

CHAPTER ONE

SKYE

Love made me whole... complete... and then it shattered me.
I never knew pain like it, it hurts... really bad.

Love ripped out my heart and shredded my soul, and here's the kicker; love did it not once but twice.

They say time is a healer... who ever said that, wants fucking shooting.

It's going to be a long bloody time before my wounds and shattered heart stitch back together.

There's a big black gaping hole in my chest where my heart used to be.

I have nothing left to give, my emotional bank is empty, drained completely dry.

My old friends,' Darkness and Despair, surround and comfort me.

Woe is me... leave me to my misery... I beg you.

I pull the duvet around me tighter, wrapping myself in a tight cocoon, shutting out the world.

You see I'm protecting myself so no one, correction, no man, can hurt me ever again.

After throwing a weeklong pity party with me being the only guest, I climbed back onto the merry go round of life. Plastering a fake smile on my face and with equally forged enthusiasm, I carried on with my life. Fake it until you make it, became my mantra. Was I fooling anyone? I don't care. In the last six months I've been building and fortifying my heart. It's now encased in a lead lined box, surrounded by ten feet of reinforced cement and steel. Nothing is getting through.

With a deep breath, I step back from the completed painting. My wedding gift to Bruce and Janice, a sad smile touches my lips at the happy memories of their day. I'll miss Bruce, but I'd glad he's found happiness. He deserves it and seeing the love blossom between him and Janice was a joy to watch.

Am I jealous? ... Hell yes!

Now, I'm ready to go back and face the man I love and lost.

FREYA

It's amazing how much your life can change in such a short space of time, especially when you meet the right person or group of people for that matter. Six months ago, I was seriously overweight, who in hell am I trying to kid, I was obese. Even now after dropping one hundred and twenty pounds I'm still classed as being overweight, and I still have twenty-eight pounds to lose to reach my target but at least I'm healthy. More importantly, I'm alive.

Standing in the doorway I watch the woman, the angel, who saved my life. Skye Darcy, the mega rich world-renowned artist and shrewd businesswoman, and one kick arse tough cookie in my book. My life really did take a turn for the better the day she found me scared to death, battered and bruised, in a crumpled heap on a street in Henley-on-Thames.

For years, I suffered at the hands of Tyler, my boyfriend... ex-boyfriend, blimey! It still feels strange saying that. After regaining consciousness from a severe beating, I finally found the strength to leave him, if I hadn't there is no shadow of doubt in my mind, I would be six feet under by now. I left my home with nothing, apart from the clothes on my back and I didn't even have any shoes on my feet!

I thank the powers that be every day for that fateful night, sometimes I still pinch myself to make sure it's not a dream and I'm actually living this fabulous life. And boy, what a fabulous dream life it is.

I knew Skye was incredibly rich before I started working for her, but the enormity of her wealth didn't dawn on me until I set foot on her private plane for the first time. Not a jet, a plane, a Boeing 737 Business Jet to be precise. The inside of the damn thing is bigger than my old house put together and better furnished.

As agreed to taking the position of Skye's PA and before leaving the country, I spent two days in Cumbria with my parents, and as expected, those days were very emotional. My parents were so pleased, yet sceptical, when I told them it was over between me and Tyler. It wasn't until I told them I was leaving the country due to my new job as PA to Skye that I knew they finally believed me.

Keeping my promise to Skye, I told my parents the truth and full story of what my life was like over the last few years with Tyler,

the mental and physical abuse I suffered at his hands. Finishing with how Skye found me and everything she has done for me since. We all cried and hugged a lot. My parents saying, they were sorry for not doing more. Me... I'm thankful for being alive and knowing they still love me. The following day I introduced my parents to Skye; they practically kissed her feet they were so grateful.

We left Cumbria the same way as we arrived, by helicopter. Alan told me, Skye owns a helicopter which was currently in New York, but it will be shipped to England when she moves there towards the end of the year. In fact, it was one of my very first tasks, arranging the transportation of the helicopter when we arrived in New York.

I thought Skye was joking when she first told me I would be doing a lot of travelling, some days I would meet myself coming back and others I'll be sat around twiddling my thumbs 'bored shitless' as she so delicately put it. I now know when it comes to my job, or anyone else's who works for her, she's deadly serious. Over the last six months, we have been to Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Malibu, San Diego, Italy, Hong Kong and Moscow on business, and the South of France and Monaco on a touring holiday... on a yacht... a humongous luxury super yacht. And yes, there have been times when I've been sat around twiddling my thumbs, but I very quickly learnt to make good use of my down time.

One of the best things, and with Skye's blessing, I have resumed my business law studies which has already come in very handy with all of Skye's business interests, plus I get the impression Skye would rather her in-laws knew less about her business goings on, not that she's said as much but there's been the odd occasion I've seen irritation flash across Skye's face when she's been with Clayton's family and they have brought up her most current activities especially those in England. I take my hat off to Skye, she has the patience of a saint. I wanted to smack Stephanie within an hour of meeting her, the condescending bitch! How dare she say Skye wouldn't have done half the things she did if it hadn't been for her precious son, Clayton, showing her what to do in business. The woman is fucking delusional.

In the first month of working for Skye, I researched everything about her, and I can tell you, Skye doesn't need some hot shot businessman to show her the ropes. If anything, she can teach

them a thing or two and by all accounts she's the one who guided Clayton and his business to tripling its turnover. Nearly all the business articles I read quoted the interviewee as saying Skye has the Midas touch, everything she gets involved in, is an instant success. Maybe I should print some copies off and shove them under Stephanie's nose next time she fucking tries saying Skye wouldn't be where she is today if it wasn't for her beloved son. Hey! that's an idea, I'll find the one where Clayton credit's his business success and is quoted as saying it's all down to Skye, that'll shut her up good and proper.

I've loved every minute of working with Skye, and that's the thing you work with her not for her, she is a force to be reckoned with. I've never had a boss before where they treat you as an equal. Skye wouldn't ask you to do something that she won't do herself, invariably you must stop her just so you have something to do. Not that she's a control freak, far from it, but since the passing of her previous PA and close friend, Skye was doing everything herself along with some help from Paul and Alan.

Another thing that took some getting used to is, although Paul, Alan and I are Skye's employee's, her friends treat us like their friends, and I feel privileged to be included in the things they do together like spa days and especially the mini breaks and holidays.

The holiday spent aboard Mr Boris Cheremisinova's, or Mr C as Skye calls him, yacht was out of this world. The Blom and Voss Palladium is ninety-six metres of pure opulence. I made the mistake of video calling my parents and showing them around the yacht with its onboard spa, gym and underwater viewing room. They kept ringing me every day asking for another video tour so they could show off and boast to their friends and neighbours how well their daughter is doing in her new job, luckily Skye and the other guests, especially Simon found it funny and even took turns to do the tour.

Meeting the people Skye fondly talked about and who I had spoken with was another bonus. Mike and Penny Holstead, who I've been liaising with lot recently arranging for all of Skye's horses to be transported to their new home in Dove Mill. Alex and Maria Cheremisinova, plus Alex's assistant Luka. Mr C told me he had deliberately kept the party small this year due to Clayton passing away. He alluded to being surprised Skye accepted his invitation, he

honestly thought Skye wouldn't want to be reminded of the annual holiday they all took on his yacht.

During the holiday, I brushed up on my French and I started to learn Russian with the help of Luka. I can't help the smile as I remember how attentive Luka was, paying me compliments and calling me beautiful. I must admit he did wonders for my self-esteem and confidence. Don't get me wrong; Skye, Paul and Alan have all been supportive and constantly tell me how well I'm doing, a never-ending stream of encouragement. The weight loss has been done through sheer will power, strict diet and humongous amounts of torturous exercise. But having a stranger tell me I'm beautiful boosted my ego no end, and I'm not ashamed to admit it.

True to her word, when we first arrived in New York, Skye arranged for me to see Phillippe, her gorgeous and totally evil personal trainer and I've been following his programme ever since. Skye then arranged for me to see a dentist, I no longer have yellow crooked teeth, they are now dazzling white and perfectly straight. Thanks to David, Skye's hair stylist, I now have glorious rich mahogany with chestnut hues hair, cut into a sharp bob reaching my shoulders. The guy deserves a medal for transforming my hair from its previous pitiful lacklustre dull as dish water brown hair, not to mention I had huge chunks missing thanks to my ex, Tyler, ripping it out whilst he beat me.

The week before going on holiday we spent time in Los Angeles, whilst Skye met with a team of producers and designers about a film project, I got impromptu lessons from a group of make-up artists. I've always thought a bit of mascara and lippy was sufficient but when these girls, and guys, finished with me I didn't recognise myself. They taught me all the tricks an A lister uses, I had no idea you can contour your face with make-up! Yesterday Shelley took me shopping and I now have a completely new wardrobe, and I understand what colours and style of clothes best work for me. Last night in my quarters I did my make-up and put on some of my new clothes, I was astounded at my transformation. Skye walked in and her reaction boosted my confidence and ego even higher, she insisted I show everyone, and frog marched me into the living room. We were met by stunned silence, then cheers and raptures of praise. The joy I felt was incredible, I fully understood how the ugly duckling felt when he looked at his

reflection in the water and saw he'd turned into a beautiful swan. I'm more determined than ever to reach my goal weight now.

During my time here in America, I've also got a glimpse of Skye's celebrity status. It was nothing like I expected, but that's my own fault. I chuckle at my naivety as I remember the young boy turning up at The Coach House, full of excitement and enthusiasm at meeting his heroine. Yeah! That was nothing compared to the thousands of overly enthusiastic fans turning up at the San Diego Comic Con to see her. It was scary as hell and fascinating at the same time. I got a huge adrenaline rush being part of the team and organising the schedule plus working with Paul and Alan on the security detail. Simon told me all about the last event he attended with Skye in Las Vegas and the ensuing chaos, only to escalate with the press descending when news of her and Clayton's engagement broke. "If you think this is a crazy train of a circus, Vegas was ten times worse" Simon said waving his arm around to the room full of fans we were standing in for Skye's meet and greet.

In the distance, I hear the yells and squeals of laughter from happy children. Shelley and Phil have arrived back from spending the day at Phil's parents' house. My smile gets bigger, both Shelley and Phil welcomed me just as warmly as Simon had. Treating me like a lifelong friend and member of the family within minutes, and a few days later the children started calling me Aunty. It seemed like the most natural thing in the world for them to call me that. Abby and Nathan absolutely adore Skye, and even though Ellie and Max are only six months old they squeal with delight whenever Skye enters the room. I totally get the tight knit group of people Skye has around her and they truly are her family in every sense of the word.

As much as Skye takes care of her 'family' financially, they take care of her but in not so obvious ways. All of them have helped me to understand Skye better. They treat Skye like a sister or sometimes an absent-minded child, even Paul and Alan do it.

The first time it happened I was shocked. The second week of being in New York, Paul entered the studio office and interrupted Skye whilst she was painting to remind her of a meeting. Skye downed her tools saying "Okay let's go"

Paul raised an eyebrow and replied "You're not going dressed like that".

Skye looked momentarily confused and glanced down at what she was wearing, seeing paint splattered dungarees she laughed at herself and rolled her eyes, "How long have I got?"

"Forty-five minutes, enough time to scrub up" Paul chuckled.

When Skye left the room to change, I asked "Does that happen often? You know, remind her to get changed".

Paul laughed "All the time, especially when she's painting. In time, you'll come to realise Skye's mind never switches off. She's a workaholic and clothes are low down, as in way, way low down on her priority list. She doesn't care about what she wears, so long as she's comfortable and can move around easily, she's happy. Oh! And she hates clothes shopping, she's more than happy to let someone else do that for her. Skye would sooner buy shoes, boots and buildings than an item of clothing".

Over the following months, Paul's words have been proven true time and time again, taking a leaf out of his book I now plan in an extra hour whenever she must attend a meeting just so she has enough time to get dressed.

The meeting was the first one I attended in formal surroundings, and it was the first time I got to meet Joshua Blake, Skye's brother-in-law who acted as her lawyer, it was great putting a face to a voice having spoken to him when Skye bought The Coach House. I must admit to being surprised to see he was blonde, after seeing pictures of Clayton and how dark he was. But I now know, he is the source of information to the rest of the family about her business activities. Since then, on numerous occasions I've had to bite my tongue and not hiss 'client confidentiality' at him. There's something about him, and I can't quite put my finger on it, I don't fully trust him. I'm sure he has Skye's best interest at heart, but something is niggling at me there's more going on with him than meets the eye. I'm certain everything he does is with an ulterior motive, and I can't quite fathom what the motive is.

The meeting itself, I found to be absolutely fascinating. Plus, it gave me the opportunity to see Skye in a completely different light. I was already in awe of the woman, but she completely blew me away. I thought she was a complete badass and operated like machine when she dealt with everyone for the Coach House and Manor. But this meeting... Wow! Just wow! It consisted of two gentlemen pitching for investment in a high-end luxury leisure complex which included a five-star hotel, casino, spa, golf course

and tennis courts. The complex would be replicated in five other countries.

Joshua had set up the meeting and he thought it was a good proposition, “One last deal to go out on a high, before selling the business to the management team” he said.

Skye wasn’t convinced and wouldn’t give any commitment, nor would she be swayed from her decision “To think about it”. No matter how much cajoling from Joshua or desperate pitching the guys did would get her to change her mind. Skye sat there completely stoic and unmoved. I’d go as far to say she was unimpressed, especially when none of the men would take her decision seriously and made thinly veiled chauvinistic comments about women not fully understanding how business worked. Skye got up and walked out. I already had total respect for the woman, now it was way, way up there. In the car on the way back to the apartment I found out why she didn’t jump at the ‘once in a lifetime investment opportunity’.

“Paul, my bullshit meter is screaming at me. Find out what you can about DM Business Ventures. I want you to dig and dig deep, something’s not quite right” Skye instructs him.

“Smell a rat?” Paul asks.

“Something like that. Freya, I want you to help”.

The following two days were exciting and exhilarating as Paul, Alan and I uncovered a complex network of businesses and shadow businesses leading to Lord Baxter, a resident of Dove Mill Village, of all places. Lord Baxter’s financials made scary reading; in that he has no money to his name. When we presented our findings to Skye, she mentioned during her stay in the village she heard the derogatory nickname Lord Broke and how he was on the lookout for a new wealthy wife, now we understood why but I have a feeling the villagers didn’t realise just how broke Baxter is.

Skye steps back from the painting she’s working on, it’s beautiful and so realistic you’d think it was a photograph. I look at it with mixed feelings, happiness with a tinge of sadness. Skye is painting Bruce and his new wife Janice. They’re standing on the beach taking their vows. In the background, Skye, has painted Paul, Alan, Simon, herself, Shelley, Phil and the children, Lisa the housekeeper and me! I jolt in surprise. We’re all mermaids and mermen. I also notice the breaking surf is galloping horses. Skye

resumes painting, it looks finished to me but I'm not the expert or perfectionist Skye is.

Bruce and Janice got married a few weeks ago, in Malibu, it was a small intimate affair. Paul was best man. I got the full story from Janice about how they had met, she was his nurse after the accident, looking after him during his stay in the ICU. They kept in touch after he left hospital, Bruce asked her out to dinner as a thank you for all she had done, then they started dating. It was a lovely ceremony, Skye cried her eyes out, but I think it was more to do with the fact Bruce was retiring from being her bodyguard. He and Janice had bought a lovely place in Malibu, a small holding with stables, where they are starting their new life together.

Now we are getting ready to head back to the UK for a weeklong trip to check on work at the Hall and estate properties along with all Skye's other business interests. After which it is back here to New York for a month, maybe a week or two more and it will be all systems go getting everything shipped over to England for the semi-permanent move there for the next twelve to eighteen months. The biggest things being the helicopter and horses, they are already en route. The last items to go will be Skye's easels and all her artwork books along with everyone's clothes. Skye did say she could buy new when she got to England, but she likes her old easels, they were the first thing she bought coming to New York to study art.

Over the last few days, I've noticed Skye becoming more withdrawn, quiet, and pensive. I've always known Skye to have an air of sadness around her, which is understandable since she suddenly and tragically lost her husband as well as a long-standing friend, she is still grieving their loss, but she hides it well. However, this melancholy is new. I shared my concerns with Shelley over breakfast.

"It's the anniversary of Clayton's death coming up. On the thirty first of October, it will have been Clayton's birthday and their wedding anniversary, the car accident happened the following day. Macy died instantly, Clayton died three days later, he never came out of the coma. The main reason why Skye's coming back here is because Stephanie is putting pressure on her to attend the memorial service, she's organising in Clayton's memory"

"You mean Stephanie is manipulating Skye by guilt tripping her for working away" I can't help the condescension in my voice.

God! The urge to slap the woman into next week grows stronger every single damn day.

Shelley smiles in understanding “Stephanie has never fully appreciated nor understood just how successful and in demand Skye is, she doesn’t understand all the things Skye does and on what scale. For some reason, she’s created this image in her head that all Skye does is paint and can’t see why she must travel the world to do it” Shelley sighs “not only that but Stephanie has lost her favourite son, although she won’t admit it. From what I’m told Clayton idolised his father and took over his business when none of his brothers showed any interest in it. Clayton took after his father in a lot of his traits aside from his colouring, he got that from Stephanie. So, I guess in a way Stephanie feels like she’s lost her husband all over again”.

“I get that, but why does she have to cling to Skye when she has two other sons to focus on and to take care of her. I’m sorry and I know this is going to sound harsh but it’s time for her to move on, start living and getting on with her life, instead of trying to control and manipulate someone else’s who technically is no longer connected to the family” I tried to sound reasonable instead of irritated, for some reason Stephanie did just that to me, she’s like an itch you can’t get at to scratch.

Large hands gripping my hips startles me out of my thoughts.

“Sorry baby” a laughing low southern drawl in my ear sends tingles down my spine. I lean back into Alan’s broad hard chest as he places a tender kiss on the side of my neck “How are you feeling?” his hands snake round to my lower abdomen and gently caress. I feel a rush of warm gratitude towards this incredible man, since I’ve done nothing but moan and bitch about how much I ache from the torturous work out Phillipee put me through a couple of hours ago.

“I’m good thank you” shyly smiling, I place my hands over the top of his and link our fingers together. Life is so good.

I can’t believe how lucky I am to get a gorgeous guy like Alan. So, tender, gentle, protective yet deadly when the moment calls for it. Thanks to Luka paying attention to me during the holiday he unwittingly spurred Alan into action. At the start of the second week Alan admitted his feelings for me. I was absolutely dumbfounded, or gobsmacked, to use Skye’s phrase. From day one, seeing him at the hospital, I harboured an attraction to him.

Okay, I fancied the pants off him, but I never thought... dreamed, yes. Thought, no... he would reciprocate my feelings due to my size and the battered mess I was in. I mean, come on! I was fat and ugly.

But on the top deck of the yacht, Alan opened his heart to me. Apparently, he's fancied me from the very first time he laid eyes on me, bruises and all. Since that day, we've been an item. This morning, we told Paul. We asked him not to say anything to Skye as neither of us wanted to lose our jobs. For some reason, Paul's response shocked and surprised me.

"I'm genuinely happy for you both, and what I will say is as long as this" he said smiling, pointing between us "doesn't interfere with doing your job, don't worry about it. Chances are Skye already knows. In fact, she probably knew what was happening between you before you two did. Anyway, it would make me a hypocrite if I said anything different. I wish you both well" Paul's rueful smile tugged at my heart when I remembered Macy, his wife, my predecessor.

"What are you thinking about?" Alan kisses and nuzzles my neck again, just the way I like it, making my toes curl and igniting butterflies in my stomach and a flurry of desire between my legs. I take a deep breath and bite my lip, resisting the urge to turn around and take things a lot further.

"I was thinking how blessed and lucky I was the night when you all found me. How much my life has changed for the better and how much I've changed in the last six months" my voice becomes a whisper with the suppressed emotion that is suddenly lodged at the back of my throat.

"What's inside hasn't changed only the outside" Alan moves his hands over my body to make his point, sending desire coursing through my veins. I squeeze my thighs together in response.

"Behave Mr Parker" my voice is husky with the lust he's stirring in my blood "You're not going to be able to finish what you've started" I look at my watch "Time to go" I reach up and pat his cheek.

"Yes ma'am" Alan chuckles and drops his hands stepping back from me, leaving me wanting.

As if Skye also heard me, she steps back from the finished painting.

CHAPTER TWO

CALEB

Life in Dove Mill Village has never been the same since the Hall and all the properties within the estate started being renovated, the village is thriving. New businesses and shops have sprung up all over the place, the weekenders seem to be spending more time here. Needless to say, gossip is never in short supply. The Coach House, being the first building to go through renovations and refurbishment, has been doing a roaring trade all through spring and summer, now as autumn really sets in there's no sign of it letting up. Since the bed and breakfast business started, along with the new function room for hire, it's been a key factor to the new businesses opening in the village square, due to a constant stream of new customers coming into the village. All thanks to the weddings and special occasion celebrations being held there.

On a Monday mid-afternoon, in an unusually quiet pub, I lean on the bar discussing horses with Chris the landlord. Chris is paying extra attention to the syndicate horses I talk about and which ones I'm thinking about putting in for the flat races over the coming weeks. Although Chris isn't a member of the syndicate a lot of his customers are, so on the rare occasions I come into the pub in the afternoon Chris always asks for an update. I don't mind. I gladly supply the information because it saves me being bothered by the owners up at the yard.

"How are the bookings going?" I ask taking a sip of beer.

It's common knowledge around the village Chris and Michelle are now the outright owners of the pub.

"Really good, even when work finishes on the Hall in a few months and all the contractors leave, we've got bookings right the way through till autumn of next year and we've got the function room booked out for weddings every weekend for the next eighteen months. You know Skye Darcy is a genius. She really does have the Midas touch when it comes to business".

"Skye!" the man startles the shit out of me and the high pitch of my voice shows it, that's the last name I expected him to come out with "What does she have to do with this place?"

Sheepishly, Chris looks around to check no-one is listening then leans on the bar speaking low "If it wasn't for our mutual friend,

me and Michelle wouldn't be here and as you know there would be no pub. When she stayed with us back in April, she overheard us talking about the letter from the brewery saying they were going to sell this place if we didn't take the offer of buying it. Anyway, cutting a long story short, Skye put a proposal to us. She's our very silent business partner. Skye put up the money to buy this place and all the renovations. We formed a partnership with her. Michelle and I have free reign running the place and have the final say in anything we do. Simon was brought in to sort all the marketing out, and he's a bloody genius in his own right. We have a conference call once a month giving Skye an update and let her know if we need anything. Simon gives us an update on the marketing activity, and we work out which is working best for generating bookings, sometimes we brainstorm new ideas. A lot of the things we do in the pub comes from those sessions" Chris leans in even closer "After the New Year, we're going to be branching out and offering business conferencing space and facilities" Chris taps the side of his nose, indicating it's a big secret "You know what the best thing is?" he asks. I shrug, clueless. I'm completely stunned by his revelations "We've been turning a huge profit every single week since we formed the partnership".

"I bet you snatched up the offer straight away" I chuckle whilst mentally I'm kicking myself for being such a complete and utter bastard to Skye when she put her business proposal to me. Actually! You didn't give her a chance to explain, you went off on one when you heard the word proposal, you bloody moron. I inwardly cringe at my condescending conscious.

"That's just it, we didn't. I mean initially we said yes more or less straightaway. She told us to think about it and discuss it, and she gave us every opportunity to change our minds. She even arranged for us to speak to a guy in America, what was his name now" Chris says thoughtfully, his fingers lightly drum on the bar and sucks on his teeth as he searches his memory "She runs a jewellery business with him, Matthew, that's it" Chris snaps his fingers and looks pleased with himself for remembering "Michelle and I spoke with him to find out what Skye's like to work with as a partner. After that I had no qualms signing on the dotted line" Chris glances around again checking for eavesdroppers "Let me give you a word of advice my friend. If Skye ever asks you what your dream or goal is to achieve for your business, tell her. If she

shares and buys in to your vision don't be surprised if she puts a proposal to you" Chris gives me a hefty pat on the shoulder and a knowing wink as he moves away "Mandy, my dear, I'm nipping upstairs. I'm expecting a visitor give me a buzz when they arrive" he calls out as he opens the door marked 'private'.

I feel cold and sick to my stomach as memories crash around my head. The day before she left, Skye asked me that very question and I blew it by over-reacting. I shudder as the memory plays out in my head like a horror film. I was a complete and utter fucking twat to her, my ego and pride jumping in and stomping all over her with their size fourteens. Would she make the offer again? I doubted it. I wouldn't be surprised if she never spoke to me again after what I said to her and especially after the fucking stunt Gabrielle pulled. Jesus Christ, what a mess. I run a hand through my long wavy hair as memories from that fateful Sunday morning come flooding back, almost drowning me.

Gabrielle declares for all to hear she's pregnant and we'd slept together the night before. The defeated agonised look in Skye's eyes and face still haunts and puzzles me to this day. Skye got into the car and drove away. I made a desperate dash after the SUV yelling at the top my lungs for her to stop and let me explain. It did no good, she couldn't hear me and whoever was driving ignored me. Instead, I turned my fury on Gabrielle, hauling her arse back inside the house.

I took great delight telling Gabrielle if she was pregnant, it wasn't mine. Of course, she tried to tell me otherwise until I showed her the letter from the doctor confirming I am sterile. Gabrielle left pretty damn quickly after that. Afterwards I spent an hour in the shower, with the water as hot as I could stand it. I scrubbed my skin raw. If I could, I would've ripped my insides out and scrubbed them too, I felt so dirty... violated.

First thing on the Monday morning I rang the doctors to get myself tested, I didn't trust Gabrielle one fucking bit, and the last thing I wanted from her was an STD. I also got myself retested to make sure I was still sterile, there was no way on god's earth I was fathering a child with that bitch, even the doctor couldn't convince me there was very little to no chance of it happening due to my sterility being a congenital condition.

"Penny for your thoughts" Rex says slapping my shoulder. I shake my head, he's my best mate but there's no fucking way I am

sharing “Hey, I’ve just been talking to Ryan, he says the club is absolutely buzzing with gossip about the demo you did Saturday afternoon with the whips and canes” Rex murmurs leaning in close to me, so no-one overhears.

“That’s nothing new, with every new group I mentor it always happens” I snort.

“Maybe so, but whatever it is you did differently, it’s got all the Subs in a tizz and squabbling over who gets to be next and I’m not talking about the staff Subs either. You’ve really shaken the wasps’ nest this time” Rex grins wickedly “according to Ryan the club is heaving”.

“Even now! At this time of the afternoon?” I say exasperated looking at the clock over the bar, it’s Monday for Christ’s sake.

“Yep. He also said a lot of people are asking what time you’ll be coming in” Rex raises an expectant eyebrow.

“On no! I’m not going in. Fuck off! It’s my day off, besides, I do have a business to run and I’ve been neglecting it” I add feeling a twinge of guilt, I’ve been dumping a lot on Sally lately.

Mind you, it is tempting to go in just to find out what happened between the lovely young woman, Max, who subbed for the demo and Master Dutch. I can’t help the fond smile when I think of her, she is a natural submissive and masochist. I even felt my body responding to her, and that hasn’t happened in a long while. Since Skye you fucking jerk, my conscience sneers at me. It took all I had to bring my body into line.

I snort out a laugh, quickly turning it into a cough, at the memory of Max getting the surprise of her life when she walked into the demo room. I reacted instantly, putting my body in front of her, hiding her from view of the ten men, all Dom’s, when I heard her cursed hiss “Shit! You have got to be fucking kidding me!” I offered her the option of withdrawing; some will find this experience daunting especially when they’re relatively new to the scene, which I knew Max was, hell she wasn’t even a member of the club, she was doing this as a favour. Then the cheeky minx surprises the hell out of me by telling me, with the wickedest smirk and a devilish twinkle in her eyes, the reason for her reaction is that one of the men in the room is her boss, in fact he was her boss’s boss. My face splits with a huge evil grin, matching hers. “This is going to be fun” she said with a salacious smile and saucy wink whilst patting my chest; and it was.

I watched the men as Max, head down, took up her position at the front of the group. Dutch was the only one whose eye's never left her the entire time. Being an evil son of a bitch, I picked him to be the one to help with the demo. This time I can't stop the laugh bubbling up inside me, especially when Max muttered "You're a sadistic bastard" with a smile of delight playing across her lips.

A gust of cool air from the pub door opening and the clicking of high heels against the stone floor snags Rex's attention before he can get any more information out of me. I look over towards the door, inwardly I groan when I see who it is.

"There you are, you naughty boys" the woman's high-pitched girly voice grates on my nerve endings and completely kills my good mood.

"Marlene" Rex calls, a wide smarmy smile breaks out across his face as he oozes charm, opening his arms in welcome to her.

Marlene Worth, totters over to us. The leopard print top really emphasises her huge fake tits, the plunging neckline strains to keep them in place. Her figure-hugging skirt is too tight, so when she walks, she kind of jiggles making it really, really difficult not to be mesmerised by her bouncing boobs. Marlene's suffocating perfume reaches us before she does. Her face is heavily made up; she looks as if she's heading for a night out on the town instead of visiting a country pub in the middle of the day.

"You're looking lovely as ever, sweetheart" Rex murmurs as he embraces her. I look at him as if he's lost his marbles "What brings you to our neck of the woods?"

"Oh, I was in the area and thought I'd pop in" Marlene says airily looking around the pub.

Yeah right, she's driven five miles out of her way to get here and that's assuming she was visiting friends in Henley. Otherwise, she's driven nearly forty miles because I know she lives in London, so she's driven all this way for what?

"Hello Caleb" Marlene's put-on husky voice catches my attention, putting me on high alert.

"Marlene" I nod, eyeing her warily.

She licks her overly glossed pouty filler filled lips and looks at me coquettishly from under her thick false eyelashes. Her smile turns predatory as her eyes roam up and down my body.

Aww hell no!

“What would you like to drink?” Rex signals to Mandy, effectively blocking Marlene’s view of me.

“I’ll have a white wine please” Marlene says smiling sweetly at Rex and not to be thwarted she moves to stand in between us.

My muscles flinch and twitch at her nearness. I step back so she’s not invading my personal space. It doesn’t work, she moves with me and places her hand, full of long red talons, on my chest. Instantly my skin shrivels in protest at her touch. I feel the clammy warmth of her hand through the cotton of my T-shirt. I do my best to repress the shudder of disgust.

“I hear you gave quite the demonstration yesterday, shame I missed it” Marlene murmurs as she leans into me “I would love it, if you gave lil’ ole me a private show”.

Marlene drags her hand and nails down my chest heading south over my stomach. My skin scrawls, as if there are a million ants inside fighting to get out, at the sensation. I want to peel and shred every centimetre of my skin she’s touched. I grab hold of her wrist before she goes any further south.

“You’ll have to speak to Barney” I say curtly. I glance over her shoulder to look at Rex, he’s frowning at her.

I know Rex has played with her quite a few times at the club, I’ve played with her twice, the first time I made the mistake of fucking her. The second time I left it all to Rex after I helped him tie her up, I didn’t even stay to finish the scene, so I guess the second time doesn’t really count. But that was months ago, and I wasn’t in a particularly good place. Since then, I’ve heard the things Marlene has been saying especially how she wants to sub for me again. She’s fucking delusional if she thinks it’ll happen. Hell will freeze over first.

“But I’m not a staff sub” Marlene makes a derisive laugh as she takes a sip of her wine.

“It doesn’t matter because Master Raven is in such high demand all subs have to register their interest through Barney” Rex smiles widely at Marlene, he trails a finger down her arm “However, I on the other hand, could be talked in to giving you a private demonstration”

Marlene huffs and stamps her foot like a spoilt brat that can’t get their own way “But I wanted...”

Her whining words are cut off as she loses our attention by the front door creaking open, this time a cold gust of wind joins the

sound of heels clicking on the stone flags. Out of the corner of my eye I see Marlene scowl as a tall, extremely beautiful, well-dressed woman with very shiny brunette hair skimming her shoulders in a sharp bob, walks to the bar. The woman's clothes look expensive, she looks expensive. The fitted white blouse with the top buttons left open giving a hint of cleavage, a fitted deep red above the knee skirt and tailored fitted black jacket compliment her voluptuous figure. Her make-up is subtle and natural, the light tan she sports, gives her a healthy glow. She's the embodiment of understated elegance compared to Marlene's epitome of being a tart.

Rex wolf whistles under his breath. Marlene completely forgotten. The woman hears him and looks over in our direction, her smile is dazzling and reveals straight white teeth. There's something about her that seems familiar to me, but I can't quite put my finger on it.

"Yes love, what can I get you?" Mandy says coming behind the bar, putting down empty glasses.

"I'm here to see Chris and Michelle" replies the woman in a well-spoken local accent, she places a slim leather-bound case on the bar.

"I'll just get them" Mandy picks up the phone and presses a button "Your visitor is here... okay, sure" she replaces a handset "They won't be long. Would you like a drink while you wait?"

"No, thank you" the woman smiles warmly at Mandy then looks around the bar as if familiarising herself with the place and noting the changes.

"You're not from around these parts are you sweetheart?" Rex says giving the woman his best knicker elastic bursting smile. Marlene is well and truly out of the picture now. Even her tutting and huffing doesn't draw his attention back to her.

The woman turns to face Rex full on, she really is beautiful and quite sensual, a secretive smile spreads across her red lips. It's starting to annoy me now, but there's something vaguely familiar about her. It's really bugging the hell out of me that I can't grasp the memory of where I know her from.

"Yes, I am actually. Although it's been a while since I was last here"

I knew it! I turn my snort of laughter into a cough. Christ! this is becoming a habit. The woman's eyes flick to mine and I see a knowing smile in them, she knows who we are. Rex, however, is

completely thrown since he's fucked the majority of slim beautiful women there are in a ten-mile radius of the village. He opens his mouth to ask another question when he is cut off by Bill Makin bursting into the pub.

"Guys, you have got to see this" Bill says gesturing urgently for us and anyone else to follow him "There's a Lamborghini Veneno parked outside. Rex, it'll even give you a hard on".

The sound of scraping of chairs suddenly fills the pub as all the men in their haste get up and pile outside. Mandy rolls her eyes.

"Can't pass this opportunity to wind Rex up" I laugh as I follow them. The clicking of heels tells me Marlene is tottering out behind us.

The Lamborghini has drawn quite a crowd, for a few minutes in absolute silence everyone walks around the vehicle slowly admiring the sleek metallic grey paint with touches of red trim running around the lines of the car and wheels.

"It looks lethal" I say admiring the unusual shape of the tail wing and vents "I keep expecting to see wings come out of the door panels".

"She's beautiful" Rex and Bill sigh together. Both reach out, their hands hovering over the roof of the car "Six-point five litre V twelve engine. Seven hundred and fifty horsepower" Rex says in an awed voice.

"Nought to sixty in two point eight seconds, top speed two hundred and twenty-one miles per hour" Bill adds in the same voice "You know they only make three of these a year".

Like a Mexican wave, surprised gasps go up around the group at that piece of information. Rex gives a sagely nod, showing he knows and agrees with Bill's statement.

"How much does one of these things cost?" Marlene asks, waving her blood red talon fingers in the direction of the car.

Rex and Bill look at Marlene horrified; did she really dare call this beautiful lady a 'thing'? Bill shakes his head in disbelief.

"Put it this way, you won't get much change out of three million" says Rex, his tone patronising, as if she should have known this. Low whistles fill the air "I wonder who it belongs to?... and don't you fucking dare say it" Rex adds after a beat scowling and pointing a finger at me.

"Killjoy" I grin evilly "Miles Cunningham" I say it anyway just to wind him up. Rex playfully thumps my shoulder. Marlene looks

at us bewildered as the rest of the gathered crowd chuckle at our antics and knowing the two men can't stand each other.

"If that fucking twat owns this then I'll... I'll... I'll run around the village green stark bollock naked" Rex throws his arms up in the air to the amused laughter of our audience. Its common knowledge in the village both men try to outdo the other and at the first opportunity. Invariably it's cars and women they compete over.

"Oh, please God! Let it be Miles" I say dramatically laughing, looking up to the sky, holding my hands together in prayer "This is something we all want to see".

Whilst everyone else swaps banter and Rex resumes drooling over the car, I notice a sharp suited man walking across the village green, a carrier bag in his hand. His focus is on the crowd around the car. Like the woman inside this man looks familiar and I rack my brain trying to place him.

The gathered crowd's attention shifts to the pub doorway when new voices and laughter is heard. The mystery brunette is smiling and laughs with Chris and Michelle as they chat walking down the path, a few have seen the man approaching and are nudging the others pointing him out. People's heads are going back and forth between the two newcomers; I hear their whispered speculations as to who they are. The crowd parts as the man gets to car and comes around to the passenger side, he opens the door for the woman. The sound of an approaching helicopter has everyone looking up.

"Shame you can't stay longer" says Chris smiling fondly at the woman as he shakes her hand.

"Sorry, today's only a flying visit" the woman looks up and points to the helicopter heading towards the Hall "Literally" she says getting into the car she waves bye to Michelle and Chris, she looks directly at me and winks. The man nods to me and smiles as he gets in the driver's side.

The penny finally drops. Holy fucking shit! I know who they are.

The low growl of the engine has the crowd getting out of the way and watch the car disappear down the high street, heading for the Hall.

"Who was that?" says Rex, his eyes still on the car.

"Freya Bennett" I, Michelle and Chris answer together. Rex's face is blank as he shrugs, he's no idea who she is.

“Skye Darcy’s assistant” supplies Chris “Amazing transformation don’t you think?” Chris chuckles as he and Michelle walk back inside the pub.

I start to follow them when Bill’s question stops me short “When did you get the new horse box? I must say it’s a monster of a vehicle mate”.

“I haven’t” I frown at Bill “What are you going on about?”

“Well fifteen minutes ago, I saw a ruddy great big, top of the range by the looks of it, horse box turning up the lane heading for your yard”.

My frown deepens. Freya and Alan, the helicopter, top of the range horse box. Skye. Shit! It must be Skye’s horses. I frantically search for my phone, realising I left it in my jacket pocket I run into the pub. A confused Rex and Bill follow hot on my heels.

“Sally” I bark down the phone to be heard, there’s a hell of a commotion going on in the yard “What’s going on?”

“You need to get here, ASAP. I’ve been trying to tell you for the past week Ms Darcy’s horses are coming today, in fact we’re unloading them right now!” Sally snaps at me and hangs up. I deserved that.

“Fuck, shitting fuck!” I curse heading out the pub ignoring all the questions being fired at me.

Getting in the clapped-out Land Rover, I berate myself all the way to the yard. I can’t call Sally out; she has tried to talk to me, but I’ve been too preoccupied with the club. I more-or-less told her to run the yard, she is more than capable. Sally only followed my orders.

I get to the yard just in time to see Dark Moon being led out of the horse box by Waya, the Native American trainer I met at Mike Holstead’s ranch earlier in the year.

“There are six polo ponies, an Arabian thoroughbred and this magnificent beast” Sally eyes shine with excitement, she’s besides herself “I’ve only ever seen pictures of a Friesian Sport horse before” I smile down at her and put my arm around her shoulders “Oh my goodness, look” Sally squeaks, clapping her hands as Marty leads out a miniature horse “Is that the Falabella?”

“It is” says Waya “This is Dark Moon’s stable mate. He’s called David” Waya smiles wickedly “In the yard the stable hands nicknamed Dark Moon, Goliath” Waya pats Dark Moon’s thick

neck as everyone laughs getting the joke instantly “It is good to see you again Mr Raven” Waya holds out his hand.

“And you” I smile warmly shaking his hand.

“I could not part with such a wonderful horse if I knew he was to go to someone else. I would have begged Ms Darcy on my knees for him to stay with Mr Holstead, but I see you have the magic touch with horses. Dark Moon will do well for you” Waya handed over the reins to me.

I’m deeply touched by the show of trust and high regard Waya expresses. I barely get my words out “Thank you. That means a lot. Mike has told me all about the good work you do for his horses”.

Amid getting the horses settled and checking them over from their long journey the phone rings, it’s a call from my bank manager. Excusing myself I take the call in the living room come office. My stomach is in turmoil as I pick up the phone. I need to get an extension on my overdraft, more so now than ever with the arrival of nine new horses. Thankfully it’s been quiet a while since I last had to beg for an extension. With fingers crossed I pick up the phone.

“Mr Bellam, thank you for returning my call” Bell End more like, the thought flits through my mind every time I say the man’s surname.

“Mr Raven, no problem. What can I do for you?” says Mr Bellam tersely.

As if you didn’t already know ya fuckwit. I bite my tongue; the bastard was going to make me beg. Taking a deep breath, I launch into my request for the extension of my overdraft, halfway through I hear the low rumble of another vehicle coming into the yard. The soft thud of doors opening and closing. My heart jumps into my throat as I peer out the window and see masses of white-blonde curly hair blowing in the breeze, then the rest of Skye comes into view.

Fuck, fuck, fuck! I mentally curse. If I were on the phone to anyone else, I’d make my excuses and hang up, but I couldn’t afford to piss off my bank manager. Instead, I resign myself to watching Skye as I answer the bank manager’s questions. It’s fucking annoying when I’ve gone through these questions countless times before, surely, he has a record of my previous answers.

My heart aches, she's more beautiful than ever. Skye greets each of the grooms warmly laughing and joking with them. Although, I detect an air of sorrow around her. No shit! And who's responsible for that you fucking twat. Hang up, go out there and explain yourself.

I listen to Mr Bell End tapping away on his keyboard making hums and ah's, tutting and more hums. If I could reach down through the phone line and smack the pretentious fucker, I would, my nerves are stretched thinner than a piece of hair. To try and calm my jittery nerves I watch Sally hand Skye a piece of paper. There's a discussion and whatever Sally is explaining Skye is agreeing with. Skye pulls her phone out of her jacket pocket then walks a short distance away, whoever she's talking to she's giving them information off the sheet of paper she's reading. Down my ear, Mr Bellam launches into a spiel listing all the reasons why I can't have the extension, as soon as I hear that, I switch off and make myself content by continuing to watch Skye wrap up her call and walk back to the grooms and Waya. Suddenly Bell End stops talking and makes a funny little squeak.

"What's the matter?" I say instantly alert.

"Someone has just deposited fifty thousand pounds into your account" Mr Bellam says in disbelief "Were you expecting such a payment?" the accusation in his voice clear as day.

"No" I load as much sarcasm into that one word as I can, why would I be asking for an extension if I was expecting a huge payment like that, dickhead "Who's deposited the money?" in my gut I know the answer before Mr Bell End says it.

"Darcy Enterprise Holdings"

"You little beauty" I whisper, my eyes following Skye as she waves bye to everyone and disappears from my view.

"Beg your pardon Mr Raven, what was that?" Bell End sounds puzzled.

"Sorry. Yes, I know who it is. Nine horses have just arrived in the yard and the owner has paid the invoice, by the sounds of it they've paid in full for the year" I smile to myself "Obviously, I don't need the extension now Mr Bell End... Bellam" I correct quickly "Thank you for your time, goodbye"

I drop the phone and rush outside only to see the taillights of a Range Rover disappearing down the lane "Damn it" I growl,

punching the door in frustration and fighting off a wave of déjà vu as unpleasant memories flood my mind from six months ago.

"Ms Darcy couldn't stay" Sally says tentatively behind me, turning to face her I notice the thick folder she's holding close to her chest "She has to get back to London, here" Sally holds out the folder to me "This is the information on all the horses, and she's paid the first quarters invoice I gave her, a copy is in the file"

"Thanks Sally" I smile, Sally nods and walks towards the stables. A thought suddenly occurs to me "When did Ms Darcy get in touch with you?" I call out.

"She rang Tuesday of last week when you didn't respond to the email, she sent you two weeks before" my stomach drops. I don't recall seeing an email from Skye "Ms Darcy asked for you, but you weren't here" I heard the accusation in Sally's voice, guilt swamps me again as I move towards her. I can see defiance and just how pissed off Sally is in her eyes; she's going to give me what for and like a man I'll take it "She gave me all the details and I accessed your email account and found it in the spam folder. I've been liaising with Freya all week. I did try to tell you and when you said to do what I thought best I figured you weren't interested in the yard anymore since you've hardly been here the last few months" I wince at Sally's hard-hitting words "Sorry if I spoke out of turn but as soon as the horses have been put through their training you take off leaving me to deal with the running of the yard and everything else" Sally mumbles.

"You're right. I'm sorry" I say resigned putting an arm around her shoulders, I pull her into me and hug her. I feel how tense she is "I've been a total tosser. A selfish, inconsiderate bastard of a shit boss, who has taken advantage of your generous giving nature. I don't fucking deserve you" I plant a kiss on the top of her head and squeeze her tightly. Sally relaxes and blushes profusely.

"Don't get me wrong, I've enjoyed the responsibility and experience. But I must admit sometimes I've been scared shitless about making the wrong decision".

"You have done a wonderful job and since Ms Darcy has just paid fifty grand into the bank, I can afford to give you a bonus for all the extra you've been doing" I smile at Sally.

"Fifty?" Sally frowns pulling away from me "But her invoice was for only five".

“Really” I say shocked opening the folder and look at the invoice, sure enough it says five thousand.

Underneath the invoice is a thick envelop, I open it pulling out the thick quality paper.

“What’s it say?” Sally asks, peering at the sheet trying to read upside down.

“Mr Raven, as per my conversation with Sally enclosed are all the details you require on each horse. I want you to train Dark Moon as previously discussed. I also want you to take on the training of Diamond Dancer and the six polo ponies or appointing someone else if necessary. The enclosed cheque is to cover any expenses you may incur paying race entry and registration fees, appointing the services of a jockey etc. I include the colours and shirt design to be made up and registered. Please invoice me for any other expenditure and costs concerning the horses. I also include details of the horsebox which is at your disposal to use as you see fit. S Darcy” I finish reading.

I feel a pang of sadness as I look over the strong cursive handwriting. The letter is to the point, no affection or debarment. What was I expecting? The woman is busy and considering how we parted six months ago, I can’t blame her.

“Holy cow!” Sally’s startled declaration snags my attention “Are you going to bank it?” I look at the cheque Sally is pointing at.

“Fuck me!” I breathe heavily; it was another fifty grand. Bewildered I shrug, I have no fucking idea of where to send it if I were to return it “Did Ms Darcy say when she’ll be back?” Sally shakes her head “Well in that case yes, I’ll bank it and we won’t invoice her until all the money runs out. What do you think?”

“Good idea” Sally says taking the folder back and handing the cheque to me “I’ll set up a separate spreadsheet especially for Ms Darcy rather than put all her horses in with the other owners”.

“Excellent idea and I’ll bank this tomorrow” I fold the cheque and put it into my back pocket “Now let’s check out this monster of a horsebox” I grin at Sally as she dangles the keys.

“I couldn’t believe my eyes when I saw this coming up the lane. I nearly had a heart attack when Ms Darcy gave me the keys. I can’t wait to turn up at the race meetings in this beauty and stick two fingers up to the other yards. None of them can boast having a top of the range Sovereign Emperor” Sally says gleefully opening the door to the twenty-six-foot-long beast.

The next day I head into London. I've never felt so nervous in my life. My palms are constantly clammy, my stomach is doing somersaults along with the butterflies having a party. I daren't eat or drink anything for fear of bringing it straight back up.

Last night, I sat looking at the fifty-grand cheque. I knew I couldn't bring myself to bank it without speaking to Skye first, no matter what I had said to Sally and all the reasoning and justifications for banking the cheque were logical. It didn't feel right. I didn't want to just take her money; we had to talk about what happened. I must apologise and more than anything I want to explain everything to her. God, damn it! I want a second chance. I love her.

In the week, we spent together I have never felt so complete and content. The connection we had, it was off the scale, not to mention the attraction, we couldn't keep our hands off each other. Skye spoke to me on a level no woman has ever reached before, it wasn't just soul deep it was also micro molecular cell deep. I want that back. And I'll be damned if I don't fucking die trying to win her back.

My whole life I felt I was missing... something. For a short time, I thought Gabrielle filled the gap, but I now know she'd been the equivalent of a band aid. Skye came along and ripped the bloody thing right off, filling the chasm until it overflowed. I have never felt such a sense of purpose like I did that week with Skye. I am her lover, friend and protector. She belongs to me, with me, of that I have no doubt; but would Skye see it that way? An ice-cold hand clasps around my heart and squeezes at the very thought of her shunning me. Shit! It scares me so much I break out in a cold sweat, leaving me damp and clammy all over my skin every time I go over this in my mind.

It took me a while to admit how deeply Skye affected me. The first few weeks after Skye left the village, I spent as much available time at the club, fucking to forget but it didn't work. I found myself craving the feelings Skye incited in me when we played or made love. Having an orgasm wasn't enough anymore. I want that connection back, I will fight for it, for us. I'll even get down on my knees and beg.

I have absolutely no fucking idea of where to start looking for her in London. Maybe her friends Nessa and Chuck will know? Of

course, they would, stupid. One thing I am certain of, if Skye is in town, she will make time to see them. Something important must be happening for Skye to head back to London so quickly. Following a hunch, I did a quick search on the internet for Skye's gallery and auction house. Sure enough, on the home page is a notice for the forth coming auction on Wednesday. It gave a list of all the artists selling work and Skye is listed. The gallery is open for viewings up until Tuesday evening. With a surge of hope, I make that my starting point. Checking the address, I found the gallery is off Carnaby Street.

Going to bed my heart felt lighter than it has for months, a plan formulated in my mind. First stop, is the gallery. If Skye isn't there and if the staff won't tell me where she is, I'll track down Nessa at the TV station. If I must, I'll suck up to that loathsome twat Miles Cunningham to get to Nessa, I will do whatever is necessary.

Walking down Carnaby Street dodging tourists, people out posing and office workers rushing to get back from an extended lunch, I find the side street the gallery is on. I see it the second I turn into the street. It stands out sandwiched in between the clothes boutiques. The front looks practically bare compared to its neighbours with mannequins dressed in an array of colourful clothes and accessories.

Inside I can see several people moving around, none have light blonde curly hair. Taking a deep breath, I step inside. It's like stepping into the Tardis; the small frontage is deceptive. The gallery opens out into a huge room, with light oak wooden flooring and brilliant white walls which paintings of all sizes hang. Dotted around in the free space within the room are huge easels displaying large paintings. Apart from the odd tourist, the rest of the people looking around are in business dress, I've never been so thankful I made the right decision to wear a suit at the last minute.

In the middle of the room, is a simple large rectangular dark wooden desk, a portly well-dressed man seems to be having a heated discussion with an equally well-dressed shorter man who is thinner and balding with glasses perched on the end of his long thin nose, both keep looking and pointing at a painting which lay between them on the desk. Pretending to look at the artwork on the walls I stealthily move closer until I can hear what they are saying.

Standing at an angle, whilst appearing to be studying a painting of the countryside, I watch the two men. After a few minutes, it becomes evident their discussion is around the painting on the tabletop. It appears the taller man brought it in to be appraised with the intention to sell, it's a fake, albeit an exceptionally good one. Naturally, he isn't happy.

"I was told you are the foremost expert on this artist, and I know you sell their work through this gallery and auction house, however I demand a second opinion" the tall man says bombastically.

"Certainly sir, you're fortunate we have someone here today who is more knowledgeable than I" the shorter man moves to the other side of the table "I'll see if they are available" he says picking up the phone and presses a button "Sorry to disturb you, but I have a situation here requiring your expertise... if you can spare the time... I appreciate it... thank you" replacing the receiver the shorter man adjusts his bow tie "My colleague will be with us shortly".

I move to another painting bringing me closer to the two men, who stand silently and impatiently waiting. The taller man looks around the gallery as the shorter one looks at the painting frowning. A door opening and closing echo's loudly through the quiet gallery, slow measured footsteps follow. My skin prickles and tingles, then I hear her, sexy as hell low husky voice, turning slowly I come face to face with Skye. My heart does a funny kerrthump beat in my chest. Her siren call to me is stronger than ever. It takes all my self-control not to jump in front of her and claim her luscious full lips.

"What do you need me to look at Mr Watson?" the short guy points to the picture on the table, Skye takes one brief look at the painting "It's a fake" she declares turning to walk away and lays eyes on me for the first time.

Shock and surprise flit across her face then a hint of a warm smile before it disappears. Skye shuts down. Her face becomes impassive as she looks at me. I break out in a cold sweat as dread seeps into my bones. But the magnetic pull won't be denied. I see her body, infinitesimally, sway and lean towards me.

"How can you possibly tell with a quick glance?" the tall man splutters "You're a joke and make a mockery of the word expert"

he spits with a disdainful look as he eyes Skye in her casual clothes of jeans and t-shirt.

How dare the pompous fucker talk to her like that! I want to reach over and give him a good slap then rip his bloody tongue out. Skye slowly turns back to face the tall man, the cold hard look on her face makes him shrink back. Christ, the woman can put the fear of God into you with a simple look, even I shudder.

"I know because that" Skye points at the painting "is too small. It is part of a mural which is thirty feet in length by ten feet in height. This image takes up about a quarter of the mural. Since the image is part of a mural, I'm sure you don't need me to tell you it can't possibly be a painting" Skye gives the man a sardonic smile "The mural in question also happens to be in a private residence in Moscow. I know all of this because I am the artist. Not only that, but I'm good friends with the person who commissioned it, and I can assure you, no study or preliminary idea paintings exist on canvas. Mr Watson" Skye looks at the short guy who's looking a tad too smug "confiscate this forgery and call the police, better yet call Mr and Mrs Cheremisinova. I'm sure our Russian friends would be extremely interested in finding out who has infiltrated their home and taken pictures of the mural. Plus, I'm interested in finding out who is doing a piss poor job of ripping off my artwork".

"Yes, Ms Darcy, with the utmost pleasure" Mr Watson says gleefully picking up the painting and carrying it to the back of the gallery.

"You can't do that. It belongs to me. I paid good money for that" the tall man tries to sound authoritative but fails miserably.

"Whatever you paid, it was too much, that is worthless. If you want it back, bring me papers of authentication from the artist who painted it, better yet bring them here. I'd love to meet the person posing as me" Skye challenges.

The tall man opens and closes his mouth a few times, at a loss of how to proceed or what to say. He gives up leaving the gallery muttering to himself. Skye turns back and looks at me, her yellow green eyes all business.

"Mr Raven, to what do I owe this pleasure?" Skye's husky voice holds none of the playful teasing and tenderness I know she is capable of "Are the horses okay?"

“Yes, they’re fine and they’ve all settled in nicely” I really want to say ‘you look good, I’ve missed you, please can we talk’ but Skye’s apathetic demeanour makes all those words stick in my throat. Instead like a fucking wuss I bottle it and pull out the cheque from the inside pocket of my jacket and hold it out to her “You paid this amount into my account yesterday. It doesn’t feel right cashing this as well, you’ve paid more than enough, too much in fact”.

I see Skye’s shoulders relax slightly but she makes no attempt to take the cheque from me “Keep it, in case of any unforeseen circumstances or vet fees” Skye voice is softer and politer, but she is still distant. I can sense the wall surrounding her and it’s reinforced with ten feet of steel.

“How often would you like a progress report?” I say in desperation, anything to keep her with me, talking to me. I’ve never offered to do this for any of my other owners, although Sally sent them out on a weekly basis.

“Once a month is fine, unless something happens which needs to be brought to my attention” Skye says giving me a slight smile, it is nowhere near the dazzling heart stopping brain frying smile she bestowed on me six months ago.

A throat being cleared draws Skye’s attention away. I curse under my breath; my time is up. I turn to see Freya.

“My apologies for the intrusion” says Freya politely, smiling at me “Ms Darcy it’s time”.

“Thanks Freya. Well, it was good seeing you again Mr Raven, please excuse me” Skye says formerly and walks away with Freya.

Shit! What a fucking chump you are. I curse myself to hell and back. I should have asked to speak somewhere in private, then I could’ve explained the situation with Gabrielle. Instead, I bottled it, had to talk about business first, no wonder Skye responded the way she did. Christ, if I had a fucking brain, I’d be bloody dangerous. Mentally, I’m kicking my arse out of the gallery and all the way down the street.

CHAPTER THREE

The following night turns bitterly cold, early autumn seems to suddenly give way to the deepest depths of winter. The villager's huddle around their fires in warm cosy houses. The brave few who do venture out to The Coach House, walk hurriedly with coats and scarfs pulled up around their ears, their heads down against the bitter biting cold wind. In the dead of night no-one sees or hears the large sleek black SUV making its way through the village, no one sees or hears the four occupants get out and let themselves inside the recently renovated cottages by the church.

CALEB

Sitting on the edge of the bed I stretch, my spine making a satisfying crack as my muscles strain. Standing, I shake my limbs lose before bending and grabbing my ankles, stretching the muscles in the back of my legs. God that feels good. I squint at the alarm clock and see it's not due to go off for another twenty minutes. That's nothing unusual, it's rare my alarm wakes me. What is unusual is the sense of purpose I feel.

I know exactly what's causing it, or rather who. Skye, she's back in the country, for how long? I don't have a fucking clue and I don't care. Last night I resolved to tell her how I feel about her, nothing and no one is going to stop me. All I have to do is figure out is where she's staying.

An hour later I'm hacking across the fields on my trusty old steed, Benson. I was sorely tempted to ride Dark Moon or Diamond Dancer; both are magnificent horses but I'm proud of myself for resisting. In a couple of days, I'll ride them once they've acclimatised. Instead, I mull through various plans of how to get in touch with Nessa and Chuck, so I can track down Skye. Yes, I have her email, since Sally found it in my Spam folder, but it seems too impersonal and I don't want to give her the opportunity to say no to a meeting, she will hear me out.

It's a beautiful clear morning with the rising sun currently sitting low in the sky and a fresh crisp breeze. There's a light frost on the ground and the morning mist swirls around the horse's feet. Reaching the brow of the hill, I slow Benson down to a trot and look out across the valley towards the village, all is quiet. It'll be

another half hour before signs of life stir. I look in the opposite direction towards the Hall. Now most of the scaffolding has been removed, makes it easier to see how fantastic the restored building looks. My memories of the Hall are hazy but I'm almost certain it never looked this good or grand before the fire, the restoration team have done a phenomenal job and it's been done in record time.

A flash of movement on the driveway snags my attention. My hands automatically go to my pockets only to find them empty. Shit! I mutter under my breath. I forgot my binoculars. Over the last six months I've rarely been without them. Not that I'll admit to it but like everyone else in the village I've been bitten by the bug of watching the Hall and all the other properties, but mainly the Hall, being renovated.

Leaning forward in the saddle and squinting, not that it's of much use, I hone-in on the movement which caught my attention. I can just make out two figures, jogging. Who the hell are they? Benson snorts in response to my murmured thought. I bring him to a stop and watch the joggers as they make their way down the lane towards the village. I can't tell what sex they are from this distance, and it's not helped as they both wear dark sweatpants and big shapeless hoodies, with the hoods up. If I were to guess, I'll go with female, based simply on the way they move.

I'm certain they're not locals; it's way too early for any of our resident joggers to be out by about three hours. I watch the joggers climb over the style and start running up Peddlers Hill, it's the steepest of all the hills around the village. They're definitely not local, none of our residents are that fit. I laugh out loud as I imagine Simone Fawcett-Fowler trying to run up the hill, her pathetic attempts at jogging around the village are entertaining as it is.

Intrigued I stay and watch the two joggers make steady progress all the way to the top, not stopping once. I'm majorly impressed; these two people are mega fit. I was expecting them to collapse on the ground on reaching the summit but to my utter astonishment they turn around and start to descend. Halfway down the wind picks up and blows the joggers hoods back revealing one to have brunette hair tied back in a short ponytail, the other has masses of wild curly fair hair secured in a loose braid.

My breath catches and my heart stops... She's here!... Thank you, there is a God after all.

I look up to the sky with the biggest, stupidest, shit eating fucking grin on my face as I send up a silent prayer to the universe or whoever's listening.

Please don't let me fuck this up.

All day there have been sightings of Skye around the village. At the mini supermarket, the Hall, the Mill, the Farm, even at my own bloody yard and I was fucking out, at the club. Christ! I'm so bloody mad at myself for going. I should have gone with my gut and cancelled the demo session but oh no, I had to play good fucking boy scout. I look round the pub, it's full. Everyone's expecting Skye to walk in at any moment no doubt. I look gloomily down into my glass. I know for a fact she won't be making an appearance tonight. Chris told me Skye called in at lunchtime and mentioned she was having dinner with the Farringtons.

"Have you seen her?" Rex says as soon as he reaches me.

"Hi Rex, good to see you too mate" I say sardonically. Rex rolls his eyes "Yes, I saw her out running with Freya this morning".

"I was out running today. I didn't see either of them" frowns Rex.

"You'll have to get up a hellva lot earlier to catch these worms" I say dryly and down the last of my scotch, I signal to Mandy for another "It must have been six thirty-ish when I saw them running up Peddlers Hill and I'm guessing they'd been out quite a while by that point"

"Running up!" Rex exclaims in disbelief, shaking his head.

"Running up" I mouth pointing a finger up towards the ceiling.

"Jesus" whispers Rex "Do you know where they ran before getting to the hill?"

I shrug pretending I didn't know "They came from the direction of the Hall. It's only a guess but maybe they went around the grounds then out onto the lane".

"And you saw them running up the hill?"

"All the way up to the top" I can't help the wicked grin on my face, Rex doesn't believe me he's shaking his head sceptically "and they didn't stop once, not even when they got to the top. Just turned right around and ran all the way back down".

I can't contain my laughter any longer, Rex is dumbfounded. He prides himself on his athletic physique and prowess. He is regularly seen out jogging around the village usually with half a dozen women in tow, but he has never attempted running up Peddlers Hill. Walk yes, run no. I can't wait for tomorrow morning.

At six o'clock the next morning I'm standing on top of the hill behind my house, binoculars trained on the Hall driveway. There is just enough light and thankfully the early morning mist hangs low on the ground. There is no sign of life anywhere, well except for the birds tweeting and the horses nickering and kicking their stall doors, it's relatively quiet.

I scan the binoculars over the cottages again checking for movement, it's well known this is where Skye and her team are staying since The Coach House is fully booked. The cottages are dark, no sign of anyone being up. I train the binoculars back on the Hall and start to scan the grounds after ten minutes of searching I spot two dark figures running around the outside of the wooded area, I track them until they reach the driveway.

Reaching into my pocket I pull out my phone and blindly press a key, after a few minutes a groggy voice growls at me "This better be fucking good".

"Call it my good deed for the day" I say brightly "You wanted to know if the girls are out running, well they're just leaving the Hall grounds. I reckon they'll be reaching Peddlers Hill in under ten minutes".

I hear a thud and crash followed by Rex cursing before I hang up. I laugh to myself as I imagine him rushing around his bedroom getting dressed. "This is going to be fun to watch" I say patting Dark Moon who stands patiently beside me. He truly is a magnificent horse; I didn't resist temptation today. Mounting the huge beast, I nudge him in the direction of Peddler's Hill. Dark Moon takes off.

From my vantage point and using the binoculars, I watch Rex reach the style just ahead of the girls. He must have run full pelt from his place and through the village to get there so quickly, I bet the silly bugger has exhausted himself. Rex gallantly gestures for them to go first, the girls don't stop simply nod and start running up the hill, Rex follows. A smile twitches at my lips, I can see Rex's disappointed face they're not dressed in skimpy Lycra, both are

again dressed in heavy baggy sweats and hoodies. About quarter of the way up Rex starts to struggle and begins to drop behind, the girls however look as fresh as daisies. By halfway Rex gives up and collapses on the ground, flat on his back, gasping for breath. The girls turn back and check on him, Rex waves them way, his raised arm doing a flopping gesture, I laugh out loud, the guy is fucking knackered. Assured he's alright they continue up the hill, not giving him a second thought.

That night in the pub Rex and I have everyone in stitches as we tell the story of Rex trying to impress the girls by running up the hill "I nearly fucking died. I thought I was having a heart attack" he finishes aiming for the sympathy vote but doesn't get it.

"Serves you right for chasing after a piece of skirt" Chris snorts "but I must say Freya looks like a new woman and has certainly come a long way since she was last here, she couldn't walk around the village green without being out of breath".

No one disagrees with him. In fact, there is a lot of appreciative nods from all the men standing around us, me included. The woman's transformation from being overweight and full of bruises, courtesy of her ex-boyfriend, to how she looks now is phenomenal.

I wake up Saturday morning with a sense of dread and foreboding. I still haven't seen Skye to speak to her. I very much wanted our meeting to be a natural occurrence. You know, two paths crossing unexpectedly, a chance meeting, that kind of thing. However, on this occasion fate isn't playing ball and I have a feeling time is running out.

Whilst getting dressed I make the decision to intercept the girls jogging but what do you know, today of all bloody days Skye and Freya didn't go for a run. Just my fucking lousy luck.

By mid-afternoon I take matters into my own hands, I'm going to call at the cottage and see Skye and if she refuses, I will demand she hears me out at least. I don't want to think she is avoiding me on purpose. It's more like piss poor timing that's the major factor for us not bumping into each other. The last couple of days have been the same. I arrive at a place only to find out Skye left five minutes earlier, or I leave only to hear later Skye turned up not long after, we are passing ships in the night. It is common knowledge around the village Skye is here for updates on all the work going on at the Hall, farm and mill. I also know Skye has been at the club to

finalise details on the commission, what isn't known is how long she will be staying.

Taking a deep calming breath, I knock on the cottage door I know Skye is staying in. I listen hard for any sign of movement. Instead, the door to the next cottage opens.

"Mr Raven, may I be of any help?" Freya says politely, she's dressed casually in jeans and a black cashmere polo neck jumper that shows off her new curves.

"Hi Freya. I'd like to see Skye".

"She's not in" Freya can see I don't quite believe her "She went for a walk".

"Oh!" I chew my lip. I wasn't expecting that, disappointment surges through me. I frown contemplating my next move, I must find her "Do you know which direction she went in?" I say hopefully.

Freya smiles kindly "I don't know, but with the kind of mood Skye is in I'm almost certain she wants solitude. I'm told the best place to look is the nearest high point".

Freya's eyes sparkle as she wills me to work out her cryptic clue "Nearest high point" I mutter, my eyes wondering around the picturesque scenery and hills. My gaze settles on the highest distant hill "You mean like the top of a hill?"

"I didn't tell you that" Freya beams delighted and nods.

"Thank you so much" I lean over the picket fence and plant a kiss on Freya's cheek, startling her "You look really good by the way".

Freya blushes at the compliment, I leave her holding her cheek as I walk briskly down the path. Getting back to the yard just in time to see Marty about to take one of the horses out, Dark Moon, I commandeer him and set off across the field which will take me to Peddlers Hill unseen by anyone using the public path. The heavy clouds that have been threatening rain all day finally give it up. A light drizzle starts, the kind that wets you more than a down pour. I urge the horse into a canter hoping the light rain doesn't put Skye off and has her returning to the cottage.

A rush of relief spreads through me a few minutes later when I see a small dark hooded figure sitting huddled on the highest rock, strands of light blonde hair that have escaped from the hood dance and weave lazily in the slight breeze. The heavily laden grey clouds dull down the colour of the moss-covered rocks, the patches of

grass and wildflowers surrounding her. Skye's body shifts slightly at the sound of horse hooves, but she doesn't get up to leave.

I dismount and tether the reins to a slim upright rock. Purposely I walk to the front of the rocks so Skye can see me climb up.

"Hi" I say softly.

Skye nods acknowledging me "Hi" she whispers, her eyes flick to me then resume looking straight ahead. Her melancholic mood matches the weather.

"We need to talk" I say softly stopping in front of her, I bend slightly making eye contact. I feel the electric charge tingle over my skin and the magnetic pull towards her getting stronger. I resist the urge to pull her to me, wrap my arms tightly around her, never letting go.

"Do we?" there's no warmth in her husky monotone voice or her sorrowful yellow green eyes. I feel a knife slicing through me at the sharpness of her words. Fear grips my stomach in its iron fist, this doesn't bode well. Oh, for fuck's sake, man up! Taking a deep breath and the bull by the horns I press on.

"Okay I need to talk; will you listen and hear me out?" after what feels like a lifetime Skye sighs and nods. My shredded nerves give out as relief brings me, heavily, to my knees.

Ignoring the pain in my knees caused by sharp cold hard rock biting into my skin through my jeans, I sigh heavily "Firstly, I want to... no... I need to apologise for my behaviour. I could give you all sorts of reasons for why I reacted the way I did but what is done is done and I wish to God every single day since I could turn back the clock. I'm really, really sorry for what I said and the way I reacted to what I can only imagine will have been an amazing and very generous business offer" I look earnestly into Skye's beautiful yellow green eyes, and all I see is pain, my heart breaks because I'm the dickhead who is causing it "I'm not used to being offered my dreams on a plate, in fact it's the opposite but that's no excuse for the vile things I said and the way I behaved. I just hope you find it in your heart to forgive me someday. That's what I wanted to say on the Sunday morning before you left. I can't tell you how thrilled and pleased I am you still brought Dark Moon and the other horses to me. It gave me hope... hope for one day we can start over, a fresh start. I wanted to say all that when I came to your gallery but being an utter jerk and coward, I bottled it. But I'm here now on

my knees, begging you to forgive me” Skye continues to look ahead, there’s no emotion or expression to give me a clue as to what she is thinking, the silence hangs heavy between us, I can’t stand it “Say something... please” I whisper, not afraid to let her hear my desperation.

Silence.

Anxiety rattles my nerves, my stomach does summersaults, dread builds heavily around me, pressing down on my shoulders. I feel the weight dragging me down, it’s unbearable.

After an agonising few minutes Skye takes a deep breath and finally looks at me, the incredible sadness in her eyes breaks my heart all over again. My arms twitch with yearning to hold her.

“How’s Gabrielle? Your baby must be due soon”.

Skye’s softly spoken words are like a knife hitting my gut and twisting. I don’t blame her, my ex-wife helped in creating the fucking humongous mess I started by dropping the pregnancy H bomb. Yet strangely, at the same time I feel the burdening anxiety weight lift as relief floods me, I want to laugh in delight but clamp down on the bubbling happiness. I school my expression. I need Skye to see my sincerity and believe what I’m about to reveal.

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen Gabrielle since that day and if she’s pregnant it’s not mine” I keep my focus on Skye, letting her see and hear my indifference.

Shock flitters across Skye’s face “How do you know that?”

I maintain Skye’s gaze, so she will see I’m telling the truth “I can’t have kids” I take a deep breath “I’m sterile. I’ve known for over two years. I just never got around to telling Gabrielle”.

Skye’s mouth hangs open in surprise, then she laughs, but it’s empty. There’s no humour, warmth or joy in it “I bet that was a nasty shock for her”.

“It was, even more so when I produced the proof and told her to leave” a slight smile plays across my lips as memories flit through my mind.

I reach inside my coat pocket and pull out the doctor’s letter. I hand it to her. Skye looks at me puzzled but takes the letter, opens it and reads. I see her shoulders sag slightly.

“If memory serves me right, Tobias had the snip about twenty years ago, because he was scared shitless of getting one of his many mistresses pregnant and my grandfather finding out” Skye says handing the letter back to me.

We hold each other's gaze then burst out laughing, real belly laughs until your sides ache kind of laughing. After a few minutes, the warmth and sparkle in Skye's eyes dies down and the melancholy and sadness return. Skye looks down at her hands, her fingers twist together. I notice there are no rings on any of her fingers.

"You're not the only one who can't have children" Skye's voice cracks slightly as she looks up at me, her yellow green eyes shimmer with unshed tears "I could buy and give you anything you wanted in the world, except your own child" Skye takes a shaky breath, this is difficult for her. I can see it in her eyes. A single tear escapes and trickles down her cheek, mingling with the fine misty rain. I clench my hands on my thighs to stop myself from reaching out to touch her "That's what hurt the most. Seeing your stunned reaction, I interpreted it as something you always wanted. I couldn't compete with Gabrielle on that score. That one thing alone, shattered me. I won't deny your harsh words from the day before hurt, they did, more than you'll ever know. Add that to seeing Gabrielle in your shirt, all mussed up" Skye takes in another shaky breath "It twisted the knife and gutted me" her voice is a husky whisper, full of agony and pain.

Memories from the quiz night and of Skye and Simon's reaction to Rex offering to father her children flood my mind. This time I don't fight the urge to reach out for her, to hold her. I pull Skye to me, crushing her to my chest with my arms wrapped tightly around her. Skye doesn't resist; I've missed this connection of holding her so much. Skye's arms slip around my waist, tightening and pulling me closer to her. My heart soars. Questions swirl around my brain, wanting to know more about why she can't have children, now is not the time to air them. I shelve them for another day and a more appropriate time to ask.

"I'm so sorry. I very rarely, if ever lock the front door and Gabrielle let herself in. I never thought she would ever come back" I whisper the words into Skye's hair, my mouth close to her ear "She came to my room. I was asleep. Normally I'm a light sleeper, however that night I drank three quarters of a bottle of whiskey. I was angry at myself for fucking things up between us" I sigh heavily "I was dreaming of you, being with you. I never woke up. I didn't know what she had done until she dropped the bombshell that morning. By the time I came to my senses, you were in the car

disappearing down the lane. I ran after you, but it was too late. I had no way of getting in touch with you. I only found out on Monday, Chris and Michelle knew how to contact you”

Skye pulls back to look at me, a small smile plays on her lips, she heard the slight dig in my tone. With the tip of my finger, I gently trace over her dark blonde eyebrow, wiping away the tiny raindrops, I continue down the side of her face coming to rest under her chin, dipping my head slowly showing Skye my intention to kiss her, giving her a chance to move away, she stays perfectly still. I place my lips over hers, they are cold yet soft. Gently kissing her, Skye responds, matching my tenderness, our lips mould and move together. My whole-body hums in delight.

“I don’t care about your money; it’s you I care about and want. I love you Skye, I have from the moment I first saw you on the train. Can we start over? Please” the last word comes out as a whispered plea.

Skye draws in a sharp gasp. Her eyes search my face. I let all the raw emotions I’m feeling for her show in my eyes, my face, I bare the deepest depths of my soul to her. With a trembling hand, Skye reaches up and traces the arch of my eyebrow, trailing her fingers down my cheek, feeling the damp roughness of my stubble. I clasp her hand to my cheek then kiss her palm. A sad smile reaches her eyes.

“You may think and say you don’t care about my money, but it is a big sticking point, because you wouldn’t have reacted the way you did if it wasn’t an issue” Skye places the tips of her fingers over my lips to stop me from talking, I was about to contradict her “I could give all of it away and I will still end up being rich. Believe me, I’ve tried on more than one occasion. You need to be able to handle my wealth, it’s not going to go away. You need to work out if it’s your pride, ego, insecurities or something else that’s the route cause. Find the reason and work on it, resolve and accept it. Like I said, my wealth is going nowhere, if anything it’s only going to increase. As for starting over” Skye sighs heavily, her sorrow filled eyes search mine “I need you to give me time. At the moment, my head is all over the place and I’m leaving tomorrow for New York”

My heart aches, for her... for me, she hasn’t said no and I detect the subtle plea for understanding in Skye’s husky voice. Even though I don’t understand I instinctively know not to push. I will give her whatever she needs and if space and time is what she

wants reluctantly I will give it, especially if it means she will one day find her way back to me.

“When will you be back?” I say trying not to sound too desperate.

“In about four weeks at the earliest” Skye says softly “maybe a week or two later. Right now, I don’t honestly know”.

“I’ll be here waiting for you. Go and get your head sorted out and come back to me”.

I kiss her long and slow, I’m starved for her. I want to imprint the feel of her soft luscious lips on mine, her sweet as honey taste on my tongue, her unique floral musky feminine scent burned into my lungs, the feel of her in my arms. I want as much of her as she can give me at this moment in time. I need enough to see me through the next four to six weeks until she comes back. Eventually, I break the kiss, a small whimper escapes Skye in protest. The sound makes me smile, it speaks volumes to my heart and soul, it fills me with so much hope; hope for us. Whether she knows it or not, Skye does have feelings for me. Christ, I’ve missed her so much.

“As loathed as I am to say this, I better go. Otherwise, you’ll be naked, and I’ll be buried balls deep inside you in less than thirty seconds if I don’t” the lust and desire surging through me makes my voice gravelly. Skye lets out a startled laugh and trembles in my arms, her eyes dilate telling me she wants the same thing. The beast in me stirs “Come home to me as soon as you can. Take care of yourself and safe journey” I kiss her forehead “I love you, Skye” I whisper against her soft skin, then I force myself away from her, chaining the beast.

SKYE

The sudden separation feels as if both my arms have been amputated. A huge gaping hole, surrounds me, ready to suck me into the abyss. I bite my tongue to stop shouting out ‘Come back’ so he’ll save me from disappearing. Instead, I watch Caleb with expert ease mount the huge black horse, Dark Moon, I suddenly realise.

Without thinking I stand and approach my horse. Dark Moon, nickers softly and comes to me. The huge horse lowers his head gently placing it against my chest, letting me pet him “Hello, my

beautiful big boy. I hope you're behaving yourself" I whisper and smile, petting his neck and nose. All my troubles and woes seem to melt away. After a few minutes I move back, letting Caleb steer Dark Moon into the direction of the stables.

"See you soon" Caleb says giving me a heart breaking and breath-taking smile. My heart thumps painfully hard in my chest, just like it did on Tuesday when he came to the gallery, and I laid eyes on him for the first time since that fateful Sunday morning all those months ago.

I lift my hand and wave as Caleb gees Dark Moon to move and I watch as he gallops across the field. My whole body is tingling and trembling from the aftershocks of being in the presence of Caleb Raven, again. I still can't believe how my body responded to him on Tuesday, and he didn't touch me then. Just looking at him sends my body into a frenzy, he looked devastatingly gorgeous in his tailored dark suit, crisp white shirt left open at the neck. His black wavy hair is slightly longer, a couple of inches past his shoulders; my fingers still tingle remembering the soft silky feel of his hair and twitch as if to grab hold, to tug and pull. Caleb looked like any respectable businessman but screamed bad boy, especially with the scar cutting through his left eyebrow. It took everything I had not to launch myself at him, I could feel my body leaning towards him, betraying me as his magnetism pulled at me like invisible tentacles stretching out and wrapping around me, drawing me in whether I liked it or not. Oh boy, I so wanted to feel his arms around me.

In my peripheral vision, I could see the women in the gallery openly ogling him. I clenched and ground my teeth to stop myself from snarling 'Back off bitches, he's mine'. There was a moment when I first saw him it made me unbelievably happy, he'd come to see me. Considering how I was extremely disappointed when I didn't see him at the yard when the horses arrived, I could feel his eyes and presence around me, but I couldn't see him. I was beyond ecstatic he tracked me down then reality kicked in, with its size thirteens; he's not mine, not anymore. He has a new life with Gabrielle, he's about to become a father. That was a fresh blow to the gut, I clamped down on my runaway emotions and mentally I put on my full metal jacket and threw up the reinforced steel wall for protection. Nothing was getting in to hurt me ever again.

Yeah right!

All it takes is for me to close my eyes and concentrate on the sensations surging around my body, the aftereffects of being in the presence of Caleb for a few minutes and all my defences come crashing down. The connection we had back in April, is definitely letting itself be known to me, it is back with a vengeance, and it isn't going to be ignored.

My skin tingles as if little electrical currents zap along the surface. My once frozen blood has thawed and is boiling hot. The sound of Caleb's rich gravelly voice sends delightful shivers up and down my spine, the touch of his soft yet firm lips have my toes curling. As Caleb kissed me, I drew in lungful after lungful of his scent, I realise now just how much I missed his fresh outdoor earthy masculine smell, until it made me light-headed. His taste assaulted me, damn! I don't remember him tasting so good.

But most of all, once more I feel the shattered pieces of my broken heart coming together and fusing. The cold numb body I have been occupying for the last six months has come alive, big time. Caleb has reawakened me, again. All it took was for him to hold me in his arms and kiss the life out of me. My inner slut had her clothes off and lay spread eagled on the cold hard ground as soon as he mentioned being buried balls deep inside me. I clench my thighs and my internal muscles, ghost memories of how he felt inside me cause a shiver to run through me.

When I open my eyes, there is no sign of Caleb, I am alone again only this time I don't feel alone. I can't help smiling and hugging myself. All is not lost; he loves and wants me. He's mine. I make my way down the hill in slightly better spirits than I did climbing. My head hurts with all the thinking I've been doing, only now I've a shit load more to work through. Thanks a bunch Caleb! My mind whispers sardonically, but I'm happily hugging myself internally.

Caleb has completely side swiped me, never in a million years did I expect to hear him say he loves me. I saw it in his eyes and face how genuine he is, he meant every bloody word he said. He hid nothing from me. He loves me! I want to scream and shout it from the roof tops whilst doing a silly jig.

I saw his strength, honour, kindness, veracity, but most of all his deep-seated need and love for me. All these months I let his harsh words torture me and cloud my judgement, convincing myself he never wanted me. That the week in April meant nothing

to him and it was all about sex, fucking each other senseless at every opportunity, like a randy pair of teenagers. I convinced myself the instant sexual attraction we experienced when we first met on the train was a figment of my overactive imagination. When I thought he deliberately ignored my email about training the horses, I further convinced myself Caleb was determined to cut all ties with me, that he had a new life with Gabrielle, getting ready for fatherhood. He may not love his wife, but he will love the child they made together. All that helped build the armour I needed to protect myself. Now, Caleb has well and truly pulled the rug from under me. I feel disorientated, euphoric and scared shitless at the same time.

“Bastard” I mutter under my breath and with a smile on my lips.

Back on the lane I head towards the cottage, Paul following a few steps behind me. I didn’t tell him I was going for a walk; he turned up as I was halfway up the hill. Then again, I don’t have to tell him, I have that many tracking devices on me. The road forks, instead of taking the lane leading to the cottages I find myself opening the gate to the churchyard. Wondering around the cemetery looking at the old headstones, I question my feelings for Caleb.

There is no denying the magnetic pull towards him is still there, in fact it is stronger than ever. I know for certain I’m powerless against it. When he came to the gallery, I had to fight to keep myself still, by Christ I wanted to fling myself into his arms and beg him to... what? Take me as his mistress? Was I that desperate, I was seriously willing to be the ‘other’ woman? Just so I could be in his life, to have whatever part of him I could get?

Yes, I was.

Now, I get him all to myself. Lucky me! I can’t help the self-satisfied smile playing around my lips. When he said he was no longer with Gabrielle, correction, he never was with her, I didn’t dare believe him. To have hope ripped away so soon, it is too much of a cruel blow. Then he produced the letter. My heart stopped; it was difficult to keep a lid on the sheer delight trying to explode out of me.

Being held in his arms I felt as if I was floating on a cloud. For months and months, I mourned the loss of his touch. My previously cold numb body became more alive than ever before;

I'm still feeling the thrum of the aftereffects. But can I risk my heart again? Was it right to fall for someone so soon after Clayton? Was I being disrespectful to my dead husband's memory?

Don't go down that rabbit hole again. Stop messing with my head. I shout back at my conscience. I recall the conversation I had with my friends when I came clean about meeting Caleb and the circumstances around what happened on that momentous train journey. They gave me some wonderful advice and insights to my behaviour, all of it true. I no longer feel guilty, and I allow myself to be happy. They told me I needed to start living my life again, to get back out there. I took their advice back in April only to get hurt, no shattered... devastated more like. Am I willing to take that gamble again? Now that is the question, I need to figure out the answer to. At least I know I don't have to put Clayton into the mix.

One thing I do know is... I love Caleb. I've fallen for him harder and faster than I did Clayton. The similarities between both relationships are unnerving. I spent a week with each man before leaving the country, only I had sex with Caleb within two hours of meeting him and I didn't even know his name, whereas it was five days before I felt I was ready to sleep with Clayton. When I left each man, I was clear on my feelings; I really liked Clayton and I was willing to pick up where we left off if he was of the same mind and single, I wouldn't have been overly bothered if he wasn't, disappointed... yes, but I would have quickly got over it. Whereas with Caleb, I loved him and when I left back in April, I was absolutely devastated he would never be mine. Admit it, you were devastated when he didn't respond to your email about the horses. I snort, derisively at myself as I acknowledge my conscience. It took all my courage to follow up with a phone call. The bittersweet taste of disappointment still lingers in my mouth when Sally told me Caleb was out. I also now know I secretly hoped Caleb and I would reconnect, accidentally on purpose, during this visit. Only fate has been a cruel friend on this occasion. But I won't deny, I am thrilled to bits Caleb has sort me out... twice.

Both men told me they loved me incredibly early in our relationship. With Clayton, by pure coincidence we met again in England after five weeks of me being away. He told me then he loved me and wanted to make a go of things when I got back to New York. My feelings were all over the place, still reeling from the shock of meeting my grandfather and all the bad memories it

dragged up. That same night, Clayton declared his love for me, as we parted the following day, I told him I loved him but now I'm not sure I did. I'd never been in love before, I certainly felt something for him but was it love? I know I grew to love him over time and I believed him to be my soulmate. Yes, I was devastated when Clayton died and I felt his loss severely. But what I feel for Caleb is so indescribably intense it doesn't even compare to what I ever felt for Clayton.

Guilt slices through me as I admit this to myself. However, I need to be honest and truthful, I need to own my shit, as Simon would so eloquently put it. I know with every cell in my body I love Caleb, gooey eyed and head over heels, lovesick. When I left Caleb, despite what happened, I know I will still have been heartbroken and devastated at the separation.

Don't get me wrong, I did love Clayton and still do. In the five years we had together, he played a big part in my life. Helping me to confront and overcome some serious nightmare issues from my past. Plus, I discovered my sexual appetite leaned towards the... adventurous, okay I like kink. In the beginning, I was in lust with Clayton which turned to love, in that moment of my life Clayton completed me and overtime I learnt to love his family, sort of.

Oh, my god! Clayton's family, what would they think? I sit down on a bench with a heavy sigh. Stephanie will hate it, no question or doubt about it. She already thinks I'm moving on too quickly, getting on with my life, she has no idea I've met someone else. She'll have a hissy fit and completely cut me off... now there's an idea! If Stephanie has her way, I will still be wearing black and wailing at the side of my husband's grave every day. Stephanie takes great umbrage in the fact I have only been to Clayton's grave once since his funeral. I visited on the anniversary we met, laying a single white Calla Lily. Stephanie is a manipulative bitch and uses emotional blackmail to get what she wants, only my patience with her is wearing extremely thin. I'm beginning to hate the woman.

I gave up long ago trying to explain my work and business commitments to her, instead I leave it to Joshua. As my lawyer, he knows exactly what I'm up to. I grind my teeth, now there's another bone of contention. I know Joshua tells his family way more about my business activities than he should do and it's starting to really irritate the shit out of me. I smile because I know Freya is dying to lay into him about client confidentiality, she hasn't

said anything to me about it, but I have heard her muttering it under her breath. It pleases me to know she has my back.

Was it time to cut ties with the family completely? Find a new lawyer, or go back to Lars and his firm? I had used Larson McKenzie for years before I met Clayton and I still feel guilty about letting myself being talked into switching to use Joshua's firm. Now Clayton's business is in the process of being sold and with Freya having extensive legal knowledge and previous experience in a law practice, plus she has resumed her business law degree studies. I can quite easily use Joshua less and less. Maybe, if I did it gradually over time, it wouldn't seem obvious and that way I won't give Stephanie further ammunition to have another go at me.

Memories from a few months' back surface. The stink Stephanie created when I told her I was selling Clayton's business to the management team. Yeah, that's one bit of information Joshua kept his mouth shut on. Fucking coward. Originally, I was approached by a few competitors offering to buy me out. I gave first refusal to Joshua and Andrew, I offered the business to them for nothing, both declined. I called a meeting of all the senior executives and announced I had been approached with several offers which I was seriously considering, I was amazed when they asked to be given time to put together their own bid.

I understand why Stephanie is so upset because it's the business her husband created and worked hard to build, then her favourite son took over making it a huge success. But the final straw that broke the donkeys back came when Stephanie accused "You're just like any other gold digger, now he's gone, and you've got your hands on his money you want to erase all memory of him".

Giving Stephanie the coldest, hardest look of contempt I felt for her, I let rip "You are conveniently forgetting Stephanie at the point of getting married I was richer than Clayton by a billion dollars. It was my money that enabled Clayton to expand his business. It was me who helped triple his company's turnover in the five years we were together. So, who's the gold digger?" my ice-cold voice drips with venom "You're also conveniently forgetting I offered, on numerous occasions, the business to your other two sons, Joshua and Andrew, for nothing, and both declined. If money is the only thing you're worried about by all means you take

over running the business, because I don't have the inclination or the time to do so".

Stephanie seriously pissed me off, after weeks of putting up with snide remarks about the business I was doing in England and the insinuations I wouldn't have been able to do half of what I did if it wasn't for Clayton's expert business acumen guiding me, I finally had enough. Fuck her feelings, she obviously doesn't care about mine and it is high time the controlling cheeky bitch was put in her place, permanently. So, I snapped and went to town on her, big time. Some would call me an asshole but it felt so good giving her a few home truths. I didn't feel one iota of guilt for ripping the rose-tinted glasses off her eyes and knocking her precious son off the pedestal she put him on. Even better, she knows I'm right. There is no way she can contradict me.

Realising she cocked up, Stephanie profusely apologised but the damage to our relationship was already done, there's no going back. I want nothing more to do with her and I cooled towards my mother-in-law. I ceased all contact, refusing to take her calls or attend her precious family meals. Which means Stephanie is resorting to manipulation by using guilt tactics. The rest of the family do her bidding, I'm just thankful the grandparents are no longer around to see this. A smile graces my lips at thoughts of Granny Blake, I miss the old cantankerous woman, she had my corner and would've definitely put Stephanie in her place if she was still around.

All week, since being back in the UK, I have received multiple daily calls from Stephanie, Joshua and Andrew. The pretence being to update me on the memorial service Stephanie is organising, which coincides with the anniversary of Clayton's death in a few weeks' time. At first, the delusional woman wanted to continue with our anniversary come Halloween party tradition. I made it very clear I would have no part in it. She changed tactics using the day of his death instead. At first, I said I wouldn't be there due to work commitments, but Stephanie eventually wore me down. I'm beginning to despise the woman even more if that's at all possible.

Stephanie also seems to conveniently forget someone else died in the accident. I vow to myself once the big show Stephanie is putting on for Clayton is finished, me and Paul along with my friends will quietly pay our respects at Macy's graveside.

And then there is Joshua and Andrew to throw into the mix, Clayton's brothers, both seem to have taken it upon themselves to console their grieving sister-in-law at any given opportunity. I used to like them both, but for a while now they've been giving me the creeps. A shudder runs through me as ghost feelings of overly extended hugs and lingering kisses on my cheeks makes me feel repulsive. Ever since Clayton and I accidentally witnessed the two of them have a threesome with Andrew's girlfriend, I've never been able to look at them the same way, at first, I found it funny. Now, I can't help but feel they see me as a challenge to get into bed. Eww! Nope, never gonna happen.

So, lost in my thoughts I slowly become aware of someone sitting next to me on the bench, in my peripheral vision I see someone dressed all in black. Hesitantly, I turn to face the person. I'm half expecting to see the cowl and scythe of the Grim Reaper. Well, I am sat in a graveyard and have a highly overactive imagination! Instead, I come face to face with the rosy shiny smiling bespectacled face of the vicar. I try to return his smile, but my heart isn't in it.

"Will we be seeing you in church on Sunday Ms Darcy?" he asks jovially.

"No" I relent when I see how crestfallen he looks "I'm not going to be here. I'll be in New York"

"Will you be gone long?"

Is he fishing or just making polite conversation? I wonder, both probably. A wicked thought occurs, let's see how much of a gossip he is.

"A month, maybe a few weeks longer. Work on the Hall finishes at the end of the month except for the decorators who will still be doing their bit, so I need to arrange for various things to be shipped over ready for moving in".

"So, Mr and Mrs Blake will be moving in then" the Vicar's excitement is palpable.

"Yes, I will" I wink at him.

The Vicar's eyes pop wide open, the wrinkles on his forehead double "You're... you're" he seems lost for words.

"Yes, I am" I smile standing up "Enjoy the rest of your day Vicar".

I feel better already, it amazing how a bit of mischief can brighten up the day. I walk away slowly as the Vicar watches me in

astonishment and disbelief, I can practically read his expression ‘All this time and Mrs Blake has been amongst us’ or something to that effect.

A pathetic looking fundraising poster for the restoration of the church catches my eye and makes me stop. It’s in the shape of a thermometer with the target amount written at the top, only a quarter of the bulbous end has been coloured in showing the pitiful amount that’s been raised. The poster is very weather worn and faded.

“How long has this been going on?” I call out to the Vicar pointing at the sign.

He walks over and looks at it with a sigh “Eighteen months, or there about” he says in a defeated tone.

I’m absolutely appalled “You mean to tell me that with at least six millionaires living in this village not one of the stingy sods can put their hand in their fucking pocket to help restore an historic building. I’m not a believer but I wouldn’t stand by to see such a beautiful building go to wrack and ruin, even if the church won’t repair and restore its own buildings”.

“With such passion, I could do with you on my fund-raising committee, believer or not” the Vicar smiles fondly at me.

“No, you don’t” I snort “I can’t be doing with do-gooders. The fuckers wind me up something rotten. Full of good intentions but do fuck all. Sorry Vicar” I wince suddenly remembering who I’m speaking to.

“You’re forgiven. I take it you get constantly asked for donations and what not for charities” the Vicar says sympathetically.

I nod “Usually it’s to attend big posh fancy gala dinners where the ticket price is stupid amounts of money and then you’re expected to spend money at the auction. Hey! That’s what you could do with, an event like that. You’ll have the money in no time because rich people love to show off and flash the cash to their peers”.

“I do like the idea, but I wouldn’t know where to start for something like that” the Vicar gives me a sideways glance “Are you sure I couldn’t persuade you to join the fundraising committee?”

I laugh and shake my head “Absolutely positive, it’s my idea of hell” I pretend to shudder whilst grinning wickedly at the Vicar “Tell you what, I’ll hold and organise the event at the Hall, we’ll

discuss it more when I get back in a few weeks and I'll appreciate you keeping it to yourself until we finalise a date... actually tell Joyce Farrington and see if she can start to compile a potential list of guests, as in local money people"

"Excellent" the Vicar grins clapping his hands together "I'll go and call on Lady Farrington now. Thank you, Ms Darcy, or do I call you Mrs Blake?" he says in a stage whisper whilst furtively looking around.

"Call me Skye"

"And I'm Donald, much more personal than Vicar".

"Nice meeting you Donald" I smile warmly shaking his hand.

Feeling much better within myself I decide to extend my walk and go into the village, after five minutes I stop and indicate to Paul to catch up. I link arms with him.

"You okay?" Paul's soft southern drawl is full of concern.

"Yeah... no" I sigh heavily. Paul squeezes and pats my hand showing he understands "I'm not looking forward to going back to New York. Stephanie is doing my head in and has been hounding the shit out of me with messages. I really don't want..." I stop and sigh again "Right this minute, I can't handle her. If she's this bad now God knows what she's going to be like in a few weeks and I just know I'm going to end up saying something, I'll regret later. That woman really needs to move on with her life. Christ, I sound like a right bitch!"

"You're entitled to your thoughts and feelings. Everyone handles grief in a different way, but I agree with you she does need to move on to a certain extent. I can't help feeling she's expecting too much by thinking everyone should be racked with misery all the time".

"Then there's Joshua and Andrew" I groan "On the one hand they're both creeping me out with their over attentiveness but at the same time, I feel sorry for them. At least we get to leave the country" Paul rolls his eyes at me making me giggle "Anyway, how are you feeling?" I ask softly.

"I'm good, I have you to keep me preoccupied" Paul shoulder bumps me as I snort "Do you want me to do anything about your in-laws?" he raises a questioning eyebrow.

"Oooh, the temptation" I fake shudder and laugh manically "Nah! I'll deal with them myself. If they don't get the message. I'll kick them in the balls and punch them in throat".

“That’s my girl” Paul laughs, he affectionately pats my hand.

“You will let me know if you need some alone time” I say softly.

“I will but it’s the last thing I need at the moment” Paul says quietly.

“Understood”.

We walk in silence for a while each of us wrapped up in our own thoughts. Paul has been a constant pillar of strength to me. In the ten years he’s worked for me, he’s proved his loyalty time and time again. I’ve come to treat him like an older big brother. I know I shouldn’t, and I do blur the lines between employer and employee, but I can’t help it. He is part of my family. I love him dearly, not in the romantic sense. I’ve never felt that way about him. I’m acutely aware there was a time when he was in love with me, but I never encouraged it and he never spoke about it. When things between Paul and Macy became something more, I whole heartedly encouraged it, both deserved happiness, why not together. They were well suited and made a fabulous couple, when they got engaged then married, I was ecstatic. A small smile breaks out on my lips as I remember how Clayton was jealous of the relationship I have with Paul. Numerous of times he tried to scold me, I was behaving inappropriately, I was the employer. His stern words rattle through my brain, he didn’t like my response. I told him to go fuck himself and I will never and will not change just to soothe his fragile ego. When I started to form similar bonds with Bruce and Alan, Clayton eventually gave up.

Reaching the village, we walk around the green, ignoring the curious looks we’re getting as we take in the new shops which have opened since our last visit. A couple more boutiques, a tearoom currently serving afternoon cream teas, a health food and apothecary shop, and a shop selling a mix of handmade art and craft items and tourist novelty trinkets. Two buildings have ‘Coming Soon’ signs in the window. One for a restaurant and the other for a bakery.

I feel a sense of pleasure looking at the one which will become the bakery. Last week Farmer Joe senior called me and put forward a proposition on behalf of his nephew Nick and his wife Gina, I liked the sound of it and agreed to meet with them. We met on Thursday. Nick told me the Mill will be operational within the next two weeks. Gina and one of their sons are bakers, they propose to

use flour the Mill produces to make fresh breads, cakes, sweet and savoury pies and pastries. The bakery will create at least ten new jobs in a village desperately needing it. I was sold on the idea and agreed to back them. Looking around now the village seems to be thriving even with the summer holiday season finished, this new venture will only enhance it.

“Have you thought about appointing a housekeeper at the Hall?” says Paul bringing me out of my thoughts.

“Yeah, but it’ll probably have to wait until we get back. I was thinking of asking Joyce if she could recommend someone”.

“Why don’t you ask Frank?” Paul points, just ahead of us where Frank Appleton is coming out of the mini supermarket “His wife is the cleaner for most of the large houses in the village and surrounding area”.

“Is she? But I want someone who’ll be more than a cleaner”.

“Can’t hurt to ask”.

“Yeah, you’re right. Frank!” I call out.

Frank stops and looks around, spotting me and Paul a huge grin breaks out on his craggy face “Ms Darcy” he touches his flat cap “Just getting tonight’s supper” he says lifting the grocery bags.

“Well, I won’t keep you. I understand your wife does cleaning for a lot of houses around here”.

“Aye that she does. I’m sure she’d be happy to take on the Hall. Why don’t you come with me and ask her yourself?” Frank says beaming at me.

“If it’s not going to disrupt getting your dinner” I smile back. I don’t correct Frank’s assumption for a cleaner. I like to keep my options open.

“Nonsense, she won’t mind at all. In fact, she’ll be tickled pink to finally meet you. She’s sick to death of me harping on about how great a boss you are” I feel my cheeks blush and I laugh out of surprise at his compliment “I’m not far” Frank points in the direction of his house on the opposite side of the pub.

As we walk the short distance Frank fills me in on the progress of the gardens and the rest of grounds.

“I had Craig Mattock come and look at the wood, sorry he’s a tree surgeon” Frank says seeing my clueless blank look at the name “He pointed out the sections which could do with thinning, he’ll be back next week to do just that. I thought we’d keep the wood for

the fires during the winter. If that's okay with you" Frank adds hastily, suddenly worried he's overstepping the mark.

"I think it's a wonderful idea" I smile warmly at him "and I trust your judgement, you're the expert in these things. The ornamental garden looks fabulous by the way; you've done an amazing job".

Frank beams proudly. "Here we are" he says opening a rickety wooden gate and gestures grandly for me to lead the way.

The front garden is immaculate as you would expect with a gardener living here. The front of the terrace house although clean looks a little worn, the windows and front door need a lick of paint and on closer inspection it needs pointing too. Halfway up the path the front door opens. A tall sturdy woman in her late forties or early fifties with short dark brown hair flecked with grey stands on the step wiping her hands on a tea towel. She looks nervous and a questioning look in her hazel eyes as she focuses on her husband.

"Jenny, this is Ms Skye Darcy. Ms Darcy my beautiful wife Jennifer Appleton" Frank says rather formally. Jenny's eyes widen in surprise as they snap to me.

"Pleased to meet you and please call me Skye" I hold out my hand, instinctively Jenny reaches for it. Her hand is warm and soft, I half expected it to be rough due to the nature of her work. I mentally slap myself, why would she have work roughened hands when she can wear rubber gloves and obviously, she uses a good moisturiser "Apologies for just dropping in on you without any notice whatsoever but Frank said it would be okay. I can call back later if it isn't".

"No, no please come in" Jenny says flustered and leads the way into a small but tidy sitting room.

"Ms Darcy was asking about you doing the cleaning at the Hall" Frank says opening another door I presume leads to the kitchen.

Jenny indicates for me and Paul to take a seat. I can see Jenny giving Paul curious glances, but her eyes snap to her husband when his words register.

"You want me to clean at the Hall?" the surprise in her voice very evident.

"Not exactly" I say screwing up my face "Actually, I'm looking for someone who will be more of a housekeeper" Frank stops dead halfway through the open door his head jerks round to look at his wife then me "This is Paul he's head of my security. He does

checks on everyone I come in contact with on a work-related basis, he happened to mention you do the cleaning at most the large houses around here and Frank coming out of the shop was perfect timing”.

“So, what would the Housekeeper job entail?” Jenny says with keen interest and getting over her shock quicker than her husband.

“Straight to business, my kind of woman” I chuckle, I like this woman. In an instant I decide to offer her the position rather than ask if she knows someone, I have a feeling she is more than capable “Frank, you’ll need to hear this as it’ll affect you as well. Don’t worry your job stays as is” I add quickly noting the worried expression on his face as he sits next to his wife, shopping left on the floor, forgotten. My heart melts as he takes hold of his wife’s hand, both giving the other a reassuring squeeze.

“I need someone who will manage the house. Obviously, there will be cleaning but when I’m in residence. God! I sound like I’m royalty” I laugh at myself making the others chuckle “As I was saying, when I’m here, it’ll be looking after me and the rest of my team plus any guests. When I’m not here it’ll be almost as an assistant role, answering calls, dealing with any post and liaising with Freya my PA, that kind of thing. I envisage the role as live in. You’ll have your own quarters and full use of all the facilities such as the gym, pool, game and cinema rooms. Obviously, there will be some cleaning, but you’ll hire staff as and when you feel you need to. You’ll get holidays and pension plus private medical and dental care just like Frank does. You’ll have a car; do you drive?” Jenny nods mutely “Good, so you can choose what kind of car you’d like, erm what else do you need to know?” I say finally running out of steam.

“How long would the job be for?” Jenny almost whispers.

“For life or for as long as you want it. Oh! Salary” I suddenly remember, pulling out my phone and accessing the internet I do a quick search on how much housekeepers get paid “I won’t ask you to sign a non-disclosure agreement, but I do expect discretion. How does forty grand a year sound?”

Total silence, after a minute and still no reaction I add “I can see I’ve shocked the hell out of you both, so I’ll leave you to have a think about it and discuss it between yourselves. I leave for New York in the morning, Frank has Freya’s contact details, get in touch and let her know your decision. If you decide not to take it, I’d be

ever so grateful if you could recommend someone, if you know of anyone that would be suitable” I start to stand.

“I’ll take it” Jenny shouts startling me “Sorry, I accept your offer” Jenny says more calmly then looks at her husband “I’m sorry love it’s too good an opportunity to pass up”.

Frank beams lovingly at his wife “It’s okay and I agree” he whispers, he lifts her hand and kisses the back. Aww, it’s so beautiful to watch; I feel the back of my eyes prickle with tears, the tenderness is so touching.

“Finally, we can be rid of this dump” Jenny says looking around the tiny worn room with its thread bare carpet and outdated rickety furniture.

“I take it this is rented?” both nod “Okay, well I suggest you serve notice. If your quarters are not ready by the time you must leave you can stay in one of the cottages. In fact, you can stay in one now if you wish” I scroll through my contacts finding the number I need and hit the call button “Hi Elliot, I have a job for you. I have a housekeeper and her partner who’ll be living in, they’ll take rooms in the west wing. They’ll need everything, here’s Jenny and you can arrange to meet up and discuss” I hand my phone to an astonished Jenny “Elliot’s the interior designer, let him know what you like and he’ll sort everything out including the furniture and any appliances” as Jenny starts talking to Elliot, I turn to Frank “Tomorrow take Jenny around the house and choose which floor in the west wing you want. Speak to Keith Hart, he’s the project manager, he’ll let you know which rooms are available”

“Thank you so much Ms Darcy” Frank says with heartfelt gratitude.

“Elliot is coming over tomorrow afternoon” Jenny says handing me my phone back.

“Excellent. Frank will take you to the house tomorrow, so you can view your accommodation space. Actually, go when Elliot is here, then you can discuss decorating and whatnot. Word of warning, don’t let Elliot railroad you, he’s good but he can get carried away which is okay, but you have to live in it when he’s done”

“I’ll bear that in mind” Jenny says with a laugh “and thank you so much”.

“Welcome to the team” I hold out my hand, Jenny surprises me by pulling me into a hug.

Paul and I make our way to the front door “We’re going to be leaving early morning, so I’ll post all three sets of keys to the cottages through your door and you can decide which one you want to stay in, they’re all fully furnished by the way”

“Can I tell people I’m going to work for you?” says Jenny tentatively.

“Of course, it’s up to you what you choose to tell people” I say opening the door and step outside to see sun rays pierce the dark rain clouds, giving them a silver lining. I take it as a good omen, it makes me smile “I’ll have Freya call you later and she’ll take all your details. Let her know what your last working day will be for your other jobs, and she’ll set you up on the pay roll”

“Will do” Jenny says with a huge grin and sparkling hazel eyes. Frank tenderly caresses his wife’s shoulders.

“If you have any questions or want clarification on anything, email Freya and she’ll sort out whatever needs doing. I’ll say goodbye, so you can get your dinner”.

“I don’t think I can eat now I’m so excited” Jenny says waving bye. I laugh.

“I’ll see you in a few weeks” I call and wave back.

“Well, you’ve made two deserving people very happy” Paul says as he shuts the gate behind us.

Walking back towards the village green, we enjoy the early evening bustle of people eager to head home or to the pub for a quick drink and to get out of the cold autumn breeze that has picked up.

“You know in at the end of this month when the clocks go back it’ll be dark at this time of day. As a child, I loved coming home to a big roaring fire and a cup of hot chocolate” I sigh wistfully reminiscing “Shame really, the fire was in the kitchen, and it was the cook who gave me the drink” I grin mischievously.

A bark of laughter escapes Paul. “You had me there. You’re terrible” he says playfully thumping my shoulder.

“It’s true! Honest” I stagger forward, giggling.

As we near the pub the aroma of food wafts on the early evening breeze. My stomach grumbles loudly. Paul raises an eyebrow at me which I ignore.

“Let’s call Alan and Freya, tell them to meet us in the pub for dinner”.

“Yes ma’am, since someone probably hasn’t eaten since breakfast” Paul says caustically as he speed dials Alan. I stick my tongue out at him in retaliation.

Whilst we wait for Freya and Alan to turn up, Chris and Michelle fill me in on the local gossip which mainly consists of what the Hall looks like along with speculation of how long I’m staying. When Freya and Alan arrive, I notice how flushed Freya is looking and it has nothing to do with the cold wind outside. I also clock Alan’s innocent yet discrete intimate touches. I’m happy for the two of them. It took them bloody long enough to get it together. I saw they were attracted to each other right from the very beginning of Freya joining the team, but neither of them did. I knew instantly when their relationship finally became something more, it happened at the start of the second week when we were on Mr C’s yacht in Monaco during the summer. It tickled me they thought they were being discrete in front of me, yet I could read the huge neon flashing sign pointing right at them that screamed ‘We’re a couple and so in love’, bless them. I didn’t want to embarrass them by letting on I knew. I’ll let them tell me in their own time.

While we eat, I fill Freya in on Jenny Appleton’s appointment as housekeeper, her salary package and the Appleton’s moving into one of the cottages whilst their accommodation at the Hall is being done.

“Oh! She’ll need a credit card. I forgot to tell her about that” I say wiping my mouth on the napkin “Jenny also needs to let you know what kind of car she wants” I frown “Did we get Frank a new car?” Freya shakes her head “Huh! I thought we did. Get a new one for Frank as well, although he may need a truck or a van... tell you what get both”.

“Thought I might find you in here” a lady’s posh cultured voice has me glancing up to see Lady Farringdon.

“Joyce!” I smile warmly “Come and grab a seat” I hitch up on the bench to make room for her.

“I tried the cottages, and I could see the car in the drive, so I knew you wouldn’t be far” says Joyce sitting down “I’ve had a visit and I wanted to make sure he wasn’t winding me up, sending me on a wild goose chase” Joyce mutters under her breath.

“Nope, it’s all true” I grin widely, indicating for the others to get closer I whisper “When we get back, we’ll be holding a charity

ball at the Hall to raise funds for the restoration of the church. I asked Donald, the vicar, to speak to Joyce about putting together a list of potential local big money guests. You know, they're rich and generous with it and live locally. I'll be bringing in some big spenders as well" I say to Joyce.

"Donald mentioned getting together when you're back to discuss a date and organising it then" says Joyce.

"Yes, I told him to keep quiet until we'd agreed a date".

"Oh, that's going to kill him!" Joyce chuckles "Just as much as keeping your identity secret".

"I didn't tell him he had to do that" I say surprised.

"Oh, he will, since I let him know who else knows and has kept quiet, besides it'll do the man good to practise what he preaches for once" Joyce says caustically, then winks mischievously making us all laugh.

"I have a suggestion" says Freya, she blushes slightly when all the attention is on her "About the ball, how about you make it a masquerade ball?"

"Ooh I like that" I say excited, Joyce nods her agreement "and we can hold an auction of some really cool prizes".

"Yes! I could arrange some crates of wine and champagne, a luxury health spa pamper weekend break, dinner at an ultra-posh trendy restaurant" Joyce reels off enthusiastically "I know just the people to tap for those".

"I can organise some big prizes like an Italian villa for a fortnight or a week in New York staying in a penthouse or spending a week on a super yacht in the French Riviera" my mind whirls as I think of my friends who I can tap "Oh! Oh! I know what else will be fun we can also do a man auction" I say clapping my hands, I'm getting giddy.

"A man auction" Joyce and Freya say in puzzled unison as Paul and Alan laugh.

"These two know what I'm on about" I grin wickedly pointing at them "A few years ago, I went to this charity gala where they had ten women, who put themselves up voluntarily I must add, anyway they auctioned off the first dance. So instead of women we have men and it's the women who get to bid for the fella they want to dance with".

"I like that, I like that a lot" says Joyce clasping her hands together "But who would we ask?"

“These two can do it for starters” I say, wiping the smiles off Paul and Alan’s faces “and don’t give me crap about doing security, you’ve both got the night off someone else can be in charge. Caleb Raven and Rex Davies, and anyone else who’s good looking” I add quickly, ignoring the image flashing through my mind of me bidding to win Caleb.

“Definitely those two and your two” Joyce grins at the boys “We’ll have to ask our minor local celebrity Miles Cunningham, he’ll only sulk if he’s left out. Leave it to me and I’ll come up with some more names”.

“When it comes to it, let’s not tell them what it is they’re doing. Joyce, tell them you need them to help out with the auction and leave it at that” I giggle.

“I love it when a devious plan comes together” Joyce chuckles “and not a word you two” she points at Paul and Alan who hold their hands up in mock surrender.

