

Tutti Fruitti Rudi



S.M. FRANKLIN

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

TUTTI FRUITTI RUDI

By S.M. Franklin

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

Black and white gif: Two half-naked young guys rubbing against each other on the bed hopefully leading to frottage.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

These two were out on the dance floor grinding and groping, touching each other everywhere until the tension got to be overwhelming. Now that they're finally alone, the passion between them is ratcheted so high, they can't spare a moment to get properly undressed.

** I'd really love a hot, tension-filled dance scene and for release from frottage to be incorporated with the gif. The rest is up to you, dear author.*

Sincerely,

Jilly

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: sex industry, masturbation, frottage, public activity

Content Warnings: dubious consent, child abuse, drug use

Word Count: 62,384

* A [Glossary](#) of terms used may be found at the end of this story

Dedication

For my Mark!

Maria Wright, and to whoever takes the time to read this.
Whether it's just one person or a thousand... I thank you.
It means a lot.

TUTTI FRUITTI RUDI

By S.M. Franklin

Chapter One

My hand just needed to move over to the left a tad more for my fingers to turn into a little pair of pincers before I could lift the wallet from the dude's pocket. The old guy stood in front of me attempting to flirt with a girl over three-quarters of his age younger than him. In other words, he was a geriatric and she was, well, barely out of school by the looks of her.

By the reddening of the back of his neck—that was about three inches above my face—and the almost slight tremble running through his body, the old bastard was probably experiencing his only boner in something like six months. No, probably six years.

The old dick moved a little, dislodging my index and middle fingers.

Shit!

Quickly moving with him, I sidestepped on the balls of my feet and bit my bottom lip. Normally this wasn't so hard. Normally, I was in and out like a fiddler's elbow. I could pick-pocket from the best of people, but tonight, I was trying to hit something bigger. I needed what this dude had in his wallet, and I was going home with it, whether I had to hover, perched like a budgie all night long or not.

Whilst I waited—and rolled my eyes at the bullshit the old guy was spewing to his would be mate—my eyes flicked up to the room at large wondering if anyone had noticed me. They hadn't. Various people of all different shapes, sizes, colours and races were planted throughout the hall. Tinkling of glasses sounded, along with people's laughter and guffaws—rich and arrogant. More of the chinless wonders meandered around, seeking out their prey. Old men with no women at home scoured and scouted the room for possible take-homes. Their beady, old eyes flickered from one barely dressed woman to another, their orbs grabbing their fill of boobs or arses. My eyes, no matter how much I told myself not to look, flipped down to their crotches—and yup—there was growth.

None of them, not one, batted an eyelash in my direction.

That was exactly what I wanted.

It wasn't the first time that I'd been nicknamed "The Cat" because I just seemed to slink inside a place, purr my way from person to person, and whilst doing that, I grabbed what I liked, including a man on occasion.

Tonight wasn't one of those occasions.

Don't get me wrong, a man right about now—a juicy bottom with an even juicier bottom—would be right up my alley. What I wouldn't give to sink my cock into some guy's arsehole and forget my troubles for what—an hour tops—but I couldn't.

Parrot, my street buddy and one-time escapade down below, waited across the room from me, part of him hidden in the shadows of dark, heavy drapes. He, like me, didn't stand out at all, even with how tall he was and how dark his skin was, compared to the old, regal gentlemen in the room. He looked over the hall, his dark eyes scanning for something. No doubt he was on his own little mission. Of what, I had no fucking clue. His eyes quickly flicked over me only to roll sideways back, pegging me with his stare. His eyes widened on the dude I was trying to lift from, then a smirk danced across his mouth. Those dark eyes of his twinkled and lit up.

A slight nod from him was all I needed.

Seconds later—possibly a minute—a huge crash sounded, suspiciously in Parrot's direction if I was hearing correctly. The old geriatric in front of me went to move to protect his little, ripe prize, giving me the opportunity I needed. I moved forward, listing to the side a little and slipped my whole hand into his pocket, seizing the thick wallet I'd been after for the past hour.

Doing a little dance and fist pump in my mind, I calmly slipped the wallet into the front of my jeans, knowing it would slip down my leg and rest at the bottom in the pouch I'd had specially sewn in. Once I felt the old leather slink against my leg, I knew I was home.

Quickly moving past the mayhem, I gave a nod of thanks to Parrot and received a raised brow in reply. I sighed. That meant that I owed him, and I didn't like owing people. It always seemed to come back and bite me in the arse. Normally, I wouldn't have minded that—in the right context, but I needed this tonight, and if that meant I had to accept Parrot's help—which I had—then so be it. My chocolate Cheerio wasn't good enough to earn as much as I'd seen the geriatric shine around tonight. I'd be lucky to earn a hundred and fifty quid before soreness cut in, and then I'd have to turn around and take all that jizz in the face. Now, that was something I wasn't doing. I'd done that plenty of times, and hell no, I wasn't doing it again.

With my steal in my jeans, I slipped out the back emergency doors and through the car park, dodging all of the fancy cars lined up like they were back

on a showroom floor, and slid my way through the copse of trees and bushes that surrounded the posh working men's club.

I knew these back turnings and little routes through bushes and trees like the back of my hand. I'd spent the night in most of them, trying to keep warm underbrush when home wasn't a very nice or warm place to be.

Only once I was sure I was far enough from the hall, I moved into a bush that was close to the park's water and pulled out my phone. Pressing the screen on, I noticed that I was low on battery. I hadn't been home in a couple of days to charge it. Tonight though, I would.

My eyes lingered on the face looking back at me. A huge sigh left me then. Responsibility and care weighed heavily on my shoulders. Sometimes I did wonder whether I was made for anything else other than what I'd been doing for the last five years.

It wasn't the first time that I questioned what the fuck I was doing with my life.

Shaking my head to clear my thoughts and get me back into the game, I rolled my lips in and wedged my phone just inside them and clamped my lips down on the hard plastic, holding it in place. Then I reached down and quickly unbuttoned my loose-fitting jeans, letting them fall down so I could reach the wallet.

Grabbing it in my hands, I shuffled a little on the spot and glanced around just to make sure I was alone. I wasn't sharing my bounty with no one. My eyes lingered on the entrance to my little surroundings of bushes for at least a minute before I was satisfied, my ears perked to the slightest little snapping twig or rustle.

Opening the wallet, I found the old dude's driving licence, which showed he was well over pension age, and a few other membership cards to places I couldn't even begin to pronounce. Leaving them situated in their little holders, I eyed the credit and debit cards and groaned when I saw that they were chip and pin. A couple of years ago, you could get away with a little credit card fraud if they were on the old system, but now, it was a nightmare. If you didn't have the PIN, you were fucked. I'd been there a couple of times and just like having a dick in my mouth, that wasn't happening again.

Next to come was the money, which was what I had been after all this time. I sighed out loud and felt a huge weight leave my chest when I saw the huge wad the wallet held. I'd seen the thick lump of papers when the oldie had been

flashing his shit around, but I never imagined this much was lying in wait. There had to be at least four hundred quid inside. That would help me and Penguin enough for at least a couple of weeks. I hopped.

Lists started piling through my mind. Things we both needed, things she needed in particular. What she really needed was a decent meal and some new clothes. I'd get the food tonight then tomorrow take her to get some clothing and shoes.

With a nod to myself, I slipped the cash from the wallet and stored it in various places throughout my clothing, just in case I got jumped on the way to the supermarket. Again, like everything else, that too had happened before.

I moved from within the bush, adjusting my jeans at the same time. If anyone had been watching me, they'd probably accuse me of beating off in the bush. Little did they know?

Tossing the wallet into the water, I watched little bubbles appear in the black ripples, then nothing. I waited just a few minutes more, my eyes scanning the surrounding park. I'd practically grown up here. I'd slept on the benches before they'd been removed. I'd lost my virginity in this park, behind the old, used toilets that the council kept locked up now, and I'd spent a stupid amount of time just standing watching the water move and sway to its own beat.

This place, no matter how much I hated it, was and is a big part of my life.

I blew out a long breath and started to walk the way to the bus stop. I should have brought my bike, which was stored behind Barry the Barber's, chained up to the street light. He let me store my shit there in exchange for me cleaning up for him. He wasn't too nifty on his feet anymore, so I kind of helped out. I was just gutted that he couldn't do anymore than that. He'd tried, but he just wasn't pulling in the dosh anymore, and I couldn't sponge off him. I wasn't like that.

Catching the bus, I climbed the stairs on the double-decker, holding onto the green handles tightly because the driver decided to pull off. I got to the top without falling back down the stairs and weaved my way to the back. The moment I got within touching distance of the seats, I smelt the piss and heavy stench of cum.

Admittedly, my cock stirred in my jeans, making me adjust the growing bulge. Damn, by the ripe smell, I'd just missed the action. I was absolutely gutted. Now if I'd have been here at the time, I would have tapped some of that shit, or at least got my phone out and started filming it, maybe put it up on YouTube to get me some hits. Yes sir, bending a willing guy over the edge of a

seat was damn-right special, or having him on his knees in front of me, blowing me away. Now, that was nice.

The bus ride took forty-five minutes. The moment the bus pulled into ASDA, I jumped off and headed straight to the trolleys and grabbed one. Thank God for twenty-four hour opening. I stepped foot inside the supermarket, and my persona completely changed. I was here for Penguin, no one else.

Responsibility made my spine straighten, the thoughts of cock disappeared from my mind, and the jeans that had been hanging around my rounded backside were adjusted so they were situated a little better. I even straightened my T-shirt that I'd been wearing for three days. Okay, so it was a little stretched around the neck and at the sides, but I still smelt okay. I gave my armpit a whiff just to make sure.

Weaving my way through the supermarket, I saw things I wanted, things I personally needed but, again, this was about Penguin. She needed so much more than me. I came second. I could sort myself out with the money I earned from bending over.

Not once had I bought anything for her with money I'd earned whilst on my back or front—whichever way. I'd only used stolen money for her. Whether that was better or worse, I didn't care. What I did know, was that my conscience liked it a lot better if I used the latter.

An hour later, I was done. I had a trolley full of meals and snacks for Penguin and myself, enough to last a month at least if I timed everything right. I just had to get it all home and hope that everything at home was and would be okay.

Chapter Two

The moment the cab turned onto the road where I lived, I knew something was wrong. I could feel it deep in my bones. A chill swept through me at the same time that my buttocks clenched. Normally, that was a good thing but not now.

I shifted in the back seat, the leather creaking a little under my weight and moved forward, wedging myself in between the two front seats. The driver glanced over at me warily, obviously not liking how close I was to him.

Obviously, my *gayness* was intimidating the man a tad. Reaching forward, I placed my hand on his meaty shoulder and gave it a little tap. "Don't worry, friend. You're safe."

He sputtered. His mouth opened and closed much like a fish.

I rolled my eyes and turned my head, scanning the road as he continued to drive, waiting for my instructions to tell him when to stop.

"Stop," I nearly shouted, pushed open the back door and jumped out the car when I saw that the front door to our shit hole of a house was open slightly. At this time of night, it should be closed and locked up. Immediately, my heart kicked up to double time, beating hard and fast in my chest. Worry and panic overwhelmed my system. Worry and panic over Penguin.

Forgetting about my shopping, I marched up the small rubbish-littered garden path, over the overgrowing weeds and stopped in front of the wedged open door. I leaned forward, the tips of my fingers just brushing against the scarred PVC door. The once-was-white door was now a dirty, yellow colour and had small cracks at the bottom where various people—including dealers—had kicked it in a time or two ago.

"Excuse me," a voice said quietly from behind me, making me jump nearly six foot in the air.

Shit, I had forgotten about him.

Gritting my teeth, I turned and saw that the cab driver had gotten all of my shopping out and had set it down on the path next to his feet. I glanced up at him with my brows raised. "What?"

"The fare," he mumbled quietly, seemingly nervous.

How could I forget about the fare?

“Your money,” I murmured and quickly skimmed my pockets looking for a fiver. I found one in my back pocket and handed it to him. He took it and eyed me a little longer, obviously looking for a tip. Sighing, I reached back into one of my pockets and pulled out a few bits of loose change, a used, crumbled tissue and my receipt. I dug through the money and found a two-pound coin. Part of me screamed not to hand it over because two pounds was two pounds for Christ sake, but another part of my mind reasoned that it was the best thing to do. So, I went with the latter. He smiled, gave me a nod and then he was gone.

It was then I realised that I was alone. I stood in the middle of my pathway wondering what the hell I was going to find when I walked inside. Fear like no other burned through my system.

Gathering my courage and pulling on my balls to get a fucking grip, I squeezed my hands together and pushed against the door, trying to get it open. I couldn't. What I had to do was body check the fucking thing until I fell inside the door.

Stumbling through the passage, I grabbed hold of the doorframe and caught myself before I face-planted the floor.

The whole place was in darkness, which wasn't really unusual. That was the first thing I noticed. I reached over blindly to the wall and felt along the plaster until I came in contact with the light switch. Flicking it on, I blinked at the intense brightness then groaned at what I saw, once the round flashes stopped dancing across my eyes.

The whole place had been turned over. It looked as if someone had been looking for something. What? I had no fucking clue.

Cabinets that held basically shit had been pulled away from the walls and were now facedown on the floor. The sofa had been turned over and laid haphazardly against the far wall, looking as if it were ready to topple over at any minute. Picture frames that were as old as dirt had been ripped down from the walls, thrown across the room and now lay smashed and in bits on the floor. The flat screen TV that I'd bought from a druggie outside the Prince pub for fifty-five quid had been pushed back against the wall, a huge crack across the front of it.

Right in the middle of all the shit though, high out of her fucking head, was my mum. She was lying on the floor at an odd angle. Her ratty, dark hair, that was greasy as hell, lay splayed around her, the ends lying in spilt drinks and ash that had been knocked over from the ashtrays that had littered the coffee table.

“Mum,” I called and stepped my way through all the shit. My boots crushed food and ash into the already ruined carpet. Bits of broken wood and glass squished and cracked under my weight. I bent down next to the woman who birthed me and pressed my fingers to the pulse in her neck, feeling it beating. It wasn't as strong as it should be, but that was due to the hypodermic needle sticking out of her left arm. “Mum, it's me, Rudi. Wake up.”

No matter how hard I jostled her or nudged her with my hand, she wouldn't open her eyes. That told me how recently she'd scored. Pulling back her eyelids on her pale, pasty face, I immediately noticed her rolled-back eyes and the blown pupils.

I fell back on my haunches and rubbed my eyes with the tips of my fingers. I knew I needed to check on Penguin, but I couldn't risk her seeing Mum like this. Of course, she had before but that was when she was younger. I'd been trying to change things, change the way she was growing up, but it looked as if it wasn't working.

My head dropped back on my shoulders as I stared up at the ceiling. It was covered in light patches of brown from nicotine and little sticky patches of oil from the kitchen that was next door. Rubbing my hands up and down my face, I looked back down at Mum and heaved a big sigh as I reached out and snagged the needle from her arm. A trail of blood just dribbled from the mark. If I looked closer, I knew I probably wouldn't even find a viable vein. I managed to keep my fingers on the plastic plunger instead of actually touching the metal.

Standing up, I walked to the kitchen with the needle outstretched away from me and stopped dead in my tracks, again. The kitchen looked even worse than the living room did. Whatever food, plates, and bowls that were left in the cupboards were now smashed and in bits on the floor. Bits of broken porcelain and cheap china along with cornflakes and flour covered the counters. The kettle and toaster—even though they were plastic pieces of shit—were broke and lying on the floor near the back door, which was like the front one, wedged open. Shaking my head, I walked over the debris to the small red and yellow sharps bin I'd lifted from a clinic where I usually got tested every month for HIV and all those other pesky diseases everyone carried. I dropped the needle through the little hole then went over to the door and banged it closed with my shoulder. I went to lock it but noticed the key was gone. Huffing, I searched my pockets for my keys and locked the door back up, giving the handle an uplifted tug just to make sure.

Walking back through the living room, I gathered my mum up in my arms. I wasn't big exactly but I was built enough. My muscles and strength were compacted. I had a six-pack, but it was barely visible because I didn't exercise enough or eat the right foods. So, gathering my mum who weighed less than ninety pounds soaking wet because of the drugs—was nothing to me. I carried her through the living room and up the stairs where I had to watch where I was stepping because, just like everywhere else, there were broken pieces of glass scattered.

Nudging my mum's bedroom door open with my foot, I sucked in a breath and felt my back teeth grind at the state of her room but especially the bed. The small space was normally a mess anyway, but the bed was just... wow. There in the middle of her used bed were little spots of blood and crusted spots of what looked like cum juice. By the smell of it too, it hadn't happened long ago, which just made my blood heat and my anger surface.

For fuck's sake.

Admittedly, part of me should have been angry and upset that someone had been using my mum, using her roughly enough that blood had been spilt, but the bigger part of me, the responsible almost parent side, just couldn't care. She was a grown woman and should have known better.

Jostling her in my arms, I settled her onto the corner of the bed in a ball, and managed to pull the sheets off without moving her too much. Not that she would have noticed anyway, mind. Once I done that, I shifted Mum until she was in the middle of the bare mattress. I pulled her covers from the floor and immediately turned my head to the side, burying it against the top of my arm when I caught a hum of the duvet. I felt sickness bubble up my throat as I gagged a little. I had to swallow hard a couple of times to get the bile to roll back down.

Now that my mum had been dealt with, I had to sort Penguin out.

What I would have liked was to have come home to see my mum be an actual normal mum or not be here at all which was normal really. She was either out getting high, prostituting herself to pay for her habit, down the pub—again—prostituting herself for drink money or she was here, banging anything she could, however she could.

What I didn't want or need was to come home to find my mum so spaced out and doped up that she didn't even know me. What I didn't want or need was to see the state of my mum and the bed she slept in whilst Penguin had been next door the entire fucking time.

Knowing that I couldn't hide the way the place was downstairs, I walked across the hall, wiping my hands down the front of my jeans. I stopped outside my bedroom door, which I had personally fitted a couple of deadlocks to from the inside. No one was getting in—well, unless me or Penguin wanted them inside.

I raised my hand and knocked once, twice, and then three times in three quick successions, which was our secret code. I waited, my ear to the door, listening for movement. When I heard none, I began to worry. Sweat beaded on my forehead, and the bottom of my back just above my crack began to dampen.

Double-checking the door, I satisfied myself that no one had gotten inside by force.

“Penguin,” I called softly and knocked again.

With my weight pressed against the door, I listened intently. I waited five minutes before I decided that I was actually gonna try and kick the door in, no matter how much I would hurt myself because I would with how much I had reinforced the door.

Just as I stepped backwards and raised my leg, the lock clicked, signalling Penguin was opening up the door. I quickly rushed forward and dropped down to my knees. My hands hovered over the door waiting for the three-foot munchkin to come out.

The door opened until only a slice could be seen. A pair of crystal-blue eyes that neither belonged to me nor my mum looked at me warily. They were wide and frightened, but the moment she saw me and it registered in her mind that it was in fact me and not anyone else, relief coursed through her big blue orbs. A huge sob broke from her mouth.

Penguin—my little five-year-old sister—pushed the door open with such strength that it banged back against the wall and went to slam into her, but I reached forward quickly and slapped my hand across it, stopping it dead.

“Rudi, where have been?” she sobbed into my shoulder. Her sentences weren't whole, because she wasn't at school, but I understood how she spoke. I did try to teach her, but I wasn't here all the time and TV wasn't the best of help.

I let my eyes drift closed at feeling her small trembling body straddle my legs, trying to worm her body into my own. She clung to me like a monkey, holding on for dear life.

“I’m sorry.” I mumbled into her hair. Burying my nose into her crown, I sniffed. She needed a bath. I was secretly glad she was dirty because that meant she hadn’t been out of the room, which in turn meant she had been doing as she’d been told. I’d made her promise me not to leave the room when I wasn’t here. It wasn’t safe for her. The only time she was allowed to leave was when there was an emergency, or if I was here to protect her.

Now I was.

“I thought,” she hiccupped and moved to straddle me even further, her small hands grabbed at my neck, “that you left me.”

A sobbed gasp broke free from my throat. “I would never leave you, Penguin.” And I wouldn’t. Penguin was the only reason I stuck around.

The first time I ran away was because Mum had started using again, and the men she brought in were horrible and liked to touch me. It got too much at one time that I ran away. When the police found me because the school had reported me missing, they’d brought me back. After that, Mum told me she was pregnant. Whose child it was, no one, including Mum, knew.

It was obvious, at that point, that she was keeping the baby. From that point, I went to the library and read up on as much as I could. By the time Mum was due to have Penguin, I was ready for the baby. I’d used the money I’d earned from street-walking to buy second-hand stuff from the charity shop on the high street. Without me doing that, the baby—Penguin—would have had nothing.

When Mum came home with Penguin, she in effect became my baby. Mum slept so much and claimed to be depressed and didn’t really take much notice of the baby. I stopped going to school and running away, pledging myself to Penguin that I would never leave her and abandon her like my mum had done. I pledged to Penguin that night that I would give my life for hers.

Since that day, I hadn’t gone back on my promise, and I never would. Penguin was my world.

“You hungry?” I asked as I stood up with her in my arms.

Penguin held on more tightly. Her tiny fingertips dug into my shoulders. “Hmmm.”

“Good because you know what?”

Her head shook back and forth as we moved downstairs. I made sure to sidestep around the shit on the floor, so I wouldn’t trip, and cleared a space on

the kitchen counter for her. She was reluctant to let me go though. Her small hands clung to my shoulders, trying to hold onto my neck.

“Please,” she begged and held on.

I sighed into her shoulder and rubbed my hands up and down her back soothingly. “I’ve got shopping outside.”

Now, she pulled back to look at me. Her crystal-clear eyes were wide still, but the fear was gone. Thank fuck. Worry still lived deep in her depths, more worry than a five-year-old should even have. “Really?”

I nodded and smiled a little. “Oh yes.”

“Food?” The hope in her voice just about broke me.

“Food,” I leaned into her and mock-whispered, making my voice a little deeper, “I’ve got sweets too.”

Her eyes went wide with excitement. Her brown brows popped high and her honey-brown scraggy hair that so needed washing bounced limply a little around her shoulders. “Wow.”

“I know.” I laughed and pulled back from her, now that she let me go. “I’m gonna go and get the bags, okay?”

Penguin hesitated in nodding but did eventually.

I quickly rushed through the house, not caring about what I was or wasn’t stepping on, and opened the front door back up. A huge sigh of relief left me when I saw the shopping still there. I had secretly been worried that someone might have stolen it, but they hadn’t.

Not being able to manage all the bags by myself, I got the first half inside then came back out for the next lot. Once everything was inside, I managed to shut the door, even though it scraped a little along the bottom of the frame because whoever had kicked it in had broken the bottom hinge, therefore, the door had dropped.

Walking back into the kitchen, I caught Penguin with the Coco Pops in her hands and the box in tatters where she’d ripped the thing open. Now she was stuck with the thick plastic bag.

I sighed. “Couldn’t wait, huh?”

“I’m hungry,” was all she said and held the bag out for me to open.

Not being able to say no to her, I rolled my eyes and even smiled a little. “Grab me a bowl.” She eagerly got up and nearly tripped over the bin that had been knocked over. “On second thought,” I stopped her and got one myself.

Penguin wasn't very big for her age. I blamed my mum for that and her drug use during pregnancy. I'd read that for a five-year-old, Penguin should've been a certain height and weight. When I did take both of those and compared them, Penguin was in the three-year age bracket. That included her speech and thought processes.

Once she was sorted out with fresh milk and Coco Pops, I went about tidying up the kitchen. I sorted the shopping into two loads. One load would stay down here for my mum to share, and the other—the bigger load—would go in my bedroom with the rest of mine and Penguin's stuff, so that when I left again, she would have plenty to eat.

Chapter Three

My eyes snapped open when I heard the first bang. It seemed to vibrate through the house.

I sat up quickly, dislodging Penguin who'd been wormed into my side, her head buried under my armpit. Her small body jerked and sprang up, staring at me through wide, frightened eyes that were still clouded over from sleep. They darted from me to the door and back again.

Reaching out, I pulled her to me and held her close as I listened to the thumping coming from downstairs. Minutes later, I heard the bedroom door—my mum's bedroom door—open and her grumping on about the banging. We both sat still as statues as we listened to my mum's grumbling and heavy stomping footsteps sounding down the stairs. Then seconds later, the banging stopped, and the front door opened with its scrape along the bottom.

I listened intently as Penguin yawned and straddled my lap. She settled her head on my shoulder and reached for her dummy off the nightstand.

"No," I said and took it away from her. She didn't need it anymore; she was too grown up for it. I could already see the damage it had done to her teeth as it was.

"Mine." She snatched it back fiercely and jammed it into her mouth.

"No," I repeated and gripped my fingers around the plastic and pulled, but her teeth were clamped down on the rubber like a vice. "You're gonna break it."

"Let go," she growled, actually growled at me.

With a heavy sigh and a narrow-eyed look, I let her have it. Settling her back down on the bed, I stood up, moved to the window and pulled the curtain back a little so I could look outside. I squinted against the bright sunshine and glanced down towards the front garden where a shiny black car sat parked in the spot outside. I'd never seen that car before parked outside, so it was obviously someone new.

Banging at my own bedroom door made me jump. I whipped around and caught Penguin slinking off the bed and crawling underneath it, effectively making herself disappear. Once I was sure she was out of sight, I straightened my boxers and T-shirt.

“Yeah?” I called out.

“Rudi?” That was my mum’s cracked and abused voice.

I blew out a breath I didn’t realise I’d been holding. Running my hands through my sleep-mussed hair, I grumped, “What?”

“I need you,” she whispered through the crack.

I moved towards the door and leaned against the frame, pressing my hands against the warmed wood. “What?”

“Come out. I need you.”

My brows furrowed, and I gave a little snort. She never needed me. That was one thing my mum didn’t need. She didn’t need me, nor did she need Penguin. She’d made that plenty clear plenty of times.

Unlocking the door anyway, I opened it a little and eyed my mother. She was a state. Her hair that looked as if it hadn’t been washed in a month was stuck to the side of her face where she’d drooled whilst sleeping. Her eyes were bloodshot, and she was listing from side to side, barely able to keep herself standing up straight.

“Rudi,” she whispered, leaning forward towards the crack. Her breath and bodily stench nearly knocked me over. “I need your help.”

Rolling my eyes, I opened the door a little wider and stepped out, pulling the door closed after me. “What do you want?” I was willing to hear her out.

She fidgeted on the spot. Her fingers scratched at her bony and scabbed elbows frantically, tearing the skin in the process. The clothes she wore were tatty and hung on her small, almost anorexic frame.

It was clear that the drugs were killing my mum.

“I’m in trouble, Rudi.”

God, how many times had I heard that very sentence?

“What do you want me to do about it?” I had to be cruel to be kind. It was the way it was with her.

She stepped forward to touch me, but I moved out of the way, plastering my back against my door. I held my hand out to stop her progress. “I need, Rudi.”

“You need what?” I snapped. I was getting annoyed. The woman hadn’t seen me in a couple of days, hadn’t even noticed that her five-year-old daughter

had been in the room next to her whilst she'd fucked God knows who. She couldn't even be bothered to ask how I was, or Penguin was for that matter.

"Money," she pleaded. Her head tilted to the side, her bloodshot and glassy eyes wide and begging. She was truly all over the gaff. "I owe him."

My head was already shaking back and forth. "No." I'd helped her enough as it was. Countless times over the past five years and more, I'd laid myself down with plenty of dealers in payment for her borrowing too much and not being able to pay her debts.

I wasn't doing it anymore.

No fucking way.

My mum moved quicker than I gave her credit for and grabbed me in a strangle-hold. "I need you to pay him, Rudi."

"I haven't got any money," I grunted as I knocked her backwards, yanking my arms out of her hold. She went sailing into the door and fell into the bathroom doorway, landing on her back with an *oomph*.

Shock registered as she attempted to climb back to her feet. She was a tad unsteady and had to reach out for the doorframe to actually stand up but when she did, she launched herself at me, nails bared.

"Stop!" I shouted as I gripped her forearms in my hands and pushed her away. "Stop it."

The damn woman was fucking mad.

"You dare hit me," she screamed as much as her croaky voice would allow.

"I didn't hit you," I shouted back and pushed against her, knocking her backwards again. With my strength and her weakened state, she was no match. She tumbled backwards again, but this time her back hit the doorframe, and she let out a pained wail as she slithered down the wood. "And I told you, I don't have any fucking money."

"I'll take Anna away."

I froze. Everything inside me froze. I blinked at her once then twice then three times for good measure. "You wouldn't dare," I whispered with a tight throat. Fear as tight as a boa constrictor whipped through my body, squeezing my lungs and heart in a hold so tight, little spots of black danced across my vision. I stumbled backwards and reached out for the doorframe, settling my

back against it so it could hold me up. If it hadn't been there, I would have hit the deck.

Pushing her way back up from the floor, a smug smile danced across her mouth. Yeah, she knew she had me. "I would."

Swallowing hard, I tried to turn my face neutral but couldn't. Anna—Penguin—was my world. Mum, no matter how bad a mum she was, was indeed my mum and Penguin's. She did have rights. She had more rights than I could ever have. She could in actual fact, if she wanted to, take Penguin away from me and then where would I be?

"I won't let you," I whispered fiercely. My teeth ground together, and my blood pressure shot through the roof. I clenched my hands together to stop the trembling that I could feel rolling through me. Possessiveness burned like a brand on my flesh.

"Pay him," she instructed slowly, the smug tint of her voice grated on my last nerve. She reached forward, her hand snatching my T-shirt, grasping the material tight in her fist. As if I were a puppy, she began to pull me along.

Stupidly, I followed her down the stairs, not fighting the hold she had over me physically and emotionally. The place was still a state because she hadn't been bothered to get out of bed and sort anything out. My feet hurt as they crunched into God knows what, but I was too focused on her previous comments of taking Penguin away from me to care. Mum continued to drag me into the living room where—oh my God, Giovanni Manetti—stood.

Now that woke me up, snapping me out of the verbal blackmail I'd just been subjected to minutes earlier.

I knew those wide, rounded shoulders anywhere. I'd stared at them enough previously. Slowly, he turned and revealed those dark, almost black, tar-coloured eyes. His Greek or Italian heritage was strong in his facial features. His brows were almost a monobrow, his eyes were round and widely shaped and set far apart, his nose was wide and spread on his face, and his lips were a tad on the thin side but admittedly, he did have a nice smile even with the fake, altered teeth. That was the only thing nice about him though. Everything else was pure monstrous. The thing that gave me the shivers was the nasty, almost purple scar that ran down the left side of his face next to his sideburn. The beard he tried to grow grew almost sporadically around the torn, previous sewn flesh.

Giovanni Manetti was one of the most known drug dealers in Southend. If you wanted, Giovanni had. His prices were a tad on the expensive side, but with the superiority that came with his name, he could afford to rip a few people off.

Not only was Giovanni Manetti a pig, he was an extremely nasty pig who liked dirty pig sex even more—not giving a shit who the unfortunate underneath him may be.

Many times over the years, my mum had gotten tick off another dealer and screwed them over in not paying her bills. They'd come round, kick the shit out of her and take whatever they could find in our home to pay the dues. When she was sober enough, she'd realise that she'd fucked her normal go-to guy, and then she'd go to Giovanni. Giovanni would give her twice the amount of smack on tick knowing she couldn't pay any of it back. But personally, I think he did it on purpose. He knew that if she didn't pay him back by a certain day, he could come round here, throw his weight around and demand repayment in the form of me.

I hated that man.

"Tutti Fruitti Rudi," he smiled and even gave me a wink as his eyes drifted up and down my body, settling on my cloth-covered crotch.

A revolted shiver rolled through me, sending the small hairs on the back of my neck flaring up, standing on end. My eyes slid closed at the use of my street name that I'd earned from the very man who stood in front of me.

"Ah, come on," he said as he moved closer to me. I went to move, but his hand shot out and latched onto my shoulder, gripping hard enough to bring tears to my eyes. His meaty fingers were like mini knives piercing my flesh. "Eh, don't be like that, Rudi."

I looked up into those tar-coloured eyes and realised that the longer he stood here holding onto me, the more power he had over me. It was better to nip it in the bud right about now.

"How much?" I managed to get out through gritted teeth. The pain in my shoulder threatened to take my legs out.

"Five."

My eyes went wide as they darted to my mum who stood off to the side. Her whole body was trembling, but, no, not out of fear of Giovanni. No, she was no

doubt wanting—needing another hit, a hit she probably didn't even have, because she'd stuffed her body full of the shit last night.

“Five hundred quid?” I shouted with exasperation. Was she fucking serious? I tried to count how many wraps that was but lost count at somewhere around fifteen. My mind whirled at the intense anger that I felt for her stupidity and selfishness.

“I needed it,” she said with complete conviction.

“Sure you needed it,” I sneered and crossed my arms over my chest, hoping to dislodge Giovanni's hand, but I was unlucky. “Your daughter fucking needed it. Don't you get it? She needs food more than you need to put that shit up your arm.”

“That shit helps me with my troubled life.”

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I stepped forward and pointed my trembling finger at her. Angry tears burned my eyes. I didn't want to cry. No, I wasn't going to cry. “You're a selfish fucking person. You don't think about anyone other than yourself. You're a fucking waste of space.”

“Stop speaking to me like that. I'm not a child,” my mum screamed.

“Then stop acting like one,” I screamed back. I screamed so hard that my voice gave out, making me have to clear my throat. I sucked in a sobbed breath and let my eyes close, telling myself over and over again to breathe. It was all going to be okay.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Giovanni butted in, waving his massive bear-sized paws around. “Let's check this out. It's not issues.”

My eyes snapped open. Was this guy crazy?

I made a face and spun around. This time, his hand was dislodged from my hurting shoulder. “Are you fucking crazy?”

His eyes darkened even more, if possible, and a snarl curled his top lip. He stepped forward menacingly, making my insides quiver in fright, but I stood tall and didn't move, even though my mind screamed at me to just get the fuck away from him, to back down and act like the submissive he wanted—that he liked.

“You talk back to me, Tutti?”

My eyes narrowed at him, my jaw ground together. “No,” I finally gritted out.

“Good.” He smiled and cuffed me upside the head. “Now we sort the arrangements.” He clapped his meaty hands together, making his top arms wobble and smiled at both me and Mum.

“He can pay everything.” Mum nodded frantically, her eyes pleading with Giovanni.

My stomach turned in on itself at her words. I knew my mum felt little for me, but for her to just basically whore me out like that, tore me apart. I wanted to cry; I wanted to stamp my foot. Fuck it, I wanted to grab hold of her and shake her to death, trying to get it through to her that mums didn't do this to their children... ever.

Giovanni's brow rose at Mum. I think he was shocked at her words, too.

Silence, intense, horrible, pain-filled silence, filled the room. I stood looking at the woman who birthed me, wondering what the hell I had done wrong. What had I done that had been so bad for her to do this to me?

When she nodded continuously at me and mouthed, “Anna.” I relented hesitantly.

“I can't pay,” I said quietly, but I knew Giovanni didn't want money anyhow. The Queen's head was useless right now. He knew the only way to get me into his bed was blackmail or debt because otherwise, I wouldn't be going anywhere near him.

The smile turned even more sinister. It reminded me of a predator—a shark, to be precise. It was full and grave, making me cringe. He walked over to where I stood and ran his hand through my black, short-cropped hair, tugging at the front part, where my tousled spikes were. When my face was upturned to him, my neck clicking and resisting against the angle, he leaned into me and pressed his chubby cheek to mine. His onion pits assaulted my senses first, then his breath came next, making my nostrils wish they were blocked. “I want you, Rudi.” His shirt-covered, extended belly first pushed up against me, brushing against my sternum. Then I could have gagged when I felt his hips thrust against me, his hardness already evident. “I want some tutti frutti, Rudi.”

My head instinctively turned away from him at the same time I tried to make some space between our bodies, but he wasn't having any of that. He moved with me until we were up against the wall. When I realised he had me blocked, I cleared my throat. “I don't do that anymore.”

The hand that was in my hair pulled even harder, yanking on the strands. Little tendrils of pain shot through my scalp. “Don't lie to me, Rudi.”

I gritted my teeth and looked him in the eye. I so wanted to hack up some phlegm and shoot it at his bully mug, but the fucker would probably enjoy that. Instead, I smiled a little, even though my eyes were stone cold. “Okay,” I managed to get out through my tight jaw. “Name the time and place.”

Giovanni's head tilted to the side like an inquisitive dog. “You're always so easy, so pliable,” he commented in wonder.

Shame flooded my system. “You've got what you wanted; now you can go.”

He stared at me for a long time before he nodded and stepped back, slowly releasing the hold he still had on my hair. Turning to my mum, he said, “Once Rudi pays me in kind, you're clean again.”

The relief and gratitude on my mum's face made a puddle of bile rise in my throat. I looked at her with utter contempt and hate. Fuck, did I hate her. I chewed on my lip to stop the flow of abuse that wanted to escape my mouth. I also snapped my hands under my pits to stop from reaching out and strangling the woman until she turned blue and collapsed.

“Thank you,” she gushed and smiled full out at Giovanni, who looked way too pleased with himself.

My hands grasped my T-shirt so hard I heard fabric tearing. My whole body jittered, but it wasn't in fear of Giovanni—okay, maybe a little bit—nor was it because I was cold. No, it was pure, white-hot-poker anger that was so hot and thunderous; it burned and bolted through my body, making everything from the bottom of my feet to the tips of my fingers quiver.

Giovanni moved to the door, but before he opened it, he turned and moved back to where I stood, still leaning against the wall. His massive body shadowed completely over me. I turned my head to the side and closed my eyes when his hand slid up my neck to cup my cheek. He thumbed the skin under my eye at the same time he snapped his hips against me. Again, I could feel his hardness, except it felt bigger and harder than ever. Leaning down so his rank breath fanned over my face, he groaned, and said, “Don't bother stretching yourself, Rudi. You know how I like it.”

A cold, bitter chill travelled through my body making my hairs stand up on end.

Yeah, I knew how he liked it.

Chapter Four

“That’s it, boy, take it, you worthless whore, you fucking fuckrat, fucking tight, twisted, twink bastard,” Giovanni grunted. His punishing thrusts continued to pound into me, unrelenting, uncaring. His thick cock pounded into my small hole without any lube easing the way. In fact, the only lube that had been used was what the condom was coated in. That was it.

I was sore as hell, and my back teeth along with my cock and balls were in constant, terrible pain. My cock felt raw like it had been scraped against a wall of sandpaper, the head pulsing but not with pleasure, with tendrils of pain. My balls pained me every time they moved inside their bag and what didn’t help was Giovanni’s own balls slapping against them.

My elbows killed too. Every momentum forward, my elbows rolled along the cold, hard surface of the kitchen counter and no matter how much I repositioned myself to ease the burning ache, I couldn’t get comfortable. For over an hour, he’d been back there behind me, banging away. I was sure with how much sweat was dripping on my back and the expletives leaving his filthy, grubby mouth, he was on something. What? I had no fucking clue.

All I wanted was for him to hurry up.

If he carried on like this, I wouldn’t be able to take a shit right for weeks.

“Yes, you’re gonna take my load, fuckwit,” he bellowed, his voice echoing in the spaciouly decorated kitchen. His spittle flew over my back, landing on my neck. His meaty hand gripped the top of my shoulder holding me in place as his thick hips pounded into me, harder, faster. His cock jammed into my arsehole with bruising quality. Faster and faster, his flabby, hairy belly slapped against the bottom of my back, his huge hairy balls banged heavily against my own pinioned ones.

“Here it comes, boy, here it comes. Take my fucking load and shit it back out again, take it, boy.” The hand on my shoulder tightened incredibly; his chewed, crudely cut nails felt like small blades digging into my muscles.

Dropping my head to the counter, I let my elbows drop and folded myself in half, basically so the pain could go from the six o’clock mark in my backside to twelve o’clock. The intense burn and constant in-and-out rhythm pain was too much. I squeezed my eyes closed and hissed when he slid down then upwards, pushing against the sore and swollen flesh surrounding my sphincter.

No matter how hard I fought not to make a noise, a pained groan left me, and I tensed on instinct, really knowing that I shouldn't have because that turned him on more than anything—a man fighting his way through a good fucking—oh yeah, Giovanni loved that. Giovanni must have felt it because his speed picked up even more. His spittle and sweat flew over my back and now both his meaty hands clamped onto my shoulders, holding me into place more than ever.

“That’s it. Oh daddy’s coming now, spitting his load into your tight backside.” He pushed in once more, then stilled. His cock thickened even more then exploded inside my arse. The condom holding his spunk, threatened to implode into my hole. Whilst his cock unloaded, his body stood away from mine, his fingers just digging into my shoulders. The moment his tube steak stopped its unburdening, his body slid against mine, his hairy chest rubbing against my back. I cringed away from him instinctively and pressed myself into the cold counter, trying to dislodge his body.

“Get off me, you fucking pig,” I growled through gritted teeth and forced my way out from underneath his dead weight. My sweat-soaked body slid against the counter, my skin pulling on the granite. Giovanni’s cock slipped out of my backside with a wet plop, making me hiss and bite my bottom lip to stop the wheeze of pain from escaping my mouth. Giovanni’s heaving, panting body flopped to the counter and there he lay, all hairy, smelly and fat. His rolls of flesh squished against the side. He turned his head from where it rested on his forearm; his beady weasel, tar-coloured eyes watching me.

My own eyes dropped to the wooden floor when I heard a wet slap. I grimaced when I saw the condom that he’d used—that was covered with lines of red and pink—had slipped from his decreased cock and was pooling on the floor, along with his spunk that had splattered upon contact.

Untying the wound wire from around the base of my deep-purple-coloured balls, I could have cried with relief. Fast, hot blood shot through my testicles, giving them life once more. What I would have liked was to have held my precious weights and massaged them better, but in all honesty and before I emptied my stomach all over him, myself, and the floor, I wanted nothing more than to get the fuck out and away from him.

I winced when I moved to pull my jeans on. My arsehole burned like a bitch and felt torn in at least four different places. The fucker knew I didn't like raw sex—who did?—but yet that’s what he had chosen as part of his repayment

schedule. I guess I should have been lucky that my mouth wasn't used. There was nothing worse than that.

As if reading my mind, Giovanni smiled, revealing a string of white teeth that looked so fucking fake it wasn't even funny, especially with his heavy, weighty face covered in patchy, overgrown hair.

"Next time, Rudi, I get your mouth."

The promise in his tone made my eyes close as bile wanted to roll up my throat. I wanted to puke all over his floor, all over him, show him what my mouth was capable of—well, now, that wasn't such a bad idea.

"Whatever," I grumbled and slipped my boots on, not even bothering with the laces. I was only going to walk through the park, so it wasn't that long a walk home. The hate I had burning for the man who was watching me, who had just used and abused me, was overwhelming. Hot anger, burning hot anger, coursed through my veins. What I wouldn't give to give him some of what I had to put up with—to see how he liked it or better yet, do something to him like maybe—kill him—that'd stop the fat fucker from hurting anyone else.

"Same time, Thursday," he said and turned his back on me. I watched him as he walked to the bathroom that was just off to the side of the kitchen, his big, naked body wobbling and slapping as he moved. Gah, the man was fucking horrible as fuck.

I flipped him the bird even though he couldn't see it and moved quickly through his house and out the front door where Joey, his henchman and all round cocksucker, sat. He winked and smirked at me, but I ignored him. He was just a wind-up merchant and a prick anyhow.

The park was near on empty as I walked through it. I liked to stay near the water if I could, unless I had to dip into the bushes. I loved watching the ducks disappear at night and the ripples of water under natural moonlight.

I stopped next to the water and watched it, letting it calm me a little before I went home. I knew Penguin would be waiting for me. I'd gotten her a new book when I'd taken her to get some new clothing. I promised her that I would read it to her after her bath if I got home at a reasonable time.

Turning away from the pond, I grimaced as I stepped on a rock and it altered my stride, making my asshole stretch. Damn it, I'd be sore forever.

Luckily, I'd pinched that four hundred quid because my hole would be useless right about now on the streets.

As I moved through the grass, I heard a couple of grunts and low moans coming from the bushes. Even though I was in a vile mood, I smiled a little, thinking that someone was getting lucky. It wouldn't be the first time that I'd witnessed someone getting it on in this particular park. After all, I did lose my virginity here.

I carried on walking and continued to look back over my shoulder every so often. By the time I got to the entrance to the park, a couple of guys came running up behind me. I instinctively moved aside and let them pass.

"Fucking faggot won't be coming through here again," one of them said so loudly I was surprised the next town didn't hear him.

My body tensed at his words. The one with a white cap turned backwards replied, "Yeah. I can't believe we caught him scoping your arse out like that, fucking pervert."

Immediately, my hackles rose. I continued to walk behind them as they slowed, listening to their conversation. Why I did this, I had no fucking clue. All I knew was that something inside me told me to, so knowing my gut had good judgement, I followed it.

I followed them all round the outside of the park. I knew they didn't even notice me behind them. It was as if I slipped into "The Cat" mode and slinked my way along, trailing. I did know that by the time they had crossed over the street and I had stopped by the side of the park, I was fuming at what I had heard. Listening to their running commentary of faggots and everything on the gay spectrum and what needed to happen to faggots like that; my stomach was twirled and twisted up real tight. To me, it sounded as if they'd gone out tonight to do one thing, and that thing was looking for gay guys to bash the ever-loving shit out of.

Eying them until they disappeared, I shook my head, climbed up onto the green fence and hopped back into the park, landing with my knees slightly bent. Even though my arsehole protested, I ran over to where I'd been hearing the grunts thinking that someone was getting busy, when in fact, someone was getting their face smashed in. I stalked through the bushes, my boots breaking the fallen twigs in half at the same time my hands caught bunches of the green stuff and pushed it out of my way. My eyes narrowed, searching for a body. I prayed to God that whoever they'd beat the crap out of was at least alive.

When I couldn't find him, I stopped dead in my place and tilted my head to the side. I cancelled out the toots and engines in the distance. I struck out the music booming somewhere nearby and the voices entering the park from the south side. Once I heard nothing but air, I closed my eyes.

I knew this park very well. I knew where grass ended and mud began. Where wood chips surrounded the swings, to the tarmac that started around the roundabout and where gravel ended and concrete started around the pond.

Nothing. I could hear absolutely fucking nothing.

Just as I was getting annoyed that I couldn't hear anything, I heard a moan. It was a little breathy, but it was something better than nothing.

I followed the direction to the east a little and crouched down, my fingers brushing against the cut and trimmed bushes. The darkness was too much; I couldn't see anything. I could have been standing in dog shit and I wouldn't have known. Whoever the injured guy was, he had to be wearing something dark because I just couldn't make him out.

Taking out my phone because my eyes could see fuck all, I pressed the screen, seeing Penguin's face. I smiled a little as I waved it around in a circle, shining the bright light over the ground around me. Turning in a circle, I tilted it this way and that way, continuously pressing the button so the illumination wouldn't go out.

There.

I moved forward quickly when I saw a black lump buried in the bush. Kneeling down, I rolled the guy onto his back, making him moan out loud and automatically bring his hands up to protect what looked like a seriously beaten and bloody face. "Please," he croaked, and then hacked up a wad of blood as he coughed. He hacked up another gob load of the red stuff and spat it out of his mouth; little rivers of it dribbled down the side of his face to his neck.

"Shhh," I crooned softly and settled my phone on his chest. I bent over at the waist so I could see him a bit better and sucked in a breath. He had dark-blond hair that was styled at the front, and the eye that was open, watching me warily, was a very vibrant green colour.

I'd bet that, without being beaten and all bloody, he was gorgeous.

"We need to get you to the hospital," I suggested, even though I knew that whatever his name was, he wouldn't go for it. Hell, if this had happened to me, I wouldn't have wanted to go to the hospital either.

The guy's head began to move back and forth. "No."

Sighing and shaking my head, I moved him a little bit more to get comfortable, even though he cursed me to hell and back again for it. Once he was comfortable and I had the moonlight shining down on us, I could get a better look at him. "What's your name?" I asked, as I pulled my T-shirt up over my head. I valued that T-shirt, but he needed it more than I did.

Gripping the top at the seams, I pulled it apart, watching small bits of white cotton fly around in the air above us. Stripping the two halves into pieces, I kept the biggest parts to press down on his cuts with, whilst the others that I cut into smaller pieces could be used to wipe away the blood from his eyes, nose, and mouth area.

"Jay."

Stopping what I was doing, my brows pulled together as I leaned down, trying to hear what he said. "Huh?"

"I'm Jay, Jay Bruins," he said a little louder this time.

A smile popped up on my face. "It's nice to meet you Jay, Jay Bruins."

In return, I received a grunt.

"Anyway," I cleared my throat and spat into the cloth then began to clean the blood from his face and mouth so he could speak properly. In the moonlight, his blood looked almost black. "I'm Rudi Costa. I live not far from here, but I've got to admit, I haven't seen you around. I kind of know everyone, even if they don't know me." I had to, with how many people I lifted from on a weekly basis, I had to know faces even if I stole from them behind their backs.

"I just moved here," he croaked. His eye watched me closely, never leaving my hands. It looked like he was waiting for me to hit him or something, rather than help him.

I nodded and wiped the last of the blood from around his mouth, then started on his eyes. He'd have a couple of shiners in the morning, a swollen nose and a fat lip. Probably a bruise or fracture to his ribs, but no doubt, he'd be up on his feet. He didn't look like a guy to be kept down.

"Yeah? Where'd you move from?"

"Portsmouth," he said. His eyes, the colour of green, green grass now that I could see them under moonlight, were utterly gorgeous. The best thing I had seen in a very long time, if ever. The more blood I cleaned off his face, the

more of his gorgeousness I revealed. He had a strong jaw that promised stubbornness and was coated in a sprinkling of dust where he hadn't shaved this morning. His pert—almost female—nose had a small little bump at the top that I wanted to know more about, and his lips, dear God, his lips were thick especially the bottom one. Admittedly, it was swollen but I just knew that without the fleshy look, it would still be pouty and fuckable.

What the fuck?

Where the hell were all these thoughts coming from? Here was the guy lying in the bushes of my local park after being gay-bashed, and I was practically mind fucking the guy. Next thing you knew, I would have been wondering whether his cock was cut or not and whether he sucked head like a good'un.

Dear God, I had to get a grip on myself.

Finished with his face, I sat back on my haunches, wiped my hands on a spare rag of my T-shirt, and stared down at Jay as he stared up at me.

“Why you helping me?” he asked quietly.

My shoulders lifted in a shrug. “Because you look like you need it?”

“Ah, right.”

“Where'd' you live?” I asked, when silence reigned a little longer between us than I felt comfortable with.

Swallowing to gather more tone to his voice, he said, “Gunners View.”

My eyes narrowed as I pictured a map in my head. I was sure I knew where he lived. My brows furrowed as I stood up and dusted off my jeans, which were now covered in blood, leaves and mud. “If you live there, why are you so far away?” By my calculations, that was something like five to seven miles away.

“I came out for dinner.”

Huh, why come all this way for dinner? Instead of asking him that, I bent down and slid my arms under his armpits, feeling the dampness pressing against my inner wrists, and sat him up. He opened his mouth to no doubt scream but clamped it shut at the last minute. He took a long, deep breath and pushed back against me. “Please,” he whispered. Obviously, his pride had taken a battering.

Nodding even though he couldn't see me, I grunted and lifted him up to his feet. Judging by his weight, we were roundabout the same kind of size. He

rested back against my chest breathing heavily. Even though he didn't stand straight, I could tell that we were kind of the same height, too. There had to be a couple of inches separating us, maybe?

"Can you walk?" I asked. My mouth was in direct line to his ear, which looked mighty tempting to take a bite from or even give a little lick too.

No, I shouldn't be thinking like that.

Ignoring the voice in my head, I readjusted myself to Jay's side mainly because it would be better for him to walk like that, but also because I'd popped a boner for the first time in a week. I'd been limp as a noodle because of worry, Giovanni, and just the fuck pot of life, and yet I'd just met Jay, and here I was sprouting wood over him already.

"Just," he said and then moaned when he limped forward. His jaw ground together and his hands fisted at his sides. "I can try."

I nodded. "That's good, real good."

For that, I received another grunt.

Chapter Five

“You wanna tell me why those guys beat you up good and proper?” I already knew the answer, but I wanted Jay to tell me.

A shrug lifted his shoulders. “No clue.”

Nibbling on my bottom lip, I tightened my hand around Jay's waist, grabbing his shirt in my fist. “You know,” I said quietly as we walked through the squishy grass. My eyes continually scanned the surroundings, checking to make sure Dumb and Dumber hadn't come back to finish Jay off. “I'm gay.” I wasn't ashamed of who or what I was. I was gay, out and proud.

Jay jerked violently away from me, only to stumble and windmill his arms out as he fell backwards, tripping over his own feet. Clucking my tongue, I rushed to his aid and grasped him around the waist, pulling him against me, nearly toppling over myself. Once I steadied him on his feet, I shook him a little for stupidity. “What the fuck was that about?”

“Nothing.” His eyes, though, betrayed his feelings.

Gripping his chin in my hand, I lifted it a little so I could look into his battered and bruised grassy eyes. “Were you like running away or something?” Okay, he wasn't a kid—although he didn't look much over nineteen or twenty—but he could have been running from something that might have happened to him, or maybe I was just projecting from myself.

Jay rolled his eyes and snatched his face away. “Running away,” he scoffed and rolled his eyes, again, dramatically this time. “I told you already,” he snapped and moved completely away from me. “I came out for dinner.”

“Alright,” I raised my hands in placation. “Calm down.” The guy was proper defensive. I only asked a question, for God's sake.

Jay nodded and looked away in the opposite direction, his eyes fixated on something else other than me. “If we can get to my car, I can drive home then.”

My brows popped up at that. “You have a car?”

Even with his swollen face, I knew Jay was giving me the *duh* look. “Of course I do.”

I recoiled a little at his tone. Now, he sounded like a spoilt little shit and as if everyone his age should own or have had a car. A little jealously beamed

through my system at that. I'd never driven a car in my life or even had the keys to one in the first place. He must have some real nice parents to be able to afford a car.

"I guess by the look on your face, you don't have one?" he asked, obviously sensing the silence that had descended between us.

"No," I admitted quietly.

Jay shrugged and leaned into my side a little more, pressing against me. Whether he did it on purpose or by accident, it felt good. "It's just a banger. My dad says until I can be trusted with something more important like his truck, then I can't have a better, more expensive one."

More jealousy came to life deep inside me. "You've got a dad, too?" I never had a dad.

Jay smiled, revealing a string of not-quite-white teeth that were gorgeous nonetheless. His smile took my breath away. "I have the best dad ever."

Not knowing what to say to that, I kept quiet. I continued to hold onto Jay all through the park until we reached the entrance. We stopped and he leaned his shoulder against the railing, whilst glancing up and down the street, then nodded towards a little car parked across the road. He was right, it was a rust bucket.

I didn't know too much about cars. Okay, I didn't know anything about them. All I could see was that his car didn't look that old—but what did I know? I did know that it had rust patches all over the back and front wheel arch type things, the wheels were black, not having any silver things on them, and it just had that "I'm fucked" look about it.

"I know." Jay chuckled and reached into his pocket for his keys.

"I didn't say anything."

He snorted, or at least tried to. "You didn't need to, I saw your face."

Once the small, red car was unlocked, I opened the driver door and helped Jay inside. He grimaced and was obviously in pain but didn't want to admit it. I couldn't blame him, I wouldn't either. Shuffling my feet, I rubbed the back of my neck. "Are you sure you're okay to drive?"

Jay rolled his eyes again. He sure did that a lot. "I'm fine."

"Sorry to tell you, mate, you don't look too fine to me."

Huffing out a breath, Jay slid the key into the little slot and waved his hand towards the passenger side. "You wanna ride with me?"

My brows pulled together as I once again shifted on the spot. There was just something about this Jay Bruins that made me nervous as a cat ready to jump from a high branch. My mouth opened then closed again. I had to get back to Penguin, but I also didn't want to leave Jay either.

"Get in." He sighed and yes, again, rolled his eyes.

I chewed on my bottom lip for a couple of seconds before nodding. I ran around to the passenger side, popped open the door and slid in. Only when my butt hit the seat did I wince and squeeze my eyes closed at the feel against my abused ring.

"You okay?" Jay's voice was softer and a lot closer to me than I would have liked at that precise moment. In the park, I didn't mind him being close, but this close when I was feeling the ill effect of Giovanni's attentions wasn't good. The two didn't belong together.

"Fine," I squeezed out through gritted teeth.

Even with the darkness in the small confines of the car, I could feel Jay's eyes burning into the side of my head. I continued to look out of the windscreen. For some reason, I didn't have the balls to turn and make eye contact with him.

With a long drawn out sigh from him, he turned the key and nothing happened. "Oh come on." He banged his fists against the steering wheel, startling us both when a *bib* sounded.

"What's the matter?"

"The fucking thing won't start," he grumbled and tried the key again. The car turned on a little; the engine sounding like it was coughing then dying again. "I told him."

Now I was just downright confused. "You told who?"

"My dad," he snapped and arched his body, which looked like it pained him to do, and reached into his front pocket of his jeans for his phone. Once he had the expensive-looking thing out, he fiddled with the screen and pressed the loudspeaker button. Seconds later, a man's deep voice sounded.

"Son?"

“Dad,” Jay breathed. “I’m stuck.”

There was a few seconds of silence on the line before, “Stuck?”

“Yeah,” Jay snapped irritably and rested his hands on the steering wheel, his fingers clenching against the leather. “My car died again.”

“I told you to not leave the lights on. Did I not?”

Jay rolled his eyes again. “Dad,” he interrupted, “I didn’t leave the bloody lights on, okay? I parked the car, got something to eat, and when I come back, it’s dead.”

There was another silence down the line, then a loud sigh. “Where are you?”

Whilst Jay rattled off where we were, I sat back in the seat feeling uncomfortable, jealous, wanting and complete all at once. It was a strange mix of feelings. I closed my eyes and listened to the timbre of Jay’s voice—the love and affection, even if he was in pain and annoyed at his dad’s constant questions—I could tell he loved the man and it was reciprocated. It was nice, albeit a tad uncomfortable to listen to.

My eyes popped open when everything went silent. I looked over at Jay to find him staring at me, his split lip hanging open and his grassy-green eyes focused on my face.

Clearing my throat, I asked, “All sorted?”

Jay shook his head. “Uh, yeah.”

“Is this them?” I asked as a silver truck with *Bruins & Son Construction* printed across the side pulled up across the road from us.

The driver door opened, and a big bear of a man jumped down from the seat and slammed the door closed behind him. Seconds later, the passenger door opened, and a slightly plump woman got out and joined Jay’s dad at the front of the truck, their hands joining immediately.

Jay nodded, pushed off his car and moved towards his dad. “Yes, that’s David Bruins, my dad.”

The moment Jay’s dad clocked the state of Jay’s face, he stopped dead in his tracks and his face morphed into something so fierce, I couldn’t even describe it. I’d seen a lot of violent and angry-looking men in my life but never something like that.

“What the fuck?” he boomed, his voice echoing in the darkened street, and rushed to Jay, gently taking his face in his big paw-like hands. He turned Jay’s face this way and that way, getting a good look at his son. “What the fuck happened?”

“Dad—”

David’s angry face turned in my direction, his eyes zoomed in on me. Slowly, he pushed Jay out of the way, like he was nothing more than a piece of paper and marched over to me, his chest heaving, his hands fisting. His size was real intimidating, but I’d dealt with punters the same size as him who’d wanted something for nothing and hadn’t gotten it, so I was damn sure I wasn’t going to let Jay’s dad intimidate me.

“Sir—”

Suddenly, I was thrust up against the car with David Bruins’s arm across my throat, cutting off my windpipe. “You fucker, you hurt my boy,” he roared down at me as spittle flew from his mouth, coating my face.

My own mouth opened and closed trying to tell the stupid dickwad that I hadn’t laid a hand on his precious boy, but I couldn’t even get a gasp out. My Adam’s apple felt as if it was being crushed, and my lungs burned with need for air. My legs kicked out, trying to get him to move, but he was fucking huge.

Jay appeared at my side, his eyes panicked as he tried to get his dad off me. “Dad, Rudi didn’t hurt me, he saved me.”

The woman also appeared in my line of sight. She rested her hand on David’s bulging bicep, giving it a little squeeze. “David, release the boy, you’re being stupid. You heard Jay.”

As if seeking the truth, his eyes turned to his son, whose chest was heaving. His hands were fisted at his sides, and his mouth was tightened into a straight white line. “Dad, let him go.”

“You’re sure?” David asked.

Now, I wanted to roll my own eyes. Didn’t the two of them just tell him that?

Jay nodded and swallowed hard, his eyes darting between me and his dad. He gave the big man a placating nod. “I’m sure. Let him go, now.”

Slowly, hesitantly, the big slab of steel was removed from my throat. I rolled to the side, my throat raw as I coughed and spluttered all over the dusty, dirty car. Intense, hot air rushed its way through my lungs, burning like a bitch.

“Are you okay?” Jay asked as he settled his hand on my shoulder, giving it a small squeeze.

I shot a glare at him and his dad then shrugged off his hand. “I’m fine, thanks,” I sneered and straightened myself up. I went to smooth down my T-shirt only to realise that I wasn’t actually wearing one. “Although being assaulted, *again*, wasn’t in my plans for tonight.”

“What do you mean, ‘again’?”

“Nothing, it doesn’t matter,” I grumbled and rubbed at my aching throat that no doubt was red and would be bruised by morning.

“What happened?” the woman’s soft voice cut through the silence.

Jay moved away from me, giving us space and leaned back against his car holding his side. “I got jumped.”

My head snapped towards Jay, wondering why he wasn’t telling them the truth. Okay, he did get jumped, so he was partly telling them the truth, but why hadn’t he volunteered that he was jumped because he was gay. By the way he talked about his dad, it was obvious he knew which way his son swung, so why didn’t he tell the truth?

David slapped his hands on his hips and thrust his chest out as his eyes intently watched his son, as if looking for a crack in his facade. “What the hell do you mean, you were jumped?”

Jay shrugged and shifted on the spot. “I was jumped, that’s it.”

“Who, what, when?”

“I don’t know.” Jay rolled his eyes and blew out an exasperated breath. “I didn’t exactly have time to ask for their names and numbers.”

“Boy.” Jay’s dad’s voice rumbled and seemed to darken. “You best remind yourself who you’re speaking to.”

The stubborn point of Jay’s chin became prominent for at least a minute before his shoulders slumped in defeat, and his body seemed to fold in on itself. “Yes, sir,” he mumbled belligerently. “Sorry, sir.”

“Are you okay?”

Again, my head snapped around to the sound of the woman’s voice. She was now at my side, her small, pale hand reaching out to touch my shoulder but hesitating. “Are you okay?” she asked again.

The touching and genuine tone of her voice made a small smile pop up on my face. "Fine, thank you."

Her intelligent blue eyes scanned my face then dropped down to my naked chest before travelling back up to my face. Her head tilted to the side a little. "Did I hear that your name was Rudi?"

"Yes."

"Good. Well, Rudi, I'm Monica and this is David." She reached backwards blindly, grabbed hold of David's hand, and pulled him forward until he was standing in front of me and next to her. David now up close looked very much like Jay but his features were more masculine, rougher and older. His scowl, though, was what got me scowling back at him. "This is David, Jay's dad."

Neither of us said anything, until Monica elbowed David's side. He huffed and sighed then held out his hand to me. "Hello, Rudi." He said my name as if nails were being pinned to his throat.

My brow popped up as I looked down at the huge work-roughened hand hanging there waiting. A nudge from my back jerked me forward a step. I sent a glare to Jay over my shoulder as I shook David's hand. "Hello."

When another bout of silence rained down on us, Monica once again elbowed David. He grunted and said, "I'm sorry for that misunderstanding, Rudi, but you can understand my confusion though, can you not?"

"Sure," I mumbled and nodded.

Monica clapped her hands together and slithered her arm around David's. "You'll have to come to dinner."

"Oh no," I objected immediately, shaking my head back and forth.

"Do what?" Jay's dad's eyes bugged out of his head.

"That's a really good idea," Jay commented from behind me.

All three of us had spoken at once.

"Well, that's settled." Monica beamed. Her blue eyes sparkled under the streetlights as they darted from me to Jay and back again. "We'll host a thank you dinner for helping out our boy."

Chapter Six

“Where have you been?” Mum asked the moment I walked into the house. She was sat in her normal, nicotine- and God-knows-what-stained armchair that funnily enough hadn't been touched last week when the house had been trashed.

The fourteen-inch CRT TV I'd had to get down from the loft after the other one got broke was switched on and showing the midnight quiz show on ITV. Fortunately, the sound was muted. I couldn't stand the woman's squeaky voice at the best of times. My eyes lifted towards the coffee table that I'd managed to put back together with a couple of screws and odd bits of old, used wood. There on the top lay bright silver foil, a lighter and an empty draw bag. I couldn't stop the snarl building on my lips or the disappointment and righteous anger flooding my system.

“Nowhere that involves you,” I grumbled and headed to the kitchen to grab a glass of water.

After that rather strange meeting with Jay's parents, I'd left them at the park, declining Monica's offer of a lift home. For one, I wasn't *that* comfortable with them yet even though I'd been invited to dinner in a week and a half, and second, I didn't want them knowing where I lived. It was embarrassing.

Part of me though, the moment I opened the front door wished I hadn't. Part of me—a small part—wanted to stay with Jay because he was fresh, new and exciting, but I knew I couldn't. It was just weird that I was feeling something for him after just knowing him tonight. It was stalker-*ish*, wasn't it?

“Where's your shirt?” I heard Mum call after me.

My brows shot up as a snort left my nose. “You actually care?”

Ignoring my comment, she asked, “Why do you have blood on you?”

Glancing down at my bared chest, I did in actual fact see small trails of Jay's blood which had dried in sticky lines on my skin. Shrugging, I ignored her completely and headed to the cupboard where I'd stored all the glasses that had survived through the raid. The kitchen looked completely different after I'd sorted it out and repaired what I could. There was still stuff missing that needed to be replaced, but I just didn't have the cash or time at the moment.

Mum followed me into the kitchen. Leaning against the doorframe, she chewed on her thumb nail. Strangely, she wasn't itching or out of her face, but that was probably due to the empty draw bag on the table. The more I stared at her though; I could tell she was up to something. I could feel that deep in my bones.

Swallowing the tap water from the glass, I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand as my brows popped up, expecting her to say what she obviously wanted to say. When she failed to say anything, I prompted her. "Well?"

She shuffled on her feet and chewed on her bottom lip, eying me warily. "I've been speaking to Giovanni—"

"I don't want to know," I interrupted. I'd had enough of Giovanni already tonight, I didn't need more. Just the thought of his bear-sized hands on my body again made a shiver trickle down my spine. My torn arsehole clenched in reaction—not good.

"Just wait." She moved to grab me, but I shifted to the left out of her reach. "Just listen."

"Don't touch me," I growled and spun around, shooting her my most hateful glare because to be perfectly honest, I felt absolutely fucking nothing for her, and that just about killed me. How fucking sad was it that I didn't feel anything for the woman who created me, carried me for nine whole months then brought me into this world, this horrible fucked-up world?

Absolutely fucking shameful.

"Listen to what?" I lashed out.

Mum swallowed loudly and rubbed the back of her neck, nervously. She began to fidget, so that was my clue it was something I wasn't going to like.

"Well?" I shouted making her jump.

"Giovanni says that if you make—" She rolled her hand towards me, attempting to explain. "If you make what you and he did together a regular thing, I can get my gear from him from now on." When I just stood there in shocked silence, she hurried on. "That means, Rudi, that there'll be no more trouble from other dealers or anything like that. Imagine how good that would be. I wouldn't have to pay for my gear anymore, and you could just work it out with Giovanni. You like him, don't you? I know he likes you," she almost gushed. Her eyes had glazed over a little. I could just see the thoughts going

round and round in her head, the piles of crack in front of her, getting high and comatose every night. "When I go see him, he talks about you all the time. He asks me what you're doing, who you're with, all that shit. Sometimes he says that I can get double from him if he has you. Say you'll think about it, huh?"

My mouth dropped open in pure unadulterated shock. I stood there staring at my mother wondering what the fuck had happened along the line. I wondered for real if I had actually heard her properly or whether my ears were deceiving me. My head dropped to the side, my eyes begging her to be wrong in what I'd just heard. "Say it again. I don't think I quite understood you."

"Giovanni says that if you make... If you make what you and he did together a regular thing, I can get my gear from him."

I did hear right the first time.

I spun around on the spot and gripped my short hair in my fists, pulling on the strands until pain shot through my scalp. I half turned and grazed my eyes up and down her withering, almost anorexic body. Again, for the millionth time I wondered where the fuck we had gone wrong.

When her eyes so much like my own continued to look at me, begging me to understand, a sour, bitter, foul laugh bubbled up my throat and tears burned my eyes as my breath came out in gasped chokes. To stop from bursting into tears like I wanted to, I bit my lip hard enough that I tasted the metal tang of blood floating around in my mouth, coating my tongue with the stuff. I swallowed a pooled amount of hot saliva mixed with the red stuff, feeling it flow over the heavy, intense lump in my throat.

"How could you?" I whispered, trying to gather myself. I would not cry in front of this woman. I would not give her my tears, my fears, my all, that was admittedly, mostly her fault in the first place. No, I wouldn't do that; I wouldn't give her the satisfaction of that.

"Do what?" she asked completely innocently. It was as if she'd not realised what she'd asked me, wanted me to do, not even five minutes ago.

My tears intensified, burning badly at the back of my eyeballs. But this time anger joined in with every other emotion. Anger, hot blazing anger, coupled itself, twinning with shame, incredulity and damn-right butchered hurt. I marched towards her, my hands clenched at my sides, stopping from wringing her fucking neck.

She backed up against the doorframe, trying to make sure she looked as small as possible. Leaning into her space, I ignored the druggie smell

emanating from her pores and breath where she'd sucked the pipe, and whispered, "Do what?" I gritted out, my lip curling much like a dog ready to attack. "You've just told me, your only son, that you practically want to pimp me out and why? Because you want more shit to put up your arms." Her mouth opened to no doubt correct me, but I beat her to it. "I hate you," I said simply, even though my insides were slowly dying because after all, she was my mother, I was part of her and vice versa. "You're a disgrace, and I wish on everything that I am that you weren't my mother."

The night was a bit chilly, making the hairs on my arms stand up on end. I walked from around the corner of Baxter's Drive, fixing my jeans at the same time. I'd just serviced old Morris who was one of my regulars. I saw him at least once a month. He was an old goat who had a severe paunch and rotted teeth, but he was a dear.

Apparently, his long-term bird wouldn't give him some backside, saying that it was immoral and taboo. The way Morris explained it one time a few years ago to me was that he'd experimented as a youngster whilst he was in the Navy with a couple of his buddies. Afterwards, he'd realised he'd liked it, but due to his strict family background, expectations and society in general, his fantasies, wants and needs took a backseat. So, he did the right thing and married his sweetheart, popped her a couple of sprogs and lived life as straight Morris. Only within the last couple of years had he said that he was feeling the need for a manly touch. He didn't want a relationship with a man, didn't actually need the whole shebang, but a little cock and the feel of man hands on his body was enough to satiate that need. So, that's where I came in.

I would meet him much like I had just a few minutes ago. I'd get into his car, he'd drive us to the usual spot around the corner and we'd get it on in his car, with me bent over the reclined passenger seat, my arse perched up high, high enough for him to have a little feel about, then do me one. He then liked for me to reach around to his arse, give it a rough squeeze and pull him into me, as if I needed him pounding into me anymore than he usually did. For an old guy, he certainly had stamina, but he wasn't rough or abusive with it. No, Morris liked it quick and fast, but there was a caring ability that came with him that no matter how much he wanted to go the whole hog, he couldn't. It wasn't in him.

Now, I stuffed my hundred quid in three different pockets and made my way home, shaking off the chill that skipped down the back of my neck.

Opening the bedroom door, I noticed the room was bathed completely in darkness. I tiptoed over to the chest of drawers and pulled out a clean pair of boxers and a T-shirt. After toeing off my boots, I moved over to the bed silently and flicked on the side light. Penguin stirred a little on her side of the bed clutching the little stuffed—once white, now grey—penguin to her chest. She had that damn pink dummy in her mouth again.

I leant down and pressed a kiss to her cheek and inhaled her scent. Something inside me settled deep down. Something deep down knew that someone loved me even if she was only three foot tall.

Grabbing my clean clothing, I closed the bedroom door after me and went to the bathroom across the passage. Opening the door, I immediately noticed there were clothes on the floor—my mother's clothes—that she obviously hadn't been bothered to pick up.

Bending down, I grabbed them all and dumped them in the broken wicker basket in the corner. The washing was piling up; I'd have to do it at the end of the week... again. Sighing, I rubbed my hands up and down my face, feeling tiredness coming on.

Feeling my phone vibrate in my pocket, I pulled it out and saw I had a text message from Jay and smiled. We'd exchanged numbers, but he hadn't contacted me immediately. Admittedly, I was a bit disappointed, but I hadn't wanted to text him because I didn't want to come across as too desperate. I was already having dreams of the guy, and waking up with a steaming boner with my baby sister in the bed was just plain... wrong.

Hi, it's me, Jay. Just wanted to say thanks for the other night & I can't wait till you come over. Maybe we chat until then? Speak later. J x

I quickly typed out a reply and hit send afterwards.

I know it was u, J. U're name came up. No probs with talking, we can do that. Hope U get better. See u next week 4 dinner. Night. R x

Whilst I stripped off my clothing, I leaned into the shower and turned on the shower, yanking my hand back when the intense hot water hit it. The system would need filling again. Dumping my clothes on top of the very growing pile of washing, I pulled the flimsy pound-shop shower curtain open and stepped into the creaky, yellow-stained enamel bath. My feet slid along the bottom as I moved out of the way of the still too hot spray.

I made a mental note to buy a bath mat when I was out next.

Whilst I waited for the water to cool down a little, I reached over to the shelf and grabbed the strawberry kid's detangling shampoo I'd bought for Penguin. The other shampoo—my shampoo—was gone. Where, I had no clue.

When the stream was cool enough, I stepped under the water and leaned against the wall, letting the fine spray patter against my tired, sore muscles. My hands pushed against the wall, my back arching a little, my feet spreading a tad. I bent over a touch, pushing my backside out, liking the way the hot water felt running down onto my exposed arsehole. I groaned into the wall, my heated breath fanning over the cold tiles.

Rolling my forehead to the side, my eyes slid closed and immediately an image of a smiling Jay popped into my mind. I felt my own smile breach my face. I licked my lips as Jay's smile in my mind changed from welcoming to downright lustful. I could just see him without the blood, swelling and pained look on his face. He was truly and utterly gorgeous; there was no doubt about it.

With his dirty-blond, spiked hair and intense green eyes watching me, goading me silently to do something naughty, I reached down to my cock that was half-hard, the tip pressing against the tiled wall. I grabbed hold of it in my hand and gave it a couple of jiggles, encouraging the blood to flow more freely and quickly.

I groaned when my hard cock pushed out of my hand and landed against the wall with a loud smack. Hissing, I turned and sucked in a lungful of water. Quickly moving from the spray and coughing, I reached for the flannel and gave it a whiff. Eh, it was alright.

Soaping up the off-white coloured flannel, I hastily whipped it around my body so I could get back to the hard need poking out from my body. Once I was squeaky-clean and out of the direct spray, I hefted one leg up onto the side of the tub, my toes gripping the edge as my hand plucked at my hard-pebbled nipples. I stretched the small hard flesh and gave them small little yanks, letting the thrill skip and dance through my body until the warmth of arousal settled into the base of my balls, making them roll and spread in their sack.

I slid my hands down my flat-planed stomach feeling the semi-ridges under my skin. One of my fingers pressed into my bellybutton then glided over my small treasure trail before arriving at my swollen and pulsing cock, giving the extra skin a small tug. My fingers circled my cock, giving it a squeeze, feeling,

sizing up my girth. I was nice and pretty thick and uncut. I looked down at my foreskin, watching as it pulled from the base of my dick all the way to the end where it rolled over the swollen head, covering my piss slit before pulling it back. The skin slipped back over the head, gathering just underneath it.

Pushing my hand further down the length, I hissed when it scraped over the tip, collecting the dribbled sap that had escaped. I sucked my bottom lip into my mouth, biting on the flesh as I gathered the sticky pre-cum in my hand and lifted it to my mouth, spitting into my cupped palm making sure I had plenty of lube.

My head dropped back on my shoulders and my eyes closed, a moan leaving my mouth, coming up from my throat. I was sure I heard Jay's voice in my ear, goading me on, telling me to rub my hands up and down my shaft, to feel the skin ripple and pull against my cock, tug on it until more clear liquid dribbled from the end.

Loosening my hold on my cock, I let my fingers trail over my smooth, velvety skin, feeling the slight veins underneath the length, pumping wildly, ensuring the red stuff built up enough to make me hard.

With my other hand, I reached down past my cock and squeezed my tight balls, giving them a gentle tug, pulling them away from my body, loving the little hint of pain that mixed with pleasure. Another moan escaped my throat, making my arsehole clench when I pulled on my nuts, at the same time I rounded my palm over the head of my throbbing cock, rubbing the sensitive plum. I hissed as I slid my hand underneath the tip, where my fingers played with the thin piece of skin and nerves that resided there.

Images, more of them, tonnes of them filtered through my mind: Jay smiling wider revealing his crooked front tooth, his eyes twinkling with mirth and naughtiness and his body radiating absolute lust and horniness. At that, my feet bounced and fidgeted in the bath, my body sailing up and down onto the tips of my toes only to drift back down again. I sighed and bit my bottom lip when I felt the tingles start in my toes and work their way up my body.

Grunting, I bent over and held onto the side of the sink with one hand whilst I leaned into the side of the bath, my knee pushing into my side as my saliva- and sap-covered hand moved faster, my hips pushing and thrusting hard into my palm, searching for more friction. My balls bounced and rolled in their warmed, hairless sack and pulled even tighter to my body, warning me that I was nearing release. I glanced down at my cock that was hard as nails and an

angry red-purple colour. My foreskin, which rolled back and forth over the head, was a slight pink that made a different contrast against one another. I watched, fascinated, as a long dribble of pre-cum seeped from my piss slit and hung down, catching on the side of the bath before hitting the floor, breaking the line.

I could feel the fingers of arousal grabbing at the base of my balls, my muscles in my legs and back, along the front of my stomach and then down to my groin. Tightening surrounded the base of my cock just like a hand... Jay's hand.

That just about did me in. My mouth dropped open as an endless sigh left my lips and my eyeballs rolled. Squeezing my eyes closed to stop the dizzying feeling I could feel coming over me, I fisted harder, faster with urgency, wanting so badly to call out his name, have his name on my lips. Better yet, to have his taste coat my lips and fill them with his own personal flavour. I wanted to suck his thick lips into my mouth, bite them then lick up the sting at the same time; I wanted to taste his tongue. To know what he really tasted like. I wanted to suck on his neck and bury my head in his shoulder, smelling his true scent.

When I felt the telltale signs that I was ready to shoot my load, I snapped my mouth closed and bit my lip, at the same time I felt my legs contract and shake, my arse clench and my hole flutter.

"Uhn," burst from my throat as my heart pounded deep in my chest beating an intense rhythm. Little hitches of breathy, puffy air pushed from between my closed lips. I lifted myself up onto my toes, clenching my calf muscles tight as the first gush of cum shot hard and fast from the tip of my cock, splashing against the side of the bath.

Jerking my cock harder in my fist, I squeezed the intense hardness and aimed it upwards. My eyelids became heavy as I glanced down, watching my cock as it bolted string after string of white and clear liquid in a fountain flush, making it dance in front of me before dripping down off the end of my fisted fingers and falling onto the floor with heavy splats.

With the last image of a smiling Jay leaving my mind along with his voice, my cock spurted its last bubble of cum. Relief and completion settled deep in my body. With my heart pounding out a breath-taking rhythm, I turned back to the shower and leaned my shoulder against the wall. I was worried that if the wall hadn't have been there, I would have collapsed into the bath with pure exhaustion.

Never once had I come so much with just the thought of a person... and that person be a person that I'd known for not even a day. Not even twenty-four hours of knowing each other, and I was already invested. Why? I had no freaking clue.

Did it scare me? Sure.

Did I feel something for Jay even after only knowing him such a short time? Yep.

Did I want to explore it? Hmmm, that was a good question.

Was I in trouble? Definitely.

Glancing down at my now decreasing, half-hard cock, the final dribble of cloudy liquid fell from the tip. I reached down and caught the drip, and then rolled it around between my fingers. I brought it halfway to my mouth, wondering if I could just taste it and maybe from that I could savour something of Jay, but the memories came back then and... No.

Sighing, I moved back to the other end of the bath and stood under the spray, letting the water wash away my evidence and hopefully the bad memories.

Chapter Seven

I ran my hands through my hair, dislodging all of my precisely twisted little spikes for what felt like the millionth time tonight. I was so bloody nervous, it wasn't even funny. I looked down at my hands and saw they were shaking like crazy. I clenched them together, telling myself over and over again to calm the fuck down before I did something stupid like fainting or something.

The days had seemed to go real quick, until today that is. For nearly two weeks, I'd worried and sweated my bollocks off wondering how the hell I could possibly get out of going to Jay's for dinner. I'd dialled his number hundreds of times with my thumb hovering over the little, green button, but for some reason, I just couldn't press it. I'd typed out the messages, my finger again hovering over the send button but I hadn't been able to do it.

Now though, I stood across the street from his house in the pricey, expensive neighbourhood, watching the people move around inside. I could see his big built dad in the living room, sitting watching the TV, Monica whizzing around the kitchen and Jay was whipping from room to room doing... whatever. I could tell they were expecting me though because if I stepped to the side, I could see a dining room that was to the east wall. The table had been set for four places.

Sighing, I ran my hands through my hair one more time and blew out a long breath as I moved across the road. My head darted from side to side, checking for what I had no clue. I did catch an old woman watching me from one of the houses across the street. I snorted; she was probably watching, waiting for me to either do some damage to something or nick something. She probably had her mobile phone at the ready.

Rolling my eyes, I reached the fence post outside Jay's house and positioned my bike alongside it. Bending down, I unlocked the chain from my bike and fastened it around the post and a couple of my spokes, locking it into place with a small snick. Giving it a small tug, I tested the strength and give, then nodded to myself.

“Hey.”

I jumped six foot in the air at the sound of Jay's voice, nearly falling on my arse.

Where the hell did he come from?

Glaring at him, I fumbled a little as I got up and rubbed my sweaty hands up and down the front of my best jeans. "Did you have to do that?" I snapped, feeling ridiculously nervous and embarrassed all of a sudden.

Jay's mouth opened and closed before his brows pulled together. "Do what?"

"Nothing." I waved my hand and cleared my suddenly dry throat. Pocketing my keys, I watched Jay from under my lashes. He was gorgeous in his beige chinos and white T-shirt that fit him just right. In fact, he looked perfect, well, perfect to me that is.

Christ, I wasn't normally this nervous. Tutti Fruition Rudi, street Rudi, was never nervous. Grown men paying for a body for the night didn't want nerves; they wanted a willing male with an even more willing hole.

But tonight, I wasn't Tutti Fruition Rudi, I was just Rudi.

Taking a deep breath, I said with a smile, "Can we start again?"

Jay nodded quickly, seeming to like that idea. "Hi," he said quietly, his voice no more than a whisper.

"Hi." I moved towards him and inhaled his scent as I stopped in front of him. Freshness and something sporty assaulted my senses, making my body tingle, my cock jerk in my tight jeans.

"I hope you're hungry; Monica's cooked up a storm."

A little whimpering sound may have escaped my mouth. No, I wasn't particularly hungry, I was anything but. I was too frigging nervous to eat a thing. I'd never done this before, never been to anyone else's house for dinner before. What did people actually do when that happened? Did you have to bring anything?

At that thought, I looked down at my hands and saw them empty. Glancing up at Jay, I felt a deep blush blooming across my face, burning the tips of my ears. Clearing my throat, I said, "I didn't bring anything."

Jay's dark-blond brows shot up in confusion. "Bring what?"

Shuffling on my feet, I shrugged. "Aren't you supposed to bring something to dinner when you're invited?"

The laugh that left Jay's throat made my hackles stand up on end a little. I didn't like the piss being taken out of me. I may not have had much to my

name, but I had some dignity and pride, well a little of each at least. My semi-boner disappeared and all my tingles extinguished.

“Hey.” Jay grabbed my hand and began to pull me up the path, letting the gate close behind us with a hard click. “I didn’t mean anything by it. You didn’t need to bring anything, we’ve got enough.”

A little snorted laugh left me then. “Well, that’s alright then.” Damn, that was a relief.

“Good.” Jay nodded, seemingly nervous now. He stopped us outside the front door that was open just a tad. “I just wanted to say before we went in that I’m... I... just... thanks for what you did in the park and all that and well... thanks for coming tonight, you know?”

Ah, he was nervous just like me. It was nice to know that I wasn’t in the nervous club alone.

Adjusting my hand a little, I let my fingers curl around his, feeling little calluses that marred his hands. “You’re welcome.” I smiled and scanned his nearly healed face. He still had bruising under his eyes, but it was more yellowy-green than the reddish-purple it was when I found him. “Your face looks a lot better.”

Jay smiled shyly and tilted his head to the side. “Monica’s been a big help, she hasn’t let me do anything this week. I’ve been on bed rest. That means no work, no gaming, and no going out. I also haven’t been... Well you know.” A dark blush stained his face. Yeah, I could guess what he meant.

“Man.” I shook my head and smiled full out despite the butterflies creating torpedoes in my stomach. “That must be a hardship.”

“Well.” He laughed, took his hand back and jammed it into the front pocket of his beige chinos that looked very nice on his lean, thinly muscled body. “Yeah, it is a hardship... because...”

I assumed because he trailed off, he wanted to say something but didn’t think it appropriate. When silence reigned between us, and to save us standing there like a pair of lemons, I cleared my throat again and pointed to the door. “Can I ask you a question?”

Jay looked relieved to say the least. “Yeah.”

Scratching the back of my head, I bit my lip a little, nibbling on the flesh. “Do you sit at the table and eat?” That thought had been bugging the shit out of me all week long.

Obviously, Jay wasn't expecting that question because his brows popped up comically, and it took him a couple more seconds after that to answer. "Well, yeah. Why?"

Well didn't that just suck?

"See the thing is—" I hesitated and eyed Jay, wondering if he was one of those people who looked down at the poor people in society. Whether he classed himself above working class? He lived in a really nice neighbourhood of Southend, actually one of the best. I, however, lived in the pits. It was the low class, the let-down part of Southend, the part that never featured on the adverts for one of the best beaches to come to, the best place to bring the family for a day out at the arcades or to the adventure park along the seafront. My part was the benefit sector, the hand-me-down-and-take-what-you-can-get part of the sparkly Essex town.

"What's the matter, Rudi?"

My eyes snapped up to Jay's. It was only then that I realised I'd been off on my glider again. I shook my head. "Uh, right, yeah. Anyway, I was saying that, I don't eat at the table. Do you ever eat watching TV?"

"Please." He snorted. "My dad's all big for family. I can't actually remember a time when we haven't had dinner at the table."

My shoulders slumped in defeat. "What if I make a fool of myself?"

Jay's hand slithered around my shoulder and gave me a sideways squeeze. "The only way you could make a fool of yourself was if you slobbered like a pup or something like that."

Beginning to feel a headache coming on, I rubbed my temples. "What if..."

Jay rolled his eyes and gave my shoulder a squeeze, indirectly brushing his own body against mine. Damn, I liked that a bit too much. "Will you just stop and relax? I swear you're more wound up than a cat on a hot tin roof."

"It's just—" I sighed and chewed on the inside of my lip. "I don't do parents. I don't do family and I don't do dinner, well not like this. All this," I waved my hands around as I struggled to explain, "this is not me. It makes me itchy as hell."

"I could be the soothing balm to your itch," he offered with a little brow waggle and a cheeky smile.

Yeah, I'd bet his balm felt real good. Fuck, I bet his balm tasted just as good, if not better.

“I said parents, not you.”

Jay's chest moved up and down as he took a deep inhale. His green eyes darkened a little and closed an inch. “That settles that. Anyway, we'll just go with you slobbering, huh?”

Whether I wanted to or not, I smiled. “I don't slobber but... what if your mum and dad ask me to pass the salt?”

Jay's plump lips twitched in an effort not to laugh at me. “Then you pass the fucking salt.”

“Do you like shepherd's pie, Rudi?” Monica asked as she set down even more dishes on the table. The whole freaking wooden surface was filled with brightly coloured plates, dishes and pots. How the hell they managed to eat like this every night was beyond me. I'd never seen so much food in one place—other than a party that is, and this definitely wasn't that. I felt like my eyes were gonna pop out of my head for Christ's sake.

I shifted a little in my seat and glanced sideways at Jay who had his elbows on the edge of the table, his chin rested on his fist—and he was staring right at me. “Yeah, I do.”

Baloo, Jay's dog, which was a giant black and tan Great Dane, slumped on the floor next to me, his nose twitching as his eyes kept flicking from Monica to the table. He was probably waiting for her to leave the room for more than a couple of minutes before he lunged at the table and polished the lot off.

Jay's dad, David, walked into the room, a cold beer in his hand. The T-shirt he had on stretched over his overly wide chest. The smile he had for Monica made me wish I was somewhere else right at that moment. Damn, that was not for public consumption. The moment his eyes slid to mine, a sneer built on his lips and his own eyes narrowed on me. It was official, that man did not like me one bit.

“Rudi,” he acknowledged with a curt nod.

“David.” I blinked at him innocently.

Yup, the sneer stayed in place.

“Stop it,” Monica snapped and sat down to the left of David and directly across from me. She smiled brightly, her blue eyes twinkling. “It's nice to have you over, Rudi.”

Jay groaned next to me. "Please don't start."

"It's nice to be invited, Monica. Thank you."

She hushed Jay with a wave of her hand and glanced back at me. "Oh, it's no biggie. After what you did for our Jay, you're welcome anytime," she gushed and handed a big spoon to David who rolled his eyes and stood up to start serving the shepherd's pie from the roast tin. Once we all had a big splat of pie on our plates, we passed around the other dishes. By the time I put the last one down, my plate was overflowing.

Jay leaned over and whispered in my ear, "You don't have to eat it all."

I couldn't even if I tried. My body wasn't made for food like this. "I'm that obvious, huh?"

He snickered and started eating. "A little."

"Rudi, honey," Monica shuffled the gravy boat a little, "can you pass the salt?"

My eyes went wide and a choked laugh caught in my throat. If I'd have had a mouthful of food, it would have sprayed across the table. I zipped my eyes to Jay and found his eyes just as wide and comical, his lips rolled together to stop from laughing. He dropped his fork on his plate with a heavy clatter. He couldn't hold it for long before a high-pitched laugh burst from his throat. I just couldn't help it. The more I tried to hold my laugh inside, the more it wanted to come free. Seconds later and with watery eyes, giggles erupted from my mouth. We both fell into each other and laughed like crazies. I turned away from him when I couldn't look at his face anymore and nearly fell off my chair. Actually, I did. My hand shot out to grab the table, but I missed it. I slipped right off the edge of the freaking chair and hit the floor with a dull thud. Baloo let out a yelp and quickly shuffled out of the way. When I remained on the floor, the dog trotted back over to me and began to wag his stubby tail, thinking it was playtime. The dog pounced when I held my hands up and started licking my face to death, leaving trails of slobber coating my face. That set Jay off even more. He bent over my chair so his head was hanging off the edge. A thin line of drool dripped from his mouth as he struggled to breathe.

From what I could see of him, damn, he looked fuckable and cute.

"Stop," I gasped and pushed at the big dog to get the hell off me. Shit, he weighed a tonne. Leaning past Baloo, I playfully slapped at Jay's head. "Move."

“Can’t,” he panted and slumped onto the wood even more, his chest shaking with intense laughter.

Monica’s head appeared around the edge of the table, a bright smile on her face. “Are you two okay?”

I blew out a long breath and wiped at my eyes with my hands then plucked a napkin from the table and washed the dog slobber off my face. Pushing up from the floor, I shook out my legs, straightening my jeans and T-shirt up before nudging Jay to move over. He calmed a little, well enough to also wipe his eyes and sit up straight. I told Baloo to move away with a sweep of my foot. I’d give the dog a sausage or something later on when no one was watching.

“When you two are finished,” Jay’s dad said. His voice was hard and stern. He was not amused. His eyes burned into both me and Jay, burned enough to immediately snap us out of our laughing fit. We both cleared out throats and settled back into our chairs.

“Sorry, Dad,” Jay mumbled. Me, I said nothing. I had a feeling I should have apologised, but there was something in David’s eyes that unsettled me. I didn’t know if it was a judgement that he’d already made of me or dislike, but it was something and not a good something either. Part of me though, rebelled against him whilst the other part of me silently respected the man for being a dad to Jay, a dad he obviously had a lot of love for and his own bout of respect for.

Silence filled the room as we ate. I got a quarter of the way through mine before I had to stop. For as long as I could remember, I’d never eaten as well. I looked down at my plate and wondered whether it would be rude to ask if I could take the rest home. Penguin would thrive on eating good, wholesome food like this. Deciding that would be a good idea, I set what was left on my plate into a neat pile and pushed it aside.

David cleared his throat across the table from me and took a sip of his beer. “So, Rudi,” he smiled even though it looked mean as hell, “how old are you?”

“Dad,” Jay interrupted.

“No.” I placed my hand on his arm, giving it a little squeeze. “It’s okay.” I looked back up at David and caught his eyes narrow and his teeth grind at where my hand rested on Jay’s arm. I snatched it back and settled it in my lap instead. “I’m twenty years old.”

David nodded and sipped more of his beer. “What do you do for work?”

I swallowed nervously. I knew this would come up eventually. I shifted in my seat a little first. "I work part-time at the barber's." It wasn't a lie but it wasn't the truth either. There was no way in hell I was gonna tell them the whole truth. They'd kick me out on my arse in a second, and that would be after they'd all let me know how much of a dirty bahookie I was.

"Part-time only?" He frowned. "You don't work full-time? Why not?"

My mouth opened and closed. I wondered whether I should let it slip about Penguin, but by the expectant looks on all their faces, I decided against it. Instead, I said, "Yeah, only part-time. I have to take care of my mum the other times."

Monica's face changed from brightly smiling to one of sympathy. She reached across the table and grabbed my hand, giving it a little squeeze. "That must be difficult."

She had no idea.

I nodded and moved my hand away. I was uncomfortable with how touchy-feely these people were. In my world, people weren't like this.

David's fingers idly skimmed his beer bottle. I knew he wanted to ask me more, probably a shitload more questions, but he kept his mouth shut. For that, I was immensely relieved. I had a feeling that if David Bruins wanted to know something, he'd get to the bottom of it.

"Okay." Monica stood up from the table and began to gather plates. "Time for dessert."

"Let us do that," David quickly offered.

Taking his lead, both me and Jay jumped up and grabbed plates, taking them to the kitchen. Whilst Jay scraped, I loaded the dishwasher. "Thanks," Jay whispered as he came up beside me, loading the cutlery into the little pots.

"Why are you thanking me?" I asked, whispering back, knowing full well Monica was over the other side humming to herself as she prepared another load of plates.

"My dad can be pretty intrusive and come across as domineering." He shrugged. "I know he can be overbearing, too, but he's only looking out for me."

"I understand." I stood up and eyed the single plate that was left. Jay reached for it but I stopped him with a hand on his arm. How the hell was I supposed to say I wanted to take it home for Penguin?

Monica saved me. She moved to the fridge, eyeing the plate at the same time. Her intelligent, blue eyes flicked between me and the food and back again. "You want me to save that for you, Rudi?"

A sigh of relief left me then. "Please."

She patted my shoulder. "No worries."

I waited till Jay was finished with the cutlery to close the dishwasher door. After I did that, I stood dumbfounded; I didn't know what to do next. I moved out of the way for Jay to take over.

Jay took my hand and pulled me out into the hallway. I quickly looked around to make sure we were alone because he obviously wanted to say something to me. Under the wall lights, his hair appeared almost golden. I felt the needy urge to run my hands through it, just to feel how soft it really was. His green eyes glowed too, showing off the real, deep colouring. He really was gorgeous and seriously lickable and definitely fuckable.

"What's up?" I asked when we both continued to stare at each other. Damn, he had the strength to make me feel like a silly teenager all over again. Usually, I had confidence that bounded out of me, but with him, it just seemed to sail completely out of the window, leaving me feeling abandoned in the big, deep blue sea.

His mouth opened and closed a few times before he moved on closer to me so our bodies were just mere inches apart. Being this close though, I could smell his aftershave and his fresh smell that did things to my body. Taking a deep breath, he licked his bottom lip slowly as he shifted from one foot to the other. "I like you, Rudi."

Well shit. I wasn't expecting him to just come out and say it.

Smiling a little, I moved on closer to him, filling the gap so the front of our bodies touched, and because I just couldn't help it, I gently ran my hands through his hair, feeling the softness wisp over my fingers. I closed my eyes and scratched my nails subtly along the top of his scalp. Images assaulted my mind, images of my hands running through Jay's hair as he went down on me, sucking me into his throat.

My eyes popped open when I heard a needy moan. Looking directly into bright, green eyes, I leaned in even further, feeling my heart kick up, and my cock starting to harden behind the zipper of my jeans. My eyes flicked between his green ones and his oh-so-tempting lips that so needed a good lick and a bite.

If I could just...

We were centimetres apart when a throat cleared behind us. Like guilty kids getting caught doing something they shouldn't, we jumped apart and looked towards Monica who stood at the kitchen door with her hands on her hips. Her rosy cheeks and embarrassed smile gave her away that she'd been there a while.

"You're both missing dessert."

Chapter Eight

“Let me show you around.” Jay grasped my hand in his. He seemed to like doing that a lot. I looked down at our joined hands as he pulled me out of the dining room, down the hall and to the stairs, which we climbed, Baloo following behind us. The contrast of our skin colours was breath-taking to look at. My hands were almost female-looking whilst Jay’s, were rough and had calloused little points all over them where he’d worked for a living. With Jay being a blond too, his skin was naturally lighter than mine. Yes, he had a suntan, but he was still relatively pale compared to my olive-toned skin.

“This is Monica and Dad’s room,” Jay said offhandedly as we passed a closed, dark wooden door at the top of the stairs.

Pulling Jay to a stop outside another closed door, I made him turn to face me. “You don’t call Monica mum?”

Jay smiled and shook his head. “Nah, she’s not my mum.”

“She’s not?”

“No.” He carried on until we came to a lighter wooden door that was on the jar. He pushed it all the way open and switched the light on. “This is my room.” He walked inside and splayed his arms wide, a big grin on his face.

I moved inside slowly, my eyes darting over his bare, pale-blue painted walls to the big double bed with black headboard and frame, to the unpacked boxes stacked by the windows. “You haven’t unpacked yet?”

A blush stole over the cute guy’s face. Jay backed up until he slumped down onto his bed and patted the space next to him. I moved over and sat down too. “I’ll be honest with you,” Jay said. “When Dad told me we were moving, I was kind of hoping that I would move with him to Southend then kind of move into my own place, not actually *in with him*.”

“Why didn’t you then?”

Baloo jumped up on the bed wobbling the both of us. “No, Baloo.” Jay clicked his fingers and pointed to the floor. “You know better.” When the dog jumped down and settled at our feet, he carried on. “Because I don’t have enough savings saved up. I have about seventy percent of the whole amount I need from the work I’ve done for the last couple of years with Dad, but renting in Southend is just as bad as London—or so I hear.”

Again, just like the car business and him having a dad, a shard of jealousy pushed through my body making me shift uncomfortably on the bed. I wondered just for a split second what it would be like to have my own place, where I could actually go to bed without a little three-foot munchkin burrowing into my side and waking me up in the morning with her small, little snores. But then, reality slammed me back down to earth again with a great big splat. That was never going to happen. One, I didn't have the money or availability like that, and two, I didn't have the support network Jay clearly had.

Heavy, thick jealousy squirmed its way through my body even more. It burned like a bitch and even turned the warming food over in my stomach this time. I jumped up from the bed and moved quickly to the door. I threw it open and began down the hall to the stairs.

"Hey," Jay shouted and raced after me. He grabbed onto my arm and yanked me backwards to face him. "What the hell, Rudi?"

From the corner of my eye—because I couldn't look directly in his face without feeling the green-eyed monster taking over, making me angry—I glanced at him for a second and saw the confusion and slight hurt in his green depths. "I'm sorry," I whispered and snatched my arm away.

Our feet thumped down the hardwood stairs, making enough racket that David and Monica appeared with worried frowns on their faces. "What's the matter? It sounded like a herd of bloody elephants were trampling down the stairs," Monica said as she dried her hands on a tea towel, which lay over one of her shoulders.

"Nothing," I quickly shook my head and reached for the tubs of food that Monica had prepared for me earlier on that I'd left by the stairs. I stopped in front of Jay's parents and held out my hand, begging it silently in my mind to hold steady. "Thank you for the invitation into your home and the food."

David looked down at my hand then back up at Jay who stood silently on the stairs. "What the fuck is going on?"

"Nothing," I repeated.

"I don't know," Jay answered at the same time.

Monica opened her mouth then closed it again. She did this about three times before sighing heavily and patting David on his shoulder. "Drop Rudi home, David."

"But—" he sputtered.

“Now.” There was no messing with that tone.

The big man sighed with frustration and grabbed his keys from the hall table. He then opened the front door without a word and walked out. Obviously, he expected me to follow.

“Rudi, please stop.” Jay’s dejected, hurt voice made me stop in my tracks. I wanted to turn around I really did, but I couldn’t. With my hand on the doorknob, I dropped my head and let out a little breath. “Please, Rudi.”

Swallowing hard, I squeezed my eyes shut and said, “I’ll call you, Jay.”

Ignoring his protests, I slammed the door after me and walked down the path to where my bike was locked up. Digging through my pockets for keys, I shuffled the tubs, nearly dropping them, until I realised that my hands were shaking too much to hold them and unlock my bike at the same time. I set them on the ground and knelt down onto my knees and let my head hang. I could feel a nasty as hell headache coming on.

I couldn’t believe what I’d just done.

“Don’t bother with that, boy.” David’s deep voice boomed from behind me. Turning quickly on my knees, I glanced over at the truck idling in the drive. David waved the hand that hung out of the window towards the back. “Throw the bike in the bed and get your fucking arse in my truck.”

I gritted my teeth and narrowed my eyes at him. “I don’t need a lift home.” I left off the “thanks” at the end. I’d cycled the five odd miles here; I could do that home too.

“Boy,” he warned and tapped his hand against the side of the door. His ring dinged against the metal.

I wasn’t *his* boy, so therefore I didn’t have to listen to anything he said.

Ignoring him, I unlocked my bike and grabbed the tubs up in my arms, holding them in a bunch under one arm whilst I began to steer the bike with the other. Okay, it was hard as hell to concentrate and ride at the same time with my head banging and all thoughts of Jay raging through it, but I did it until a big silver truck pulled up beside me.

“You’re one stubborn little shit, you know that?” David hissed.

“I told you,” I snapped and just managed to dodge a lamppost that suddenly popped out of nowhere. “I don’t need a lift home.”

Then just my luck, the heavens started to open up. Big fat drops of water fell over me, drowning me in seconds. The green and white stretch T-shirt I'd worn was now see-through and my jeans were stuck to my legs making it hard to peddle. The rain was so heavy, I could barely see in front of me.

"See." I could hear the smile in Jay's dad's voice. "Someone up there agrees with me."

Stopping the bike, I huffed and sent a glare to the man that disliked me with something fierce, plus I didn't feel too dizzy about him myself. "Will you shut up if I get in?"

"No, not particularly."

Well at least he was honest; you had to give him that!

Huffing again, I gave up. Walking over to the truck, I shoved the tubs at David through the window and walked my bike to the back of the truck, lifted it up and settled it slowly into the bed then ran around to the passenger side and lifted myself up into the seat, slamming the door closed after me.

"See," David crowed and shoved the tubs back at me. "If you'd have done that in the beginning, you wouldn't be a drowned rat right about now." He reached into the back seat and grabbed a clean cream-coloured towel and shoved it at me with a grunt.

"I was fine without your help."

David snorted in disagreement but said nothing else. When we reached town, he asked for directions. I told him to stop a street before my own. Turning to open the door, he grabbed my wrist in a firm grip, making me turn back to look at him.

"I understand, you know," he said. Now his voice was completely different. His eyes, so much like Jay's, were sincere, I could tell that at least.

My brows drew together as I let my hand fall from the door back to my lap. "You understand what, exactly?"

"You and what you're doing."

A snort left me then. "I don't think so."

No one understood. No one ever took the time to understand how complicated, how unfair my life actually was. No, I wasn't dramatic about it. Hell, I didn't need to be. I didn't need people feeling sorry for me, pitying me. I needed nothing, nothing from no one.

"I understand more than you know," he said with utter conviction.

That just seemed to wind me up even more. I snapped my head towards him, feeling my blood pressure beginning to build along with the coil in my stomach beginning to tighten. "You understand fuck all. People like you have your own life, your own business, your own perfect little family. You people," I sneered, "don't give a fuck about people like me."

"That's where you're wrong," he shouted in my face. "I was you once upon a time. That's why I can see it." He rubbed an agitated hand across his shaved head. "I saw it the moment I laid my eyes on you. I've been where you are, and I know it's not a nice place to be, Rudi."

"Whatever."

"Don't even go there," he growled, his hand tightening on the steering wheel at the same time. "Don't go there with me; the attitude doesn't become you, Rudi."

"Again," I repeated, "you don't know anything. You think you know, but you don't." I reached for the door and my tubs and pushed the heavy thing open. Sliding off the seat, I landed on the ground—in the middle of a great big bloody puddle that came up over my anklebones. With a groan because my boots were acting like sponges and soaking the water up, I turned to slam the door as I muttered a "thank you".

With my bike in my hand, the tubs back under my arm and very wet feet, I watched—with a heavy head, a thickly beating heart and a coil in my stomach so strong, it burned like a bitch—David slowly drive away. I watched until his little red lights disappeared from sight before turning around and walking my bike towards home.

"Rudi, come sweep over here," Barry instructed as he moved to the other black leather seat. I'd already prepped the old guy who sat waiting for Barry to shave him with a cutthroat. The old, worn leather pouch was waiting on the counter, along with his old-fashioned shaving foam, a bowl of warm water and clean, fresh-scented towels.

Moving to do as Barry asked, I grabbed the multi-coloured broom from where it leaned against the wall and began to sweep around the first leather bucket chair he'd used just minutes before. I swirled the brush this way and that way, collecting all the loose hair and gathered it in a pile. As I bent down to

pick up the dustpan and brush, I felt my phone vibrate in my front pocket. It had been like that all morning.

All morning, I'd watched nothing but Jay's name flicker across my phone. I knew why he was calling, and I felt ridiculously awful about it. He was calling to apologise, leaving apologetic text messages for something that wasn't even his bloody fault. It was my own stupid, completely arrogant fault. I knew the polite thing to do was answer the poor guy, put him out of his misery, but I couldn't for some reason.

The main reason was because sorry—the word and the meaning—didn't come very easy to me. The second main reason that was pretty close to the first, was that my balls weren't feeling particularly big today and there was only one person to blame for that.

Giovanni.

Giovanni and Jay didn't belong in the same sentence let alone the same set of thoughts.

My second set of repayment was due tonight, and I could honestly say that I was not looking forward to it. I'd already suffered with an upset stomach for most of last night and the shits due to nervousness. His words from the last time he'd taken me roughly against his kitchen counter kept going over and over in my mind, never letting it settle for more than a minute. All I could see were the old times of me on my knees with his thick cock jutting down my throat, taking my breath away, threatening to choke me...

"Rudi," Barry barked making me jump.

I whipped around, knocking my shoulder into the leather bucket chair's arm. I grimaced when a dull pain shot through it. Rubbing and flexing my arm, I looked up at Barry who was watching me with plain concern written on his aged, ragged face. "You okay, kid?"

Plastering the fakest smile on my face, I shrugged my shoulders and feigned indifference. I even managed to get a cheeky wink in there too for good measure. "I'm fine, Baz. No worries here."

His old, wise eyes narrowed on me before he sighed and shook his head. He reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out a handful of change and motioned me over. "Take this," he mumbled and stuffed the money into my palm. "Go buy us some food with it."

"But—"

“Save it,” he snapped. “Ever since you came in here this morning, you’ve been worth shit. Get out, get some food into that body of yours and come back with a better head on your bloody shoulders.”

I wanted to argue with him but deep down, I knew he was right and that just made me feel even more like shit. Shuffling my feet, I grabbed the broom, settling it against the wall by the door and headed outside. The sunshine was bright, well too bright for my sleep-deprived eyes. I slipped the sunglasses down from the top of my head and made my way down to the cafe that made the best hot drinks ever in Southend. I didn’t need food; I needed a good old-fashioned cup of tea. Maybe that would settle my stomach a little?

Opening the door to the cafe, I stopped and inhaled long and deep. I let out a little sigh at the smell that reverberated through me. There was nothing better than smelling a cafe with freshly cooked bacon sandwiches and coffee brewing.

I made my way past the tables, turning to the side here and there until I stopped at the counter and waited in line behind an older woman who had a fussy toddler with her who wanted everything then nothing at all.

Even though I felt like shit, a small smile tickled up on my face. Penguin was exactly the same. When I’d take her out to the shop with me, she’d run to all the sweet jars and buckets and start picking this up and that up, then when I’d ask her what she wanted, she’d say, “Nothing.”

Kids, they were so indecisive.

I stepped up to the counter when she moved out of the way and smiled at the resident waitress, cook and all round do-everything-woman, Lou. She ran the place along with her husband who worked in the back and their daughter, Lacey, who ran around like a busy bee all day.

“Hey, stranger,” she smiled back at me and leaned across the counter to pat my hand once before turning to make my tea, a take-away coffee for Barry and two bacon sandwiches—one with brown sauce and another with red sauce and pepper. Not once did she ask for my order, that’s how well she knew me, but I should have told her I didn’t want my sandwich at least.

“Hey, Lou, how’s it going?”

She set the first polystyrene cup on the counter and shrugged. “A little slow. Tourist season is coming up so things should pick up. Though, I have noticed a couple of builders who look mighty fine coming in for their breakfast every morning.” She leaned in again when she set Barry’s coffee down. “I think one

or a couple of them have the hots for Lacey. I tell you," she shook her head even though she had a sparkle in her eyes, "those men, their eyes follow her little tush around this place like she was made of gold or something."

I pursed my lips and nodded. "Lacey is beautiful." I didn't do birds and I didn't do fanny but that didn't mean I couldn't appreciate the feminine form.

Lou agreed. "That she is. Oh look." She glanced at something over my shoulder. "Here they come for their lunch now."

With my brows pulled together, I looked over my shoulder and sucked in a breath when I saw a bunch of really hot guys—actually fucking hot guys—covered in dust from head-to-foot enter the cafe. Their very nice, much pumped muscles were practically breaking through the holes in their T-shirts and trousers. However, the man that drew my attention the most because he was not only the most gorgeous of them all, but because he was the smallest—was Jay. He was laughing at something one of the bigger guys said to him. His smile looked so good, his lips spread around the shape of his teeth, the small crinkles at the sides of his eyes and—oh God, the colour of his eyes when mirth joined them was just intoxicating.

Needing to take a breath, I did and licked my lips at the same time my eyes drifted down to his T-shirt that was ripped in at least three different places and stretched across his thinly muscled chest. I went down further to his tracksuit bottoms, which showed off a nice package that wobbled and swung a little when he moved. I followed that down to his steel toe-capped booted feet. Even though he was filthy and the clothes so needed to be thrown in the bin, he looked sexy as f'ing hell.

A throat clearing drew my attention back to the counter where Lou stood with a raised brow and a smirk playing at her lips. "See something you like?"

Instead of answering her nosy question, I leaned in and asked, "They the builders you were talking about?"

"Sure are." She nodded in their direction. "There's more in the morning. Those five though are regular as clockwork. Which one has got your pick?"

"No one," I mumbled as I dug around in my pocket for money and handed the correct amount over. Dumping the rest back in my trousers, I picked up my selection and headed for the door.

My mind screamed at me to just look over at him one more time, take his smile and keep it deep in my memory until I had the balls enough to talk to

him... but I couldn't. Guilt—even more guilt than I had already—would eat me alive.

No, I'd deal with Jay after I'd dealt with Giovanni.

Chapter Nine

I stood across from Giovanni's house listening to the roars and heavy, drug-filled laughter and crude comments coming from the men inside. They were in the back garden no doubt drinking and shooting the night away awaiting their entertainment... me. Part of me was fuming because even though Giovanni had said he'd wanted my mouth, what he hadn't said was that there was going to be company.

My eyes squeezed closed when I remembered the last time he'd made me do something with other men present... no, I couldn't even let my mind open that memory up. I knew if I did, I'd be seeing it for days whether my eyes were closed or not.

Rubbing the goose bumps that had just popped up on my arms, I shifted from one foot to another, debating about what to do. I knew if I went in there, I would never be the same again, but I also knew that if I didn't, Giovanni would hunt me down and make me pay.

The question, and it was a very difficult one, was did I go or didn't I?

Whilst debating, I kept to the shadows of the bushes and paced back and forth. Occasionally, I let my eyes fall back to the house, watching for movement. It was the ringing of my mobile that brought me to a stop. I sucked in a shuddering breath at Giovanni's name that appeared flashing across the screen. Seeing the man's name set my teeth on edge.

Go, or don't go.

Over and over again, those four words rushed through my mind, giving me an intense headache with their forcefulness. My head pounded in time with my blood pressure. My forehead felt like a hammer was banging on the front of it. Dropping down into a crouch, I rubbed my temples as I peered up through the thick bush.

Go, or don't go.

Making a decision on the spot, I screwed my eyes closed and pressed the red button, ending his call immediately. A sense of relief came over me, loosening my tightened limbs. Relief stole through my blood, entered my lungs and freed some more air for me, but it all went to shit when I heard the deep booming voice of Giovanni scream out my name in frustration across the road. All of the tenseness and worry seeped back into me, flooding me with the stuff.

Silencing my phone, I stuffed it back into my pocket, pushed up from my crouch and left. My legs moved quickly and of their own accord. I didn't even bother looking back over my shoulder, I just couldn't. It wasn't until I stopped at the park did I realise where I was. I walked around the pond, two, three, four times trying to clear everything in my mind. All throughout though, I could feel the vibrations of my phone in my pocket. Ignoring it all, I kept walking. I paid no attention to people who passed me, dogs being walked who ran up to me for a little scratch behind the ears, nothing. I walked over to the kids' swings, dumped my backside into the black moulding and swung back and forth, my boots scuffing along the ground.

My eyes narrowed around the park. It was silent all of a sudden. I couldn't even hear the ripples of water anymore. That was what I wanted. Just silence so I could think without something else interrupting.

Dropping my head into my hands, I held it there until tiredness came on, along with a shiver from the semi-cold night. Wrapping my arms around my middle, I made my way home. Hoping that when I got in, I'd claim a bath then hit the sack. My head was killing me.

Fifteen minutes it took for me to walk home from the park. I decided against going the long way so I hit the shortcuts instead.

Eying my bike in the front garden and noting that it was still locked up, I dug through my pockets for my keys and pushed the gold, shoe-shop copy into the front door's lock and went to turn it only for it *not* to turn. Frowning, I slipped the key out, held it up to the streetlight to check it was the right one and slid it back into the lock.

The door didn't unlock. The fucking thing didn't even budge.

Huh, that was strange.

Thinking maybe the bottom lock was on—which was highly unlikely—I put the Chubb key in next and again, that one didn't turn either. Trying both keys again—multiple times—I kicked at the door when they didn't work. Bending down so my knees rested against the concrete step, I pushed up the letterbox and peered through it seeing and hearing the small fourteen-inch portable on. So at least someone was in.

“Mum,” I shouted and slapped my hand against the door. I called her name three more times before she appeared standing on the other side of the door, not

bothering to open it for me. “What the hell?” I mumbled and banged my fist against the door. “Mum, let me in.”

Mum didn't move. “I can't do that, Rudi.”

“What?” What the fuck had she put into her body now? “What do you mean?”

She bent down so she was face-to-face with me. Her eyes were glassy and her pupils were pinpricks, so I knew she'd had a score recently. “You didn't stick to your arrangement, Rudi.” Her speech was slurred a little, too.

My face screwed up in confusion. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Giovanni,” she answered simply.

Swallowing hard, I shifted my knees a little because the pain of them resting on the concrete was actually pretty uncomfortable. Gripping the dirty chrome letterbox tighter in my hand, I leaned into the door and gritted out, “Let me in, Mum.”

“I can't.”

Blowing out a long breath, I told her, “If you don't let me, I'll kick the fucking door down.” And I would too. This was my fucking home for fuck's sake and Penguin—oh fuck, Penguin—was upstairs waiting for me. I needed to get inside; there were no ifs, ands, or buts about it.

Mum pushed up onto her feet and moved away from the door enough for me to see the whole length of her. She crossed her arms over her non-existent chest, a smug look on her face. “You do that, and I'll call the police, Rudi.”

“You wouldn't.”

“Oh, yeah I would.” She even tapped her foot for fuck's sake. “Giovanni, see, was very helpful when you didn't turn up tonight. Of course, he was pissed as hell and said you'd pay when he found you. Obviously, I told him I'd send you back because as you know, Rudi,” she said and moved back closer to me and the door, “it's for the best.”

“You're off your fucking rocker, woman. Open the Goddamned door right now.”

“No.”

I pushed myself up and kicked at the door with my booted foot. When it didn't move, I moved a few steps backwards, raised my leg and charged

forward, kicking at the weakened part of the door that had already been kicked in previously by drug dealers and such. On the third kick, I heard my mum's warning of calling the police ring through the PVC.

"You stupid woman," I rolled my eyes. "You're gonna call the police with drugs in the house. Are you entirely fucking stupid?"

That was met with silence.

I smiled smugly and charged at the door again, this time though I kicked and punched it at the same time. A sickening crunch sounded and immediate pain shot through my left hand. I gripped it tight to my chest as I spun around and grimaced, biting my lip when intense pain radiated along my index and middle fingers to gather around my wrist as I moved it a little. Shit, I was sure I'd broken something.

"Open the fucking door," I screamed out through gritted teeth, not giving a fuck about the neighbours or how late it was. I was losing my temper and fast.

"No."

Intense anger burned through me, making my body vibrate with it. I paced up and down the garden path, kicking the shit litter out of the way as I went. My eyes continuously flicked up to my bedroom window, wondering if Penguin was okay.

When nothing continued to happen, as in my mum wouldn't open the frigging door, I moved back towards it and leaned a shoulder against the dirty PVC, trying a different approach with her. "Listen, Mum," I started and eased my voice so it was softer even though I was mad as hell and hurting like crazy. "I couldn't go through with Giovanni tonight, alright? I'll go tomorrow." That lie just rolled straight off my tongue. Like fuck I was going back.

Silence.

"I'll even..." I had to shut my mouth to think about what I could use to lie to her with. "I'll even do him an extra time; get a better deal for you than the one he offered, how's that?"

"You would?"

Bingo!

"Of course," I readily agreed even though my mind screamed that I was crazy stupid for even suggesting the fucking thing.

When more silence met me, nervousness set in. She still hadn't opened the door, and I had no clue what the hell she was doing inside there. Sliding down the door till I landed on my backside, I flexed my hand and decided maybe I hadn't broken it after all. I'd probably just sprained it or something. Pulling open the letterbox again, I peered inside. I eyed her on the phone as she paced back and forth, her eyes continuing to skip to the door every so often. When she caught my eyes, she quickly murmured something into the phone and snapped it closed.

"That was Giovanni, he's on his way."

My whole insides froze. I pushed back up to my knees, gritting my teeth at the pain radiating through them and my hand in conjunction. "Mum, please." I couldn't believe I was begging her for Christ's sake. "Don't do this."

"Too late," she shrugged and fidgeted a little. "You know how this works, Rudi. You made an arrangement, remember?"

How the hell could I forget?

Rubbing the hand that didn't hurt up and down my face, I blew out a breath. "Mum, open the door, eh?"

"No."

Roughly, I rubbed my tired and aching eyes with the heels of my hands. It was just one thing after another, it really was. "Mum," I said tiredly, all the fight leaving me. "Open the door."

"No, Rudi," she screeched.

"You'll regret this, Mother, you really will," I threatened. Standing up, I bit my lip and walked around to the front of the house and peered up at my bedroom window just one more time. It was closed up all tight, just like I had left it. Damn. I walked back around to the side of the house and leaned back a little on my heels, scanning the high fence to the back garden. I could probably climb that, jump over, land in the back garden and climb up the drainpipe, squeezing myself through the bathroom window. It would be a tight fit but I could do it, I was sure.

With a nod because that was a bloody good idea, I glared at the dirty front door and grabbed my bike from the front garden before Giovanni turned up. Steering my bike was difficult with one hand but I managed.

Just as I got to the top of the road, I pulled my bike up against the brick wall and peered around it. What I saw made a shudder run through me. Giovanni's

big, black car—the same car from the other day—stopped outside my house and said horrible fat fucker got out and went to my house. The door was immediately opened for him.

I'd come back when everyone was gone and when none of them was expecting it.

Chapter Ten

Hours I'd sat on my bike down by the beach, watching the tide roll in and roll back out again, letting the sea-salted air sweep into my lungs and back out again. All the while I did this, I continuously went over my plans front-to-back, back-to-front. I knew exactly what I was going to do and how I was going to do it. I just needed to get in. Once I did that, I could worry about everything else afterwards.

When I thought enough time had passed, I rode back home making sure to park my bike at the top of the road. When it was locked to the green lamppost, I quickly moved down the road, my eyes scanning the area continuously. Part of me actually worried that Giovanni was gonna jump out of the bush and grab me or something, but I waved that thought away. Giovanni wasn't like that. No, he was like a slithery snake. He would wait until it was time to strike before coming.

Slowing my approach, I bit my lip and squeezed my okay hand into a fist as I peered around a set of hedges that belonged to the house next door. My eyes scanned the living room window—all the lights were out. Good. My eyes just had to pop up to the top window. A little breath left me when I saw nothing had changed. That was good, real good.

Taking a deep breath and scanning the immediate area one more time, I moved. I ran down the path on the balls of my feet, praying that my boots weren't sounding too much. Stopping at the front door, I pulled my keys out, holding them tightly in my hand, trying to subdue the clanging of the metals. Once I had them stilled, I inserted the key in the top lock and turned.

It didn't.

Damn.

Withholding the need to bang my screwed-up fists against the door, I gritted my teeth and pocketed my keys again then walked over to the fence. I raised my hands, skimming them along the top of the wood and gave it a little tug, testing its strength. I nodded to myself when it barely moved.

Walking backwards a little, I gave a run and jump and latched onto the wood, levering myself up and on top of the fence. Blowing out little puffs of air, I gripped the wood, squeezing my jaw tight when pain shot through my

injured hand. Ignoring the throbbing, I twisted and swung my other leg over and slipped down until my feet hit the squished grass with a dull thud.

The garden was so dark that I could barely see in front of my face, but luckily, I knew where everything was. I moved quickly to the back door that led to the kitchen. My hand gripped the handle and gave it a little wrench.

The damn thing was locked too.

I leaned backwards with my hands on my hips as I scanned the back of the house. The drainpipes were old, so they hadn't yet been replaced with plastic ones. Thank fucking God. Plastic ones wouldn't have held my weight at all, and then I'd be truly fucked.

Moving towards the pipe that came from the toilet, I gripped it in my hands and gave it an experimental jerk just like I'd done with the fence. Once I was satisfied that it wasn't going to pull from the brackets that held it in place, I climbed my way up the black pipe. My boots scraped against the bricks, no doubt ruining them even more. The skin of my knuckles became sore as they rubbed against the abrasive surface.

Once I reached the bathroom window, I gripped the dirty, sooty ledge, praying that the old thing held out. I just needed to get inside, and I could sort all this shit out.

Crawling up onto the little ledge, I stilled for at least a minute and blew out a long breath. Damn, my adrenaline was pumping, and my heart was throbbing intensely in my chest. Spittle flew from my mouth with every long exhale I took.

Rubbing the back of my hand across my mouth, I got up onto my knees and gripped the top tail window, giving it a little yank. I knew that because the window was so high from inside the bathroom, we couldn't reach it to close the handle, so for appearances sake, the window appeared closed but wasn't locked.

When the fucking thing wouldn't open, I swore a blue streak and pushed myself up against the window for more leverage. The grey T-shirt I wore brushed against the dirty window that seriously needed washing. My poor battered fingers were aching and sore as hell from the pressure against the white plastic moulding.

Eventually, the thing opened. I sat back on my knees very aware of the drop down behind me.

Now I had to figure out how to get through the window.

I stared at the inside of the bathroom and what little I could see of the passage beyond the door. If I could just get in there, then all this could be over. I'd explain—no, I'd shake my mum to death to get her to understand that what she was doing was fucking crazy.

Ten minutes later, I dropped down from the window and landed on my feet. I froze with my hands in the air wondering if anyone had heard me, but then I snorted to myself. If Giovanni had been around then no doubt my mum was high as a kite, and I could have kicked the freaking door in and she wouldn't have heard anything.

That was the story of my life. I probably went through all of that shit, acting like Tom Cruise with the little theme song going round and round in my mind—for absolutely nothing.

It didn't matter now anyhow though. I was in, just like I wanted.

Listening to my mum's heavy snores coming from her room, I rolled my eyes. Wiping my hands on my jeans and sniffing because my nose was running, I walked from the bathroom across the hall to where my bedroom was. I tried the door and noticed it was locked up tight. Good. I felt real bad for having to wake up Penguin, but I had to. I knew for a fact she would have locked herself in.

Knocking our secret code on the door, I waited something like fifteen minutes—my muscles tense as hell, my heart beating frantically in my chest—before I heard the locks disengage, and a sleepy-eyed Penguin appeared with her own stuffed penguin in the crux of her elbow.

The first thing I noticed was that she had that bloody dummy in her mouth and the nappy she had on was around her ankles, soaked with piss.

I growled to myself and berated myself over and over again as I moved into the room, taking her into my arms and closing the door behind us. I should have been here, should have been here to look after her, feed her, make sure she had a bath and change her nappy for her.

“You back, Rudi?” she croaked and buried her face against my neck.

“I'm back, Penguin.”

“You gone?” she whispered around the dummy.

Leaning over to switch the lamp on, I pulled her back a little and inched the dummy from her mouth. "I'm not gone, baby, I've just been really busy." Really, really busy trying to get back into my own home.

Nodding, she tried to burrow back into me, but I needed to change the nappy she wore. The stench of piss was strong. I eyed the nappies in the bin in the corner. Even though I'd been gone all day and I'd cleared yesterday's ones out, today's ones smelt strongly.

Changing her nappy, I gave her a wipe with a couple of baby wipes and whipped another clean nappy on her then picked her up so she clung to me like a monkey. "Is that better now?"

"Yes."

"Are you hungry?" I was starving, but Penguin needed to be sorted first.

"No, sleep." A yawn made her face squish together adorably. When she looked up at me, her blue eyes in the dim light were tired and worried. "Stay with me?"

Damn it all to hell, she just about broke my heart. Forgetting about needing food, I moved back on the bed. Sitting back against the headboard with her on my lap, I squeezed her tight to my chest. Running my sore hand through her hair, I listened to her little puffs of air fanning over my neck.

"I'll never leave you, Penguin. Never."

I just had to find a way to get out of all this shit.

"Coco Pops?" I asked Penguin as she shuffled into the kitchen behind me.

Rubbing her eyes with her small fists, she nodded and moved to where I stood, waiting patiently beside me. I made her a small bowl of the little chocolate balls and walked her to the two-person table that was scratched to hell and barely standing. Lifting her into the chair, I gave her a table spoon. "Try not to spill it, okay?"

"I try, Rudi."

"Good girl." Taking the dummy from her on the quick, I pocketed it and moved to switch the kettle on. As I was getting the bottle of bleach from under the sink because the sinkhole stunk, my mum shuffled into the kitchen and let out a little squeal when she caught sight of me. She whipped her head this way

and that way, eying the doors, obviously wondering how the hell I managed to get in.

I raised my brow at her as I opened the cupboard door and grabbed a cup. I'd need to do the washing up soon; we were beginning to run out of clean plates and cutlery. I'd wait until the bleach settled a little first though.

"What are you doing here?" she finally asked.

With my back to her, I said, "Didn't think you could keep me out, did you?"

"You broke your promise, Rudi."

I whipped around, a glare already on my face aimed directly at her. "I promised fuck all." Promises didn't exist in my world—well, unless you were Penguin that is, but everyone else's promises meant and were nothing, nothing at all.

Her shaking hand came up, a pointed finger jabbing at me. "You promised that if you and Giovanni... did whatever you do then everything would be okay."

My face screwed up in disbelief. "I don't know what the fuck you heard, but you heard wrong."

"I know what I heard," she screamed sounding like a spoiled child. "You had an arrangement and you broke it. I want you out."

A sour chuckle left me as I poured milk in my tea. I dumped the six pints to the side and stirred the tea bag in, watching little clouds of brown infuse with the white. "I'm not going anywhere."

"I want you out, Rudi. You're not welcome here."

I snorted. "I've never been welcome here."

"I'll just call Giovanni, then."

Even though my stomach muscles tightened at that, I'd had enough of the threats. I picked up my tea and settled my hip against the counter, facing her, feigning indifference. "Call him, tell him I'm here." My balls didn't feel as big as I said that. "Tell him I broke in and am feeding Penguin because you can't. Tell him to come and use me, abuse me because I won't take him voluntarily. He'll have to force me."

Her mouth snapped closed and tightened into a thin line. I could see the cogs turning in her drug-induced mind, trying to come up with threats, stories, and all-round bullshit to try to get me out or to do what she wanted.

It wasn't happening.

"For fuck's sake, Rudi," she screamed again. Her voice gave up halfway through. She cleared her throat and said quieter this time, "I don't want you here."

"I don't want to be here, but does it look like I have a choice?" I asked incredulously. "You think I want to be here with you?" I sneered and looked her up and down taking in her usual rumped and used state. "You think I want my baby sister to be here where you don't give a fuck about her? I don't think so."

"Take her then."

You could cut the silence in the room with a knife. A shocked gasp left my throat, and the tea in my hand spilled and splashed over the rim of the cup, burning my hand. Hissing, I dropped the cup onto the counter and stared at my mother with utter contempt.

"What did you just say?" I asked when I could gather enough breath.

She waved her thin, bony arm towards where Penguin was blissfully eating her Coco Pops. "Take her. She's only trouble anyway. Take her with you when you go."

"You can't be serious?" Just because I didn't want to be here, didn't mean I wanted to take Penguin away. Okay, I did want to take Penguin away, but only when I had a better, safer place to go. Right now, I had nowhere to go, nowhere safe.

"Oh, I am." She was shaking now, her hands idling scratching at her scabby elbows. I watched as scabs dropped to the floor one after the other and blood bloomed across her skin as her nails bit harder into her flesh the more she went on. Her eyes were wide and frantic, her jaw working back and forth. She truly was the picture postcard of a true junkie.

The lump in my throat was nearly unmovable. I didn't know why I was so shocked to hear that she could just easily sweep me and Penguin to the side—she'd done that enough to both of us already, but to hear her be so blunt about it, just cut deep like a knife.

"What if—"

My hand whipped up as I moved past her. I'd heard enough. "Save it."

"Rudi—"

Ignoring her, I moved to where Penguin was. Bless her; she sat patiently with her hands in her lap watching us. There was worry in her crystal-blue depths, more worry than should ever be there. Chocolate milk was all around her mouth and down the front of her bobbed pink nightdress, soggy balls of chocolate had gathered in her lap, too.

“Penguin,” I swept her up into my arms and quickly left the kitchen, hitting the stairs two at a time. “You wanna come out with me today?”

Her big, blue eyes went wide, excitement danced deep inside them taking out the worry. “Can go park?”

I debated this for a minute. “What about the beach?”

Penguin gasped and flung her arms around me. “Love you, Rudi.”

Chapter Eleven

“Not too far, Penguin,” I shouted and shifted in the sand as I watched Penguin play in the wet muck with her bucket and spade. The little imp had wormed a new pink set out of me as we’d walked down the seafront, but it was worth it to see the smile constantly on her face. She looked like a caged animal that’d been let free.

I watched for a little longer as another little girl came up to play with Penguin. Penguin at first seemed to not like the company. She seemed to shift away from the little girl, as if intimidated. I felt my teeth grinding together as I watched. That was my fault. If she was in school, other kids wouldn’t be an issue. But I knew the moment I took Penguin anywhere near a school, they’d call Social Services on me, and quicker than you could say “abracadabra.” Next thing you knew, they’d be crawling all over me. No doubt about it, they’d want to take Penguin away from me.

That couldn’t happen.

Satisfied when the little girl’s mum came up behind her and gave me a little smile and a nod, I relaxed back into the sand a bit, my elbows sinking into the yellow stuff. I glanced around, taking in the other toddlers with their families, the older couples walking their dogs and just people lounging around in the sand, soaking up the sun that had made an appearance. The sun was shining high and bright, which was a change, and there wasn’t a breeze to be had anywhere.

“I thought it was you.”

My body stilled at the sound of that voice. Slowly, my head lolled to the side and found Jay standing right next to me, his toes wiggling into the sand. My eyes stared at his bare feet then travelled slowly up his bare, hairy legs to the tight jean shorts he wore that ended just above his knees. I continued all the way up to his tight package that made my mouth water a little. My eyes roamed up further to the T-shirt he wore that showed off his trim waist. Then I moved on to his slick, muscled chest that looked oh-so-very-nice under the white stretch top he wore, which just so happened to hug his rounded, sculptured shoulders. Going up even further, I licked my lips when I saw that his jaw had been cleanly shaved and his lips were pink and inviting. His eyes though—guttled—were covered in dark glasses—expensive glasses. His dark-blond hair

was cut to a point and shaved with at least a number two at the sides and by the looks of it, around the back too.

“Rudi?”

My head snapped back. “Huh?”

Jay’s head tilted to the side as he slapped his hands on his hips, his black Dr Martens boots dangling from his wrist where they were tied together. “You’ve been ignoring me.”

It wasn’t a question. No, it was a point.

My mouth opened to deny it, but it was true. I’d ignored the guy because I was a fucking fool and a stupid-arse prick. I’d run from him, his house, his family and why, because I was jealous as hell and couldn’t deal with it. I knew that if I had stayed, I would have either said something that I couldn’t afford to take back or passed out from everything going on in my head.

“You’re right,” I admitted quietly. I hated admitting I was wrong or saying sorry—both hurt like a bitch. Also, it damaged my ego and pride a little. Not having a lot of both as it was, I couldn’t afford to give it away.

Jay pointed to the space next to me. “Can I sit?”

My eyes flicked to Penguin who was still off in her own little world of sea and sand. “Go for it.”

Dropping his boots first, Jay sat down with such grace; I self-consciously shifted and straightened a little. “Nice weather we’re having, huh?” Jay said absently as he scratched his nose and stretched his legs out, crossing them at the ankle.

I nodded and chewed on my lip a little. “I thought you were working?”

“I was,” he answered. “But Dad had some issue with a supplier and that set us back, so he said all of us can have the day off.”

“Huh.”

The silence between us was suffocating. I needed to apologise; I had to. There was a major part of me that really liked Jay. Okay, I didn’t know him very well, not very well at all, but something inside me when I was around him, settled. Something inside me, whatever it was, told me Jay was okay, he was good, but there was a little percent that still held me back and then there was the anger and jealousy I had to contend with too.

“Why’d you run, Rudi?” Once again, my mouth opened but this time it was to tell him the truth, but Jay cut me off by raising his hand. “No, don’t say it; I don’t think I could bear to hear you say it.” Jay’s jaw worked. “You don’t like me. Do you, Rudi?”

What the hell? “What?”

“That’s why you ran, isn’t it?”

“No, Jay.”

“No.” He shook his head and smiled, but it wasn’t one of his bright contaminating smiles. No, it was sad and a tad bitter. “Don’t say that, Rudi. Don’t bullshit me. I get it. I came on too strong. I mean, who saves someone from getting beat up then comes around their house for dinner, puts up with all the shit that you did with regards to my dad, then when I tell you that I like you and show you my room, you run. I understand.” He shrugged. “I came on too strong, I get that.”

Grabbing hold of his arm, I turned him a little so he faced me. “Where do you get all this shit from?”

Jay’s mouth opened and closed a couple of times before he snapped it closed. Snatching his arm back, he said, “You, that’s who. Me, my imagination, who the hell do you think? You’ve been ignoring me for days, Rudi.” He leaned forward and hissed, “Days, Rudi. My mind goes into overdrive. One day it’s your fault, next day it’s my fault, then the day after that, it’s everyone else’s fault.”

“I know,” I admitted quietly. “I’m sorry.” There I had said it.

A snort left Jay. “Sorry?”

My own brown eyes narrowed on him now. “I said I was sorry.”

“And what exactly are you sorry for?” he asked. His chin struck out as he crossed his arms over his chest. “Sorry for running out on me for no reason? Sorry for ignoring me, making me feel like I’d done something wrong? What, Rudi?”

I threw my hands up in the air as I pushed myself up and began to dust myself off. I could feel sand up my crack. *Ugh*. “Everything, okay? I’m sorry for it all.”

“Oh, no you don’t,” Jay growled and jumped up with me. He grabbed my forearm and spun me around to face him. “You’re not running on me again.”

“Look, Jay,” I ran my hand through my hair and licked my suddenly dry lips, “I do like you. I just didn’t have time to tell you. The reason I left... Well... uh... that’s my business, not yours. Just know that it wasn’t about you or anything you did. It’s me, not you.”

“Gee,” he said sarcastically. “That helps and makes me feel just flipping dandy.”

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever.”

As I turned away, Jay grabbed my arm again, yanked me forward towards him and slammed his mouth down onto mine. His arms wrapped around my body, holding me tightly to him as his soft lips pressed onto my own. As I opened my mouth on a shocked gasp, Jay went forward and swiped his tongue along the inside of my bottom lip then over the edge of my teeth.

My own tongue moved, consciously seeking his one out. Hesitantly, I let it forward and the tips of our tongues touched. My back arched a little and my hands that had been hanging limply at my sides snapped around Jay’s thinly muscled body and dragged him against me so from the tips of our toes to our noses, we were pressed together.

Moans left our throats when both of our mouths opened wider and our lips sealed together completely. I sent my tongue forward searching out his hot cavern, wanting just this once to taste the man that had been haunting my dreams, my mind, and my body. Just once I wanted to drag his taste into my own body and keep it, hold it, savour it.

The moment my tongue lathed against his lips, I was a goner.

Nothing had ever tasted better than Jay. Nothing I’d ever had in my mouth had tasted this ripe, this delicious, this *right*. A slight hint of mint with some sort of toffee-flavoured sweet, drifted off his breath and fanned against my lips.

Tilting my head to the side so I could go deeper, I thrust my tongue deep into his mouth, sweeping along the tips of his top teeth, feeling the semi-wonky one at the front. I swept my tongue along the insides of his cheeks and may even have felt his tonsils I went so far back.

We pulled apart with hungered groans and laboured breaths, our bodies hard pressed into each other. I could feel hot pressure on my hardened-as-a-rod cock. Glancing down at the small space barely between us, I saw Jay’s cock lying along his hip, pushing into my own.

“Damn,” I whispered as I let my hand drop from around Jay’s back. Smoothing it down to his hip, my fingers danced softly over the intensely hard lump. Thumbing the engorged tip through the thinning denim, I enjoyed listening to Jay’s sexy moan of more, of want, escape his mouth.

Glancing up at him, I bit my bottom lip when I saw that his glasses were missing. He threw his head back on a moan and flexed his hips into my hand. His red, ruddy lips were parted and puffy. I leaned forward and just had to lick at, suckle at his bottom lip, just once.

Jay’s lids opened as I pulled back, his grassy-green eyes were dark gems hidden within dark golden-blond coloured eyelashes. “Hi,” he said. His voice had turned all husky and deep.

I couldn’t help the chuckle that escaped. “Hi.”

“That was...”

A long breath left me then. “That was... damn fine.”

“Would it be strange and weird for me to say that I missed you?” Jay asked hesitantly. His hands ghosted over my bare chest, the tips of his fingers brushing against my taut, budded nipples. Little zaps of lust shot through my groin at the same time small droplets of pre-cum dribbled from my cock, soaking the top of my right thigh.

“No.” I shook my head and stepped back away from him, running my hands through my hair. If he touched me anymore, I was liable to come all over myself, which was... yeah! Bringing my hand back down again, I noticed it was trembling. God, what this man did to me. “That’s not weird at all.”

His face crinkled into a cute-as-fuck smile. “You missed me too?”

My mouth opened to tell him “fuck, yes” I had missed him like crazy even though I barely knew him, but Penguin’s high-pitched scream had me whipping around, frantically searching for her. I’d been so into Jay that I’d completely forgotten about her. How irresponsible was that?

“Penguin!” I shouted, my eyes searching frantically through the throngs of people. Where the hell had they all come from? None of them were here earlier.

“Hey.” Jay’s fingers grazed my arm, his face contorted into worry. “What’s the matter?”

“Rudi?” Her screeched call of my name sent a shiver of fear down my neck. It made all my hairs stand up on end and my heart beat double-time in my chest.

Running towards her voice, I pushed people out of my way, elbowing them and shoving them until I stopped when water touched my feet, splashing over them till it reached my ankles. I glanced down at the wetness watching the foamy seawater splash over my toes.

Water.

We weren't that close to the water. I made sure not to be. Penguin couldn't swim. I'd never taught her. When we'd arrived earlier, I'd taken note that the tide had been out and sat back up on the beach more than usual just to make sure. How the fuck didn't I notice that Penguin had been that close to the water? How could I have not noticed?

"Penguin!" I screamed as I rubbed the tips of my fingers across my forehead. My eyes hurt and burned as they searched for her. There were kids playing, splashing in the water, parents not too far from them.

I looked for the bright red swimming costume and the little, smaller than average five-year-old with honey-brown hair bouncing around in the water, but from where I was standing, they all looked the fucking same.

All the kids looked the fucking same.

Jay appeared at my side. I could feel his intense gaze on me, his questions ready to be fired at me, but he could just bloody well wait. I needed to find Penguin.

With the amount of noise around me and then a helicopter just happened to fly over us at the same time, I screamed out Penguin's name again—

"There." Jay pointed and went off running, me quick on his tail. Jay waded into the water, his legs powering through the rolling waves and seaweed that I could see through the cloudy water. My rolled-up jeans stuck like glue to my legs the moment I got knee-deep into the sea.

A shuddering breath left me when Jay bent down and swept something up into his arms. As he turned, I caught the sight of red and ran towards him as quickly as I could, snatching Penguin from his arms, holding her scared and trembling body to my own. I scaled my hands through her hair and gripped her small skull in the palm of my hand, pushing her head into my neck.

"Rudi," she sobbed, her salty tears dripping down my bare chest. Hacking coughs rattled her back.

Turning her around, I forced her forward as I smacked her stiffly on her small back, watching dribbles of seawater escape her mouth. When she only

dry-heaved, I wrapped her back in my arms again, holding her close to me. I closed my eyes and apologised over and over, mumbling the sorry words into her hair.

“Scared, Rudi.”

“Shhh now, Penguin. Rudi’s here. Shhh.” I repeated those words over and over again as I waded back out of the water. Not caring about the towels and my stuff that I’d left on the sand, I walked all the way through the throngs of people who watched me intently with worry and relief in their eyes but also disgust too.

Shame none of them helped though. Instead of standing there sneering at me for obviously being gay and getting it on with Jay in a public place, they could have gotten to Penguin quicker than I could have... but didn’t.

Sitting down on the wooden bench, I wrapped Penguin tighter to me and tried to temper down her shudders and cries. My own stomach was in knots and my hands shook ridiculously. I held her close, buried my nose in her hair and closed my eyes, trying not to think about if I had lost her.

No, I wasn’t even going there.

The bench moved and creaked when a weight settled next to us. Lifting my head, I turned it a little and caught Jay’s worried eyes. His suspicious, if not curious, green eyes flicked between me and Penguin then back again.

“I think we need to talk.”

Chapter Twelve

I glared at Jay. “We’ve got nothing to talk about. Did you not just see what happened?”

Jay’s jaw worked as he pushed up from the bench and hitched his hands on his hips, his eyes darkening with what looked like anger. “Yes, Rudi, we do have to talk. We need to talk about that... *kid* in your lap and yes, thank you very much, I did see what happened. I saved her from the water, remember?”

As if I could forget. Never ever would that picture leave my mind.

Not giving a fuck about what he wanted, I got up from the bench, wrapped Penguin’s shivering body tighter in my arms and marched off. My feet scraped along the concrete of the slope as I moved along, reminding me that I was barefooted. I pushed past other people walking up and down the slope, not caring about anyone else or their protestations.

That’s what happened when I did care about others. I took my eyes off Penguin for a minute to indulge in someone that I felt something for, something stupid for, and look at what happened. Whoever the hell was up there above me obviously didn’t like it and punished me.

Well, I knew when to take a hint.

And Jay, God, I didn’t need to explain anything to Jay. I barely knew him, for Christ’s sake. What right did he have to know who Penguin was?

“Damn it, Rudi,” Jay shouted and cursed behind me. I heard his bare feet too, slapping against the concrete as he chased after me.

My legs pumped furiously down the road, my eyes not seeing anything—or anyone—as I continued on. I had no freaking clue where I was going. Penguin still snuffled and cried in my arms, her tiny body shivering.

How could I be so fucking stupid?

“Rudi,” Jay said when he caught up. He appeared in front of me, my bags hanging from his shoulders and wrists, my towels slung around his neck with his boots. His hands popped up, trying to stop me from going any further. “Just wait a fucking minute will you? You and this running lark is ridiculous.” He puffed out much-needed breaths.

“Get out of my way, Jay.”

Jay's eyes narrowed. "No."

I shrugged. "Fine." Sidestepping him, I walked around him, continuing down the road. I felt wetness spread under my feet. Somewhere in the back of my mind, something warned me to stop, to listen to Jay because *again* I was being stupid and arrogant, ignorant and downright childish.

"Just wait." Jay appeared back in front of me, determination etched everywhere on his perfect, gorgeous face.

I stopped, and only then did I look around to see exactly where I was. I'd walked quite a way from the beach and in the opposite direction of home. On the spot, I turned in a circle. Where exactly was I going?

"Good." Jay nodded and approached me warily as if I were a rabid animal. His arms came up and brushed up and down my own ones. Only when he did that, did I realise that I was now cold too. I could feel goose bumps popping up all over my body. I glanced up at the sky to see that the sun was hidden by dark clouds.

Typical.

"What do you want, Jay?" I asked quietly.

"To help you."

My brows scrunched together as I shifted Penguin in my arms. My arms, now I noticed, were beginning to ache with her dead weight. "Why would you do that?"

Jay's eyes flicked between me and Penguin before he answered softly, "Because you look like you need help."

I bristled and stepped backwards. My head darted from one side to the other, scanning the road, imagining a small map in my head. Once I was sure where I was, I began to walk in the direction of back home. Maybe I could persuade Mum to let me back in whilst I sorted something out? "I don't need your help, Jay. I don't need anyone's help." For so long, I'd done it by myself and never needed anyone's help and I didn't need help now either.

"Goddamnit," Jay growled and grabbed hold of my arm, pulling me to a stop. "You're not doing this to me again, Rudi. You're coming with me."

"I'm doing no such thing. Remove your hand right now." I glared at him, promising him that no matter whether I thought he was gorgeous or not, I would hurt him to get him away from me.

“Uh-huh.” He nodded and pursed his lips whilst clamping his fingers more firmly around my bicep. “You’re coming with me whether you like it or not.”

I bared my teeth at him. “You’ll regret this.”

Jay spun around to face me, his own teeth bared, his eyes flaring. “Listen here, Rudi Costa. There are people in this world who need help. Those that need the most help don’t ask for it and do you know why?” Not giving me a chance to answer or say anything at all, he carried on, his voice rising with every other word. “Because they have too much fucking pride, just like when you found me in the park. I had too much Goddamned pride to ask for you to help me, but you did anyway, why? Because you saw I needed it, and I did fucking need it. Right now,” he jabbed his finger at me, “you need it. I don’t know what the hell is going on with you, but I know that it involves the girl in your arms.” His eyes turned soft. I scanned furiously for pity but found none. I could deal with anything else other than pity. Pity was degrading. “Just let me help, please, Rudi.”

Adjusting Penguin again in my arms, I reached up and rubbed at my eyes that felt so bloody tired. All the fight left me just like a stiff wind. I felt nothing but tiredness and the want to cry, which was something I was not doing.

I didn’t cry. Well, only sometimes and that only happened when I was alone.

“Fine,” I garbled out through a tight throat. “Fine.”

“Good.” Jay sounded relieved. He wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me into his side, sharing some of his body heat. “You made the right decision.”

That, I wasn’t really sure of, but I damn well hoped so.

“Are you sure about this?” I hissed at Jay who looked too damn controlled and relaxed. He locked the car up and came around to where I stood on the passenger side.

“One hundred percent,” he smiled softly and gently ran the tips of his fingers down the length of my jaw. His fingers felt real good on my sweaty, clammy skin right about then. “Trust me, huh?”

That was asking a lot. I trusted no one... ever. Just the thought of letting someone in, into mine and Penguin’s lives was huge. Admittedly, no one had

ever tried—wanted to be a part of us, so I guess that part was new more than anything.

“Rudi?”

I looked directly at Jay, deep into his grassy-green eyes seeing truth staring back at me. I knew—I *knew* this man didn't want to hurt me or Penguin. Not on purpose anyhow. Blowing out a long breath, I nodded reluctantly. “Okay.”

The thanks, happiness, and relief that danced through Jay's eyes made a weight lift off my shoulders. It seemed, whether I liked it or not, Jay wanted to help. He wanted to help and be there for us.

“Thank you,” he whispered and leaned in close to me, making my breath stutter. He pressed his mouth oh so softly against my own, just brushing back and forth like a whisper. Once, twice and three times he did this before he pulled back and licked his own lips. “Let's get this sorted.”

“Let's,” I agreed.

“Monica?” Jay shouted as he opened the front door. Baloo came skidding to a halt, his nails scraping against the shiny wooden floor as he scrambled for purchase. Jumping up, he launched himself at Jay, making Jay grunt and go back a step as his front paws landed on his shoulders. “Nice to see you too, big guy,” Jay reached round and rubbed the big dog's head then pushed him down.

“In the kitchen,” Monica's musical voice chimed.

I swallowed and licked my lips, closing my eyes a little when I tasted Jay's remnants loitering on my lips. I followed Jay into the kitchen where Monica stood at the counter, chopping what looked like green peppers. Did the woman ever stop cooking?

Turning, she looked over her shoulder, a bright smile on her face. Her eyes flicked to where I stood in the doorway. Her smile stayed in place as her brows rose. “Rudi, it's nice to see you again.”

Not giving me a chance to answer, Jay moved to Monica and gently took hold of her arm and pulled her over to where I stood with Penguin, who was wrapped in an old blanket that Jay had had in the boot of his car.

“What's going on, Jay?” Monica asked, her eyes darting between the two of us. Her smile was gone now, a confused look replacing it.

Jay reached out to take Penguin, but I shook my head and tightened my hold on her, backing away slightly. Okay, I'd agreed to trust him but that only went so far.

The man sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “We need you to help us with something,” he said as he led the way to a room along the passage. We moved on past the dining room, where we’d eaten dinner last week, and past a downstairs bathroom, to another door that was right at the back of the house. Jay pushed the door open, revealing what looked like a semi-made up guest room. In one corner, there were brown boxes stacked up somewhat neatly, whilst in the other corner, sat a small double bed with a mini, three-drawer chest of drawers next to it. A black and chrome lamp had been placed on the top, all alone.

“Why do I have a feeling I’m not going to like this?” Monica asked cautiously.

Jay quickly moved over to the window and pulled the curtains closed then moved to the bed and divested the bed of the covers. Turning, he waved a hand for me to place Penguin down on the bed. The moment my arms let go of her, she let out a high-pitched wail and started to flail over the bed.

“Penguin, shhh, it’s me, Rudi.” I grasped her again and tried to keep hold of her, but she was squirming like a slimy eel.

Monica gasped and moved to stand next to me. Her hand reached out to touch Penguin, but my sister darted back away from both of us, scrambling until she was folded into the corner of the bed up against the wall. Her eyes were the size of saucers on her small, pale face. Her small body was shivering like mad and her teeth were chattering. I didn’t understand why she was still cold, it wasn’t even that cold, not really.

“Honey,” Monica’s soft voice sounded like musical bells. She moved onto the bed, crawling slowly towards Penguin who eyed the woman extremely warily. Other than my mum and strangers that had been in and out of our home—mostly men though, Penguin had never consulted with another woman and never a woman who spoke so nicely and softly as Monica.

Jay’s heat spread over my back, telling me how close he really was to me. Next, his arms snaked around my waist. His hands, I could feel, were hesitant but sure all at the same time. I grabbed hold of them tightly, locking them into place in front of me as I watched Monica with Penguin.

“Who are you?” Monica asked my sister.

Penguin’s head tilted to the side, her eyes scanning Monica’s face, obviously wondering whether she could trust this woman. Her brows pulled

together but soon smoothed out. A small smile pulled up the corners of her lips as she jabbed her thumb against her small chest. "I Penguin."

Monica's brows popped up high on her head. "Penguin?"

"Yep, Penguin."

"You don't have another name?"

Penguin's smile disappeared, a hard glint appearing in her eyes as her mouth tightened into a hard line. "My name Penguin!" she shouted. Her small voice was scratchy from all the coughing and spluttering she'd done earlier. "I Penguin."

"Okay, okay." Jay's step-mum held her hands up in defence. "How old are you then?"

The smile came back on Penguin's face. "I five."

The woman's brows pulled together, a confused look darkened her face but it was gone a second later. "Are you hungry, honey?" Monica asked, instead of continuing with her line of questioning. My sister nodded slowly and her eyes flicked to me as if to ask permission. I nodded and watched both of them intently. I chewed on my thumbnail as my insides quivered.

"I'll grab something," Jay said. Before I could ask if he needed any help, he was gone.

I glanced over at Monica to see her watching me, her face hard and her eyes even harder. I knew this was coming. I could already see the prejudice, the accusations already formed in her mind. She obviously had taken a look at Penguin and assumed I was to blame for the condition she was in. I suppose I was the person to blame. After all, I had been the one to look after her since she was born. However, what I didn't appreciate was that she'd already had me hung, drawn and freaking quartered.

Grinding my jaw together, I said, "I know what you're thinking."

"No." Monica shook her head and shot me a frosted glare. "No, no, you don't, Rudi."

Monica advanced on me, trapping me against the wall, her finger jabbing in my face. "That girl is malnourished, underfed, and underweight. Her teeth are bad and not even properly developed, her body fat is practically zero and she can barely string a sentence together. What the hell, Rudi?"

My heart beat heavily in my chest, and my anger zipped along my skin like an electrical current. “You have no fucking clue what the hell you’re talking about.”

“I know what I’ve seen, Rudi. I’ve looked over that child with a professional eye, and it’s not good.”

I knew this already and that was why I kept her away from people like Monica. Apparently, as Jay had told me just a short time ago, Monica used to work in a domestic violence unit for women and children. I glanced at Jay who stood in the doorway, no doubt blocking my way so I couldn’t leave. I shot him my meanest glare. I didn’t like being hoodwinked or blindsided. He’d told me that I could trust him and look what happened when I did. People came swarming in and started telling me how wrong I’d done this and that when they had no freaking clue how hard things were for me and Penguin.

“I’ve tried my best.”

“Well, let me tell you.” Monica got back up in my face. Her intelligent, warm blue eyes were now cold and distant. Blame lay deep within her depths. “Your best isn’t good enough.”

“Screw you,” I yelled at her, feeling emotion well up inside me, more than I knew what to do with. “You don’t know what it’s like living day-to-day in my life. The day Penguin was born, she came home with my mum and you know what? My mum dumped the baby on the bottom of my bed and left her there to cry, need changing, need feeding. Me,” I slapped my hands against my bare chest, feeling my heart beat heavily and thickly. “I was a fifteen-year-old boy who... who... who had no fucking clue about babies except what I’d read in books, books that I spent trolling through libraries for. I dropped out of school and took care of that child as if she were my own. I fed her, clothed her and taught her everything she knows. Half the time I don’t know how the fuck I did that even.

“I didn’t and don’t have any money for her other than what I earn myself. We don’t know who her dad is, so there’s no help there and my mum’s a drug addict who would rather shoot her Child Benefit payments up her arm than feed Penguin or me for that matter. Each time I go to work, I have to lock Penguin in our bedroom because one, I have no one to look after her, and two—” A thick sob gushed from my chest as hot tears filled my eyes. A single tear strolled down my cheek, settling on the trembling curve of my bottom lip. “And two, because I won’t have the men who my mum mixes with, mess around with

Penguin like they did me. I couldn't let that happen to Penguin." I swiped at my nose angrily, wiping the snot away. "I won't allow what happened to me to happen to Penguin. So now blame me for the state of her and tell me it's my entire fault, Monica. Tell me what I've done isn't good enough."

There, now I'd spilled most of life story out to both of them. Now would they get off my fucking back and back the fuck off?

"Oh, God, Rudi," Monica stepped forward and without warning, wrapped me in her arms. Running her hands up and down my back much like a mother would, she continually whispered, "I'm sorry. God, I'm sorry."

No matter how hard I fought it, I couldn't hold it back. Everything inside me fell away like crumbling bread. My knees weakened and sobs shook my body, making it shake terribly. I gripped Monica's shoulders, holding on for dear life as everything that I'd ever locked up deep inside me, ran away, and left me bit by bit.

"What the fuck is going on?"

We both jumped at the angry sound of Jay's dad. We pulled apart only to see the big, hulking man standing in the doorway just behind Jay, looking extremely pissed.

Chapter Thirteen

“I can’t with good conscience let you leave with that child,” David Bruins said as he sat across the table from me.

My hackles rose immediately, and I jumped up from the table. “You can’t take Penguin away from me,” I shouted defensively, my throat raw and groggy from how much I’d sobbed earlier.

David rolled his eyes much like Jay had a habit of doing and motioned for me to sit down again. I did after the third wave of his hand and a raised brow. “Boy, we aren’t taking that girl away from you. Have you seen her? That kid worships the ground you walk on. It’d break her in two if you were to disappear. No, what I’m saying is that I think with everything you’ve explained, and Monica’s professional opinion, it’s best she stays here.”

I knew what he was saying was right, even if it was a bastard to admit. I’d watched Penguin over the last couple of hours with Monica, David and even Jay. She was a little quiet and timid, but she looked more relaxed than I’d ever seen her. The scared, worried and lost look in her eyes had dimmed, revealing a light that I’d never managed to garner myself from her. She’d eaten good wholesome food and had had a decent bath and now was in bed, out like a light with Jay’s dog, Baloo, in bed with her, curled around her small body.

“Well, that’s very nice of you but—”

“Rudi,” Jay’s voice from beside me was soft and hesitant.

“What?” I asked on an exhale.

“You know what my dad’s saying is right, don’t you?”

I glanced at him from under my lashes and nodded eventually. “It’s just—” I sighed heavily and pursed my lips. “Even though I used to leave her at home and there were risks with that, hell, I knew that, it’s just I knew she was safe locked up. Here, I know she’ll be safe and she’ll be with people. I know, *I know*.” I raised my hand and nodded a little, eyeing each one of them separately. “That will do her a world of good, but I just can’t get my head around not going home, her not being at home but being somewhere safe. I know I’ll be able to breathe without nearly having a heart attack every bloody minute. It just hurts and is a little weird to know that it’s not me she’s with, it’s someone else—a proper family.”

David tapped his fingers on the table. "I understand, Rudi, I do."

The tone of his voice took me back to when he dropped me home that night I'd run from here—from Jay. David had tried to tell me the same then, and I'd brushed it off because I didn't think he would understand me, understand what was going on. But now, I could see that he did understand and was doing his best. Considering me and Penguin were virtually strangers, he was doing a hell of a lot. Part of me wondered whether it was because he wanted to or whether it was because of Jay.

One would have to wait to find out.

"Okay." Monica clapped her hands together, a tired smile on her face. "Now you, Rudi."

My brows pulled together. "What about me?"

Monica and David shared a look before David sighed heavily and ran his bear-sized hand across his shaved head. "See, we've decided that seeing as today is Friday, you should stay here the weekend in the *guest bedroom*." He looked pointedly at me and Jay.

"Dad, please," Jay groaned and palmed his face. "That is so embarrassing."

David snorted. "Embarrassing it may be," he agreed, "but no funny business, under my roof."

"But we're adults!"

"I couldn't give a fuck if you were the Pope, son. No touching, no petting and... Uh..." The big man shifted in his seat and cleared his throat as his cheeks turned a bright shade of pink. "No sex," he mumbled. "Ever."

"That won't happen anyway," I blurted immediately.

Jay turned incredulous eyes on me. His mouth dropped open in pure shock. "Seriously?"

There was no way on this earth I was having sex with him under his parents' roof. That didn't detract from the fact that, yes, I wanted to rip his clothes off and do him up against the wall, maybe bend him over the back of the couch and eat his fucking arse out—sucking his flavour into my mouth so I'd be able to taste him days later, but Jay was different. He deserved to be worshipped in bed and in an *actual* bed. For one, I wasn't that person who deserved that right to be inside him, and two, I didn't even own a bed.

“Uh, hello,” David waved his hand to get our attention. “Back to the point in question,” he sighed and scratched at his brow with his thumb. “Rudi stays here for the weekend in the guest room with Penguin until Monday. Then when Monday comes, he finds somewhere else.”

“Dad,” Jay sat forward in his seat and leaned into the table. “Rudi has nowhere to go.”

“Jay.” I placed my hand on his arm. “It’s fine.” The most important person here was Penguin, and I had suitable and safe people ready to look after her. Belongs I could see her everyday and be just a phone call away, I would be happy.

Or so I hoped.

“Jay,” David warned.

“No, Dad, you don’t understand. Rudi has nowhere to go. Where is he supposed to sleep?”

“Jay,” Monica interrupted softly. “Rudi’s considered an adult now, as are you and have been for a couple of years. All we’re saying is that he should have his own place. I’m sure he has someone he can share a room with or something like that until he can sort something permanent out.”

I bit my lip to stop from laughing out loud at that. I had no one. With my type of life, friends didn’t come along very often. If and when they did, they didn’t really or truly want to be friends, they were just using me to get what they wanted.

Jay rolled his eyes and banged his fist on the table. “Does it look like he has any friends?”

“It’s fine, Jay,” I semi-repeated and gave his arm a small squeeze. Looking back to Monica and David, I said, “I’m thankful for the weekend you’re giving me. Monday’s good. I can start looking for a place to live and kip on a friend’s sofa.”

“See?” Monica smiled and reached across the table to pat Jay’s hand. “Everything will be okay.”

Jay turned a little in his seat, his eyes hard. He stared at me for a long moment before he nodded and attempted a smile, but it was stiff and made him look like he was suffering with constipation.

“That’s all sorted,” David said with a final nod and polished off the rest of his beer. Over the rim of his dark brown glass bottle, he eyed me. Once he put the drink down, he leaned into the table and said, “You’re welcome back anytime to come see Penguin. She’d be real hurt if you didn’t come see her, Rudi. Do you get what I’m saying?”

Yeah, I understood the threat in that little sentence. Giving him a stiff nod, I pushed up from the table and made my way to the guest room down the hall, where Penguin slept. If I was going to be away from her come Monday then I wanted to spend as much time as possible with her.

The clicking of the door startled me from sleep. I sat up in bed quickly, my arm automatically reaching over to check Penguin. She was fast asleep, buried up against the wall across the mattress from me.

Nodding to myself that she was okay, my eyes darted back to the door. I couldn’t see who it was, yet because all the lights were out, including the one in the passage. Reaching over to the chest of drawers, my hands tapped the top feeling for something to use as a weapon. When I couldn’t find anything other than my phone, I silently cursed, and instead, slithered off the bed to the floor as quietly as I could. Landing on all fours, I rolled my lips in and crawled across the floor. Stopping just behind the semi-opened door, I sat back and clenched my hands together as a dark figure stepped into the room.

Letting them take one more step towards the bed, I pounced.

“Arghhhh.” The dark figure screamed out in shock and fright. It didn’t sound very manly.

We both landed in a heap on the floor with a couple of dull thumps. Because I couldn’t see anything, I was completely blind. Searching with my hands, I wrapped one hand around the man’s throat, holding him in place, my thumb digging into the pulse point whilst the other went across his mouth. The man scrambled to get up, his hands clutching at me, his legs kicking out. The man tried to speak but couldn’t.

“Keep fucking still,” I growled and shifted my body over his so I could feel for any weapon he may have had. I didn’t recall the clatter of a knife or anything like that from when we went down. I twisted from where I sat on his legs and frowned when I came up with bare skin.

What burglar robbed a house half-naked?

Leaning down to what I assumed was his face, I whispered, “What the fuck are you doing here? Who the fuck are you?” When the man continued to mumble behind my hand, I realised that I’d need to remove it first. “If I let my hand go, you won’t scream or make any unnecessary noise will you?”

His head shook back and forth. Releasing my hand, the man sucked in a deep breath and even coughed a little. “Rudi?” he croaked.

I froze as I straddled the dark figure. One of my hands clutched his wrists above his head, holding him in place whilst the other one stayed tight on his throat. “Jay?” I hissed incredulously. “What the fuck?”

Panting, Jay huffed and attempted to wriggle free. There were several problems with that, the most prominent one being that every time he wiggled, his cock—which was directly underneath my balls—hardened and skimmed along my taint, just brushing against it.

“Jay,” I breathed, as my hips just flicked that little bit, feeling his cock poke and rub along my boxer-covered crease. Damn that felt good. Letting go of his wrists, I trailed my hand down over his head, feeling his soft hair and down his face. My fingers touched his lips, fondling the plumpness as I pulled back. My hips moved in tight little circles, as I splayed my hands on his chest, feeling his heart beat quickly under my palms.

“Unh,” Jay gasped as his hands landed on my hips, holding me in place as his hips flicked upwards then rolled like a ripple against me. “Feels. So. Good,” he panted.

A snuffle from behind us snapped us both out of the moment. Heat that had been overwhelming and exceptional dropped to minus zero in an instant. The boner in my boxers collapsed and shrivelled up. By the softness underneath me, Jay was in the same position.

Pushing up from the floor, I walked over to the chest of drawers and flicked the lamp on, nearly blinding the both of us. When I could actually see without white spots dancing across my vision, I looked over at Jay and saw him standing in the middle of the room with a very nice but embarrassed blush on his face and his bottom lip being attacked by his teeth. His thinly muscled body on display—a little pair of red boxers that were incredibly tight and very fucking nice—covering his important bits.

Hitching my hands on my hips, I asked, “What are you doing in here, Jay?”

Jay swallowed and looked at everything other than me. “I wanted to see you.”

I couldn't help but laugh. He looked like a child who'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "You could have seen me in the morning."

There went those eyes rolling again. His lips also twitched. "I didn't want to wait till morning." He shifted on the spot a little and jerked his head towards the door. "Can we like go outside or something?"

Nodding, I checked on Penguin and saw that she was still asleep. Flicking the light off so we were back to utter darkness, I held my hands out in front of me and grasped Jay's ones when I felt them. Keeping hold of him and trusting him not to let me fall on my face, he led us out slowly towards what I remembered was the living room where the sliding doors opened up onto the back deck.

The moment the doors opened, the sea could be heard splashing against the seawall in the distance. The moonlight lit up the entire garden, basking it in an eerily white glow. Inhaling deeply, a tang of sea salt hung in the air, along with the smell of dewy grass that tickled my senses. We moved over to the heavy wooden table and chairs. Taking a seat, I shivered a little when my bare back hit the cold—and somewhat damp—wood.

Jay dragged his chair so he sat directly in front of me, positioning his legs in between mine. His hands clasped my knees as he stared at me. Under the almost-white moonlight, he was stunning. His hair appeared virtually golden and his eyes—although sleepy—were stunning.

"So?" I chuckled when he just continued to stare at me.

"God, you're hot," he breathed and leaned forward so he was totally in my space. This close, I could smell a slight hint of aftershave to his skin that did funny things to my body when I inhaled it. A little pit in the bottom of my stomach tingled and made my toes wiggle.

"Thanks." I smiled sheepishly. Compliments like that made me go all funny inside. It was an unusual feeling. "Seriously though, what did you want to talk about?"

"Rudi." He shook his head, stood up and climbed on top of me. His legs slipped through the gaps in the sides of the chair, and he wiggled to get himself comfortable. "I didn't and don't want to talk to you. I admit I wanted to see you, but more than that, I wanted to touch you." He licked his lips slowly. "Correction, I want to touch you."

"Whoa." I grabbed his hips as his bum hit my lap. My head automatically whipped from one side to the other, checking that we were totally alone. The

last thing I wanted was for either David or Monica to have followed us out and be hiding in the shadows.

“We’re alone,” Jay assured me and leaned in so we were centimetres apart. This close I could see his full green eyes. They were beautiful, hell, he was beautiful. “Kiss me, Rudi.”

My mouth opened to tell him that the moment we kissed, it would go further. We both knew this. Instead of letting me speak, Jay pushed his lips against mine, effectively shutting me up. His tongue came out and demanded entry, licking and pushing against the crux of my lips, trying to get them to part. On a sigh, because I just couldn’t resist him or his taste or in fact his smell, I opened up and let his tongue sail into my mouth, seeking my own one out. I caught hold of it and wrestled back and forth, our muscles fighting for dominance. My hands squeezed his hips, holding him in place as my own flexed upwards. My cock, which had been lying limp between my legs, hardened up and smeared against the crease of his arse.

Jay pulled away from me, panting. His lips were red and swollen, damp in some spots. His grassy-green eyes were glassy and half-mast from lust. He licked his lips and smiled crookedly whilst blatantly reaching down and adjusting his tenting lump in those *fuck me* boxers.

“Touch me, Rudi,” he whispered.

My breath caught in my chest when he pulled down the elastic of his shorts, letting his cut piece of meat flick towards me. It hit my stomach and bounced back again, dragging a string of pre-cum with it. The red—almost purple head—was damp and shiny, his sap dribbling in small, little teardrops down the underside of his cock. I wanted so badly to reach out, wrap my hand around his beautiful-looking cock and bring him pleasure—so much pleasure—but I couldn’t. I just couldn’t give this man something that I knew he would take and keep close to him when I was who I was. Yeah, in the heat of the moment things happened, but we weren’t really there right now. Actually, we weren’t far from it either. The thing was: when did it stop? When did a hand job stop at just a hand job?

Answer: they didn’t.

Swallowing hard at the sight of his very nice, very succulent cock, I glanced up into Jay’s grassy eyes and smiled a little. Reaching upwards, I slid my hands along his face, feeling little hairs scraping against my palms. I gripped his

cheeks and bought him forward so our foreheads touched. "I would love to touch you, Jay, I really would."

Jay's eyes slid closed but not before I saw rejection sinking into his depths. "You don't want me."

"Oh God," I cursed and thrust my hard as hell cock against his arse, letting it prod the little starfish I knew that was there, wanting and waiting for me. "Does this feel like I don't want you?"

"But—" Jay blew out a breath which fanned out against my face. "—you don't want to touch me."

"No, I do want to touch you, but I can't."

"But why?" he whined. "What's the matter?"

I didn't even understand it all myself. I was playing off the bat right now.

"Everything's the matter. All this is wrong. You deserve someone so much better than me. You deserve someone who won't let you down, who can give you the world. You, Jay, deserve someone that has less baggage, someone you know better than... than... me."

"It's you that I want though."

A pain foreign to me clung to my chest, making it hurt in a certain place. I let go of one side of Jay's face and rubbed at the pain absently with the heel of my hand. "I like you, Jay, I really do—"

"Can we work on it?"

I screwed my eyes shut. "What?"

Leaning forward again, Jay gripped my own face in his hands and held it still, whilst his lips skimmed along my cheekbones, along the bridge of my nose, over my brows, then across and over my temples. Planting little open-mouth kisses, Jay's hot breath fanned over my chin, along my jaw down to my neck, where his nimble teeth nibbled at my tendons, before he sucked at the skin, no doubt leaving little marks on his way. "You're so warm," he whispered against my skin. "And you smell so good." Then the hot sucking kisses came along my collarbone and up to my ears. He sucked my earlobe into his mouth, lathing his tongue back and forth over the fleshy skin.

I just about came in my fucking pants when he did that.

"Jay," I gasped when he nibbled at my Adam's apple. His lips travelled back up to my ears, breathing heavily into my skin, sending little tendrils of

electricity along the small, tiny hairs that coated my body. He was driving me crazy. My head dropped backwards against the damp wood and my eyes squeezed shut. Intense want and need burned through my body for the man in my lap. How easy it would be for me to rip his pants off, spit in my hand, finger him a little to loosen that guardian muscle up and slip my cock into his tight, warm cavern. It was all so easy, yet so fucking hard... figuratively and literally.

Moving back down to my neck, Jay bit down on my skin. Not hard enough to pierce or puncture but enough that my cock jerked and dribbled more precum against the bottom of my belly. Jay licked up the sting with his hot, wet tongue then lathed it down into the small point between my collarbones before pulling back. He lifted himself up a tad so he could look down at me. He smiled a little whilst a devilish glint sparkled in his eyes.

"I will have you, Rudi Costa, and vice versa. I want to feel you inside my body, Rudi. I want to feel you days later when I sit down, bend over, whatever. I want your taste in my mouth and down my throat. I want it all, Rudi." He looked me dead in the eye. "I want you."

"We can't," I told him, but my voice lacked conviction even to my own ears.

"We can and we will."

Chapter Fourteen

Thoughts of Jay and Penguin dominated my mind. Jay, because it had been a couple of days since I'd seen his smile, heard his voice and felt his hand in my own, and Penguin, because I hadn't woken up with her small body plastered to my side. I hadn't heard her voice or seen her smile that was crooked and cute.

I blinked rapidly at that and squeezed my eyes closed, begging, praying, telling myself not to cry... again. When I'd left Monday, it had almost killed me. Jay hadn't wanted to go to work at six, but David made him, and me letting him walk out the door knowing that I wasn't going to be there when he got back must have been hard.

If anyone had been watching, they would have waved a hand and told us to stop fucking about. It was as if the world was ending or something, but truthfully, leaving Penguin and Jay felt like that or somewhere near it.

Shaking my head, I blew out a breath and watched them leave my mind like thin wisps of air.

The moment my mind emptied of their beings, I remembered where I was. Immediately, I wished I hadn't. The floor I slept on was hard as fuck and smelt of damp, dirt and worse—piss. I rolled over to my side and wished I hadn't. The man that Parrot had brought home last night and fucked on the sofa just feet from me—had puked all over himself and said puke had dripped from his wide open mouth to the floor, where it lay in a pile—whilst he snored his freaking head off.

Gross.

The smell burned the insides of my nostrils and made even my empty stomach turn over, wanting to expel whatever was left. I pushed up from the floor, kicked the threadbare covers aside and tiptoed from the room, holding my breath at the same time.

Opening the bathroom door, I stepped inside and kicked the door closed after me. I rested my hip against the sink and let my eyes drift closed. I was dead tired and I ached all over. The floor was okay for the first and second night but after the third, fourth and fifth, it was beginning to get to me and my body. My neck was smarting, and places on my body I didn't even know existed complained every time I turned over in my sleep or to get comfortable.

Walking over to the toilet, I lifted the grimy lid with the tip of my little finger and let loose a stream of pee. I thought home was dirty but this was damn-right disgusting. Yawning, I rubbed at my chest with my free hand and tilted my head to the side when I heard movement outside the door. Shaking my cock off, I pulled the chain and walked back to the sink, washed my hands and sluiced my face with the cold water, instantly waking myself up.

“Open up.” The banging on the door made me jump.

Grabbing my toothbrush from the small pot by the sink, I squeezed a pea-sized amount of toothpaste on the bristles and opened the door to see Parrot looking like absolute shit. He grimaced and pushed past me, heading for the toilet. Just as I stepped out of the bathroom, I heard his retching. Someone had obviously had too much last night.

Heading to the kitchen, I filled the kettle and flicked the switch, then leaned against the counter as I brushed my teeth.

Parrot appeared, stumbling into the kitchen. He grunted as he shoved me out of the way to get to the fridge. He pulled the milk out and drank right from the bottle, making sure to burp afterwards.

Well that put me off the tea I was about to make.

Curling my lip, I raised a brow. “Did you have to do that?”

Parrot’s own dark brows popped up, his dark eyes not looking bothered at all. “Do what?”

“Drink the milk from the bottle.” Okay, it wasn’t the freshest of milk but damn, it was the only milk we had and now he’d contaminated it.

Parrot blinked. “Is this your flat?”

I rolled my eyes and immediately smiled when Jay’s face popped into my mind. “No but—”

“Then shut it,” he barked.

“Whatever,” I mumbled and reached for the coffee. My thing was tea. I loved a good old cup of hot, sweet tea, but I also didn’t mind coffee. Coffee without milk however was not in my top five, but beggars couldn’t be choosers. Spitting in the sink, I leaned over and rinsed my mouth out and set my toothbrush to the side, reminding myself to put it back in the bathroom afterwards.

Silence settled like an uncomfortable blanket between us until Parrot broke it. "Giovanni's been dogging you."

My hand froze halfway to my mouth, the almost burnt coffee steam burning the tip of my nose. "Oh?"

"Hmmm." He nodded and reached past me for the bread, only to open the bread bin and see the wrapper empty. He cursed and slammed the plastic lid back down. "He's put out word that he wants you."

I snorted and sipped at my dark drink, grimacing a little at the extra bitter taste mixing with the mint toothpaste. "He can wait on. There ain't no way I'm going back to him."

Parrot eyed me for at least a minute, his dark eyes stayed fixed on my face. If anyone didn't know Parrot they'd have freaked out already with the intense, almost-crazed look in his eyes. The truth was the guy *was* batshit crazy. He was good to have on your side but also as unpredictable as the weather when it came to his moods. I was sure that if the right people got hold of Parrot, they'd lock him away forever in a mental hospital. Oh yeah, for sure. The man was not stupid, he was just plain crazy.

"You know what else I heard?"

Sighing heavily, I rolled my eyes again. It looked like I'd picked that habit up from Jay after all. "What's that?"

"Your mum is in trouble, Tutti."

"Don't call me that," I grouched and shoved past him to sit at the small table.

Parrot smirked. "I like that, it suits you."

"It suits your mama."

A snort left his nose along with a choked cough. "Everything suits my mama just like yours. Anyways, your mum, I was telling you. She in trouble, Rudes." He shook his head and pursed his lips. All his laughter was gone now. "I heard she was all over the shop."

"Why should I care?"

"I didn't say you should. I'm just telling you what I been hearing, you get me? That woman been spouting shit, Rudes, about how you hit her and shit like that. She also been flapping her gums about you breaking some sort of 'greement with Giovanni."

I scratched irritably at the side of my face. The damn woman was more trouble than she was worth. She was the one that caused all this mess, and now I was the one paying for it, as usual.

“Well it’s all lies.”

“Cuz,” he scoffed. “I figured that time ago. Problem we have or you, shall I say, is that Giovanni is out and wanting your arse, you get me? He wants in. To own it, slap it and stamp it down. You in deep, Rudes.”

“Gee, thanks, Parrot,” I deadpanned and pushed the coffee away from me. I didn’t feel like drinking it anymore, not with the burning sensation starting back up in my stomach. “This was all supposed to be different. She told me to go, Parrot, to get the fuck out of her house and to take Penguin with me, and I did,” I said with pure exasperation. “I knew Giovanni would be after me—that was a given, but to hear all the other shit and be blamed for it, it’s just plain wrong. I promised Penguin that I’d sort everything out and get us a nice place where we can be together, you know?” I said, and he nodded, still intently watching me. “But how the fuck can I go out and earn some crust if Giovanni’s wanting me?”

Parrot was quiet for at least a minute before he made a noise at the back of his throat and shrugged. A wild, almost sinister smile spread across his face. “We go to work.”

Over and over again, I practised the words, letting them roll over my tongue to hear how they sounded out loud. I needed to make sure my voice was strong and didn’t sound as scared and as nervous as I actually was inside. Okay, scared wasn’t the right word, maybe fearful of being rejected was better.

I needed to do this right because I couldn’t take sleeping at Parrot’s no more. It was killing my back and neck, and the place was just downright disgusting. The thing that got to me the most was the reminder of it being like back home. There were men in and out of the place whenever they felt like it. Albeit they weren’t druggies or drunks, but they were sex addicts, I swear. The way Parrot went at them made even me want to become a monk, and that was saying something.

Barry walked in from the back, where he’d been sorting through a couple of boxes of mix for his special old-fashioned shaving foam. “Got it.” He grinned with triumph showing off nicotine-stained teeth at the same time.

I smiled back a little and idly played with the broom in my hand. From the corner of my eye, I watched him potter around on his legs that weren't quite so steady anymore. I was always just a couple of feet from him in case he took a tumble.

"Spit it out, Christ!" Barry snapped.

My head shot up to look at him. "What?"

The old man shook his head, dislodging his white hair so it fell over his brow. "All morning you've been chewing that tongue of yours off. Spit it out."

"You're right," I nodded.

"Of course I am," he scoffed and rolled his hand for me to get on with it.

Taking a deep breath, I straightened my shoulders and let it all out. "Well, you see, Barry, I've finally left home because... of... of reasons and well you know, I need somewhere to lay my hat. I've been staying with... a... acquaintance and desperately need my own place. So I was wondering if I could like... maybe rent out the flat above here. I know it's empty, and I really don't care about the state of it, if it is in a state, that is," I added quickly. When Barry continued to be silent, I took that as my cue to carry on. "I could pay you whatever you wanted and work for free to cover even more of the rent. I mean, it couldn't be that much though, could it? It has to be a one or two bedroom place and real small because I've had a look up at the windows as I cycled here this morning, and they don't look too big, you know? I'd probably struggle with the bills for a little bit until I could work things out, but I could deal with that. So what do you think?"

When he continued to be silent, I shifted on the spot and licked my lips. Still when he continued to stare hard at me, I waved my hands out and let them drop back to my sides with heavy slaps. "Just forget I said anything."

"Just wait a bloody minute," he growled. "Kids these days." He shook his head and puffed out a heavy smoker's wheeze. "Always in a bloody rush."

Hope so big rushed through my body making my head a little dizzy. I reached out blindly to clasp the back of the black leather bucket chair just in case I face-planted the floor. That wouldn't look good. I'd probably give him a heart attack if that happened.

"You serious?"

I nodded quickly, albeit a little jerkily. "Deadly."

Barry sighed and scratched at his whiskers that were coming through, even though he only probably shaved this morning. A thoughtful look popped up on his face. "The place isn't too good."

"That's no problem."

"It needs a lick of paint, probably a couple of repairs, oh and a pest control check, but other than that, it's fine."

My brows furrowed. "If it's been fine, why is it empty?"

A dark, shadowed look swam in his eyes. "Because it is," he snapped. "Do you want it or not?"

Suddenly confused as hell but still desperate, I nodded quickly and could have kissed the man when he grunted and reached into his pocket, coming out with a small set of keys that he tossed at me. "Rent is due on Thursdays."

Now, I knew I really needed to get the money sorted otherwise, I was up shit creek.

I glanced at myself in the small bathroom mirror above the sink in Parrot's bathroom. My scoop-neck T-shirt fitted just right across my chest, tightening a little around my biceps. I turned this way and that way, flexing my arms a little and puffing out my chest. I was due to see Penguin tonight—along with Jay, and I wanted to look my best even though my clothes were old, a little tattered and somewhat borrowed. My hair was shaped just right after getting Barry to trim up the sides and front a little. My sideburns were shaved into small diamond points and my brows had been plucked and tweezed, shaping them properly.

A knock sounded on the bathroom door making me roll my eyes. "What?"

"Yo, Rudes." Parrot's voice sounded muffled. Turning, I flicked the lock and pulled down the handle. Parrot pushed his way inside and whistled low, his head nodding slowly as he made me turn in a circle. "Nice. You look buff, Rudi."

"Thanks." I smiled a little and took a deep breath. For some reason, I was really nervous about seeing both Penguin and Jay, but especially Jay.

"You scrub up well, Rudes. You sure we can't get something going on?" he asked as he rubbed the front of his jeans, which showed a noticeable bulge. The dirty fucker was turned on.

I made a face as a shudder ran through me. We'd tried that already—once—and there was no way in hell we were going back there—ever. "Fuck, no."

"Are you sure?"

This guy was something else.

Smacking him across the chest, I walked out the bathroom, leaving him there, and headed to the living room where my stuff was. Dropping down to my knees, I rifled through my small bag of clothing. I had a couple pair of jeans, a few T-shirts and a hoody that I'd grabbed, but other than that, I had nothing, really. Everything was still at home—a home that I wasn't welcomed at.

Sighing, I wrapped my clothes up, trying to make them as small as possible. Parrot came into the room and slouched down on the sofa, his leg swinging back and forth as it hung over the arm, his fingers dancing quickly over the screen of his phone.

"You know, Rudes, I heard something today."

I rolled my eyes. Parrot heard things daily. Most of it was just gossip. Honestly, he was worse than a group of old ladies gasbagging together. "What's that?"

Leaning forward on his elbow, he pointed his phone at me. "It's about Giovanni and your mum."

"That's old news, Parrot, like yesterday."

"Nah-uh." He shook his head and pursed his lips. "This is good stuff, Rudes. I'm talking about top notch."

When I said nothing, Parrot prodded again and again and *again* until I threw my hands up in the air. "Okay, I give," I said with pure exasperation. "What's so fucking important that you feel the need to bug the shit out of me?"

Parrot smirked and tapped his fingers against his thigh whilst his eyes—which were dark pools of black—sparkled with mischievous intent. "You know you had that 'greement with Giovanni about you paying for your mum's tick in three meetings?"

"Not agreement, Parrot, arrangements."

"Whatever." He waved his hand dismissively. "That's just semantics. Anyway, you had that thing with him, and you didn't turn up the second time, therefore you backed out, and as we all know, you do not do that to someone like Giovanni. You get me?"

"I get you," I sighed and went to rub my hand through my hair but stopped myself at the last minute. "I had the first meeting with him where he reamed my backside till I bled like a fucking pig. Like fuck I was going there again—all for him to do the same to my mouth. You know I don't spin that shit no more, Parrot."

"I know," he admitted and went back to swinging his leg. "But seriously though, after you bailed, I heard not only was Giovanni dogging you, but he was all up in your mum's shit. 'parently, they got some shit going on together."

Now I was interested. I stood up and crossed my arms over my chest. Something inside me didn't like where this was going. "Is that right?"

The guy rolled his lips in and sniffed loudly. "Oh yeah." He nodded. "Your mum's taken your place."

"What?" I made a face. "What do you mean 'taken my place'?"

I received a shrug before, "Giovanni was pissed as hell that you've hit ground. He been looking everywhere for you as I already told you. Because no one been seeing you, he lost. Anyways, word has it, he took it out on your mum and has bundled her into keeping shit at the house. Thing is, he sees it as his right because you done him over."

"I didn't do him over," I gritted out as I began to pace around the small, untidy living room. "So what you're saying is that he's using her as a safe place to stash his shit?"

"Not only that."

My brows furrowed. "What else?" What more could there be?

A smug smile danced across Parrot's mouth. "I got news that she's ripping him off. Skimming from his stash and selling twenty quid wraps from the door, Rudes. She's running him like he's running her."

My mouth dropped open in pure shock. I stared long and hard at the man wondering whether he was doing me over or not, but by the look of seriousness on his face, he was deadly serious.

"Oh, my God," I whispered and spun around, blowing out a long breath. It was just one thing after another. Nothing this woman—my mum—did surprised me anymore.

Parrot nodded, got up from the sofa and moved to stand in front of me. Squatting a little so we were eye-to-eye, he leaned into whisper, "You know what this means right, Rudes?"

“No. I don't get what this means.” I wasn't exactly following. All I had in my head was Giovanni taking whatever shit out on my mum. Okay, the woman had done me over multiple times and treated me like nothing more than shit on the bottom of her shoe, but there was still something inside me that clenched—hard when I thought about Giovanni doing to her what he'd done to me.

“It means,” Parrot said slowly as if I were stupid, “we cash in on the shit, right?”

I reared back as if he had slapped me. “Oh to the hell no.” I shook my head and waved my hands in front of me. “I am not going back there. You've got another thing coming if you think I am.”

“Will you just think for a minute?” he snapped and moved back into my space. He gripped my shoulder in his hands, digging his fingers into my flesh. “Think about Penguin. Think about what you promised her and all that shit, Rudes. Think about it, Cuz. We can get in there, be in and out within minutes with a shitload of that fat fucker's gear. Then when our pockets are full, we go down the Wellington, pawn the lot and bingo!” he boomed, his eyes wild with uncontained excitement. “We be rolling in it, Rudes. At the same time, we do that fucker over and punish him.”

“What you got against Giovanni?”

The excitement bled from Parrot's eyes. Intense darkness spread, making his eyes chilly and cold all at once. “A couple of things.”

“Like what?”

“Nothing.” His jaw worked and his hands clenched into fists. “So, what do you say?”

My immediate reaction was *no fucking way*. There was no way on this earth I was going back, it was like going back to Titanic—no. However, when I let my mind go and thought of Penguin and everything that I had in fact promised her, there was a little niggling sensation in the back of my mind that told me I could give her those things and more if I just went back that one more time. If I just put everything that had happened to me into a small box and packed it up for the night, I could be a stranger, mute, estranged. If I had myself locked up tight—my feelings and emotions to be precise—then nothing I heard or saw could effectively do anything to me.

But I couldn't.

Then a voice whispered in the back of my mind that I could, that I could do this. What was the harm? After weighing up the pros and the cons, I really had no choice but to do it.

Huffing out a long breath, I looked up into Parrot's dark, waiting eyes with my arm forced up my back and nodded. "You're on."

Chapter Fifteen

Damn, I was sweating my fucking tits off. I wiped at my forehead with a swipe of my arm and blew out a fast breath. Parrot, who stood next to me, looked completely and utterly too calm and collected for what we were just about to do. His hands weren't even shaking a little. Mine, huh, they were trembling.

"Give me your money." Parrot curled his fingers in a "gimme" gesture.

I looked down at his palm and back up at him with a raised brow. "For what?"

"For the gear, of course," he said if I were stupid. At my blank look, he sighed and explained, "This is what's gonna happen. I'm gonna go knock on your door and your old bag of a mum is gonna open up, and then I'm gonna pretend I'm a customer coming to get me some of that nice gear that Giovanni's storing upstairs. Whilst that's happening, you're gonna shimmy up the drainpipe, like you did before, and track your way into the house. When you do that, you grab the shit and leg it back out again."

I stared at the man, wondering if he was off his fucking rocker. "Are you fucking serious?" I hissed and glared at the stupid-as-hell man.

"Excuse me," he argued. "Remember I'm the one helping you here."

My eyes narrowed. "And why is that, exactly?"

Parrot licked his big lips and shifted on the spot. He peeked around the wall we were hiding behind then dodged back. "I'm getting something out of all this shit as well."

"Yeah, I know. The Giovanni thing."

"Not just that."

My head began to pound. I rubbed my temples. "What do you mean, exactly?"

"Well, duh, Rudes. When you get that laffy taffy of yours back out here, I take my twenty-five percent and we all even. Then you can be going on your merry old way, find your guy and give him some pump and run. There." He shrugged and splayed his hands wide. "We all be happy."

I stared at the man incredulously. Surely he had to be winding me up? “Seriously?”

“Uh-huh. Of course.”

“You expect me to give you twenty-five percent when I’m the one risking falling from the fucking roof and breaking my Goddamned neck, and may I add, stealing Giovanni’s gear. I think you’ve been bashed over the head a few too many times, Parrot.”

“Cuz, please,” he scoffed. “You’re not *that* stupid and remember Giovanni deserves this. Now hand over the money.”

That hand of his came out again. I glanced down at the palm as I gritted my teeth and reached into my back pocket, pulling out my last twenty-pound note. It was a little grey and rumpled around the edges. “I’m missing seeing Penguin and Jay for all this bollocks. That’s all the money I have. This better work otherwise, I will kill you,” I warned and slammed the purple-headed paper in his palm, wondering if I’d just made a deal with the devil or not.

“Rudes.” Parrot smiled evilly and popped his head around the wall again. He nodded once. “Has anyone ever told you, you worry too much?”

Landing on the other side of the fence, I listened to Parrot work his magic with my mum. Damn, he was a smooth talker when he needed to be. I rolled my eyes when he got a little too fresh for my liking. When he coughed, that was my cue to go. I ran around the back of the house and eyed the bathroom window. I felt myself smile when I saw it was still open from last time I’d been here. Climbing in the daytime was a lot freaking easier than in pitch-black darkness.

My boots still scraped along the brick and my fingers burned as they brushed against the rough surface. My jeans pulled across my bum, and I cursed when I heard my top pull and stretch a little across my biceps. Climbing up onto the mini ledge, I slithered my way through the bathroom window, landing on the floor a lot easier and smoother than last time.

I just took my first step into the passage when I heard footsteps sounding up the stairs. My eyes went wide as my heart beat frantically in my chest. Sweat that was already present—tripled and beaded across my forehead. I was about to get caught if I didn’t get my arse moving. Eying possible hiding places, I saw my bedroom door open and ran towards it. Darting around the wood, I scanned

the bedroom quickly, seeing it a complete and utter mess. I dropped to the floor, rolling over so my body just fit under the bed in time for the door to swing open fully.

Gripping the duvet cover that hung over the side of the bed haphazardly, I moved it aside a little, just in time to see my mum come into the bedroom. I watched her bare, bony feet move across the floor towards my wardrobe, the door opened and then something rustled. Adjusting my body angle a little because I wanted to see better but also because something sharp was digging into my hip, I caught sight of my mum and bit my lip to stop from making a noise. She was covered in dark black, blue and purple bruises. Her hair, that was usually down and greasy, was pulled back into a mess of a bun with little tendrils hanging down. Her wafer-thin body trembled, making the dirty, pink nightdress she wore dance. My eyes travelled down her bare twig-sized legs, and I cringed. From the back, I could see the finger marks pressed into her skin just above her knees. When she turned with a small gear bag in her hands, I caught sight of clear needle and blood marks down the front of her, covering little parts of the pink material.

She was a complete and utter mess. It looked like Giovanni had already had his way with her, and it wasn't good.

Once the door closed again, I listened to her move back downstairs before I rolled back out from under the bed and pushed myself up, kicking shit out of the way. I grimaced when I looked down at the bed that I used to share with Penguin. The off-white sheets were now grey in some places, and in others, there were dried patches of what looked like cum.

Gagging, I moved over to the wardrobe and felt my eyes go wide and my jaw drop open at the stacks and stacks of drugs that had been placed neatly inside. My clothes, that were once hanging up and folded along the bottom, were now gone—all replaced with boxes and packets of Class A drugs. Wrapped up in meshed cotton, the smell permeated my nose, making me turn my head to the side and bury my nose in my upper arm. My hands reached out to touch the bags of sugar-sized parcels but I snatched them back at the last minute. Never once in my life—voluntarily—had I touched drugs. Never would I ever touch them either. I'd seen too much damage done with them and now wasn't any different.

Dropping to my knees, I scanned the packages for anything different than what looked like coke and some smack. I think there was also finely wrapped parcels of brown too—probably ash by the looks of it. The more I leaned in, the

more the smell of drugs filled my nose. I swear I got high just breathing it in. Finally, at the bottom of the wardrobe, in between the bottom of two stacks, was a clear dustbin liner wrapped up with an elastic band around it. Pulling the package out and cringing at the sound it made, I turned and dropped it onto the bed. Busting the band and rolling the bag out, I gasped and could have swallowed my tongue when I saw an obscene amount of fifty-pound notes, all piled up together. On a closer look there had to be something like ten maybe fifteen or even twenty grand staring up at me.

“Holy fucking shit,” I whispered as sweat rolled down the side of my face. Sitting back on my haunches, I annoyingly wiped the salty liquid away and chewed on my lips. I knew that taking this money meant so fucking much, but at the same time, justice and Giovanni’s just desserts rolled through my head, making me smile a little. I knew that fat fucker was loaded, but damn, if he could just leave amounts of drugs and money here then how much more did he have elsewhere?

Also, if he had this much just here, then he wouldn’t really miss it, would he?

Deciding what was best, I grabbed the money, wrapped the bag back up and stuffed it under my arm. I stopped at the door and turned back to look at the drugs that I’d left untouched. If I took what looked like a key from the stack, I could give that to Parrott instead of parting with the cash, even though there was more than either of us had probably seen in our lives.

Again deciding that was the best thing to do, I raced back and grabbed a square parcel of coke which went under my arm too. Chewing on my poor, abused bottom lip, I dipped back into the stash and pulled out a book-shaped package full of pressed ash. Before I left, I quickly searched through the shit that littered my old bedroom floor and found an old duffel bag. It was wrinkled as hell and had a small hole at the bottom, but it would hide what I was holding.

Strapping the bag across my back, I climbed back out the window, landing effortlessly on my feet. My whole body trembled with adrenaline, fear and excitement. I was carrying a shitload of money and a high quantity of drugs, and it was fair to say that I was shitting a fucking brick!

I watched and waited until Parrot left on his merry way before heading in the opposite direction. I needed not only to get to the flat I’d rented off Barry because that needed sorting out, but I needed to get far away from Parrot before

his craziness took over. I'd seen when I'd handed over the two keys of drugs to him, his eyes zeroing in on the money, pound signs dinging over and over again. I knew he wouldn't spare me in his want to take the money from me, no matter what.

Continuing to watch my back, I held the duffel bag close to my chest, my palms sweating like mad and my heart beating ten to the dozen. I could actually feel the sweat pouring from my pores and trailing down my face. I needed to get this money put away before I bumped into someone and either accidentally dropped it—which was very bloody unlikely—or someone just happened to take a fancy to my bag and felt like lifting it, which again was very bloody unlikely because I was not letting the bag go... For nothing.

I darted down the back alley behind the row of shops and up the black metal stairs that creaked a little under my weight. The door was hard as hell to open and squeaked like a good'en, so I knew I'd have to oil it or something when I could.

The moment the door opened, the smell of must, dust and mould assaulted my senses, sending me into fits of coughing and sneezing. I sneezed until my nose ran and was red at the tip, and my throat was raw. Shutting the door after me, I walked slowly through the small flat, grimacing and chewing my lip at the state of the place. The walls were a nicotine-brown colour and peeling in some places, the ceiling just as bad and the floor, oh hell, it looked like a puppy had been let loose, ripping the old musty carpet up and tearing it to pieces. The closer I looked it did seem there was a pest problem just like Barry had said. In the corner of the okay-sized living room, there were big, fat droppings what looked like came from rats.

I stood back and ran my hands through my hair. This was gonna take forever to sort out. The whole flipping place looked like it was ready to be condemned. I walked from room to room, noting the problems in my head, creating lists that continued to grow and grow and grow.

Opening a window because the smell was really getting to me now, I leaned out; my hands pressed against the windowsill and watched people walk by downstairs, cars bibbing and engines rumbling. If I listened real good and hard, I could faintly hear the sea in the distance.

I glanced back over my shoulder to the living room and nodded to myself. Okay the place was a complete and utter mess, but it was my complete and utter mess. I closed my eyes and watched a small movie play out in my head. I

imagined Penguin running into the room, a big smile on her face as she dropped down to the nice, clean floor and played with new toys that she gotten out of boxes and packets rather than from the charity shop. I imagined putting her to bed in her *own bed* and in her *own room*.

Tears gathered in my eyes as I turned and leaned back against the window frame. A huge sob stuck in my chest, taking my breath away at the same time as I glanced around the living room—my living room. Slithering down the stained and dirty wall, I hit the carpet with a dull thud and completely broke down. I'd finally done it. I'd finally done something that I promised not only myself but Penguin too.

Relief, so much relief poured from me, easing off my tired and weary shoulders. Tears, so many of them rained down my face, dripping off my chin, salty and hot. I cried for not only myself but for Penguin. I cried for achieving something that I never thought I would, but also because I now had a chance to make our lives better and be somebody that not only I could be proud of, but Penguin could be too.

I didn't have to be Tutti Fruitti Rudi anymore. I didn't have to duck and dive to make sure we had food in our stomachs. No, I had a shitload of money and a place to lay my hat, somewhere to call home.

"*Home,*" I whispered.

I'd finally done it.

Chapter Sixteen

“Whoa.” Jay gripped my shoulders as I lifted him up and spun him around, shouting and hooting at the same time. “Put me down, you crazy person.” He giggled and slapped my shoulders. Once I set him on his feet, he tilted his head to the side and eyed me with vibrant, dancing eyes. “What has you so happy?”

I couldn't help but move on my feet, shuffling from one to the other. I wasn't nervous, no; I was excited, ecstatic and damn near to exploding. I wanted him to come see my new place, show him all I'd done in the last couple of days. I'd spent a tidy amount of the money on everything I could think of that the flat needed, along with me and Penguin. The rest of the dosh had been stashed somewhere safe where I could take only small amounts out if and when needed.

“I have a place...” I explained it all to Jay, my hands moving at a fast pace as excitement made my sentences all run together, bleeding into one whole burst of breath. By the time I was finished, I needed to take a couple of deep breaths, but I was cool.

Something flashed in Jay's eyes causing his smile some hesitation. “Oh that's good. Well done.”

Well, that wasn't what I was expecting.

I didn't actually know what I expected, but I do know that wasn't it. No, I did know what I expected. I expected him to throw his arms around my shoulders and tell me how good I had done, how pleased he was that I was sorting myself out along with Penguin, but that didn't come... at all.

Suddenly he quietened and his smile looked a bit too strained now. “You okay?” I asked after silence settled over us like a heavy fog.

“Oh yeah.” He nodded jerkily and shoved his hands in the front pocket of his jeans. “I'm just...” He cleared his throat. “See, I've got to go. I've been working like a dog for the last couple of days and I'm,” he pointed to his car that was parked in the drive, “due to meet a couple of guys from work.”

“Oh.” Disappointment slammed through me at his sudden rejection. “I thought maybe we could do something. You know? Me, you and Penguin.” I had ideas of the three of us going down to the seafront, grabbing some candy floss, hot doughnuts and maybe some Rossi's ice cream, then sitting down on the sand watching the sun go down. Penguin would love that.

Jay shifted on his feet, his dirty work boots scraping against the wood. “Maybe tomorrow?”

I nodded numbly as I watched him move past me to his car. My eyes continued to watch him, my mind silently begging him to look back and give me some sort of smile, but he didn't. He just got into his car, started it up after a couple of turns and backed out of the drive. Seconds later, he was gone, and I stood outside his house all alone wondering what the fuck has just happened.

“Well that went well,” I mumbled to myself as I knocked on the door.

Monica answered it with a huge smile on her face. I didn't miss her eyes quickly darting up and down the length of me, scanning my clothing and the way I looked. I was due to take Penguin out for a couple of hours.

My head tilted to the side, my eyes narrowing a little. I was upset and a little sad at Jay's attitude just now, and the sadness had morphed into anger. Then to stand in front of his mum, effectively, and her to judge me all because she'd looked after Penguin for a little while—just made my blood boil.

“Are you finished?” I snarled and raised my brows. “Or would you like me to take my clothes off, show you my body for any track marks or anything like that? Would that be good for you, Monica? Would that ease the worry I see seeping from your eyes?”

Monica gasped and slapped her hand over her mouth. “Rudi.”

“Save it.” I gave her the hand. “I'm here for Penguin.”

“What on earth's the matter?” she asked, moving closer to me, her hand snaking out to touch my shoulder. “What's going on, Rudi?”

I moved out of her reach and hitched my hands on my hips. Today had been real good. I'd made progress at work by giving Barry my first week's rent. I'd earned respect off the old dude for doing that, and that made my chest puff out with pride that I'd done something good with the drug money. Then once I'd finished work, I'd gone around the shops like a mad person buying as much as I could carry by way of decoration for the flat. I had things on order, waiting to be delivered. Beds had been ordered and were coming on Saturday because I'd paid for forty-eight hour delivery. I had food, plenty of good, wholesome food in the cupboards and shit like that. Hell, I'd even bought a few cookbooks from the charity shop so I could learn to cook better food for Penguin. I'd done more than I had in my life today, and within the last couple of minutes, I felt it all flush down the toilet, leaving me with bitter anger and hurt all rolled together in a brightly wrapped package with a fucking bright red bow sitting on top.

“You, Jay, everyone,” I shouted and clenched my hands into fists. Taking deep breaths, I tried to calm my temper. “Can I just have Penguin, please?”

Monica swallowed hard and rubbed her neck. “Do you think it’s a good idea to look after Penguin in the mood you’re in?”

The glare I shot her way was so hot, it could have melted something. “Excuse me?”

The woman backed up and closed the door a little. “Now, Rudi,” she said as if she were trying to convince Cujo to get away from her. “Taking Penguin out whilst you’re in this mood, isn’t a good idea, is it?”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “I’ve asked you twice if I can have my sister and twice you’ve ignored me. I’ll ask a third time before I come in and get her. What’s it gonna be?”

Jay’s mum’s face hardened, along with her grip on the door. Her knuckles whitened along with her lips. “Listen here, Rudi Costa. I will not be spoken to in that manner. In my opinion, you are not in the right mind to take care of a vulnerable person like Penguin. If you want to go and cool off, then that is fine by me, but I cannot and will not let you have that child. Do I make myself clear?”

I leaned into the door and looked her directly in the eye. “I’ve asked for my sister and you haven’t given her to me. You have no right to keep her from me. I’ve done naff all wrong. Now, again, give me Penguin before I call the police.”

“I’m sorry,” she said as she closed the door a little more. Now all that was left was a sliver. “I can’t let her go whilst you’re being unreasonable. Come back tomorrow, and we’ll talk about it. Goodbye.”

The bitch slammed the door in my face.

Throwing myself at the door, I kicked it first, and then pounded on the thick, rich wood with my closed fists, shouting out for Penguin. I had to see her. I hadn’t seen or spoken to her since the day before yesterday. All I wanted to see she was okay and hear her voice, maybe feel her in my arms. The woman had no right keeping me away from Penguin. Didn’t she understand the damage she was doing by keeping us away from each other?

I continued to do this until my throat gave out from shouting too much. The palms of my hands ached and stung with how hard I’d hit them against the door, and my toes pulsed with every beat of my heart inside my boots.

I swiped at the angry tears that threatened to fall. "I'll be back," I promised.

Long ago, the music had all bled into one long, boring-as-hell song. I was so drunk that I couldn't differentiate when one ended and another began. All I knew was that the amount of alcohol I'd had, had blurred my mind and everything along with it.

Now, that was a real good thing.

I chuckled at that, earning myself a few concerned looks from the bartender who was watching me closely. I'd seen his look in the beginning when I'd come in. He'd tried his chat up lines on me, telling me my eyes were the colour of coconut shells, told me I was gorgeous, and I had a glint in my eye that asked for trouble. I'd snorted and told him that my arsehole was closed up to actual arse lickers. After that, he'd steered clear, only coming close to me when I ordered another drink.

Four pints and a couple of neat vodkas later—because I was a lightweight—did I feel *not* like me, which was good.

"Another!" I shouted and threw a crisp tenner in the general direction of the bartender. I leaned into the wood and waved my hands around in the air when the man failed to look in my direction.

"No more," he said, as he stopped across the bar from me. He sighed heavily and picked the money up, twisted it a little and leaned over to stuff it in the pocket on the left hand side of my shirt. "Go home."

I snorted and splayed my hands on the bar, letting them slide across the thickly painted and polished wood until my elbow slipped off the edge. "I don't have a home."

"Sure you do. Everyone has a home."

"Whatever," I slurred and slipped off the stool only to nearly face-plant the floor. I turned and gripped the bar, holding myself steady until the world stopped tilting on its axis. Damn, that felt wrong. Maybe I should have stopped at my second beer. But then, where was the fun in that?

Chuckling again to myself, I wiped the spittle that had fallen from my mouth with the back of my hand and moved through the throngs of people, bumping into chests and shoulders on the way. I apologised and giggled when in response, I felt hands grope my backside and my cock. I laughed out loud

and pushed my crotch into people's hands, liking the clenching squeezes on my neglected parts.

A heat covered my back and strong hands settling on my hips, holding them hostage. Lips, very hot lips danced over the side and back of my neck. A goatee if I could feel correctly, scraped against my skin, making me sigh and lean into the contact whilst trying to move forward at the same time. The guy stayed with me until we hit the doors, where the stud muffin bouncers smiled, shook their heads and pushed open the dark doors so the street came into view. I stumbled outside and sucked in a deep lungful of air, which seemed to wake me up a little.

I opened my eyes when the big guy spun me around and grasped my hand, pulling me down the darkened almost pitch black alley which stunk of piss and wet cardboard. I grunted a little when I was thrust up against the wall and a mouth with thick—too thick lips—pushed against my own, sucking my tongue into his mouth. Something in the back of my mind screamed at me to stop, to think about what I was doing, whilst another part gave the first part the finger and even made a little *Nernerneenerner* sound. Then another part—as the guy continued to eat my face—demanded that I open my eyes and look to see if green ones stared back at me.

I did and they didn't.

The eyes that opened were a deep brown, much like my own. They were half-mast, no doubt—again, much like my own. They had little lines in the corners, so the guy was older than me. By the feel of his hands and body pressed up against my own, he was a lot bigger than me too.

Well didn't that just turn me the fuck off? The stranger pulled back from the kiss, obviously noticing that I wasn't feeling it. I wasn't, and there was one reason for that—he wasn't Jay. That thought definitely penetrated my mind. I stumbled back against the brick and held my hands out in front of me when he came closer, signalling him to stop. "Stop, man, stop!"

"Oh come on." He advanced, his hands snaking around my waist, thrusting his hips and hard-on against me. He felt nice and big. I couldn't help the moan when he turned his hips a little to the right and thrust up against my own cock that was half-hard. "There we are," he mumbled and began kissing my neck again as he rubbed me till I was fully hard.

"Arghhhh," I moaned out loud and bit my lip when hands moved from around my back down to the front of me, popping the button fly open and

taking my cock out. I hissed a little when the guy's strong hold gripped it a little tighter than I would have liked, squeezing the head until it darkened and a small dribble of pre-cum slithered out.

"You've got a nice-looking cock, but I don't want that. Turn around, let me fuck this arse."

I smiled and fought at the same time to keep my eyes open. Suddenly, I realised that the night air was making me tired as hell the more I breathed it in. I stifled a yawn. "Who says I'm a bottom?"

The man's dark brows rose, a wicked smile appearing across his face. "You're nothing but. You've got too much of a nice arse not to be. Now do as you're told and turn around. Face the wall and place your hands above your head."

Saluting him, I wobbled as I turned and thrust my jean-covered backside out at him. He growled and attacked my jeans, ripping them down my legs, leaving me bare to the night air. Hands, thick and heavy, moved over my bare skin. "I knew it." He sounded pleased and a little awed too. I knew I had a nice arse. It was round, muscled, hairless and silky smooth all at once. "Gonna fuck this into the wall."

"Do it," I whispered even though I didn't really give a fuck. The hard-on I'd had minutes ago was withering down to nothing very quickly. That little part of my mind still screamed that I was making a huge mistake, that it wasn't Jay behind me with his hands roaming over my body. No, I knew it wasn't. I guess that was part of it all though. I'd gone over to Jay's to spend some time with him and hope to get to know each other better, perhaps be able to take back some of the things I'd said, like me not being good enough for him. I was stupid enough to think that stealing all that money and doing something good with it made me a different person.

How deluded I was.

Fingers pulled apart my cheeks and hot breath fanned over my hole. Then hot spit landed in the middle of my starfish and a rough finger pushed and prodded, trying to break its way through. I pushed out and relaxed—or tried to. I closed my eyes and let out a deep breath—his finger broke through, wiggling and twisting. Another finger joined in, stretching me a little, making me moan when blunt-headed tips stroked against my prostate. I whimpered when he removed his fingers and pulled out. Shuffling sounded behind me over the sound of cars bibbing in the background. The club music I could hear a little, but I could feel and hear the bass more than anything.

“Ready?” he asked. Not giving me a chance to answer, he thrust himself inside me to the hilt. “Fucking hell,” he gasped and gripped my hips tighter in his meaty fingers. His breath fanned over my back as his shirt rubbed against the knobs of my spine.

I gritted my teeth at the quick flash of intense, burning pain. My arsehole clenched rhythmically, trying to close in on itself, but it wouldn't and couldn't, not with the fucking huge cock stuffed up my backside. I breathed out and whimpered, “Move.” I knew the moment he started moving, the pain would change—hopefully.

The guy grunted loudly and pulled all the way out until I thought he had second thoughts, but then he slammed back into me with such force, I fell forward onto the wall, grazing the front of my bare cock. I reached down quickly and grabbed hold of my piece, wincing when my hand moved over the soft, scraped, bared tip. Fuck, that hurt.

I had no clue how long he fucked me, but I did know that the more it went on, the more turned off I became. The constant back and forth woke me up a little more each time, plus the burn of my arsehole, because we had no lube, kept me from relaxing. Spit really wasn't a good substitute.

The big man behind me—who I'd failed to get a name from—gripped my shoulders and thrust even harder against me, his hips smashing against my flesh, his cock jutting back and forth. “Coming,” he shouted and pushed me into the wall, crushing my cheek against the abrasive surface as I felt his cock unload into my arse. What felt like minutes but was probably only seconds later, I felt dribbles of his cum leak out the sides where his cock immediately started to deflate inside me.

Bare.

“What the fuck?” I whispered brokenly and attempted to push away from him. I felt little drops of cum land on the back of my thighs. He pulled out, and my asshole clenched, keeping his shit inside me, when I wanted nothing more than to get the whole fucking lot of it out. “You went bare inside me?” I whirled around on him in time to see him flick the excess cum from his slimy cock and stuff it back into his jeans.

A smug look came over his face. “But you're Tutti Fruitti Rudi.”

I froze and swallowed hard as I felt the blood bleed from my face. My eyes burned and my throat quivered. “What?” I'd never seen this guy before in my

life. I would have remembered someone like him. Through my drink-induced brain, I tried for the life of me to remember, but I couldn't.

“You're the famous Rudi. Every gay guy in Southend and the surrounding areas knows you. Rumours have it that you've got the best asshole a man could have. Now,” he smiled even bigger than before, all proud of himself and shit, “I can testify to that. Damn, you were well worth the money.” He dug into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. Folding two twenties together, he tossed them at me, along with his card. All three landed scattered at my feet. “Call me for a repeat. I may even pay you more or maybe, you could be *the birthday present* at one of my mate's parties? Yeah, Pete's birthday's coming up in a couple of weeks. You think you could make it?”

I stared blankly at the man as he continued to blabber off about me doing whatever. Finally, he gave up, thanked me and told me to give him a call when I wanted a “good old time fuck”. Then he was gone.

Looking down at myself, I cringed at what I saw. My jeans were still around my ankles and my flaccid cock was swinging in the subtle breeze. I could feel trickles of his cum juice subtly easing its way out of me with every exhale I took. I swallowed past my quivering throat and saw a tear fall from my eye as I bent over to yank my jeans up.

What the hell had I done?

Chapter Seventeen

The clinic was full, which made this even more embarrassing. Normally I wasn't embarrassed at all. I'd come here once a month to get checked, have a lorry load of condoms shoved at me and probably lift a few things in the meantime, but now was different.

Last night I'd fucked up big time.

After seeing Angela at the counter and booking myself in, I sat down on one of the blue plastic seats and waited. The overhead TV was on, *This Morning's* theme tune echoing around the full room. I glanced around at the sea of faces. Most were my age or younger. One or two were a little older but not by much. I eyed the girls who sat curled up by themselves, their arms wrapped around their middles. They were the scared little ones, worried that they were pregnant. They always came in with the same worried, dejected looks on their faces. Then you had the guys and girls who you could tell were regulars here—more regular than me—and just coming in to have a quick test before they could get going, not really giving a shit overall. The gay guys were different. They had this far away, not quite there look on their faces. You could tell their minds were off wondering what the hell they were gonna do if they found out they were HIV positive... or anything else.

Right now I was in exactly the same place.

The last time I'd gone bareback—not voluntarily—was when I was abused by the men that my mum had brought home. Since then, when I had gained control of my life and who and what touched me, everyone wore a condom. I wore a condom when I fucked someone. It was a written rule amongst gay men—hell with all men but especially the LGBT community. It was pushed, elbowed and downright shoved down our throats by the counsellors, doctors and nurses to use protection each and every time because the outcry of HIV was spreading like nobody's business. Everyone was turning up HIV positive and not knowing about it because they thought they were safe. By then, it was too late. The deed had been done, and it was too bloody late to do anything.

That and the thought that I associated unprotected sex with being abused, scared me into using protection, making sure I was wrapped every time I slid into someone and vice versa. Just the thought that one time of utter stupidity last night would ruin the rest of my life, just about broke me, but at the same time, made me angry as hell.

I was never that stupid. Whenever I bent over for someone, I always watched, made sure they were wearing something. Drinking lowered my inhibitions, my security and made me fucking stupid as hell. In effect, drinking—and drinking too much—could have caused me to contract the HIV fucking virus and whatever the fuck else, too.

Stupidness.

What felt like hours later, my usual nurse, Paul, waved me over, a ready smile on his face. The moment he saw mine—or lack of—he frowned and followed me into the room, making sure to close the door after us with a soft hush.

“Rudi?”

“I need the HIV test, like now,” I said quickly, not being able to stand still. There was no point in beating around the bush. My whole body trembled with nerves. My heart beat ridiculously fast in my chest and my head pounded, not just with a hangover but with overwhelming tension.

Paul nodded and moved over to the sink, where he began washing his hands with the antiseptic stuff. I moved to the long, white bed and hefted myself on top of it and held out my arms, ready and waiting for him.

With purple gloves snapped into place, Paul approached me with a little finger punch thing ready in his hands. I held out my finger, wincing a little at the stab I knew was coming. Placing the device at my forefinger tip, Paul pressed it down, puncturing my skin. Seconds later, a red blob appeared. He reached over blindly for a test strip thingy as he looked up at me, his brows drawn together. “Something you want to tell me, Rudi?”

“No.”

Paul sighed and dropped the puncture device into a grey kidney dish, along with the wrap from the test strip. Placing a cotton wool ball over my finger, he held it in place for a couple of seconds. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Rudi.” The nurse looked up at me again, his icy blue eyes pleading with me. “Talk to me. I see you once a month and have done for the last couple of years. We usually have a laugh and chat about everything that you’ve been doing and who I’ve seen and what funny things have happened during that month.”

“For fuck’s sake, Paul!” I shouted and glared at the persistent man. Did he not understand that I had a hundred and one things on my mind and talking was the last thing I wanted to do? “I don’t want to talk. Is that okay?”

“Did something happen? You can talk to me, you know.”

He just had to keep prodding. “God damn you. I don’t need to talk to anyone, I don’t need anything. No, that’s a lie. All I need is this bloody HIV test and the results. That’s all I want and need, thank you very much.”

Now Paul just sounded hurt when he spoke. “If you don’t want to talk to me, you can talk to the counsellor, you know that. She’s in today. I can make sure you get seen right away, be her first patient.”

Sighing heavily, I dropped my head forward, wishing I had plenty of hair I could hide behind. “I don’t need to talk to anyone. I assure you, nothing happened, nothing like that anyway.”

“Are you sure?”

Rolling my eyes, I looked up at him and nodded. “I’m sure.”

He stared at me for a long moment before he nodded, then held out a white swab for my mouth. “Open up.”

Ten minutes later, I was back outside, even more nervous and worried than I had been before I went in. I knew the test took an hour at the most and that hour made my bum hole clench repeatedly, my gut jump and my heart beat triple time. My stomach churned, threatening to bring up the toast I’d managed to force down my throat earlier. The tea I’d had burned like hot acid in my stomach, creating little regurgitations in my chest.

The phone in my pocket buzzed, alerting me of a new text.

Pulling it out, I opened the phone and saw the text was from Jay. I debated about opening it, my finger just hovering over the little button. I wasn’t sure if I was ready to deal with him or the situation yet. I had too many things on my mind and part of me—even though I knew it was wrong—blamed him for my actions last night. If he wouldn’t have blown me out yesterday for whatever reason, things wouldn’t have turned out the way they did. I wouldn’t have gone to the club and got blind drunk and had unprotected sex in a dirty, filthy piss-stained alley with a stranger. No, I would have spent the night with Penguin and Jay along Southend seafront, maybe taking Penguin into the arcades and giving her some two pence coins for the machines, then maybe fighting playfully with Jay over who could win Penguin a teddy from the grabbers.

Deciding to ignore Jay's text, I closed the phone and set it back in my pocket. Fifteen minutes later, it went off again, buzzing intently against the side of my thigh. I clenched my hands into fists and debated about taking the piece of plastic out and perhaps crushing it in my grip. Maybe that would shut the thing up?

Getting annoyed and frustrated at not only the constant buzzing, but also the waiting, I got up from the uncomfortable blue plastic and paced the length of the clinic, not paying any attention to anyone else or their pained looks. I wrapped my arms around my waist, berating myself over and over again about how stupid I'd been last night. I'd bollocked myself repeatedly but that wasn't enough. I'd been stupid, so incredibly stupid.

"Rudi."

Nurse Paul's voice had me spinning around. I rushed to him and gripped his forearms, my eyes darted back and forth across his face, trying to read it. "It's negative, right?"

Paul gave me a small smile and led me back to the room, where he told me to sit down, but I was too worked up. "Rudi, have a seat."

"I can't." I swallowed and rubbed my forehead with the tips of my fingers that shook. "Just tell me."

"Okay." The nurse nodded and reached over to a sheet of printed paper from his desk. "The results are negative. That means that either it's really a negative, because the person or persons you had risky sex with didn't have the HIV virus, or if they did, had a very low viral load. Either that, or it's a false negative because the virus hasn't had a chance to infect you yet."

Relief so fucking strong swept through me and actually took my legs out. I collapsed to the floor, my hand reaching out to grab the end of the bed, clenching against the soft blue paper that rested on top of it. "Thank fuck."

"It's not one hundred percent, Rudi. I'd suggest you come back in two weeks, have another test."

My head was already shaking back and forth. "I don't need to come back. If the results have come back negative just like the others I've had previously, then I'll be okay." In my head, it had to be okay. I'd gotten the negative news, and that, in my mind, was all that I had wanted. Anything else that could spoil that, my mind didn't want to know.

Paul sighed and pursed his lips. “Rudi,” he said sternly, obviously using his medical position to pull rank on me. “In my opinion, I would suggest you come back in a couple of weeks’ time to have another test, just to be on the safe side. You can never be too sure with things like this, especially with... you and everything... else.”

“I’m not doing that anymore, Paul.” I wiped my sweaty hands down the front of my jeans and licked my suddenly dry lips. “I’ll come back in my usual four weeks, okay?”

The nurse’s jaw ticked obviously wanting to say more. Hell, he probably wanted to strangle me and shake me till I gave in, but I was set in my ways on this. I walked over to where he sat and held out my hand. He looked down at it before sighing heavily and pulling me into him. He clasped my hand and held it in between the two of his. Looking up at me, he said, “I don’t like this, Rudi.”

I smiled a little, even though it felt shaky as hell, because no matter how much my mind repeated over and over again that I’d gotten a negative result, my body was still in shock at not only the result but the need to be here, too. “I’ll be fine, Paul. Thanks for everything.”

I’d just opened the door when Paul called my name. I looked over my shoulder at him. “Yeah?”

“You forgot these.” He held up a yellow biohazard plastic bag filled with my usual monthly wares.

Chapter Eighteen

“You know,” Jay said warily. “I think we need to talk.”

That was an understatement.

We both stood staring at each other. He had dark rings around his eyes, and even though he had a nice new tan from working outside, it only made his face look more tired, especially around his eyes and mouth. He actually looked like he hadn't slept much better than me. His dark-blond hair was messed on top and looked as if he'd run his hands through it a million times today.

Probably what I looked like if I'd have looked in the mirror this morning.

“Okay.” I nodded and adjusted Penguin in my arms. Subtly, I scanned our surroundings in the car park we stood in, watching people drive in and out, park their cars, go to the small black machine before walking off to do whatever they came to do. “You wanna come back to my place?”

Jay nodded back at me and smiled a little. “I'd like that.”

After he locked up and ticketed his own car, he pocketed the keys and waved at me to get on with it. With my place not being far, I carried Penguin all the way, with Jay walking by my side, not saying anything. The silence wasn't heavy or uncomfortable, but I could tell that Jay was silently having a conversation with himself, probably about what he and I were going to say. That was going to be one interesting chat, because I was feeling that there were some crossed wires going on somewhere.

Fifteen minutes later, we arrived at the creaky steps that led up to my flat. Going first, I unlocked the door, giving it a quick jerk of my shoulder, because I still hadn't oiled the thing, and held my hand out, waiting for Jay to go in. He hesitated a little, and then seemed to shake himself.

Penguin tensed in my arms, her head burrowing into my neck. “Rudi,” she whispered whilst her hands clutched at my T-shirt, trying to pull herself into me more. It was clear she didn't want to go into the flat.

“Hey, Penguin,” I smoothed my hand up and down her back as I walked with her to her new bedroom, “I've got a surprise for you.”

Hesitantly, her head popped up, her eyes widening a little. “You have?”

“Uh-huh.” I nodded and tickled her, making her squirm in my arms. Damn, it felt good to hold her and have her near. “You wanna see?”

“Yes.” She squealed and wiggled to get down.

Placing her on her feet, I held her small hand in mine and stopped outside the closed door. I looked down at Penguin to see her chewing on her bottom lip and glancing up at me a little nervously. I glanced back at Jay to see that he'd stopped down the passage a little, giving me and Penguin our little time. I smiled at him in acknowledgement and thanks.

Opening the newly painted door, I smiled broadly and flicked the light switch, illuminating the pink and white room. I'd spent a shitload of time and money making the room perfect for Penguin. I knew that I didn't really need to go to any trouble at all. Penguin would have accepted anything I would have given her and if that had been a bed in a small room without anything else, she would have been happy, but she deserved better than that and now with the money—even though it was stolen and came from drugs and God knows where and what else—I could do this for her.

The walls were painted a candyfloss pink that I'd had made especially for her in B&Q. I'd bought small stencils of penguins, teddy bears and hearts and painted them on along the top of the wall as a replacement border. I'd also gotten a new wardrobe set with side table and chest of drawers that I'd also filled with new clothes. Her bed, that sat along the far wall with the window just to the side of it, was a special pink and white, with silver painted swirls and stars along the princess-cut headboard and footboard. The covers were gingham pink with little white bows that looked real girly.

Penguin squealed long and loud when she spotted the bed. Why she did this, I had no clue. My brows furrowed when I glanced at the toys that were stacked up in the corner, waiting for her to rip open and bug me to put batteries in, but she didn't. She instead headed straight past those as if they weren't even there.

Huh.

Climbing onto her bed, she squirmed until she was under the covers and looking up at me, her bright blue eyes shining and twinkling, her cheeks rosy and bunched where she'd smiled so much. “I love Rudi.”

Something inside me settled. Seeing her so happy and so *her age* made me feel complete a little bit more, like I'd done the right thing.

Walking over to the bed, I crawled on top of the covers and curled up around her, against the wall, and pulled her small body into my arms. Burying my nose in her hair, I felt my brows pull in a little when I smelled coconut instead of strawberries, but then a shadow fell over the door. I glanced up to see

Jay standing in the doorway looking way too uncomfortable. His hands were clenching and unclenching, his lips were pursed and his brows were arched.

“Jay, come,” Penguin said into the silenced room. She patted her hand to the other side of her, her blue eyes intently watching the man that had come to mean something to both me and Penguin. “Jay, come,” she repeated when Jay failed to move.

He looked at me I guess for permission. I nodded and watched his lithe form move across the room. He sat down on the bed and bent over, the muscles in his back pulled and bunched, his biceps jerked and rolled as his hands fiddled with something. The tendons in his arms flicked and ticked. Only when I heard the plop of his boots hit the new carpet did I realise he was taking them off. Before I could reach down to my own—because I should have thought of that myself—Jay turned and undone mine, pulling them off my feet before dropping them to the floor. Then he ruffled under the covers, making Penguin scream out loud in fits of giggles, trying to get her sandals—that Monica had bought—off her feet.

When all of our shoes were removed, Jay slipped in next to Penguin. His head rested on one of his bent arms, whilst the other stretched over Penguin hesitantly so it rested on my hip. His fingers curled around my hip bone, his thumb pressing against the soft skin there. “Is this okay?” he whispered, his eyes flicking all over my face.

I glanced down at Penguin to see her blue eyes glazed over and rolling a little, her eyelids becoming heavier by the minute. I didn't answer him until Penguin's eyes were closed and her mouth had dropped open with little snuffled snores coming out.

“It's fine.”

Jay sighed heavily, enough to ruffle Penguin's hair. He swallowed hard, his eyes intently focused on me. “I'm sorry.”

My brows pulled together as I slid my arm across Penguin so it touched Jay's chest. I fanned my hand out, feeling his muscles under my touch and his hot skin. Peace much like when I held Penguin in my arms, settled inside me when this man was close. “What are you apologising for?”

“I was a stupid prick to you the other night,” he said softly. “I'm sorry for that.”

“You were kind of a prick,” I admitted. “Why'd you do it, because I know it's not your normal persona?”

Jay didn't answer for so long; I thought maybe I'd missed something. Eventually though, he said, "I... I got jealous."

I nearly choked on my next breath. "Jealous?" I said incredulously, remembering only at the last minute that we weren't alone. "Of what, exactly?"

"Of you," he whispered fiercely, his fingers tightening around my hip. "Of you and this." He let go of my hip and waved his hand around. "I got jealous that you came to us with practically nothing and the... state that you and Penguin were in then—what days, nearly a week later—you turn up and announce that you have a new place and it's like this and like that. Then you started going on about what you're gonna be doing with it and how Penguin's gonna love it. I got jealous, simple as."

"I did come to you with nothing but the shit my mum had dealt out. You're right about that," I admitted even though it bugged the shit out of me.

Jay nodded. "I know and I feel bad for that, for thinking of you in that manner and assuming that someone like you could never have this because if I admitted it, I did think that. I'm sorry for doing that. I'm sorry for being a prick."

"We're quite the pair, huh?" The look on his face just about broke my heart. I shuffled closer and slipped my hand around his back, pulling him in closer still. "You don't need to be jealous. I understand what you thought and secretly, I wondered when I first met you whether you were like that, but after spending time with you, I realised that you weren't. That night, I guess you were just feeling something or another really. You'd probably had a bad day at work and came home to something that had upset you further and..."

"I guess you're right," Jay admitted quietly. "I'd had an okay day at work, but when I got home, I just wanted to have a shower and go out with you and Penguin. Instead, I came home to Monica having a moan at me about not doing something before heading to work earlier that morning, then telling me that Dad wanted to have a word with me when he got home because he'd been at a merchant's all day and was pissed about something or another. An hour or so later, you came around and told me about all this, I guess that was my way of exploding."

I snorted. "I'm glad you don't get angry or anything like that when you explode."

"Nah," Jay smiled, his eyes relaxing a little. "I just kind of go off and sulk much like I did that night."

Memories, thoughts and snippets of angry men in my life, flashed before my eyes. Men hitting me and my mum when I was younger flitted through my mind. My body instantly tensed at the phantom feel of hands and fists hitting my body, blood rushing to the surface as bruises formed and cuts exploded, the red stuff splattering and dripping from my body.

“Hey,” Jay said softly, his hand reached up and cupped my face, his thumb tracing over the curve of my cheek. “You okay?”

My eyes opened, and I realised where I was and that I was okay. I was okay. I scanned Jay's face, taking in all the little bits of it that I loved and adored, then I looked down at Penguin. I gazed at her sleeping form for the longest time. When I felt my body relax, I looked back up at Jay just in time to catch the concerned frown on his face before it was wiped away. “I'm fine.”

“Are you sure?”

My head dropped to the side as my hand slipped under the hem of Jay's top, feeling his hot and soft skin. I needed to touch something on him even if it was a little part. “Yeah, I am now.”

“You are staying for dinner, right?”

After having our little chat or heart-to-heart, whatever it was called, we'd fallen asleep both curled around Penguin. We'd woken to her complaining about being too hot. Now, I was in the kitchen starting dinner, whilst Penguin watched cartoons in the living room.

Jay eyed me warily as he perched himself up on a stall against the old kitchen counter. The thing creaked under his weight. “You cook?”

I clucked my tongue and shot him a glare, but I didn't really mean it, though. “Of course I cook. I've cooked since I was ten years old.”

“I'm sorry,” Jay said quickly, as if sensing his mistake. “I didn't realise.”

“You're alright.” I sighed and reached for a new saucepan out of a set I'd bought. Settling it on the counter, I moved to the vegetable rack that held the potatoes and fresh veg. I grabbed the bag of spuds and dropped them to the counter too, as I searched through the cutlery drawer for a small knife. “You couldn't have known.”

“I bet you had to do a lot of other things too, huh?” he asked softly, his eyes just as soft and rounded a little.

Damn, I could feel the pity creeping in.

“Don’t pity me,” I warned, pointing the knife at him before I turned my back and began to peel the spuds. The peel dropped to the counter in a long string. “Pity is for everyone else, not me. Anyway—” I cleared my throat and glanced at him over my shoulder “—do you cook any?”

Jay snorted and shifted on the stall a little. “Please.” He snorted again. “Have you seen Monica?”

We both laughed at that. “She does seem to like to cook a lot.”

“If I didn’t work as much as I did and be on my feet all day, I’d be the size of a house. That woman never leaves the kitchen. When Dad brought her home to meet me on their third or fourth date—I can’t remember which—he was supposed to cook her something real nice. He’d sweated about it all day, babbling on about how good it had to be because Monica was this cooking connoisseur or something like that. Anyway—” he waved his hand and smiled fondly “—she came over and completely took over and ended up cooking for us. From that moment, I think Dad fell in love with her.”

I moved to the sink and filled the saucepan with water then turned and grabbed the colander for the raw potatoes that I’d peeled. “What happened to your real mum?”

Jay was silent for a minute or so before he said ever so softly, “She left me and Dad when I was a couple months old.”

So shocked, I dropped the knife and moved to his side, taking his hand in mine. The other slid across his shoulders, bringing him closer to me. I rested my chin on his head. “I’m sorry.”

“Hey.” He chuckled, but it sounded a little forced. “No pity. Huh?”

I pulled away and swatted him a little. “That’s me, not you.”

“Whatever,” he grumped but ruined it by smiling. “Nah, I’m not bitter. She had her reasons or that’s what Dad told me. He said that things weren’t right when she got pregnant. Apparently, it was just a onetime thing between them, and then she turned up one day when he was at work and sprung it on him. Immediately, he assumed responsibility and took care of her and me eventually. Apparently, after I was born, she suffered with some depression or whatever and couldn’t handle it. One day, Dad came home from work to find me left alone, crying and in a state. Seemed he’d left for work around eight that

morning and she'd left—as the neighbour at the time had said—about eleven. He didn't get home till six, maybe seven, that night."

The way he just rattled that story off, made something inside me break for him. I thought I had it bad—hell I did, but Jay's was bad in a different way. I had a mother who just didn't give a fuck—period. He had a mother who sounded as if she'd gone through some heavy shit and couldn't cope. In the end though, whether we liked it not, I guess we were both fucked up somehow over both women's actions.

To save us having to say anything else, Penguin came bounding into the kitchen and stopped next to me, her eyes dancing over the counter, watching the peel drop from my hands. "What having dinner?" she asked.

"What's this?" I held up the peeled potato.

Her eyes narrowed on the vegetable before she smiled. "Tato."

"That's right." I nodded and reached over the counter for the packet of sausages that I'd set aside. "And these?"

"Saus... saus... suesages." Her pronunciation was a little off and took a couple of tries before she got it right. "Sausages." She bounced up and down, clapping crazily.

"Excellent. Good girl." I winked and shuffled her along so I could light the cooker, which had to be done with a lighter, because the flick switch didn't work. I flicked the lighter and held in my swearing—biting my tongue when the flame licked up and caught my thumb, singeing the small hairs.

"We having sausage surprise?" Penguin asked as she moved back away from the cooker when she saw the hot oil beginning to sizzle and pop. I'd taught her well. She went to Jay's side and held up her arms. He swung around on the stool and lifted her into his lap. Settling herself as if she did it everyday, she smiled and curled into his body. "I like Jay."

My brows shot up, a genuine smile popped onto my face. My eyes flicked between Penguin and Jay. They looked so right. Right there in my kitchen, both of them settled together. Another part inside me clicked and felt even more complete. I could feel the past forty-eight hours being swept away, the more time I spent with both of them.

Before I turned back to the oil, which I could smell was beginning to get real hot, I looked up at Jay as I licked my bottom lip and pulled it in between

my teeth, feeling my body tingling a little, especially my groin area. "I like Jay, too."

"That was delicious. Thank you." Jay rubbed his stomach as he stretched against the sofa. The muscles in his chest and stomach cramped together, highlighting the pack through his T-shirt, before he relaxed and they disappeared. I couldn't stop the disappointment that shot through me when he did that, even if I tried.

"You're welcome." I smiled and got up, grabbing the plates from the coffee table. We'd eaten all together on the floor, because I hadn't had time to put the dining table I'd bought up, yet. It didn't matter anyhow, because Penguin got most of the mash and gravy down the front of her and on the floor. Part of me was glad I hadn't gotten the carpet yet.

"I'll help." Jay quickly jumped up and swiped up Penguin's plate. She'd moved from the floor once she'd eaten a considerable amount of food and was now lying on one of the sofas watching TV.

Jay followed me into the kitchen and set the plates on the side. As I turned, he grabbed me and pushed me up against the counter. His hands slid around my waist and slipped down into the back pockets of my jeans, where he squeezed my cheeks in his palms. I sucked in a breath when I felt his hardness rock into the front of me, flicking against my own readiness. "I want you," he whispered against my lips before crashing his down on mine. Again, I sucked in another breath and moaned a little, grabbing back at him when I felt his hot tongue spread against my own. The taste of sausage, mash, gravy and pure Jay flared over my taste buds. Damn, he tasted fucking good.

Rocking both of our bodies together, I grasped at his shirt, pulling him closer yet pushing him away. I found skin and grabbed it, my fingernails scraping against soft, pliable, hot skin. Needing a breath, I pulled away and panted into his neck, sucking in deep lungfuls of much needed air, but at the same time, taking in Jay's unique spicy, yet sporty smell that drove me and my body to want and need more.

"I want you," Jay repeated and cupped my face, holding it in place whilst he pressed his mouth to mine once, twice and three times.

"You can have me," I whispered and leaned forward to kiss him again, but he moved out of reach. I whimpered when he continued to hold me in place, not

letting me move. My hands reached out to slip back under his top. I wanted—no needed—more skin. “Jay.”

“Really?” His green eyes that had clouded over with lust were serious as hell now. There was no messing about. His body, which was hot to the touch, moved out of reach a little so I couldn't touch him. “Seriously, Rudi?”

I swallowed heavily, sensing a lot rested on this little thing that was happening between us. “Yes. Fuck, yes.”

“Thank fucking God.” He finally gave me what I wanted which was his luscious lips. I sucked them into my mouth, laving my tongue back and forth over the plump, swelled damp pillows. Once I did that, I sucked the bottom one into my mouth and bit down on it, making him groan against me, his hips flicking in small ticks against my own; his hands gripped my face harder, his fingers slicked up in my hair.

“Rudi?” Penguin's voice, sounding very freaking close, had both of us jumping apart.

Jay moved to the kitchen counter and pressed the front of his hips into the old wood, groaning at the same time. “Give me strength,” he hissed and thumped his hand against his cock, trying to get the tent out of his jeans, but by how hard and shapely it looked, it wouldn't happen anytime soon.

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand just as Penguin came into the kitchen, the bloody pink dummy in her mouth. “I looking for you.”

I scowled at the dummy and held my hand out for it, my fingers curling in a “gimme” gesture. “Give me the dummy.”

Her mouth opened as if to argue, but she huffed instead and placed it in my palm. “I ready for bath time.”

Upon hearing Jay's groan, I busted out laughing and fell against the cabinets. I slid to the floor and reached for Penguin, pulling her down with me. Jay dropped down too and slid across the floor until he sat next to us. “Maybe it'll happen sometime when we're alone, huh?” I managed to get out when I stopped laughing.

“Oh, it will, and when it does, there'll be fireworks.”

The seriousness and intent in his voice made hope flourish inside me. Glancing at him from the corner of my eye, I realised, yeah, there would be fireworks.

Chapter Nineteen

The music was so loud that I couldn't even hear my own voice as I called for Jay. When he made no move to acknowledge my call, I grabbed hold of his hand just in time before we were separated. I gripped his wrist and yanked him back towards me, knocking into some other people at the same time. They looked over their shoulders at me and Jay with raised eyebrows. I shrugged and shoved my way through the packed club. There were people everywhere. A mix of men, women and some even were in between... I think.

"Drinks!" Jay shouted in my ear. His hot breath wafted over my skin, making me bite my lip and stifle a groan. I'd been on edge all freaking day waiting for this alone time with Jay. My body felt like I was plugged up to a car battery.

I turned at the last minute, caught his lips and pressed a quick kiss to his shocked pillows. "Sure."

Jay smiled, gave me a kiss back and led the way towards the bar. His body weaved from side to side in time with the music, that very nice arse of his wiggling one way then another.

My hands reached out to his lean hips, holding him close to me as we moved almost as one. The bodies surrounding us pulsed in time with Christina Aguilera's "Dirrrty" playing on the overhead speakers. Strobes of varying different colours danced and swished around the black-coloured walls, creating streaks of intense bright light.

The bar area was filled with people shouting and barking out their orders to the overworked and stressed-looking bartenders who were very nicely bare from the waist upwards. They had their hands filled with bottles and glasses but amazingly, nothing was dropped and nothing was spilled.

Jay squeezed himself in between two muscle-eating men who took up way too much space for their own good. One of them gave Jay the once-over. He even had the cheek to lean back a little on his heels and scan that tight little arse that I knew my boy had.

"Oi." I leaned in close to him, my nose flaring and my lip curling. I was not gonna be intimidated by his size one bit. Just because we were in a gay club didn't mean he had the right to fucking ogle what wasn't his. "Move your fucking eyes."

The dude's sharp eyebrows shot up in shock. His eyes that suddenly danced and sparkled looked me up and down. He tilted his head to the side as his eyes narrowed on my face, his lips pursed in thought. "I know you from somewhere?"

Immediately, my stomach dropped. Not this again. When Jay had told me that he wanted to go out for his birthday to a club, I'd agreed. His parents were looking after Penguin for the night, so we could be alone. I'd arranged to come here, some thirty miles away from home, and I was still getting this shit?

I scanned his face, taking in his sharp, shapely brows, to his nicely trimmed beard that coated the bottom half of his face and neck. His thin lips were perky and a deep pink, telling me he'd had *some* action not so long ago. "Nah," I shook my head. I would have remembered someone like him.

He shrugged but looked a little gutted as he did so. "No probs." He then leaned in to whisper in my ear. "Sorry for eying your boy, but you've got to admit he's got a nice arse. However," he chuckled breathily, and I could have sworn I felt his tongue touch the tip of my ear for at least a second, maybe less, "if you two ever get bored." Then he slid something in my pocket, grabbed his beer from the bar and turned. Next minute, he was gone, a nameless person in the already packed crowd.

Jay glanced over his shoulder at me, completely oblivious. "You okay?"

I swallowed at the intense, unwelcome reminder of not so long ago. My mistake at the last club, the reminder of the guy when he'd shoved his card and money at me after he'd fucked me bare. A repulsed shiver worked its way through me, turning over the greasy bacon sandwich I'd eaten earlier.

Shaking my head, I plastered a fake smile on my face and patted Jay's hip. "I'm fine."

Jay opened his mouth to no doubt question me, when the bartender stopped in front of him and called over, taking Jay's attention from me. Talk about divine intervention. Jay was like a dog with a bone sometimes and I didn't want to give him this bone. Tonight was his night, our night. It was supposed to be about just me and him and damn it, I was going to make it happen... even if I had to go about it feeling like shit and looking over my shoulder.

We'd been dancing for what felt like hours but was probably only a half hour. Sweat ran down the back of my neck, soaking my collar and the space

between my shoulder blades. I ran my hands along Jay's back, feeling his muscles under my fingers. They moved as he moved, rolling and tensing. I loved the feel of him under my hands. He felt... right.

Suddenly, everything went black and silent.

It took probably a whole minute of silence for the people dancing to realise that there was no music playing anymore. I'd stopped, immediately on edge. Jay, however, kept on shaking his thing next to me. I raised my hand and gave it a little wave in front of my face but I couldn't see it. I couldn't see a damn thing.

"Jay," I said urgently, my hands scrabbling for him.

"I'm here," he said breathlessly as he wormed his way into my arms. I could feel his heartbeat pumping against my own, his heavy breathing from dancing too much fanning out across my neck. I licked my lips as my hands tightened around his waist. I turned a little, trying to look left and right but again, I couldn't see anything.

"What's going on?" Jay whispered against the sweaty skin on my neck.

I turned my head a little and pressed a kiss to his equally sweaty temple. "I have no clue." Immediately after that came out of my mouth, I had an idea that the place was about to get raided or something. When I saw no torches or indeed lights come back on, I realised I was letting my imagination run away from me.

Around us, I could hear the moans and groans, grumbles and threats to the DJ and owner of the club about spoiling people's fun, interrupting their dancing and good times and just ruining it altogether.

"What the fuck is going on?" I heard a deep male voice not so far from me bark. I turned in that direction, noticing, recognising that voice. It was the guy from the bar.

"Calm down," a voice echoed through the speakers, along with a sharp ting of feedback that made my ears ache and tingle. "I'm Gustav, the DJ for this evening."

"Get the music back on, dickwad," another male voice shouted out, this time somewhere near the front. A few other comments were called out from males and females spread throughout the space.

Suddenly, a light flicked on above where the DJ decks were located, making me blink with how bright it was. A heavy-set man appeared, his white shirt

looked a little skew-whiff and from what I could see, there were a couple of people lumbering things up onto the stage behind him.

Jay stood on his tiptoes trying to see the front, too. My eyes narrowed, but I was too far away to see any fine detail. All I could actually make out were big black barrels being carried onto the stage then set up in a certain round pattern.

The DJ picked the mic back up and spoke into it, his slightly foreign accent pronouncing his words a little differently. "Firstly, I have to apologise. Tonight we had a special event planned, but due to unfortunate circumstances beyond our control, we have had to cancel." A round of boos and heckles rung out. The DJ waved his hands to get everyone to settle down. "Calm down, please. We understand you may be disappointed and will of course be offering one free drink at the bar tonight and a half-price entry voucher for your next visit to compensate you." That was met with a round of applause. He smiled and waved his hands again. "Now, we have something else planned that was supposed to be next week's show, so we hope you enjoy it." He spun around to face the black barrels and boomed into the mic, "Spin that shit."

Before anyone could ask what the hell he was talking about, Far East Movement's "Like a G6" began to play over the speakers, the bass vibrating through the cramped space. Jay immediately started back up dancing even in the dark.

I moved with him, my lips rolling in as I flicked my hips. My hands held Jay's hips still, keeping him in place so I could rub against him. I kissed his sweaty neck, flicking his hair out of the way with my tongue so I could lick at his salty flavour.

All too shortly, the music changed and the overhead lights flicked on, except they weren't normal ones like before. They were a strange purple colour. My eyes flinched as I stared up at them a bit longer than I think I was supposed to.

"UV," Jay whispered and cried out in excitement when Daddy Yankee's "Rompee" started. Pulling away from me, Jay smiled devilishly and turned to the side a little, running his hands over his body, stopping at his nipples to give them a tweak through his T-shirt. I sucked in a breath as I watched him, feeling my cock jerking rapidly in my jeans, making me a tad lightheaded with how much blood I was losing from up top.

With that tempting smile in place and a twinkle in his eye, Jay's hands moved from his chest up to his hair where he ran his fingers through it and

pulled on the ends a little. His hips swirled in time with the music, which meant his T-shirt pulled up slightly, revealing a strip of smooth, tanned skin that glowed eerily under the strange lights above us.

The longer I stood there watching him, the more other people moved in, surrounding him. I felt my teeth grind together as—oh God—bitter, hot jealousy speared through me at seeing, watching other men—good-looking, hot men—move on up to him. Four men, one in front, one behind and one on each side of Jay began to grind in time with him and the music that pulsed much too loudly around us. All four sets of hands landed on Jay's waist, holding tight as they moved in sync with each other. Honestly, even though it made me jealous as hell, it was also a little arousing to watch and a bit fascinating. The longer they danced with each other, the more their moves became more sexualised. From the rolls of all five of their pelvises to the lithe way their hips and chests popped, nothing but sex flittered from those moves.

Just then, Jay looked over at me. His eyes were heavy lidded and glazed over. His mouth dropped open, and his pink tongue peeked out and licked at his plump bottom lip. I sucked my own bottom lip in with a tortured groan as I continued to watch him. He kept his eyes open—even if they were half-mast—spearing me with his gaze. He leaned back into the guy behind him and let him take his weight.

I could feel my hands twitching to go to him and move the guys away from him, warn them to keep their fucking hands to themselves, but the look of heat for me in Jay's eyes, the flushed, relaxed look on his face kept me where I was, just subtly rocking to the music.

“All for you,” Jay mouthed.

All for me.

He shuffled back over to where I stood, finally leaving the hang-all-overs behind. His body undulated like a snake towards me, somehow winding around me. His hot breath blew against my cheek, his lips just brushing against my skin, before he whispered for me to stay in place, while he danced around me.

I didn't know this side of Jay, but I knew I fucking liked it. Fuck, I adjusted my cock that hardened almost immediately at the look in Jay's face, that flushed, pink cheeked, puffy-lipped look just about did me in.

All for me.

I must have said that out loud because Jay got real close. His damp, hot breath fanned out over my ear when he sucked my lobe into his mouth,

chewing on the end a little before releasing it with a soft pop. He pressed a too-chaste kiss on the shell of my ear. "You know it," he whispered, before dancing away again.

Suddenly, all the lights went out, plunging us all into darkness again, but it was only for a couple of seconds, before the UVs came back on. Only this time, the strobes hit at the same time as Rihanna's "Rude Boy" blasted through the speakers. Pink, blue, green and yellow flashing strobes moved and danced in time with the beat of the song.

Jay appeared at my back, rubbing all up on me as if he were a cat. I reached back blindly and grabbed at his body, moulding it against my own, feeling his sweat-soaked clothing making my own damper. I could feel his hardness pressing into my butt cheeks, riding the mounds. My hands clasped his wet T-shirt in my fist and gave it a yank, forcing him to twirl around to face me. He laughed in my face, pressed a kiss to my upturned lips and pushed up off my shoulders, sending me stumbling back a little. Before I could right myself he was back, his legs spread across one of my own straddling it. His hands roamed all over the front of me, scrunching against the material of my T-shirt as if he wanted it gone. Again like a cat, he rubbed his chest against my side and trailed his mouth up to my face, giving my cheek a little nip and a lick before retreating.

He was teasing me... and it was working.

I watched his tight backside in those *fuck me* jeans as he moved a few paces ahead of me. I rolled my lips into my mouth, biting down on them as I watched those round mounds, imagining what his hole would be like right now. What it would taste like; smell like, if I was to stuff my face in the crease of his arse. God, it would be heaven. All that damp and sweat, shit! It would be so damned right tantalizing, all riled up and ready to be fucked. I could just imagine my eager tongue delving into that small puckered hole, tasting his mustiness, his true essence. Yup, I could do that and take his taste back with me, leaving it in my mouth all night long.

That sounded like a good fucking idea if I did say so myself.

Groaning, I slapped my hand down on my ever-growing erection, forcing the little fella down, reminding him that later on, me and Jay were gonna get it on. It was happening tonight. I was not waiting anymore. I had a case of blue balls, and they had Jay's name written all over them.

Again, the lights flicked out, taking every piece of light with it. No one complained because they knew what was coming next. I waited, my eyes still trying to see through the darkness, but it was useless.

Ten seconds later, the lights flicked back, but this time they were black, purple and blue coloured. The funky UVs kicked on along with the strobe lights, creating an extravagant and slightly overpowering mix. The intro song turned into George Michael's "Freeek!!!" Then something happened that not only scared the shit out of me but took my breath away too.

Water rained down in a fine spray but not just any water... freezing cold bloody water.

Shrieks and curses could be heard around me as I shook my head from one side to another, flicking the water from my hair. Running my hands up and down my face, I brushed the droplets aside and coughed a little.

"Hell yeah!" Jay screamed in delight and threw himself at me, his legs going round my waist. I stumbled backwards into a couple of people as his weight hit me dead on. They pushed me off them so I went back forwards again. Damn, Jay was heavy. But he felt oh so fucking good in my arms. I gripped his arse cheeks, one each in my hands, and shuffled him a little to make him feel more stable in my arms. Now we were face-to-face. Water dripped from the small tip of his nose and landed on my cheek as he shook it off. His hair that had been perfectly mussed before was now completely skew-whiff and weighted down at the front, giving him a semi quiff. Little pear-shaped droplets hung from the strands, flicking off in every direction as he moved to the music. It was like his body couldn't stop writhing.

Damn, he was gorgeous and all mine.

I couldn't help it anymore. I thrust my mouth at him, snatching his lips in a tight suction and gobbled them into my mouth, where I nibbled along the plumpest parts and chewed the smaller, thinner parts. I licked and laved them all better, well, until he was moaning and writhing more against me. He tasted like pure Jay, mixed with the lemon shots we'd had earlier at the bar. I licked all around inside his mouth, greedily taking everything I could. I loved the taste of Jay in my mouth. I liked knowing that it was him I tasted hours later.

Jay made me feel settled. The taste of him in my mouth reminded me that all wasn't bad; it was good... especially with Jay.

Jay moaned louder in my arms as he fought to dominate our kiss. He could try, but it was never going to happen. His legs tightened around my waist and

his hips thrust harder and thicker against my stomach, as George sang higher and louder in our ears. The deep bass seemed to get heavier and vibrated more in our ear drums. I swear from where we were joined, I could feel the intense beat pulsing through our bodies.

Pulling back, we were both panting, sucking in needed gulps of air. I could have happily carried on kissing him; he tasted delish. As Jay gasped, he smiled sheepishly down at me, his cheeks filling with blossoming red.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” I asked, or more like shouted, as my eyes flicked all over his water- and sweat-covered face.

In response, Jay threw his head back—which nearly toppled us over—and screamed out loud to the music, his voice scratching the lyrics, as his hard cock pressed into my stomach, continually moving up and down, stroking against me. I guess I got my answer? His arms waved around, the long flexed muscles bunching and releasing with each movement. My eyes drifted down his chest, where his hard nipples poked through the cotton, to his stomach, where the soaked cloth stuck to his abs, showing off a tight hard-worked six pack. The more he wiggled and moved, the more his T-shirt rode up showing off those lick-worthy abs, which were tanned and had a little trail of hair that ran down the middle of them and disappeared into his jeans.

What I wouldn't have given to be able to let him go and lick his treasure trail, and at the same time, seeing where it went and licking that too.

More water rained down on us, on everyone, soaking whoever dared to dance. The water wasn't a fine mist anymore, it was a downright drenching. On contact, it splattered like heavy thunderous rain. I glanced around, squinting and noticed that a space had been created around us, people moving to their own little group. I could see under the pink, yellow and bright blue strobe lights that people had striped their clothes off, baring various parts of their bodies.

Now that wasn't a bad idea.

Easing Jay down till he was on his feet—which splashed in the gathering water—I ignored his pouting lips and reached for my soaked-through top. Gripping the back, I pulled it up over my head, only to stop halfway. It was hard as fuck to do, with not only the cotton being soaked, sticking to my skin like Velcro, but Jay found it amusing to tickle my ribs and run his fingers along till he reached my belly button.

I squealed, admittedly like a girl, and just managed to get the top up over my head before I squirmed too much and ended up face-planting the floor.

Once it was free, I looked at Jay with a raised eyebrow and held the top over my head, giving it a little swing at the same time my hips moved to the same beat. Just as I flicked the top in Jay's direction, the music changed again, along with the dancing strobes and water pressured release.

A burst of bass pounded through the hall, nearly blowing the speakers and my ear drums along with it. Then Sunna's "Power Struggle" sounded with a loud sound of buzzing bees. A clap of water exploded as the first beat of the drum came in.

Bright UV, pink, yellow, green and blue water rained down, drenching us in another load of cold, breath-taking water. I reached out to Jay, my hands snatching my T-shirt that rested around his neck. Using both ends, I pulled him towards me, making him stumble.

Nodding to the beat and admittedly shivering a little, I pressed our bodies together, driving our hard cocks against one another's. My eyes slid closed at the electric sensation. With the water storming over us and my bare chest rubbing against the wet cotton of Jay's top, I was ready to burst. I could feel the swirling of tingles starting in my toes, working their way up through my body.

If I wasn't too careful, I'd come in my fucking jeans.

"Yes," Jay moaned and clasped his hands around my neck, plastering his body against my own. The water poured and ran down the space between our noses. As he blew out a breath, droplets flicked onto my lips and dribbled down my chin. I licked them up and reached forward, licking some off his face as we danced close together, and the beat of the music the only conductor.

All around us, everyone drifted out, sounding almost silent in our own little world. It was just me, Jay and the music. Our hands moved over each of our bodies, wanting to touch everything in sight. His hands greedily shifted over my bare chest, flicking my nipples and giving them little taps with the tips of his fingers before those deft fingers drifted down to my waist, where he traced the material of my jeans—teasing me—before his hands slipped down inside, making my stomach muscles quiver in want and need.

The feel of his hands on my body—on any part of it—was like heaven. It was soft and meaningful, wanting and needing. It was everything. It felt so damn good.

My head dropped back on my shoulders, my mouth falling open as a long sigh left my lips when I felt Jay slide down my body with his hands still fastened inside my jeans. Not touching my pulsing ready-as-fuck cock, no, just

touching the sensitive skin around it. Driving me even wilder, he scraped his ragged nails over the sensitive skin surrounding my cock, sending me jerking into mid-air, thrusting my hips up and down, looking for reprieve. I could feel over the soaked jeans clinging to my legs, Jay's body heat moving up and down my legs, rubbing his hard crotch against my muscled quads, making them quiver too.

Jay popped up so we were face-to-face again, and pressed small, hot kisses down the length of my throat, whilst his fingers moved down an inch, then another and another. One hand moved to my hip, caressing the soft skin there, whilst the other moved to the base of my cock. The moment his digits came into contact with me—my hardness—I couldn't help it; I thrust at him like a randy rabbit. I wanted release. Hell, my cock wanted release already, like yesterday.

“Soon,” Jay whispered before moving back down my body. His chest rubbed against my own before disappearing. I gasped and spat out a mouthful of water in a river to the ceiling, when hot breath fanned over my sensitized cock through the fly of my jeans.

I couldn't take it anymore.

Reaching down for Jay, I manhandled him till he was standing in front of me, and then plastered my mouth to his, forcing him backwards. We crashed into the crowds of people, grinding and pulsing to the music. I didn't care about the curses leaving their mouths or the nudges I received in return. All I wanted was Jay, and damn it, I was gonna get him.

Finally, we hit a wall which made Jay grunt at the force. Before he could say anything, I pulled his left leg up, holding it with my hip whilst I reached between us and ripped his jeans open. The button pinged and I heard fabric tear but I also felt something scuff against my fingers. Little dings of pain and a slight burn told me I'd been cut, which must have been the zip, but I ignored it and carried on ripping the material apart, searching for my want.

And there it was.

My hand snaked into the folds of his jeans seeking out the hard pleasure I knew resided there. I gripped his hot, cut shaft in my hand and rubbed it long and hard, pulling the skin till it tugged at the head of his cock.

“Home,” Jay garbled and pushed against me, his hips moving back and forth, wanting so bad no doubt for me to get him off, and needing it.

“What?” I panted, moving my lips down his throat. I nibbled at his skin, taking it into my mouth and laved my tongue repetitively over the small, bite-sized lumps, soaking up his salty, tangy sweat and water. I wanted to mark him—in a good way of course—over and over again. I wanted him to wake up tomorrow morning with my bite-shaped marks all over his body, knowing that we’d had a good night. I moved on down and sucked his Adam’s apple into my mouth, again, laving my tongue over the sharp ridge, back and forth, back and forth. His skin was hot, wet and tasted absolutely fucking delicious.

“Home,” Jay repeated and tried to still my hand on his cock. “Let’s go home.”

I shook my head and forced my other hand deeper into his jeans, seeking out his balls that I knew were tight to his hot-as-shit body. I found the slightly furred sack and gave it a deep tug, making the man in my arms cry out and grind into my hand harder.

“Please, Rudi.”

Stopping at the begging tone of his voice, I opened my eyes not realising that I’d closed them and looked deep into the most gorgeous eyes I’d ever seen. The eyes of the man I was, if I admitted it, falling in love with. “What’s the matter?”

Jay blinked. His eyes were still lusted over and dazed-looking though, as he licked his lips. “Take me home, Rudi.”

I sucked in a breath, my eyes flicking between his green orbs, asking him if he was serious. He nodded and leaned forward, brushing a small butterfly kiss to my lips. “Take me home,” he repeated on a breathy, shaky whisper.

Gathering my wanting need and shoving it back down again, I pulled away from him and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. I closed my eyes and sucked in a few deep breaths. I had to get a hold of myself. Never in my life had I been so turned on that I’d wanted to do that, especially not to someone I felt something for.

Only when I stood there for at least a few minutes did I realise the music was still pumping, but there wasn’t really any other sound. Opening my eyes, I turned around and felt my brows pop up and my eyes widen when I noticed that the people who’d been dancing around us, had gathered in one huge group and had made a half circle around me, Jay and the wall I’d been just about ready to take him up against.

The more my eyes flicked over the crowd, the more it came to me—the more I realised that this lot was waiting for me and Jay to get it on, for us to be their show. On some, if not all, I saw that their eyes were intent, greedy and full of lust waiting.

“Not happening,” I said out loud and grabbed Jay’s hand, yanking him out of the club.

Chapter Twenty

We fell through the front door, our feet catching each other's. I reached back and caught the door with the tips of my fingers, giving it a nudge. With the oil that I'd applied, the thing didn't make a racket like it used to. Just as the door clicked shut, Jay caught me and spun me around, slamming my back against the door and throwing himself at me.

His lips crashed down on my own, his tongue fighting for entrance. With a smirk, I opened up and lifted him up so he could wrap his legs around my waist. Once he was settled in my arms, I stumbled down the passage, using the walls to hold us both up. My shoulder caught on a picture I'd hung up of a bunch of flowers. The frame wobbled, and then dropped to the floor with a dull thud, the glass cracking.

Our breath, hot, wet and panting, was the only sound in the flat, as I led Jay to my bedroom, which he'd yet to see. Kicking the door open with my boot, I stumbled inside and tripped over the corner of the doorframe, sending us staggering.

When he'd come round last week bringing Penguin home with him, I hadn't finished my room and didn't really give a shit about it, but when we'd discussed his birthday, including tonight and possible results of said night, I knew I had to get my finger out and sort it.

So I did.

The bed, wardrobe and side tables were all brand new, along with the covers and curtains. The covers were a soft brown that matched the stone-coloured walls. I did debate about using blue, but thought it might appear a tad immature, and I was anything but, so I went with the soft stone.

Reaching the bed just in time, I dropped Jay down but instead of letting go, he pulled me with him. I landed on top of him with a great big *humph* that made us both giggle and made the new bed groan. I rolled to the side and pushed the huge, white, square, spotty pillows aside. Whilst I did this, Jay got up onto his knees and stripped off his T-shirt. He flung it over his head, and I watched it sail through the air, until it hit the big, square, linen-covered lamps I'd bought from IKEA.

Before we'd driven home, he'd complained about being soaking wet and not wanting to ruin his seat, because damp was a nightmare in a car, or some

shit like that, so he'd changed into a spare pair of cargo shorts that he'd kept in his boot, just in case. Me, I'd taken his picnic blanket. I didn't mind the damp.

Now though, Jay was unbuttoning his shorts, his eyes heavy-lidded as they watched me roll back over and pop my own button. I blindly pushed down my wet jeans so they settled just above the top of my thighs. The damp material was coarse against my hips, and when I looked down, I noticed the top of my legs were red-raw from the cold water. My cock sprang free, eager and wanting—still as hard as ever, which was shocking with how cold the actual water had been.

Rolling back to my knees, I moved up close to him. With my bent legs straddling his, I gripped his face in my hands, holding him still, letting him have his way with me. His hands danced all over my body, the tips of his fingers massaging deep into my skin, leaving goose bumps in their wake. I rolled my hips against his own the minute his cock poked through the wide flaps of his shorts.

“Shit,” Jay hissed as our bare cocks touched for the first time ever.

Looking down, I sucked in a deep breath at the sight of our two rock-hard shafts touching, rubbing against each other. The sight was breath-taking. I watched as his bare, long cock throbbed, a bead of sap dribbled from the ruddy end and rolled down his cleanly cut length. My own fully-sheathed cock rubbed the sap in, my own juice coming to the forefront. It ran from the tip of my exposed cock, pooled around my skin, before falling over the top onto Jay's very nice-looking piece.

“Yes,” he groaned and pushed his face against my own, his lips skimming over my skin. He tried to move, tried to lick and bite at my neck, but I wouldn't let him. I wanted him in front of me, my hands on his face so I could look into his eyes when we both exploded.

As if understanding this, Jay gave up trying to move his face and instead moved his hands until they were pressing against my body, his blunt fingernails grasping over my skin, pulling against my flesh. The calloused, work-roughened points made me shiver as they railed over my back and down to my semi-bare backside.

“Touch me,” I begged, still continuing to flick my hips to a nameless tune in my head. Rounding my pelvis in tight circles, I drove us both wild when our bellies touched, our cocks banged together, trapped against our hot flesh. Releasing them, they dropped and prodded together again, the juices from both

of us dripping and dribbling, not only against the bed covers, but our semi-naked flesh, too. "Touch me, tease me."

Jay did as I asked. His hands floated over my sensitized skin. They drifted down to my backside, where he slipped them inside my jeans and pulled the material away. His fingers gripped my arse cheeks, and his index finger dipped into my crack, pressing against my puckered starfish.

I growled, "Yes," thrusting harder against him, feeling his already slightly trembling body beginning to quiver and shake even more. That told me how close he was to exploding, much like myself. Our bodies moved with lyrical movements, our breathing coming out heavier and faster, more like pants than anything else.

Jay moaned and tucked his lip into his mouth as a deep blush stole over his bare, thinly muscled chest, quickly rising up his neck to explode over his face. I grumbled and snatched his lip back with my teeth and nibbled it in my own mouth before laving it with my tongue. Jay opened up on a sigh, letting me inside. That was all it took, the touch of our tongues. Just that small heated touch ignited the spark, and an explosion happened.

The hands on my body grabbed and flexed, blunt nails dug into my flesh almost painfully as Jay moved his hips in an uncontrolled rhythm. Jiggling around on his lap, I locked myself into place and watched, fascinated and gratified as his breathing came hard and fast before he snatched his mouth from mine and threw his head back, his eyes snapping closed and his mouth opening on a silent scream as his cock throbbed quicker and pulsed, rubbing frantically before it exploded against my own.

I watched, my eyes flicking between watching Jay's face and the pleasure rolling off it—to his exploding cock that covered us both in thin milky-white streams. Watching him in that vulnerable, yet ultimate pleasurable position triggered my own orgasm.

The intense pleasure shot from my toes through the soles of my feet, up my calves, to my thighs—which were shaking terribly—and settled in my groin. My hands that still held Jay's soft and hot face tightened and clutched his skin harder. His eyes popped open and his own hands reached up and gripped my wrists, holding onto them. His thumbs rubbed back and forth over my pulse points as his eyes stared deep into my own, green watching brown.

Then I felt it.

My balls rolled in their sack, heavy and full of cum. Cum with Jay's name on it. Whimpering little noises escaped my mouth; encouraged by Jay's whispering words, his steady eyes never leaving mine.

The most intense orgasm of my life pushed through my groin, making my balls bounce and bound up into my body, pulling almost tightly. My pucker clenched repeatedly. The muscles in my backside clamped and cramped against the force of seed pushing its way through my tube.

Using Jay's already cooling and clumping essence as lube, I rubbed furiously. I could feel the foreskin on my cock rolling back and forth, pulling tightly back over the head before pushing back, covering my helmet with each fast forward and back motion.

What felt like hours, but was only probably a few seconds later, my cock jerked violently and a stream of white arced in the air between us before dropping with a splat against our bodies. Another one came, forcing its way through my being, taking everything I had with it. Another and another arced through the air, covering our chests in my juice. The heavy smell of seed filled the air, stringing out another small strip from me.

As the last one left me, my body convulsed. My stomach felt like someone had a fist in my gut, twisting it, but it wasn't with pain. No, it was with intense—the most intense—pleasure I'd ever had. Loosening my hands from around Jay's face, I leaned in to give him a soft kiss before my body dropped to the bed, shaken and sweaty. My breath came out in pants; my heart beat ten to a dozen in my chest and my rib cage hurt from the heavy pressure.

We'd both gotten off and we hadn't even touched each other. I felt a stupid smile pull up on my face. Damn that was good. I could hear the heavy pounding of blood in my ears and the weighted fog pulling me down into darkness that loomed.

Before I finally slipped into a pleasurable state of unconsciousness, Jay gently whispered the words I'd longed to hear: "Rudi, I love you."

The End

Glossary

Bahookie – Arse

Bollocking – Reprimand

Budgie – Budgerigar

Cujo – Rabid Dog

Dosh – Money

Fella – Man

Fiver – £5.00 Note

Gear – Drugs

Good'un – A Good One

Laffy Taffy – Backside

Naff – Fuck

Nernenerner – Told You So

Sprog – Child

Spud – Potato

Tato – Potato

Tenner – £10.00 Note

Author Bio

I live in London or Essex depending on what way you look at it, but I am defo a Londoner not an Essex girl, no matter what anyone says.

My three babies drive me round the bend with loudness, sticky stuff and smells you don't even want to know about but I love them. Same with my Hubby. He's long suffering and patient with me and has been for a long time. He's my good side and I'm his bad side.

You can find me curled up on the sofa or in bed with my aging laptop trying to keep up with my ideas and characters. I'm a huge bookworm and love to read if and when I can. When I have spare time—which is extremely sparse—I read Lenormand and Tarot cards.

I am officially a nut and am not afraid to admit it. I'm also OCD with regard to lists, packets of any kind and washing. If you see me coming, run. I would!

Just a quick note: if you don't like me, blow me!

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