would turn back time and stop it from happening.

“Where is he?” I asked through clenched teeth. Wherever he was, I was going to kill him. I didn’t care that he was probably double my age or more.

“At our c-camp,” she murmured against my neck, stuttering and sobbing.

My heart stopped. Why would he be at their camp?

“But your dad’s there.” Her whole body tensed and she stopped breathing. No.

“Oakley?” I whispered, terrified of her answer to my next question. “Does he know?”

I held my breath, waiting for her answer. Oh god, please say no, Oakley. She just nodded in confirmation. I felt like throwing up. Blood boiled in my veins. He knew some sick pervert had hurt her, and he was sitting around a fucking campfire with him!

I pulled back to look her, but she lowered her head, staring at the ground in shame. I tried to lift her chin up, but she refused.

“Look at me.”

She shook her head, letting out a quiet little sob, tears dropped from her chin to the floor.

“Please, baby.” I bent my head down awkwardly and managed to see half of her face. Her eyes were red and puffy from crying so much.

“Oakley, did your dad...did he? Did he...you know?”

She shook her head again.

“No, but he let him.”

My heart dropped at the same time she burst into tears again. He was her dad! How could he? He should be the one protecting her. My hands started to shake. I felt ill and so fucking angry I just wanted to murder them both. Oakley curled up on my lap and sobbed so hard it broke my heart.

How could I have missed it? I should have known. I had been there for her entire damn life and I didn’t know a thing! I had never seen her in so

much pain before. I needed to fix it, but how did you fix something like that.

“Where is your camp?” I asked slowly, trying to keep the anger out of my voice.

She gasped and pulled back. Her face was soaking wet with tears.

“No. You can’t, Cole”

I can’t? She really expected me to do nothing after what she just told me?

“Please. I-I can’t. My mum. Please don’t,” she rambled, her voice cutting out occasionally.

“Shh,” I whispered, wiping the tears from her cheeks. I didn’t know how I managed to stay so calm and not jump up and go look for them. I didn’t feel calm, but she came first and I needed to make sure she was safe before I did anything. “What about your mum?”

“It’ll break her heart. I can’t. I don’t want to hurt her. I don’t want her to hate me.”

“Is that what he told you? That she would hate you?” I spat angrily. Shit, I was going to be sick. I took a deep breath and swallowed hard.

She nodded weakly, her head barely moving.

“I wanted to tell her. I tried to when it first started, but Dad walked in. He shouted at me when she left. I was so scared. I didn’t want to hurt Mum, and he said it would kill her.” She coughed, cleared her throat. “He told me not to talk.”

I froze. “That’s why you didn’t speak for almost eleven years?” Her dad was the reason. There are no words to describe just how much I hated him, how much I wanted him to suffer.

“Oakley, where is he?” I asked again.

Her eyes widened in panic. “You can’t. Please, Cole.”

She begged me not to go after them. As much as I wanted to go and rip both their heads off, I just couldn’t leave her alone. She was so broken and vulnerable. I hated seeing her like that. I sighed and lifted her chin but again, but like before she refused to look me in the eye. I hated that she felt ashamed. None of this was her fault.

After ten minutes of just sitting on the ground holding her, crying together and trying not to throw up, I finally came to a decision. If she didn’t want me to go find them, we were reporting them.

“We’re going to the police.” They were not getting away with what they’d done to her.

She gasped and pulled back. “No. Mum will-”

I pressed my finger to her lips and shook my head. I had to get it though to her that he had to pay and it wasn't her fault. No one was going to blame her.

“Oakley, your mum is not going to hate you. What happened wasn't your fault. You're her daughter, and she loves you. She won't hate you,” I said fiercely, begging her with my eyes to believe me. She had to believe it.

“Look at me, please.” She raised her head slightly but still wouldn't look directly into my eyes. “Everything's gonna be okay, I promise. We just need to go to the police.”

She shook her head defiantly. It took almost half an hour to convince her, by which time we'd got in the car and driven away from that hellhole. I was going to the police whether she agreed to it or not though. There was no way either of them were getting away with it.

I knelt down in front of her in the police station reception area.

“Someone's going to be out soon.”

They were arranging for a female officer to interview her. She hadn't said one word since agreeing to this, and she still hadn't looked at me. However she felt about me at the minute wasn't as important as putting those sick bastards in prison.

“Hi. I'm Marie. Do you want to follow me through to the interview room?” Marie said, smiling warmly at Oakley. She nodded.

I stood up too, but she shook her head at me.

“I want to do this alone.”

What the hell? I didn't want to leave her alone for a second. How was she going to cope going through it all when she completely broke down while telling me before?

“Please, Cole, I don't want you to hear it all,” she whispered, a tear trickled down her cheek and she walked away from me without another word.

I sat down in a daze. Was that what she was worried about? I knew I didn't want to hear it. It made me sick, but I wanted to be there for her.

As I waited for her, so many things passed through my mind. I tried to think of something, any little clue that I'd missed, but there was nothing. She never seemed scared of Max. He didn't act any differently towards her. He was the perfect, concerned, protective father. *Of course he was, you prat, that was how he got away with it!*

When the door finally opened, I jumped up and rushed to her side. She

looked exhausted and slumped against my chest.

“What happens now?” I asked.

“We’ll arrest her Mr Farrell and Mr Glosser, and bring them in for questioning,” Marie told me. I gritted my teeth when she mentioned them. Glosser. That was *his* surname.

“I want to go now,” Oakley whispered, gripping hold of my shirt. I nodded reluctantly. There were thousands more questions that I wanted to ask Marie, but Oakley just looked so defeated. I knew I needed to take her home, where she was going to have to go through it all again.

As soon as we got close enough to her house, I tensed up. Max’s car was in the drive, along with a police car. Oakley looked at me with a horrified expression. Her eyes were wide with fear.

“It’s fine, baby.” I stopped the car at the end of the road so we could wait until they had left.

“Are you okay?” I stupidly asked. Are you okay? Of course she wasn’t. She shrugged, her eyes dazed. Everything had happened so quickly.

“It’s going to be alright. We’ll do it together. I’ll be right with you. I promise.”

She had fallen silent again, using physical actions to reply to questions. I looked back at her house as the door opened. Max was being walked to the car with his hands behind his back in handcuffs. Seeing him made me want to start the car and run him down.

Oakley shrank in the seat. She looked like a scared, lost little girl. Swallowing a lump in my throat, I squeezed her limp hand, trying to comfort her.

Sarah practically jumped on her daughter as we walked through the door. She pulled Oakley in her arms and sobbed.

“Oh God, sweetheart, you’re okay,” she mumbled. “Listen, everything’s going to be okay so don’t worry, but your dad’s been arrested for...” She stopped talking and whimpered. “Well it doesn’t matter because it’s not true. I’ve got to go to the station, so you wait here with Jasper, okay?”

What? I was just about to scream at her when I realised – she didn’t know yet. Of course the officers that arrested Max didn’t stay around to chat about it.

I was just about to open my mouth and explain for her when Oakley stepped forward.

“It *is* true,” she confessed in a croaky voice, barely above a whisper.

The room fell silent. Everyone's mouths fell open in shock. I watched Sarah as the shock from Oakley talking turned to horror as she registered exactly what she'd said. Sarah gulped; her eyes were wide with fear. She already knew but didn't want to believe it.

"H-how do you? You're talking...Oakley, what are you saying?"

Oakley said nothing, but she didn't need to. Her tired, broken eyes said everything.

"No. Please tell me it's not true. Please, please?" Sarah asked desperately.

Oakley stepped back, pressing her body into mine.

"I'm sorry, Mum," she whispered, looking at the ground. The hatred I had for Max doubled as she apologised. Oakley had nothing to be sorry for. We were the ones that should be apologising to her. Apologising for not seeing it and helping her sooner. Eleven damn years she had been living with this.

"No," Sarah sobbed, her voice broke, and she clamped her hand over her mouth. Oakley burst into tears as Sarah ran to the bathroom, crying hysterically and gagging.

I turned Oakley around and tried to get her to look at me.

"Hates me," she murmured.

"Shh, no she doesn't. Not you." Looking up, I saw that everyone was frozen in their seats. I pleaded with my eyes for one of them to do something. Anything. I was so fucking lost and didn't know how to fix it.

Jasper suddenly jumped up, as if it had just sunk in.

"I'm gonna fucking kill him," he raged, turning red in anger. My dad grabbed Jasper just as he was about to run for the door.

"Get off me! I'm gonna murder him."

Oakley turned around and whispered desperately, "Jasper."

"He touched you." Jasper's face crumpled in pain as he looked at his sister. "Oakley." She shook her head and collapsed against me. I was strong enough that time to hold her up. Carrying her to the sofa, I sat her down on my lap and wrapped my arms around her fragile body.

"No? He didn't?" Jasper questioned. The look of desperation on his face mirrored mine earlier when I willed it not to be true.

"Not him, but he knew," she explained. Her voice cracked, and she coughed.

"Oakley, sweetie, I..." Mum said, trailing off, unable to find the words.

Mum had mascara running down her face and puffy eyes from crying so hard. She looked a total mess and usually it would bother her, but right now, I could tell she couldn't have cared less. Mum loved Oakley like a daughter.

The bathroom door lock clicked open, and Oakley tensed. I looked down to reassure her but stopped open mouthed as I saw her peering up like a scared little girl. Seeing her like that was like taking a bullet. Was that terrified expression how she looked up at her father when Frank abused her?

Sarah walked over to us, and I had never been so nervous before. *You have to believe her, Sarah.* She pulled Oakley out of my arms, and they both sagged to the floor.

"It's okay now, baby," she whispered, stroking Oakley's hair soothingly. "Shhh." They cried together and clung to each other. "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry. You're safe now. I promise. I'm so sorry," Sarah chanted.

I lent down and held my head in my hands. Why her? Things like that happened to strangers, not to someone I loved. All that time she had been keeping that secret in, afraid that it would break her families' hearts or that no one would even believe her. How could I have failed her so badly?

Everyone went silent and just cried. It still felt like a nightmare. I just wanted to wake up and for it not to have happened to her.

"What happened?" Jasper asked, his eyes haunted as he slid to the floor with his mum and sister. *You don't want to know, Jasper.*

Oakley looked up and pressed her back against my legs. Clearing her throat, she slowly told her story, stopping to cough or to regain control. As she explained that at the age of five, shortly after Jasper refused to go on any more camping trips, Frank started to turn up. She told us in as little detail as she could what happened. She told us that the first time Frank raped her was when she was just ten.

Bile rose to my throat. I clenched my jaw together until it throbbed in pain. Ten. Taking deep breaths, I tried to stay calm for her sake.

"It stopped when I was thirteen. Dad never explained why. He didn't even tell me I shouldn't talk still, but then he didn't need to.

"I really believed him when he said it was over. At first I was scared to go away again, but he said he wanted to..."

She paused and took a deep breath. *Wanted to what?*

"That he wanted our relationship to be how it was when I was little. Before. I wanted that too. I wanted him to be a proper dad again." She started shaking again. "I really believed him."

Her strangled sobs made me feel like shit.

Chapter Twenty-one

Cole

It had been ten days since Oakley spoke up about what had happened to her, and ten days since I had slept properly. I stayed at Oakley's house and held her while she cried herself to sleep. Then I just watched her, managing to drift off for only a few hours a night.

The police had searched the house and taken Max's work computer and laptop away. The next morning Sarah had packed up all this things and threw it all out. There wasn't even a trace of Max in the house; even all the photographs with him in had been burned.

Oakley blamed herself whenever she saw anyone crying. I had told her a million times that none of it was her fault, and I would tell her a million more until she believed it.

She rolled over in bed and snuggled against my chest. Her long blonde hair was fanned out on the pillow behind her. When she slept, she looked so peaceful. Every morning I hoped she would sleep just a little bit longer so she wouldn't have to deal with everything. It was strange that now, when everyone was falling apart, Oakley was the one picking us all up – when she was the one who had endured the most. I used to think she was this fragile girl, afraid of everything, now I knew she was the strongest person I had ever met.

For the past few days she'd been distant. We were together most of the time but she was somewhere else, holding something back. I hated that she wasn't talking to me. She was trying to cope but the vacant look in her eyes told me she wasn't.

"Are you okay?" I asked her, as her bright blue eyes fluttered open but didn't look directly at me. *Of course she isn't okay!*

"Yeah." She lied.

I frowned.

"Why can't you look at me? Are you angry? I know I should have seen what was going on, I'm so-"

She pulled back and pressed her finger over my lips.

“Don’t ever think that. It’s not your fault.” I knew she wouldn’t ever blame anyone else, but no matter what anyone said, I would always feel guilty.

I kissed her forehead.

“Oakley, we slept together...” I trailed off not really knowing exactly how to put it. I needed to know that she actually wanted to and that I hadn’t taken advantage of her. She said yes, I knew that much, but did she mean yes?

She stiffened, looking at me in horror. The colour drained from my face.

“I know. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have let you. It was really selfish.”

Her eyes filled with tears.

Wait, selfish? She didn’t think I would want to after knowing the truth.

“Oakley, that’s not what I meant. I hate what happened to you; I want to kill them for doing it, but it’s not changed how I feel about you. You’re still the most perfect and beautiful girl to me. I still love you more than anything,” I told her honestly. “You definitely wanted to though? I mean, we didn’t have to if you didn’t want to.”

“Yes, I wanted to. Being with you was something *completely* different to Frank. You made me feel safe and loved and special.”

I breathed out a sigh of relief.

“It almost feels like it happened in a different life. When I was thirteen, and Dad said it was over, and I shouldn’t think about it, I did. Well, as much as I could. It was always at the back of my mind, but I did move on. I felt like because it was over I could start being a normal teenager. Well, almost normal, I still wasn’t allowed to talk.”

Her voice was still really quiet and husky, and broke occasionally. I loved hearing her voice again.

“I just couldn’t go back to that place again. When I saw Frank, I knew what was going to happen. I couldn’t do it.”

“You shouldn’t have ever had to. I’m sorry you couldn’t come to me.”

“What did I say about blaming yourself,” she scolded, with a little frown and then smiled. *You don’t have to be the strong one.*

I kissed the tip of her nose and hugged her tighter. “I still don’t know how you managed to not talk to anyone. I never understood why you never texted me back.”

“I didn’t want anyone to get hurt. If I kept quiet, then everything would be fine. If I started texting you would have asked why I didn’t speak,

wouldn't you?"

I nodded. Of course, I would have.

"And I did text you back, every night. I just didn't send any of them." She reached across me and grabbed her phone from the bedside table.

I took the phone and looked at what she was showing me. There was a huge list of text messages in her outbox, all to me. I looked up at her in shock. She replied every night even though she could never send them. Flicking through the newest ones, I saw her declarations of love and her telling me how happy she was.

"I love you, Cole."

Closing my eyes, I smiled. I never thought I would get to hear her say that.

"I love you too." I replied, pressing my lips to hers.

I tried calling Oakley again, but it went straight to answerphone. The second time today. She had spent a little more time with her mum and brother and a little less time with me. Of course, I didn't mind, but I just wanted her to let me know she was okay.

"Cole, you need to come downstairs now," Mia shouted breathlessly. I jumped off my bed and practically ran downstairs. What the hell was going on?

"What?" I questioned, and looked up. Oakley, Sarah, and Jasper were standing in by the front door. They were all crying, and so was Mum, Dad and Mia.

"What's going on?" My heart stopped. No one had said anything, but their expressions told me it wasn't good.

Oakley took a deep breath and stepped towards me. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "We're moving, now."

"Moving? Where?"

"To my uncle Pete's."

"Pete," I repeated. Sarah's brother. The one that lived in Australia.

"I can't stay here any more. None of us can." She shook her head and added, "There are too many bad memories. I love you so much, Cole, and this is killing me, but I have to go."

"You can't." I shook my head, trying to make sense of what she was saying. They were moving halfway across the world. She was leaving me.

"Don't. Don't, please." I closed the distance between us, wrapping my

arms around her, and touching my forehead to hers. "I love you. You can't go. You can move in here if you can't live at yours, or we can go somewhere else, to a different town. Oakley, you can't just leave. Please," I begged desperately.

She clung to me as she cried her heart out. *Oh God, she's really doing this.* "I owe you so much, Cole. You gave me my life back, and I will never stop loving you. If there was a way I could stay I would do it, but there isn't."

She pulled back, and I tightened my grip. My chest tightened, and I could barely breathe.

"Please. No. Don't do this, please, Oakley, please," I rambled, holding her tighter and never wanting to let go. "I'll come with you."

"You're life's here." She pulled away just enough to look me in the eyes. "You can't give up your life, not for me."

I shook my head, frowning at how stupid she was being. "You are my life."

She sobbed and closed her eyes. Tears spilled over and poured down her face. *Do something, Cole. Don't just let her leave,* I yelled at myself. Pressing my lips to hers, I kissed her with everything I had. She kissed me back and held me as tight as I held her.

"I love you," she whispered, and started to pull away.

Panic coursed through my veins.

"No. No, don't do this," I pleaded. Her hands gripped mine and pulled them off her. My vision blurred as I started to cry. *Stop fucking crying and make her see sense!*

"Don't."

She walked backwards and mouthed 'I love you' before walking to her Sarah's car. I couldn't move. I stood at the front door and stared in horror as she got into the car.

Neither of us looked away from each other as Sarah started the car. I was vaguely aware of my parents and Mia standing around, but all I could focus on was Oakley crying in the back of the car.

I watched numbly as their car disappeared. My heart broke further with every inch of distance that was put between us. Everything hurt so much. It was as if I was being stabbed all over.

I loved her so much. More than anything in the world. Enough to let her go.

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