

TANGLED

Chapter Sixteen

JOSH

I lit another cigarette. I was down to my last few because I had been chain smoking since we got to the strip club. Didn't matter which girl was in front of me. Didn't matter if she was stripping or dancing naked.

My head was somewhere else. Somewhere it shouldn't be. I ran a hand through my hair, the frustration getting the best of me. I was frustrated with myself. I never had this... feeling? I didn't even know what to fucking call it.

Why couldn't I get lost in the naked girls like everyone else? All the boys seemed to be enjoying it, throwing money and getting lap dances. And what was I doing? Fucking feeling like this. Most of the guys paid the strippers to lie to them, most of the guys were willing to pay them for an easy lay.

When we weren't at the club, we were here. And I had never felt more disconnected. I glanced down my phone. Her number was up and it was taking all my will power not to message her.

The normal questions ran through my mind:

Was she ok?

What was she doing?

Is she asleep? She should be. But it was a Saturday night. She could be out.

Who was she out with?

Did I have a right to ask for that?

Questions like these continued to flood my mind. Soph was literally stuck in my head. Ever since Monday I hadn't been able to think of anything else but her. Wasn't like her and I had a special moment. Wasn't like we fell in love or anything. When I really thought about it, hell, she literally got stuck in my head as soon as I saw her again in that bathroom after all those years.

But since Monday she had withdrawn completely. She wasn't home. She never was. And by Bax's attitude, I knew she wasn't spending time with him. He was in the worst mood. I looked up to see him glaring down at his phone.

I don't know what happened between Soph and him, but whatever had happened caused him to be more of a dick. He was here even though he wasn't meant to be seen with us. It was like he didn't give a fuck anymore whether he got locked up or not.

All week I had been busy with the club. All week my mind was meant to be focused on our business. Instead every spare second I had my mind was drifting to Soph. And that look in her eyes as she stood half naked in front of me.

That look... it had me. Couldn't explain why she would be looking at me like that. Couldn't understand what the look meant. It was as if she felt safe. I had never seen a girl look at me like that.

And it was doing my head.

Cold stares, jealous glares, and a pleading look of need or lust—I knew those looks and dealt with them regularly around the club from girls.

But the look Soph gave me was... I couldn't fucking explain it. It was driving me insane.

I butted the cigarette out and immediately lit another.

My phone was still in my hand, and I was thinking of one reason, one good reason, to message her after one in the morning. I didn't want to wake her up. But something was telling me she wasn't asleep.

I looked up at Bax who had just threw his phone on the table and grabbed another beer. He was drinking heavily tonight. He was throwing down a lot of cash as well but wasn't one bit interested in the girls.

This was the only time ever that Bax and I had something in common. We both had our minds on something else. I didn't know who was controlling his thoughts. But mine were on a tiny blonde with the most dazzling hazel eyes and red lips. Her skin was so soft. The type of soft one never believes is real. And while she was small, I had never seen a more perfect body. And her laugh that just made you smile... Even thinking about it had my lips twitching up. When it came to Soph, she brought out another side to me. A side I didn't know. And the feelings I felt for her were a fucking mystery to me.

I unlocked my phone.

Her number was already on my screen. And I couldn't think of one excuse why to message her.

Was it normal to message after one in the morning asking if she was ok?

Nah I couldn't do that.

I started to shake my knee up and down, thinking. Come on... one reason that was all I needed.

The guys got louder as the group of girls increased and it started to piss me off. I didn't give a fuck about those naked girls.

Maybe I could just head home and hope she was there?

Yeah, that was an idea. An accidental run-in.

But what if she wasn't home and was out at a party? I'd just spend the night hoping she would come home and then when she didn't I wouldn't be able to stop my mind running with all the possibilities.

I decided I was messaging her.

I unlocked my phone again.

I'd just keep it simple.

R u up? I sent it. Bloody hell, it was just a message. But my brain went into overdrive. What if she was serious when she said she

was done with males and had cut me off already? What if she moved on from Bax and she was way too busy with the next guy to check her phone.

My mind went wild with ideas as it tended to when Soph was involved. It was like she injected my brain with drugs which causes it to race and over think every little detail.

My phone buzzed in my hand and I looked down. She actually wrote back, which meant she was up. I just stared at her name on my screen for a few more seconds before I unlocked it and opened the message.

Just got home. U?

So she had been out. I stared at the screen a little longer. Well, if she was home that was a solid reason to head there. Then again, she could be heading back out. I sighed. I didn't know what she was up to this week. She could have ditched Bax and moved on to a new guy who she was going to head to now.

I guess I had one question, so I started to type it.

U staying home?

I stared at the screen, seeing she had read it. I knew for a fact Kyle had taken Kayla to the coast for the weekend, and Mum and Dad were out of town.

That meant if I head home right now, it would just be me and Soph.

The speech bubble appeared at the bottom of the screen. She was

writing back to me.

“Hey, Josh, you want another round?” Aaz barked at me, causing me to look up.

“What?”

“Another round? Do you want on?” He looked at me like I was stupid.

The fact I had hadn't been paying attention had managed to get everyone else's. Even Wolf was giving me an odd look.

I glanced down at my phone.

Yep.

That was all I needed to know. I stood up. “Nah, I'm heading home. But I'll pay.” I pulled out my wallet and threw down a bunch of fifties. I looked at Wolf and he gave me a head nod, which meant he wasn't questioning me as to why I was bailing on their Saturday night.

I walked out of the darkly lit strip club. I had to go back to the club, change the bike to the car, and take off my vest and leave it in the dorm room.

I knew one day I wouldn't be able to hide how I spent my time, or who I really was. The word was starting to get around now. But that didn't mean I was about to tell Soph tonight.

The house was dark when I pulled up to it. I locked my car and walked up the porch steps, the security light coming on. I twisted

the doorknob. At least it was locked. I unlocked it and entered the foyer was dark.

I was about to go up the stairs but stopped when I heard a noise, which sounded like it came from the kitchen.

I walked through the lounge and saw the lights on in the kitchen, and I heard her curse as I walked in.

“What are you doing?”

She jumped as she spun around, dropping whatever she was holding.

There was white powder across her cheek.

“Are you doing drugs or something?” I asked as I walked towards her, feeling the most relaxed I had felt all week. Just being in her company relaxed me and I didn’t know why.

She stepped out of the way of whatever she was trying to hide from me. I frowned, seeing the large tub.

“The school nurse reported my weight to the counsellor. Apparently I’m too thin.” She crossed her arms and shot a glare at the large tub of protein powder. “Honestly, they are making it out like I’m a second away from being anorexic.”

I looked at her. She was wearing a long black singlet that showed off her figure. She was thin, but she hadn’t entered unhealthy yet. I think she was only a couple of kilograms away from it. They clearly had noticed this as well.

I asked her if she had been eating on Monday. She hadn't given me an answer then.

“So you are doing protein powder?”

She sighed and picked up the scoop from the floor. “Well, I got told if I exercise I have to have a protein drink. I ran for nearly two hours, so I'm just doing what I am told.”

My head snapped at her. “You ran for two hours!”

She shrugged. “I can run for nearly three. I'm getting fitter.”

She couldn't be serious right now. “Soph running for two hours isn't fucking healthy.”

She rolled her eyes. “I like how I feel after a run.”

Suddenly it wasn't just her eating patterns that were setting off warnings. She was exercising aggressively like she was punishing her body.

“What have you eaten today?” I crossed my arms, standing in front of her. I saw her squirm.

“Um, stuff.”

“Start naming what you've eaten, Sophia.”

She groaned. “Please don't call me that! And why must you be on my back too! Everyone else is already on my back about it. God, I'm not that thin!”

I gripped her shoulder and gently pushed her around to face me.
“What have you eaten today?”

She sighed and looked up at me. “I can’t remember.”

“Well start trying. Breakfast, what did you eat?”

“Didn’t.”

“Lunch?”

She frowned and then looked like she remembered. “An apple. It was a green one, they’re my favorite.”

Just don’t snap at her. She clearly didn’t see what was happening. “Ok, what about dinner?”

“Skipped it cause I went for a run.” She shrugged.

“So all you’ve fucking eaten all day is an apple!” I gritted out, trying to keep my anger in check. She couldn’t be serious, standing in front of me saying she didn’t have a problem when all she has eaten was an apple!

“Well, and this shake I’m making.” She looked up at me, frowning. “It’s not a big deal. Some days I have less.”

“Less than an apple!”

“Calm down, Josh.” She rolled her eyes and turned around, picking up the lid to the protein powder and twisting it on. “God, you are acting like I’ve just told you a horror story.”

“What are you doing?”

I watched her pack up. “I’m going to bed.”

“No you aren’t!” I snapped. I would admit that came out rude and controlling. I assumed she had taken it that by the way she turned around and looked up at me. Yep. It had come across exactly the way I had said.

Well, she needed a rude awakening.

“We are ordering takeaway and you aren’t going to sleep until I’ve filled you up with carbs.” I pulled my phone out.

“No! Not happening! I am not stuffing my face!” She reached for my phone but I held it above her head. She didn’t have a chance of getting it off me.

“It’s not stuffing your face. It’s called eating.”

“I don’t eat junk food.”

I rolled my eyes. “The old Soph did.”

Her hazel eyes sliced through my eyes. “Well, the new Soph doesn’t eat shit. I admit I’m not eating much. But it’s not like I go weeks without eating—maybe a day or two and then my body will remind me I haven’t eaten.”

My expression dropped. “You go days without eating?”

She exhaled slowly and then nodded her head. “It’s not a big deal.”

What the fuck had happened to her? What the hell sort of damage had Kyle done? How can she stand here in front of me and say she doesn't eat for days but everything is fine? It wasn't a big deal?

I knew she was struggling with the breakup, but clearly I didn't realize how much. She was putting on a good show to everyone. And fuck, I fell for it.

But she wasn't ok. She sure as fuck wasn't coping. She was punishing herself. And the sad part was she didn't even see it.

"Well, if you don't want junk. What do you want?" I was going to be reasonable. If she hadn't been eating and had been avoiding all junk food, that meant her stomach couldn't take the greasy food I had planned for.

"It's ok, Josh. I can just go to bed. Start fresh tomorrow." She gave me a small smile, like the last thing she wanted was to bother me.

Didn't she see by now that she wasn't a bother. Wasn't like she was forcing me to care; I just did. I realized that in that moment I cared. I cared if she ate or not. I cared if she was abusing her body.

As a friend.

This was what a friendship was like, right?

"Name it and I'll get it for you." I took a step closer to her, blocking her between the kitchen island and me. "Anything, Soph, what do you want?"

She bit her bottom lip. “You’ll think it’s stupid.”

“Try me.” Whatever she wanted she was getting. And then, as of tomorrow, I was going to make sure she ate breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

“I feel like Nutella on toast.” Her lips twitched up.

Getting something overly sweet into her sounded like a good idea.

“Let’s go.”

“What, where?” She frowned and I took her hand. God, she was cold.

“You cold?” I asked.

“Um, yeah. It’s another thing I do these days. I don’t dress appropriately for the weather.”

“You don’t have the heating on either.” I shook my head. “Why?”

“Because I didn’t see a point in running up your parent’s electricity bill when I’m the only one home.”

It was one of her best qualities the way she cared for other people. But it was also one of her biggest weaknesses. I let go of her hand and took my hoodie off.

“Josh, you don’t have to give me your jumper. I can go up and get something from my room.” She looked at the jumper I was

handing her.

For some reason, I didn't know why, something inside me wanted her to take it. As if her wearing my hoodie meant something more than just her wearing it to keep warm.

“Arms up,” I said when she still was hesitating on wearing it.

She sighed and then put her arms up. Pleasure that she was doing what I wanted flooded my body. I shouldn't have been so pleased with her, just for doing something I asked, but I was. Still, I wasn't sure if that was out of friendship or not.

It swallowed her, dropping down below her knees.

She pulled her hair out and smiled at me. “It smells like you.” She pushed up the sleeves.

“Good or bad thing?”

Her smile got wider, and I wasn't sure if it was one of her real smiles or not.

“Great thing,” she said. I wasn't expecting that. And she then did something else I wasn't expecting—she slipped her hand in mine.

I was always the one to touch her. She never touched me. Her eyes ran up me until they locked with mine. She looked like she wasn't sure if she had crossed a line or not.

I couldn't stop the smile and it was automatic to link our hands. I

heard her exhale slowly, like she had been holding on to her breath, while she waited for my decision on whether she had crossed a line or not.

When it came to Soph, there wasn't any boundaries or rules she could break. Well, not when it came to me anyway. My normal rules when it came to women didn't apply to her. I glanced behind me as she followed through the house, looking at the ground.

Maybe my normal rules didn't apply to her because she was a friend?

Was that the reason? Something in my gut told me there was another reason. I was either too stupid to see it, or I was right about the friendship thing

“So what were you doing before you took pity on me and came home?” Soph asked, munching on her toast.

She was eating. Thank fuck for that. Now I was just going to make sure she kept doing it. She was used to her pattern of not eating for days and exercising intensely. I was going to have to break that habit. How do you go about making someone eat? I couldn't force the food down her throat. She wouldn't eat anything loaded in carbs, which told me she was watching what she ate.

“Earth to Josh.” She clicked her fingers in my face.

Right, she asked a question. “What did you ask?”

She rolled her eyes and swallowed her toast before answering. “You really aren't listening to me are you? You know you can go to

bed. It is late.”

“Nah. My mind was just somewhere else. What did you ask?” I turned on the bar stool to face her.

“What were you doing before you came here after taking pity on me?” She turned on her bar stool to face me too, forgetting about her food.

“You keep eating and I’ll tell you.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’ve eaten half a piece!”

“And I want you to have both pieces.” I nodded towards the food. “Keep eating.”

She sighed and picked up a piece of toast. “You are forcing me to eat.”

Yes I was.

She took a bite. “Ok, tell me what you were doing.” She turned back to face me, her toast in hand.

What could I say? I couldn’t really tell her what I was doing. I hated lying to her, but I didn’t see another option.

“At a friends,” I lied, and I hoped she didn’t press me on it.

She arched her eyebrows and slowly chewed a piece of toast, and I knew by her expression I was in trouble.

“So we lie to each other now?” she said, looking at me

unimpressed. She also did something I didn't want her doing, and that was stop eating.

I sighed. "I was with my friends."

She looked at me a bit harder. "Uhuh. You are leaving parts out..." She chewed her bottom lip and glanced down at her toast, then looked me back in the eye. "But that's ok. You don't have to tell me everything."

That had me wanting to groan. I did want to be honest with her. I did want to tell her where I was and who I was with. But I couldn't, and it was for her own good.

"What did you do tonight?" I tried to change the subject. I guess I shouldn't expect her to be honest with me when I couldn't be honest with her.

I think that thought ran through her head too as she looked at me. Yeah, she was weighing up if she was going to tell me or not.

"I was..." She sighed and put her toast down. "You wouldn't believe me."

No. She wouldn't believe me if I told her what I had been doing tonight. I doubt anything she could have done would surprise me. "Try me. And keep eating."

She groaned and then took the tiniest bite she could take and swallowed sharply. "Promise you won't judge?"

Hell, I should be saying that to her. "You know I won't." That was the truth. I would never judge anything she did. But I would help

encourage her to make better decisions.

“I was stripping.”

“You were fucking what!”

“I told you, you wouldn’t believe me.” She took another bite of the toast, not seeming one bit fussed by my reaction.

I couldn’t form words. I couldn’t wrap my head around what she just said. “You were like... stripping at a club or something?” The words just fell out. I couldn’t, no, I wouldn’t believe that she was doing that. She was too far above that. Surely she had more respect for herself?

No man deserved to be able to see her naked. It should be a sin. In fact, I’m sure it is. It was sinful to take in her perfect body, her well-shaped breasts, and the way her body had this perfect curve.

“Wasn’t like it was in front of men.” She decided to now only add that detail. “God, wipe that look off your face!” She pushed my shoulder.

“So it wasn’t at a club? You aren’t becoming a stripper or anything?” I think I was still panicking.

She shrugged. “Well, I don’t know.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it is for a job bartending and dancing. But it’s not like I’ll be stripping.”

“You aren’t fucking doing it.” Nope. Never. Ever. Happening.

“Why?”

I scoffed. She wanted to know why I wouldn’t let her dance and strip and fall into that side of life. “Because I said so,” I replied firmly. “You aren’t doing it. If you need money, I’ll help you.”

“I don’t need money! God, I have like three credit cards and a bank account in the thousands.”

“Well, if you aren’t doing it for the money? Why do it?”

She looked down at her feet and then slowly lifted her head. “You ever wanted to do something risky to see if you can do it?”

Yes. But I was a hopeless case. I was a wipe off. No one was expecting anything of me or my life. She wasn’t a wipe off. Her life was just beginning. Her life wasn’t being framed by bad decisions in her past like mine was.

I knew what she was talking about. But I couldn’t let her do what she wanted to do just to get some life experience that could cost her the perfect life she deserved.

“Soph, you are better than all that. You don’t need to know if you can face that type of life when it isn’t where your life is heading.” I tried to speak clearly to her. “Hell, you’re heading to early acceptance to a university of your choice and you can have any man you want. Why throw that away for some cash you don’t need in a job that is degrading?”

She looked at me torn, like there was something she was keeping

to herself. I didn't think, fuck, maybe I should have, but I found myself pushing up my jumper so my hand was on her bare knee.

“You not sure what you want to study?” I took a stab in the dark.

She looked down at my hand and chewed her bottom lip again, and again. I found myself just acting and not thinking, and I pried the lip from her grasp with my fingers.

“What's up, Soph?” I asked gently and leaned in closer to her. My hand was still close to her face. I didn't stop myself as I tucked her hair behind her ear. “Come on, it can't be that bad?”

She looked me in the eye and I saw something she normally kept hidden: emptiness.

“Dad and Mum are forcing me into the medical field. It's been expected since I was ten. It's what I've worked towards. The offers are rolling in and I've stopped answering my phone and stopped opening the letters.” She swallowed sharply, and again emptiness was in her eyes.

“What changed? Is it Kyle? Has he made you stop wanting your career?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Maybe it is part his fault, but it's mainly mine. I realized something and realizing that made me see...”

“See what?”

She shook her head. “You wouldn't understand.”

She kept saying that. “Come on, Soph, just tell me. I can help.” I didn’t know how I was going to; I wasn’t smart like her. I’d never had a heart to heart with someone. Or helped someone make a decision.

Fuck, no one came to me for advice, unless you include my club brothers. And I didn’t see helping out a brother the same as helping Soph out.

Her eyes glanced down and then back up. “No one can help me.”

Why would she think that? “Well, at least tell me what you realized?” I was going to work away around her closed answers. Get her to open up.

She stopped looking me in the eye and fiddled with the sleeve of my hoodie. She finally sighed. “Being a doctor means you care for others. It also means you feel for others.” She was looking me in the eye, but I had never seen her so distant. “I can’t look after myself and... I don’t feel anything anymore.” She dropped her toast on the plate. “How can I go into a field where I don’t have two of the essential skills?”

Kyle. It was all Kyle’s fucking fault. I had never wanted to hurt my brother more. How stupid was he? How could he do this to the most perfect woman? How could he not see what I saw? And if he did see what I saw, how the hell did he let her go?

He hadn’t just broken her heart; he had destroyed who she was. I was seeing that now. She had been hiding it well, but I was starting to see what Soph was hiding from everyone. My Soph—the Soph I knew for years—was loving, carefree, happy and cared for everyone. And now, well, she was sitting here saying she

couldn't even look after herself. Hell! She was saying she didn't feel anything for anyone anymore.

The girl that would go out of her way to help others! I found myself unable to say anything. I couldn't accept the fact that my Soph was saying something like that. That the girl I knew was gone completely.

"Yeah, see, there isn't much to say to that, is there?" she said dimly, sounding like a broken woman. Her eyes were glued to her lap. "Thanks for dinner, Josh. I'll, um..." She looked up and again what I saw I hated seeing in her eyes. She finally gave me a fake smile, like everything was ok and her world wasn't falling away. "Night, Josh." She pushed away from me.

I stood up and stopped her. "You aren't heartless, Soph. You're just going through a hard time." That was it, right? She would snap out of this... cause I didn't want to believe that Kyle had destroyed her completely. I didn't know much about feelings, or what happens when you break up with someone. So I didn't know what she was going through. But I was hoping, for her sake, that her old self would come back. It had to. The Soph I knew couldn't just be... gone.

She was looking down at our feet. "It doesn't matter anymore. I am who I am. The one good thing about it is I didn't feel heartbroken when I told Bax to stay away from me."

I frowned. "You told him to leave you alone?" Was there a chance her brain was still working though her world was falling apart?

Her hazel eyes looked up and that dim, barely even considered to be a smile was on her face. "Yeah. At least for a week."

I thought it was too good to be true. She hadn't wiped him out of her life altogether. He didn't deserve a second of her time. "You can do better than him." I didn't stop myself when I reached out for her, grabbing her hips and pulling her towards me. "You know that, right?"

I just had to touch her. It was like... if I touched her, she would feel something and come back, not be so cold or distant. I wanted her to feel again. I wanted her to laugh again and the thing I wanted the most, the very most, was for her to be herself again.

Her hazel eyes were still looking in mine, and while I knew she heard what I said, she was keeping her answer to herself.

"Soph, did you hear me? You can do better than Bax." My hands spread on her hips. "You deserve better, you know that right?"

She shook her head. "I don't deserve better, Josh. That's where you are wrong."

She couldn't be serious. "You deserve a relationship. Not one-night stands."

"But that's all I want. I made it very clear to Bax that that was all I was capable of. I don't do love. I don't do feelings. I don't do relationships. He knew all that, and what does he do? He wants more." She clenched her fists at her side. "I thought every guy wanted a girl to sleep with whenever and have her happy, hell, even supportive of him seeing other girls."

She was right, most guys would love that. It would be their dream come true. What Soph wasn't factoring in was... well, her.

When you got a taste of Soph, you didn't want anyone else but her. Bax wanted to lay claim on her before anyone else did. Because he knew, like I knew, she could do better than him.

She would have billionaires begging for her attention. Men that wanted for nothing their whole life, even they would want her. And wouldn't give up until she was theirs. But it didn't matter what you promised her, what you could give her, she wasn't interested because in her head she wasn't worth a second thought. In her head she wasn't worth anything.

Someone had to make her realize she was worthy. Someone had to make her feel again. Someone had to get her to risk her heart again.

But I knew I wasn't capable of helping her with any of those things. Just wasn't in me. I wasn't that type of person. I was the type of person to use my fists instead of my words.

But I could still try and be her friend.

Her phone buzzed on the kitchen island and she was more interested in staring up at me than getting it.

For some reason, my grip on her tightened. I didn't want her leaving.

When the phone stopped ringing, it started again right away. She sighed and looked at it. A small groan left her lips.

"What's wrong?" I asked, and she unclenched her fist and picked it up.

“I told him earlier to leave me alone.” She looked down at the phone. “Again he just ignores what I want.”

Bax. It had to be him. “You going to answer?” I knew what Bax wanted. He wanted her. Not just for sex. But he actually wanted her as his. It only took him a few weeks of being with her for him to see what I saw. She was priceless and deserved a life better than what he or I could give her. But him being the selfish bastard he is, he was going to claim her regardless of whether she deserved better or not.

“He will be drunk and just want sex and I’m not interested after the stunt he pulled.” She blocked his call and then turned her phone off. “He can speak to my voicemail.”

I smiled. I was proud of her. She might not think she deserved better, but all hope wasn’t lost.

“You going to sleep?” she asked, and her hands ran down my arms as my hands still clung to her hips.

“Aren’t you?” I pulled her in closer. Friends touched, right? cause I had to touch her. Couldn’t explain... It was like a need—a desperate need to touch her. I’d never felt like this for a woman before. Never wanted to touch a woman as badly as I wanted to touch her.

It was even the small touches I wanted. Like when we were in the supermarket I had to have my hand on her lower back as she decided on whether she wanted whole meal or white bread. Then when her hands didn’t have something in them, I had to have one hand locked on hers.

She didn't seem to mind either. She didn't pull away. She didn't even flinch when I wrapped an arm around her and pulled to my side. She didn't care either when we were at the cash register and I wrapped both arms around her waist like she was mine and pulled her back to my chest.

Anyone could make the mistake thinking we were together. But we weren't. We were just friends. Friends did that type of crap.

"What are you thinking right now?" She ran two fingers down my jaw, looking puzzled up at me.

I wasn't telling her what I was thinking. If I did, she would think I was mad. Having an obsession with touching her—she would think the worst.

"Nothing. You going to bed or not?"

She grinned, and I think it was a real one. "Nope." She shook her head. "I'm watching reruns of The Young Ones. They are on the BBC from two am to 4 four am."

I groaned. "The music in that show is terrible, Soph. How can you still be obsessed with it?"

"But the comedy is priceless." She suddenly seemed hesitant. "Um, are you interested in joining me?"

She was asking me to join her? I could tell by the she stopped running her finger down my jaw and looked like she was holding her breath that she was nervous.

"Your room or mine?" I smiled at her.

She inhaled sharply. “Mine because my electric blanket is on.” She started to back away, her hands gripping my arms and gently getting me to follow.

She didn’t have to convince me to follow. I let go of her and then I spun her around, wrapping my arms around her waist.

“You still cold?” I asked, walking behind her. God, she was tiny.

“Not as cold as I was. Not with your hoodie.” She pulled her hands into the sleeves as we walked up the stairs.

We came to a stop at her door and she twisted the doorknob. Then she stepped out of my arms, her arm searching for the light switch.

Chapter Seventeen

JOSH

The light came on.

Her hand went out for me, and I grabbed it just as she balanced on one foot to take her heel off. She sighed with relief as she removed the other.

“God, you have no idea how amazing that feels.” She kept holding my hand. “Now I just need to get out this lingerie.”

My expression dropped, and she let go of my hand and took my hoodie off.

“What did you say?” I asked, not believing she had just said what I thought had escaped her lips.

She tilted her head. “I’ve got to take the lingerie off. It was for the job interview. You know, you have to dress up to strip.”

Yep. She had said what I thought she said. God. Please. Don’t be cruel. Don’t let her do it front of me. I was silently begging a higher spirit above me to not torture me.

She was reading my expression, and if she could even pick up on a tiny bit of panic I was feeling about her stripping in front of me, she should know not to do it. Cause I wouldn’t be able to control myself. The need would overcome me. The need to explore her body- naked and in front of me- fuck it would kill me not to act on those feelings- and I’m a man of control.

A cheeky grin and she took a step closer to me. “Do you want to undress me Josh?” Her voice went up with a hint of teasing.

Why the fuck would she say that. I swallowed sharply. Just don’t let her see how badly I want to do it. Cause yes, I did want to undress her. But then I also wanted to explore her naked skin. She linked her hand with mine and pulled me into the room, moving me back to until I was against the bed. When my legs hit the edge of the bed she gave me a firm push, landing me on my ass.

She stepped in between my legs with the most alluring look on her face. If I wasn’t already stiff, that look would have done it alone.

She had me ridged, scared to fucking move a muscle. Not

trusting myself near her.

She gripped the hem of my hoodie and pulled it off. Then she dropped it beside me. She hadn't just abandoned it. She placed it down, like it was special to her.

Then I swallowed sharply as her hand went to the strap of her long singlet. "You know what the girls said that I stripped in front of?" Her voice was low, alluring, and so fucking sweet. It would send a diabetic into a sugar coma.

She pushed the other strap off her shoulder, threading her arms out.

Please don't do it. I prayed as her hands went to her breasts and she slowly pulled the fabric down.

She dropped her mouth to my ear. "Still no idea on what they said, Josh?" I could hear the smirk in her voice.

She was getting pleasure out of this.

"No," I forced out, as she picked up my hands. She placed them on the fabric of her top, on the sides of her breasts. Not on her breasts, but so fucking close—my thumbs nearly touching them.

Slowly she pushed my hands down, causing the fabric to go down with them.

I hissed in sharply, seeing her low-cut black bra, the top of her breasts spilling out. My eyes couldn't move off them. She kept moving my hands down, pulling the fabric down, showing more of her beautiful snow white skin.

She was going to kill me. Tempting and waving a drug in front of me. That drug being her body.

The singlet got to her hips and she took her hands off mine, and my hands stilled on her hips.

She leaned in towards me, linking her arms around my neck. “You doing to finish the job, Josh?”

I was breathing in sharply and out even sharper, trying my best to keep my shit together.

“Come on, Josh, I’ve done most of the work.” Her words were like velvet to my ears.

Don’t do it. Don’t fucking do it. I kept repeating over and over in my head, telling myself to take my hands off her. But what do I do instead? Instead of fucking listening to myself...

My hands started to push the fabric down. I don’t think I could believe my luck. If you had told me hours ago I would be stripping her, I wouldn’t have believed it. I wouldn’t believe that I, Josh Hawkins, would get to see Soph in her underwear again.

I moved the singlet down her thigh and I took a staggered breath in when my fingers brushed over the straps connecting to her stockings. Why? Why was she doing this to me?

I looked up at her and her eyes were on me. She looked so calm. My hands kept pushing down the singlet until it fell down on its own.

She dipped her head, her eyes locked with mine. She unlocked her hands from around my neck. My hands were back on her, gripping the back of her thighs and pushing her closer to me in between my legs. My hands ran up her thighs over her ass, and paused on her lower back.

She didn't stop me. She didn't even push me away. She pushed her hair to the side and then cupped my face. I knew it was going to happen. It had to happen. The kiss was coming. And once her lips touched mine, I wouldn't be stopping with a kiss.

It wasn't in me.

I would set myself a challenge as soon as she kissed me. That challenge being having her grasping and moaning, clenching. Fuck, yes. She would be regret ever teasing me.

Her mouth went to my ear again, and I wanted to groan because I wanted her lips on mine.

“They said I wore black well. What do you think?” She put her hands on my shoulders and smiled at me. “No words?”

She was a bloody minx!

I inhaled sharply. Was her mission to kill me with temptation?

She stepped back and she laughed. “Clearly I've made you uncomfortable. Don't worry, Josh, I won't ask you to finish the job.” She leaned across me and picked up my hoodie, giving me a large grin. “How about you find the remote? I'll only be a sec.”

She walked off with my hoodie in hand. My eyes just followed

her, then being glued to her ass, seeing the lace shape it perfectly. She thought I was uncomfortable? Fuck, she had made me feel everything else but that.

She slightly closed the door to the wardrobe, but it wasn't enough. I knew I should look away, I knew it was the gentleman thing to do and it was the right thing to do, but my eyes were stuck on her.

I watched her unclip her tights and roll them down. I had never seen anything as sexy as that. Then her hands went behind her back. It was too late to look away. She took the bra off and I was reminded just how perfect her breasts were.

Even from here, I could admire the shape, the perkiness to them. And then my view was ruined when she pulled my hoodie over her body. I got up quickly and my eyes ran over her bed and bedside table, spotting the remote on the floor.

The last thing I wanted was for her to walk back in here and see me gawking at her.

“Did you find it?”

I straightened up from picking it up. “Yep.” I watched her as she went to the side of bed and threw the blankets back.

“Awesome.” She shot me a smile and got into the bed. “Oh my god, this bed is so warm.” She tucked her legs under and pulled the blankets up. Seems like she was sleeping in my hoodie. I suppressed my smile and pleasure of seeing that.

I threw the remote into the middle of the bed. “I don't know

which channel is which.”

“But everyone knows the free to air channels?” She picked the remote up.

“Yeah, and then they went digital while I was in prison.” I informed her and kicked my shoes off. I couldn’t take my top off in front of her. I wasn’t ready for that.

She was having a fling with Bax. But when she realized who I was and what I stood for, that wouldn’t be changing. Well, she wouldn’t want to be friends with that type of person. I knew her. I knew, when it came to Soph, she would stand on the side of the law. She might be flirting with danger at the moment, but she would come to her senses and she would ditch Bax.

Well, at least that was what I was hoping for. cause the other option was she ended up with Bax. And I wouldn’t let that happen. She deserved better. Better than what she could get from this town. I saw the envelopes from overseas on the kitchen island from colleges and universities all over the world. She was going to achieve great things. And I wouldn’t let Bax be the man to stop that.

“You going to get into bed, Josh?”

I looked up, seeing her eyes on me.

“I forgot about the channels doing that. Must be difficult adjusting to things out of prison.” She added, with a frown. “I guess a lot things have changed for you.”

That summed up my life. I nodded my head. I didn’t want her

pity or the awkwardness that came along when anyone talked about my prison sentence.

She leaned across and threw the blankets back for me.

Whenever someone mentioned my prison sentence the same question always followed: “Why?” Why did I go to prison? So far Soph hadn’t asked, but right now she had a perfect opportunity to.

Instead she looked up at me with a smile. “Your electric blanket isn’t on. I never sleep on the left.”

And that was Soph for you. She would surprise you. I was grateful she had changed the subject. I didn’t want to lie to her. And I didn’t know how to tell her the truth at the same time.

I hated bringing up why I went to prison. I was going to waste four years behind bars all because something in me made me do the right thing. And Christine didn’t even stick by me for a month after my sentence. Hell, she didn’t even waste a day.

Women for you.

But then I looked at Soph. The small smile on her face. The blushed cheeks. Her red lips. Her blonde hair pulled to the side. I didn’t see her as I saw every other woman.

I was thankful she had changed the subject. I gave her a smile. “Are you planning on wearing my hoodie to bed or something?” I asked as I climbed in.

“Yep.” She pushed the sleeves up. “Do you want to come to my side where it is warm?” She grinned, carefree.

I shook my head, at least she was covered. “You know you’ll get hot.” I got in the bed. And I knew she wasn’t wearing a top under it.

“Nope. I freeze in here every night.”

“Why don’t you put the central heating on?”

“Don’t know how.”

I rolled my eyes. “So you’ve just been freezing every night?” Why didn’t Mom and Dad show her how to put on the heating?

“I use the electric blanket.” She glanced at the television. “I love this episode.”

“You love every episode.” I didn’t know if I should move more into the middle of the bed, closer to her, or keep to my side.

“Rick is my favorite.”

“I remember.” Why she loved such an old show was beyond me.

“Kyle used to hate watching it with me too.” She sat up in the bed. “You can go if you want. I know how much Kyle hated it. Maybe it is a family trait.”

Her eyes were on the television, but I knew what she was really doing. She was giving me an excuse to leave. To leave her. Cause that’s what she was used to: men leaving her. My brother was the reason why she was expecting me to leave right now. Cause she didn’t think I’d want to suffer through this, just to be with her.

I got my answer on whether I should move closer or further away.

I slid into the middle of the bed. “Bloody hell, Soph, you are going to cook yourself.”

That had her taking her eyes off the television and looking at me. She leaned forward, sitting up. A small yawn escaping her lips. “So you are going to stay?”

“Yes and watch the hour and half of musical torture.” I put my arm behind her, but I wasn’t touching her. It was up to her whether she wanted me touching her or not. She could make the decision.

“It’s not all music. It has like one music feature. You are forgetting about all the comedy.” Her eyes kept locked with mine. And she didn’t lean back into my arm, or lay in to my side.

I wanted her to, but I wasn’t going to make her. She tucked her hair behind her ear.

“Did you know the actor Rik Mayall, who plays Rick, died three years ago?” She was still sitting up and she seemed nervous.

“Nah, baby girl, I had no idea,” I said gently. When Soph loved something, she knew even the small details about it. I was waiting for her to make a decision, to pull away from me, fall back into my arm, or move back to the edge of her bed.

“Does it bother you if I wear your hoodie? I don’t want it to be awkward. I get it if you don’t want me to. Kyle hated me wearing

anything mildly male.” Her voice was pulled back like she was expecting to be in trouble.

Was it wrong that I wanted her to be wearing something that was mine? It was probably unhealthy and a sign of something else- but I was seeing it as, she was the only woman I wanted to have something that belonged to me.

“Nope, doesn’t bother me.” And it was the truth. “You can have it if you want.”

She head flung to face me, her attention on the television gone. “You serious?”

I shrugged. “It’s not a big deal, Soph.” Was it? “It’s just a sweater,” I added, more for myself.

The smile on her face was tiny, but it was the first real smile I had seen. It wasn’t fake. I didn’t have to think about whether it was it real or not. I knew it was a real smile. Not a big one, but it was real, and it was directed fully at me.

I’d made her smile.

She didn’t say anything and slid down the bed and then curled into my side.

Automatically my arm wrapped around her, pulling her closer. Her head was on my chest and my hand was running up and down her side.

“If I fall asleep on you. I’m sorry.” Sophie yawned and cuddled in closer to me, hooking one of her legs over mine.

Last time we slept together I was in a world of pain, but tonight I wasn't. And I was going to enjoy every second of sleeping with her.

I kissed the top of her hair as her eyelids were grew heavier.

Chapter Eighteen

Soph

I slowly woke up, feeling relaxed and comfortable. So comfortable I didn't want to move or open my eyes. I just wanted to lay there all day. His hand was under the hoodie that I was wearing. I wouldn't lie and say I didn't love this hoodie. A guy had never given me something of theirs to wear before. I had worn Bax's t-shirt, but that was different; it was an emergency. Like, Kyle hated it if I wore his t-shirt or sweater. And then Josh goes gives his hoodie to me.

His fingers were running up and down my side, and he was slowly putting me back to sleep.

"You know that is amazing." I sighed into the pillow. My body knew it was time to wake up, but Josh was putting me back to sleep. I felt him kiss the back of my head.

I pushed back into him. I hope he didn't mind me sleeping on his arm. I had slept on it all night.

"Is your arm dead? I'm so sorry Josh. You should have pushed me off," I said and lifted my head. God, I had slept all over him all night. He wasn't my boyfriend. He didn't have to put up with that.

His hand on my side, he pushed me back down.

“It’s fine.” His voice was low and close to my ear.

“I’ve slept on you all night. That’s not fine.” I rolled over onto my back and his hand was now on my stomach. I sure that if I was with any other guy I would be very self-conscious of the fact that the blankets were the only thing covering my bottom half. The hoodie was up around my waist, and I wasn’t wearing pajama pants; I was, however, wearing underwear that didn’t leave much to the imagination. I moved to my side to face him, and his hand moved smoothly just across my body.

“You sleep alright?” he asked that like I wouldn’t have slept perfectly with him.

I smiled, taking in his concerned face. “I think that is the best night sleep I’ve had in a while.”

The corner of his lips twitched up. “Good.”

I knew he was always touching me, but I found myself, like last night, wanting to touch him. So I moved my hand under the blanket and slowly traced my fingers up his arm.

“What are you doing today?” I asked, getting lost at the feel of his skin. His fingers traced circles so gently on my lower back. My eyes slowly closed, overwhelmed with his touch.

“Got to fix the throttle on my bike.”

My eyes opened wide. “You have a bike?”

His eyes had been shut and I don't think he realized what he said until I questioned him. Then his eyes were open, like he had just told me his life secret. "Um..." Was all he managed.

I arched my eyebrows at him confused. Ok, something was wrong. He had a bike, what was the big deal? Why was he looking so... horrified?

"Josh, what is with the expression?" I asked, his fingers had stilled on my back and he looked scared. "Are you ok?" Suddenly I was concerned for him. I wondered if I'd upset him. How was having a motor bike a secret? He used to ride dirt bikes when he was younger. "Josh, are you ok?" I repeated.

"Fine." He staggered out and frowned.

"Then what is with the expression?" I frowned.

"I'm not." He wiped the expression I was talking about off his face. "I should go." His words were firm and he looked so distance. In fact, I liked the horrified expression more than the one on his face right now. He was looking at me like... well I had seen that look before on his brothers face, when Kyle told me he would never love me again and wanted nothing to do with me.

Yeah, Josh wanted nothing to do with me. His expression was telling me that. He wasn't hiding it either, he was looking at me like I was nothing but a fly in his life.

Suddenly he wanted to run away from me. That for some reason hurt. I don't know why, but I really cared about his opinion and I felt so comfortable and relaxed with him. I had hoped he felt the

same. But right now he wasn't comfortable with me and he sure as hell wasn't relaxed. He wanted to run. And I nodded my head.

"Sorry." I said. I didn't know what else to say. I was making him want to bolt. I didn't know why. But it was me who was scaring him away. I guess sorry was the only word to say.

He didn't need to tell me he wanted nothing to do with me. His facial expression told me everything. Told me he was regretting ever speaking to me. Told me wanted to be anywhere but here. But what was hurting me more than it should, was well, the regret in his eyes, was telling me he regretted last night, and I had enjoyed it so much. I had hoped that our friendship was growing in a positive direction.

Hell, I never had a male friend that cared as much as him. The friendship developing between Josh and me, it was deeper, stronger than the friendship I'd had with Kayla. I never had a male friend I felt so comfortable in front of. That brought out another side to me.

Josh brought out things in me I thought were dead, like laughter, confidence, and faith—I had faith in him, trusted him.

But that friendship that I was enjoying, that friendship I was starting to count on, well, I think Josh was putting an end to it.

It was like I had touched a subject that made him pull the eject rope. Wish I knew why he wanted out of my life. But I guess I should be used to people, especially Hawkins, coming abruptly into my life and departing just as abruptly, giving no real reason.

I stopped touching him. I got off his arm and sat up. He wanted to run and I wasn't going to stop him. I had no right. As much as I would love for him to tell me why he wanted to run, what was scaring him, I had to let him go.

“Soph.” He was saying my name like he was trying to undo something. There was nothing to undo.

I was averting my eyes, looking everywhere but in his direction.

“Soph?”

He must have read my reaction. He must have realized I had read his reaction well. I had got the point, he wanted out, he wanted to run.

“Like you said, Josh, you should go.” I pushed the blankets down and went to get up. I knew I was going to have to look at him, so I wiped my expression. And I gave him a fake smile. “Go fix whatever needs fixing.” I didn't need to know the details, wasn't my place. “Like I've said before, you don't have to explain yourself to me.”

He knew that by now, right?

“Soph, come back.”

I was forced to look at him again and kept my expression neutral. “Josh, you should know by now, you don't have to explain yourself to me. You don't have to tell me anything.” It was a simple fact. I didn't expect anything from him, but every little thing he gave me I was so grateful for. I forced a smile, keeping what I was really thinking to myself: “Go start your day. Thanks for last night.”

And I was thankful. I was so thankful for him being with me last night. I don't know why he came home, but he had, and he had spent the night with me. He had made me eat; he acted like he cared. And no one really cared about me anymore, so just a small dose of it, well, it went straight to my heart.

He groaned and got out of bed. "I don't want to lie to you."

My lips formed a tight line. To be honest, it sounded like he meant that, like he really didn't want to lie to me, but it was like he was in a position where he had to.

Whatever. He didn't answer to me. Didn't have to tell me one honest word.

I looked up from staring into the carpet, facts went through my head on why he didn't have to tell me to truth. I was surprised to see his eyes on me. I wondered why was he looking at me so intently. God, it was intense. I swallowed sharply. Please, I begged silently to whoever was above me to make his eyes snap off me. Please, oh please stop it.

I couldn't move and at the same time couldn't look away from him.

His expression earlier, which was telling me he didn't love me, never would, and didn't want anything to do with me, was gone. Now his face was serious; his emotions were hidden, so he might still be thinking all those things, but not putting them on display for me to read.

Then finally his eyes snapped off me. And I took a deep breath

in.

“What are you doing today?” he asked, totally changing the subject. But I heard the edge in his voice; he was angry. There was a tint of anger to his tone, and it was loud enough for me to pick up on it.

“I might answer one of Bax’s miss calls.” I crossed my arms. I don’t know why but I suddenly felt like I needed to be on defense and Josh’s head snapped up after he pulled on his pants.

“You going back to him?” Geez he didn’t hold back the judgement in those five words.

“I guess.” I frowned. I told him I wasn’t judging him and he didn’t have to answer to me, yet he wasn’t returning that to me. He was judging me and he spoke like I had to answer to him. “Why are you so angry?”

“He’s a biker,” Josh spat those words out and crossed his arms. “He stands against the law. The law your parents love, that you love. Every value you hold dear well he gives it the finger. He goes through a different woman each week. He will never love you, respect you, or really care about you. So why the fuck are you going back to him?”

I was taken back by that. He had just listed a stack of facts that should stop me from going to Bax. Josh hadn’t listed one fact that wasn’t true. But he was demanding that I explain why I would go back to Bax.

I looked harder at him. Yeah, he wanted to know. He wasn’t dropping subject. So I stood a bit taller. He wanted an answer, a

real answer, then I'd tell him exactly what I thought.

“I don't care what he stands for, or what he doesn't. Yeah, he is a biker, but that doesn't mean he is rotten to the core. Just because he is one thing, doesn't mean you give up on him completely! God! What type of person do you take me for, Josh?” I shook my head frustrated. “The values you are talking about, that I hold dear, well, he does stand for them—loyalty, fairness, he has a love for a club, one that he is willing to protect with his life. Those three things say more about his character than the fact that he is an outlaw biker.”

I wasn't finished there. Josh had mentioned a few other things I wanted to cover, I couldn't stop myself from pointing a finger at him.

“I encourage him to go to other women. I don't want love. And I don't need his respect. I also don't need him to care for me. I don't expect anything from him.”

Yeah, he wanted an answer, well I just gave my answer to him! But his judgmental eyes stayed on me, narrowing as they locked on to mine.

I thought Josh was angry before, but the look on his face now went from pissed to offended to furious.

“You deserve so much fucking better than that! You deserve better than some low life criminal, who isn't going to contribute to the world! You deserve everything, Sophia! Why are you settling for a man that will never love you! Never put you first! Never...” His lips tightened. “He won't care about your health. He won't care about your future. All he cares about is fucking you—

literally!”

I couldn't argue with one fact that Josh had just said. But I did have a minor adjustment to make to his statement. “Just because you view him as not contributing to the world, doesn't mean that's true.” I wanted to stand firm on that. “He affects other people lives, that's contributing to the world. Even if those people are other bikers and women, they are still people and his life still matters. He is contributing to the world.”

I couldn't explain the expression that captured Josh's face; it was like I had just rewritten a rule he had put in stone. “You think he contributes to the world?” Josh repeated what I said like he had misheard it. He repeated it like it couldn't be true.

“Sure he does.” I shrugged, but felt frustrated at the same time. God, why were people so quick to judge someone's image? “Everyone does in their own way.”

“You really don't care that he is a biker, do you?” He looked shocked, surprised, and something else as well. I would have to pick as amazement, he was looking at me like I was the perfect female and he was seeing it for the first time. I didn't understand why he was looking at me like that, I was far from perfect. “You really think even a biker's life contributes to the world?” he added.

I softly smiled at him. I felt like he was turning what I was saying about Bax and putting it on himself. He wasn't a biker though. But the criminal part, he did wear that. He had been to prison and I think deep down he didn't think much of himself. So he couldn't believe that someone else would accept his flaws and also see the light he gives the world.

Josh thought his life meant nothing. That's why he lived day by day. I think he thought just because he went to prison his life was worthless and he wouldn't leave an imprint on this world.

He wore his prison scars well. The scar of being cut off from society, the scar of going to prison to begin with. I knew he hadn't learned his lesson while in there. I didn't have proof of that. And he had never confirmed if he was or wasn't in the criminal underworld.

Still it didn't matter. His life matters. And he was leaving a mark on the world. Hell, he was leaving a mark on my life.

"Of course I do," I finally said and his expression turned back into amazement. "Just because Bax has a criminal record, doesn't exclude him from being a good person." I thought about Bax for a few more moments and a smile crept across my face as I remembered something. "You know he likes to gamble. It's his thing. He loves it." I shook my head, I never got it. "Anyway, whatever he wins he gives it to a homeless dog charity, and if he loses he matches whatever he lost and still donates. Little things like that say more about him than just some record the police have on him."

Like I said a while back, I wasn't seeing the world as black and white anymore. I saw grey. I saw the good in someone, even when everything about them told you they should be a bad person.

"You know, Josh, you shouldn't be so hard on other people. Everyone has their own issues and problems weighing them down." I uncrossed my arms and I think I had made my point to him, but I had something I wanted to add—something I felt like he needed to hear. "You also shouldn't be so hard on yourself."

Stop thinking your life means nothing and you won't leave a mark on the world. Cause you have left a mark on me. And I'm sure I'm one of many." I gave him a real smile. "Sorry for holding you up. You better get going."

He was just staring at me. I didn't know what about. It was almost like I had shared the most detailed and private fact about myself to him and he couldn't wrap his head around it.

I didn't know what to do, and the more I stared at him I realized I didn't think there was anything I could say to make him snap out of it. So I turned and went to my wardrobe, pushing opening the door and leaving it ajar.

I took off his hoodie and couldn't stop the smile on my face as I looked down at it. I don't think he realized how much that meant to me. It was perfect too. It kept me warm, smelt like him, and, like how when I'm with Josh I felt safe, his hoodie gave me a small dose of that safety. I couldn't compare it to a hug by him because his hugs just blew my mind. But his hoodie surrounded me with his scent and that was comforting.

In that moment, I wasn't sure if it was wrong to be feeling that.

I just put on my bra when the door burst open. I turned, but as soon as I did I was off the ground.

"Josh, what the hell are you doing?" I said alarmed. He kicked closed my wardrobe door, still holding me in the air. He lifted me like I weighed nothing at all. I was thin, but I still weighed something! He shouldn't have been able to be balance my full body weight with one arm. I wrapped my legs around him, because I was guessing that was what he wanted by the way he

was holding me. He wanted me close; he didn't want space between us. I could tell that by his actions.

He leaned me back against the closed door, an intense look on his face like his will power had snapped.

His other hand moved up my side, exploring my revealed skin. I knew I wasn't wearing much, but I wasn't uncomfortable or nervous like I should be.

I saw his eyes flash to my lips and he slowly moved in closer, like my lips were pulling his lips to mine. I knew what he wanted. But I also knew he wasn't ready for it.

I moved just before his lips made it to mine and kissed his cheek. I felt like my lips were leaving a mark on his skin, as if I had branded him.

I looked back into his eyes. So blue, so enchanting, so magical I could get lost in them. Actually, I was getting lost in them now. Did he know how incredibly good looking he was? Before he went to prison he couldn't walk into a café without every girl's eyes going to him. He was "that" guy. If you were a girl or a woman you couldn't not look at him and admire and day dream.

Now I think the pull he has on women is stronger. He was so well built, but it wasn't just his body that women would drool over and gawk at. It was the whole package. The sharp blue eyes, the way he carried himself, he didn't give a fuck what anyone thought of him and that was very appealing.

He wasn't just your normal bad boy. He was a man. A man that didn't give a fuck about society or what was expected of him. He

did what he wanted, when he wanted. He wasn't a bad boy: he was a dangerous, deadly man—that would give you an overdose of lust and then depart your life as quickly as he entered it, not caring what he left behind.

“Josh, you should go start your day,” I said gently and linked my arms around his neck. “You don't have to explain yourself to me, remember that.”

His masked expression dropped, and he looked so torn. “I want to be honest with you, Soph. I really do.”

“But you don't have to,” I added. I tilted my head, staring into his amazing eyes. “You don't have to explain your life to me. I don't expect that. You are a very private person. I've always known that.”

I didn't go into this friendship with Josh thinking he would be telling me his every secret. I knew him. I knew he was private and the walls he had up never came down. He was carefree, but at the same it was a show; he wasn't showing his real self. He never had. He shows the world he doesn't care, he doesn't need anyone, and he had this confidence that couldn't be shaken.

But on a rare occasion—very rare—you get a glimpse of what he is hiding from the world. Like how he was so concerned last night hearing I hadn't eaten. He hadn't hidden his reaction. He cared about me. It showed last night. Not just care about me like he has to put up with me because I'm staying at his house, but cared for my physical health.

Josh didn't think he was capable of showing emotion or expressing it, but he had shown concern last night, real concern.

“Can I ask you something?” His words were low and so soft, as if he was hoping I wouldn’t hear it.

“Always.”

He looked at me hesitantly. “What do I have to do to make sure I don’t lose you?” His tone dipped into nerves and anxiety. He had just asked a question, and I could tell he was really worried about the answer.

I couldn’t stop the smile. “Josh, there is nothing you can do that will result in you losing me.” Out of all the things for him to be worried about he didn’t have to worry about that. “Seriously. There is nothing you can do.”

“Not even things about me?” His hand paused just under my bra. “Not even what people say about me?” I thought about what had been written in the papers about him. I had read one article about him, and it didn’t say why he went to prison, but listed all the reasons why a man like him or any criminal shouldn’t be given early release.

Again I found myself smiling at him, and I unlinked my arms and my placed my hand over his cheek. “Josh, you could be a mass murder, guilty as fuck, and I’d still be standing beside you.” I kissed his other cheek that I wasn’t cupping. “I don’t give a darn about your money either, or how you spend it. All I want is a friend.” I knew money was a sore point with him, because he had a lot of it. His granddad, who he was really close to, left Josh his estate—everything.

As soon as word got out that Josh had money, that wasn’t his

family money, it was fair to say girls were promising him everything just to get money out of him. I think that's one of the reason he didn't trust women.

“Can I ask something of you?” I wasn't sure if this was about to cross a line.

“Yeah sweetheart. You can ask anything of me and I'll try my best to be honest,” he said, like he wanted to tell me every detail about his life, like he hated not being about to share whatever it was that that he couldn't share with me.

He was still holding all my weight. But it was like I was a feather and he could hold me up all day and all night.

I took a nervous breath in. Ok, I was going to be honest with him. “Start living like your life matters.” My hand stilled on his cheek and I tried my best to give him some advice. “I know you don't express emotions well. I know you don't do friendships. I know you don't do relationships. But that doesn't mean your life doesn't matter.”

Did he not see how important he was to this world? He contributed it to it, even if he didn't see it. Hell, he contributed a hell of a lot to my life. I think anyone that met Josh was marked by him and that grin of his—the grin he tried his best to hide. It impacted your life thinking you might never see a grin as big, as loving, as his.

I leaned my forehead to his. “You matter. You leave a mark on me, every time you spend time with me. And I'm positive I'm not the only one. Every woman and man that comes in to contact with you, well, they are marked by you.”

I don't think he believed what I saying. Perhaps he was too far gone for that to be the case. I sighed. Yeah, he really wasn't believing it. I could tell by his tight expression, like he had a list of reasons behind him why that wasn't the case.

Maybe over time I could make him see it.

He kissed the corner of my mouth and then pulled back. I think he knew as well as I did he wasn't ready to kiss me.

"Are you busy tonight?" he asked as his hand moved to my back and his other held me up. "Do you have any plans?"

"Maybe a run. Oh, and there is an earlier showing of The Young Ones. Like, the episodes I missed during the week!" My face lit up remembering that and I didn't hide my smile, and then my expression soured. "And then your family dinner, which I'm guessing you are bailing on."

I didn't see why I had to attend their family dinners. I was a guest. But Louise said, before leaving, she really wanted me to make plans around the dinner she had planned for tonight. It would be fine if it was just Louise and Jed, but the devil and the devil's assistant would be back from the coast.

"There is a family dinner tonight?"

"What did you not get told to make plans around it?" I scoffed. I wasn't Kyle's girlfriend anymore. It wasn't like Louise and Jed were going to have me as a daughter-in-law. So why they were still making sure I felt like family I didn't know.

Josh frowned. “No. But by your reaction you were told to.”

“Yes.” I sighed. “I swear I’m turning into that annoying ex-girlfriend. I mean, Kyle has to put up with me at his house and family dinners! Like, how awful is it to have to have dinner with your new girlfriend and your ex? I’m like a pathetic clinging ex-girlfriend.”

“Soph, stop.” Josh’s hand moved off me and he cupped my face, forcing me to look him in the eye. “You aren’t pathetic.”

“Yes I am! I am the pathetic ex-girlfriend that he can’t get rid of.” That was putting the situation nicely. I looked Josh in the eye. “How would you like it if you couldn’t escape your ex-girlfriend and she moved into your house and was suddenly at all family dinners?”

It wasn’t a normal situation. It wasn’t healthy and it sure as fuck wasn’t fair to me or Kyle. I deserved to move on, not being forced to see him with his new girlfriend. And he deserved a clean break from me.

Then Josh said something that surprised me: “I think it is good you are around.”

“What?”

“Every day Kyle is reminded of his mistake. I know my brother; he regrets what happened between you and him.” Josh so gently tucked my hair behind my ear. “He hates that you are talking to me too.” Josh smiled, a full blown cheeky smile. “I love watching

him squirm. When he looks at you, I think he hates himself a bit more each time.”

I rolled my eyes. “Trust me, he doesn’t hate himself. He hates me. I think Kayla is going to kill me at one of these family dinners with her steak knife.”

Josh suppressed a smirk. “I think Kyle loves you too much to let that happen.”

“Are you insane?” Seriously, had Josh lost his mind? “Do I have to remind you of our break up? Do I have to remind you he has a new girlfriend? That he just spent a romantic weekend with his girlfriend?”

This time he didn’t suppress his smirk; he let it spread. It was like he knew something I didn’t.

I huffed. “Well, if I die tonight at the hand of Kayla, remember to turn my electric blanket off.”

Josh laughed. “Awe, sweetheart. I’ve missed your humor.” He leaned forward and kissed my cheek. “I’d love to say I could save you tonight, but I’ve got something I can’t get out of.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. You just want to attend my funeral.” I winked. “Ok Hawkins, put me down. You have places to go and people to see who aren’t me.”

I couldn’t hold up his day any more.

He pulled me back away from the back of the door and I slid down his body. It looked like he didn’t want to let go of me and his

hands froze on my hips as soon as my feet hit the ground. Yep, he didn't want to let go of me.

I thought it was a bit cute. I looked up at him, smiling, and his eyes ran up and down me.

“You know that job you were thinking about taking?” His eyes slowly moved up my body, until he was looking me in eye.

I nodded my head.

“You aren't taking it.”

“Why?”

“Because I don't want another guy seeing you like this.” He swallowed sharply, a tint in his eyes that I didn't understand. “I have a need to kill Bax and Kyle just because they have seen you like this.”

I laughed. He couldn't be serious! I slowly sobered up. “Josh, Bax and Kyle have seen me in less than this.” They had seen completely naked. I frowned for a second. “But then again, so have you.”

“So that's it, Kyle, Bax and me, that's everyone who has seen your body naked?” He questioned me like I held the million dollar answer.

“Are you asking who I have and haven't had sex with?”

“No.” He shook his head. “But if Kyle, Bax, and me are the only ones you have seen you completely naked, I already have an

answer to that question and don't need to ask it. So the question stands, are we the only three?"

I could lie? But he most likely would pick up on it. "It's most likely pathetic that I've only been with two guys, right?" I said deflated. Compare me to Kayla she had more experience, knew more about sex than I. God, she was probably wowing Kyle with all her experience. "I bet Kyle is loving the upgrade." And that's what Kayla was to me: an upgrade.

"Baby girl, look at me."

I shook my head, I didn't need pity. "It's fine, you should go." I couldn't pull my eyes off my feet. I felt behind me, twisting the door knob and opening the door. "Thanks for last night, Josh."

His hand lifted up my chin and he forced me to look up at him.

"You aren't a car. Kyle hasn't upgraded from you. If you are anything, Soph, you are the grand prize, the woman every man would fight each other to death just to get you."

I rolled my eyes. "You are my friend, you have to say that."

He arched his eyebrows. "Have I ever come across as the type of guy that would lie to make you feel better?"

I frowned. No, he wasn't. Josh would never lie to make anyone feel better—not even me. It just wasn't in him. A dim smile graced my lips. "Thanks, Josh." I took a step out of his way, chewing my bottom lip.

He paused in front of me and then moved slowly, as if giving me

time to stop him if I wanted to, and he gently kissed the top of my head, lingering for a second. “I’ll see you soon.”

He really was a good friend. He walked out the door, and I turned. “Oh, Josh?”

“Um?” He turned back to look at me.

I crossed my arms with a smile. “Don’t be a tight bastard and try and repair that throttle. Just replace it with a new one.”

He frowned and then I watched as he understood what I was talking about. “You know me too well, Soph.” He gave me a wink and he didn’t seem completely terrified at the mention of the throttle, even though earlier it sent him into a meltdown.

I watched him leave and I admit I was disappointed when I saw him close my bedroom door. Now I was faced with one question: did I call Bax or not? For some stupid and unexplainable reason, I felt like I would be betraying Josh if I called Bax.

I didn’t know why I had this feeling. I didn’t know where I got that idea from. Josh and I were friends, that was it. Nothing more.

Seriously, never ever would Josh see me as more than a friend.

So why was I worried about what he’d think?

Chapter Nineteen

Soph

Had I been blind for years? Kayla was obnoxious. Her hair. Her

makeup. Her perfume. Her personality. Everything about her was obnoxious. Why was I only seeing it now?

Now, as she gushed over every single detail of her weekend away with Kyle. I would throw up, but I haven't eaten anything today apart from bits of this potato, which I was busy destroying but not really eating.

Kyle and Kayla had spent the weekend at Kyle's sex house. Well, it wasn't his sex house. It was his parent's house on the coast. But Kyle was the only one using it. We used to escape down to it, stay for the weekend. Walks on the beach, lounging around in the hammock, and then sex in the ocean, in the master suite, in the bathroom, hell, everywhere in the house. Yeah, it was fair to say it was his sex house.

So I knew right now as Kayla told Louise how much she loved their unique dining table she must have experienced it up close and personal.

Sex on the dining table, classic Kyle.

My eyes bounced off my plate and, what do you know, Kyle was looking directly at me. When it came to these family dinners, he always took the chance just to stare at me.

"Kyle and I had so much fun on the beach. And Kyle is such a good surfer." Kayla put her hand over Kyle's on the table.

God, they were making me sick. Were Kyle and I ever that in love? It was sickly. Their relationship was just as obnoxious. I guess it should be expected. Even she would take a normal relationship and twist it and turn it

I was suddenly disappointed a shark hadn't taken Kyle off his board.

“But I guess our weekend was boring compare to Sophia's.” Kayla turned all attention on to me, a tint of vengeance and pleasure in her eyes.

What the fuck.

My weekend had been uneventful. I auditioned for a job, that now couldn't take because I think Josh was serious about no one else seeing my body. But not just that, Josh said I was too good for it. He made a lot of good points, proving that he really was a good friend and had my back when I was about to make a mistake.

Usually I liked to make a mistake on my own—you know, trip over, face plant. I never listened when someone told me I was about to make a mistake. Not when my parents told me. Not even when Kyle would warn me. I viewed a friendship as meaning that you are there in the good times and bad. And sometimes you couldn't prevent me going through a bad time, even if you knew better and advised me off it.

But this time, just this once, I was going to take Josh's advice and not take the job.

I narrowed my eyes at Kayla. She would have to know I spent the weekend by myself.

She sipped her water and then put the glass down, an evil glint in her eyes. “You know the rumor around school is you are into the drug and party scene now, right? So I'm guessing you spent the

weekend doing what you now do best?” She added a concerned pout to the end of her sentence.

Again I was thinking what the fuck. She was the one into the party scene! She was the one experimenting with drugs!

I glanced at Kyle, but I couldn't read his expression. Meanwhile, Kayla was enjoying me being examined like I was a dead bug on a glass plate under a microscope.

Louise and Jed's eyes widened in surprise and I knew what was coming next. A lecture.

“Actually, she spent the weekend with me.”

Every head in the room snapped to the doorway. My mouth fell slightly open.

“Josh, what are you doing here?” Louise got up in a hurry, sounding so happy. “Sweetheart, I thought you were busy today, otherwise I would have invited you for dinner.” Louise moved so quickly around the table to hug her son.

Josh hugged her back, but his eyes were on me, like he was silently telling me not to panic.

He had told me he had something on tonight, that he couldn't get out of, so what was he doing here? Josh was a busy guy, and I knew for a fact he hated these dinners. Every time he was forced to come to one, I would watch him hate every second of it as he sat across from me.

Louise pulled back from him, looking delighted. “Your father

said I wasn't allowed to make it mandatory that you came tonight. You know let you live your life." She rolled her eyes. "He thinks I baby you. But a mother can't stop worrying about her son."

A small grin spread across Josh's lips. "Yeah, I love you too mum." Josh let go of her.

"I'll get you a plate," Louise said and headed for the kitchen.

"Kyle, move over and make room for your brother," Louise said from the kitchen.

Kyle rolled his eyes and wasn't in a hurry to get up to move down. Josh and Kyle always sat next to each other. I think they were brought up sitting next to each other.

Though for some reason I had noticed Kyle was even more of a jerk to Josh than normal lately. Sure they never got on—complete opposites. But they usually made more of an effort with each other. Like, as much as they disagree on things, they always came together.

Josh walked to Kyle's side and did something that made Kyle do a double take. I watched, startled, not believing what I was seeing as Josh picked up the chair next to Kyle and walked around the table with it, placing it next to mine.

And not just on my side of the table, but right next to me. Like, as close as Kayla's and Kyle's chairs were together. Josh causally sat down next to me and extended his arm on the back of my chair causally like it was no big deal.

I could nearly hear Kyle grinding his teeth from as he gave his

brother a death glare.

Josh's eyes were on me. He gave me a wink and then he turned his attention onto Kyle.

“So how was your weekend, Kyle?” Josh said causally. Louise placed a plate of food in front of Josh and gave him a frown, most likely questioning why the hell Josh was sitting next to me.

“Fine.” Kyle snapped and leaned back in his chair, looking like he wanted to kill his brother. “So you and Sophia,” he spat my full name out as if it was sour, “spent the weekend together?”

Kyle wasn't asking nicely, politely or because he wanted to know. No, he was asking with judgement in his voice and daring his brother not to say yes. As if Kyle would launch across the table and kill Josh if he did.

Josh glanced at me and gave me a small smirk, and then he looked back at Kyle. “Yeah, Soph and I had a good weekend, if that is what you are asking?”

Tension. That was all I felt. Tension between Josh and Kyle. It was tight and bloody thick.

Kyle scoffed. “I can't think of one thing that you two could do together.” Kyle waved a hand at us. “The nobody and the criminal. Seriously, what do you two have in common?”

Then it hit me.

Kyle was right. I was a nobody. Kyle had made me someone and then he took it away. My eyes suddenly dropped to my plate.

Yeah, Kyle was right. The nobody—that summed me up. Again Kyle was right. Josh shouldn't waste a second me with, not because he was a criminal, but because anyone could see I was a nobody.

I didn't think one word could hurt me. But I shouldn't be surprised. It was a word off Kyle's tongue after all. Kyle always knew how to get to my heart and twist the knife he had in there sharply. God, he had me nearly in tears with just one word!

I was going to get up and leave, let them have their family dinner. I wasn't hungry to begin with. Yep, I was leaving. I dropped my knife and fork and went to push myself away from the table. But then Josh's arm that was the back of my chair dropped around me.

“Soph and I have shit load in common.” Josh's voice wasn't friendly. And I didn't know the expression he was giving Kyle because I wouldn't look up from my plate.

I literally was a second away from tears.

I knew Kyle didn't think much of me. How could he? I wanted to run. I wanted to leave. Now.

“More than what you and her have in common.” Josh's tone hardened. “You wanted to know how she spent her weekend? With me. In her bed. That enough of an answer for you?”

“In her bed? Since when did you sleep in any woman's bed?” Kyle's voice had an edge to it. “Everyone knows you don't sleep in any woman's bed because they might get clingy.” Kyle had said it so confidently.

I went to get up. I didn't need Josh having to explain himself. But his hand on my shoulder, pushing me back down. He wasn't letting me go anywhere.

“Yeah, her bed because she loves her electric blanket. And I didn't have one.” Josh's kept control over his voice, but not well enough; you could hear the tint of anger. “But I fixed that today, little brother, so don't you worry about it.”

I frowned and looked up for once this evening. “What do you mean you fixed that today?”

Josh was so busy having a glare off with Kyle, he didn't answer straight away. Then finally their glare broke. Josh's eyes landed on mine, and the anger that was in them slowly disappeared.

“I brought you an electric blanket.”

“But I already have one.”

A smirk spread across his lips. “For my bed, sweetheart.” He leaned in, his mouth going to my ear. “My bed is bigger and so is my TV.” He said it softly but loud enough for everyone to hear. He wanted everyone to hear that. For some reason, he wanted to give the impression to everyone that we were sleeping together.

I guess we had spent two nights together. He pulled back slowly, a carefree expression on his face, but I noted nerves as well. He was worried about my reaction. Was he thinking I would declare I would never sleep in his bed or something? Yeah, right now, reading his expression, he was worried about that.

A small smile appeared on my face and I turned my body into him. “Bigger screen to watch The Young Ones on. And a bigger bed. You’re just better when it comes to everything, aren’t you?”

“It’s on tonight, right?” he asked, acting like our conversation wasn’t being listened to by everyone. For some reason that made my small smile get bigger.

“It is, but you watched it last night. I’m going to force you to watch it two nights in a row.” I continued or charade of being the only ones at the table.

Josh smirked and he turned in completely to face me, his hand going to the side of my face, gently pushing my hair back over my shoulder. “What can I say, I’m a sucker for the comedy.” His words were soft and kind and had me by the heart.

He was a really good friend. But he was proving to me he wasn’t just capable of being a friend, he was capable of being a great friend.

I was getting lost in his vibrant blue eyes again. God, I was a sucker for his eyes. They weren’t just a bright blue, they had a hint of dark blue to them too when you looked closer. But it wasn’t just any type of dark blue; it was the type of dark blue the ocean turns when the moon is cast over it. Yeah, that type of dark blue.

I was so lost in them, loving them, that I sighed frustrated when he broke our eye contact.

“Have you eaten a thing?” His eyes were on my plate and then back on me. I could see the annoyance in his expression. “You’ve stabbed a potato, that’s it?”

I rolled my eyes and looked back at my plate. Ok, everything was not untouched apart from the potato, which did look like it had been stabbed to death. Well, what did he expect? I had to take my frustration out on something listening to Kayla.

I looked back at Josh. “Not hungry.”

He arched his eyebrows. “Do you really want to say that to me?” There was a threat in his tone, a threat that he would call me out and make me list everything I’ve eaten today and if I did tell him the list, which was coming up blank. And I didn’t want to see his reaction.

I swallowed sharply. “Um. It’s cold now.” I pushed the plate away from me, turning and giving him a full smile. “I only liked the potato anyway.”

His eyes widened, “Really, so you love potatoes?”

“To death. Pity there was only one.” And just like that I dodged the whole ‘no eating’ thing.

Josh pushed himself away from the table slightly. I looked back at him, was he leaving? Well I guess he had made one heck of an appearance. My eyes were still on him when he looked back at me. Why was he looking at me like that?

“Up,” he said and gestured with his hand for me to move. “Now.”

I frowned. “What?”

“Up. Now.”

I did not understand why I had to stand. But doing as I was told, I pushed myself away from the table. Just as I stood, his arms wrapped around my waist and he pulled me down to his lap. Surprised by the sudden move, my arm wrapped around his neck automatically to catch myself. I heard Kyle scoff like it was unbelievable, but my attention was on Josh as he repositioned me.

One of Josh’s hands stilled on my side, holding me in place and the other reached around me pulling his plate closer.

“Start eating,” he said firmly, and his hand went to mine, which were locked around his neck. “Now, Soph.”

I groaned. So this was why I was on his lap. “I am not eating your tea.” I even pouted a little. There was nothing wrong with me not eating. Nothing at all.

“Just so happens I don’t feel like potatoes and mum has given me heaps. So you can either start eating them, or I’ll start feeding them to you.” He was serious right now, his tone, his expression deadly fucking serious. He didn’t care who was watching; he didn’t care who saw him feed me. He wasn’t backing down.

I huffed. “Fine.” I turned on his lap and picked up the fork. “But just for this, Josh, I’m sleeping in the middle of the bed. With both electric blankets on.” I smirked a bit at my plan. I knew for a fact he thought the temperature I kept my blanket at was too hot.

Then he did something I wasn’t expecting: he kissed my bare shoulder. I turned just slightly to look at him, and all I saw was pleasure. He was happy right now. Him getting me to eat made

him happy.

Louise and Jed got up and entered their own conversation. Seem attention was off Josh and me. They went into the kitchen talking about something. My eyes were glued to Josh.

So was my attention.

“Soph, you aren’t eating.” He nudged his head towards the plate. “Eat.”

I sighed and turned my attention back to his plate. “You know I think your bed is more comfortable than mine.” I started to chop up the potato.

“It is and from now on you are sleeping in it.”

I wanted to laugh, but then I began to wonder whether he was serious.

Kyle laughing caused my eyes to snap to off Josh and on to him. “So what are you going to do, Sophia, when you go to sleep in his bed one night and wake up to him and another woman?” Kyle’s eyes hardened with annoyance but also enjoyment.

Kyle had taken what Josh said as fact, like I would be spending every night in Josh’s bed from now on. And if you looked at Josh’s expression, you might have thought that too. But I doubted very much that Josh was serious about me sleeping in his bed every night.

Kyle was right, Josh did sleep with other women. I wasn’t having sex with Josh, we were only friends. Josh would need have sex at

some point, so Kyle had a point. But I wasn't about to gush over how awkward it would be if Josh kicked me out of his bed so he could have sex with another woman.

Nope. I wasn't doing that.

I sighed causally. "Well, who knows, Kyle. I am in to the drugs and party scene now. Doesn't sexual exploration come with that?" Seeing the shock on Kyle's face was priceless and with that said I put the fork in my mouth and took the potato off it.

Josh laughed and it hummed through my body as I sat on him. I think Josh had never seen his brother so fucking speechless. Ha. Take that, Kyle. For once he had nothing to say. I glanced at Kayla and her expression mirrored her boyfriend's.

Did Kyle really think he could put me in a position where I would feel awkward and he would control and know my feelings? Yeah, I think he did. I think in his world I was still his little Soph, the one that would shy away from an awkward situation or at the mention of sex.

Seeing as he was in shock, I decided to use that to my advantage. I pointed my fork at him after swallowing my potato. "You know what you should do, Kyle, you should get tattoos. I know it goes against your whole golden boy image. But trust me, they turn girls on." I looked at Kayla. "You always had a thing for tattoos, right?"

They both just stared at me with mouths slightly open.

I shrugged. "I never really liked them, until I saw Josh's. And now I don't even glance at a guy that doesn't have them." That was true now. I loved the work in tattoos. But I loved Josh's tattoos the

best. And I hadn't even seen all of them.

Kyle shook his head, snapping out of shock. "So you are telling me you stand for everything my brother does?" He looked at me like that was impossible. "You are actually saying that not one of his tattoos offend you? That you, Sophia, would accept his type of life?"

I frowned, what the fuck was Kyle on about?

"So you are saying that you would stand by him even though he is worthless criminal?" Kyle added, and just those words made my blood boil. "His life is going nowhere!"

I had spent so long being hurt by Kyle I was never really mad at him. I never thought I deserved him in the first place. But for him to sit there and degrade another human being, especially his brother, had just sent my body into overdrive with hate towards him.

I could not believe that the Kyle I knew would think so little of a person! Let alone his flesh and blood!

I felt Josh's hand go still on my back, and I didn't need to see his expression. I already knew what Josh thought of himself, which wasn't much. Josh was most likely thinking Kyle was painting his life with more color than he deserved.

"Clearly you and I have a different understanding of worthlessness. I value Josh more than I value men like you— spineless, gutless shits that treat women like they are nothing but a sex symbol." My glare hardened on Kyle, the lid on my temper gone. "Your life is the one going nowhere, do you know why that

is?”

He didn't answer so I took the chance.

“Because you will never have a woman that truly loves you for you in your life. You will have the degree, you will have the expensive car and house and successful career, but you know what else you will have? A wife who will never love you for you without those things, and who will care more about the dollars in the bank than about you.” I held Kyle's eyes. I wasn't finished. “Do you know what your brother will have?” I arched my eyebrows. “A woman who stands by his every decision, who loves the dark and the light side of him, and who won't just fight for him but also beside him. He is going to have a woman that loves him for him. No matter what. He will have a family and he also will be there for his children, not working in a pointless corporate job. So remind me again, who will have the worthless life?”

Just like that I shut Kyle down. I shut down everything he thought about himself. He really thought he was better than Josh. Well, he was wrong. Josh was so much better than him. Josh was the one that was going to have the great life. Josh was the one that would have the woman who loved him. Josh was more of a man than Kyle would ever be.

Kyle just stared at me and then finally opened his mouth. “Well, at least now I know which brother you think more of.”

I shook my head. “It's not that at all, Kyle. It's about which brother is more of a man.” I dropped my fork. “Maybe one day you will actually realize how much of an example your brother is. Until then, I guess your future is looking as bright and happy as a funeral march.”

I didn't feel one bit bad when I saw the hurt in Kyle's eyes because only moments before he was trying to put that hurt in Josh's. Yeah, I didn't feel one bit bad as Kyle looked at me so hurt I thought he was close to tears, like my opinion really mattered to him. That me saying I thought Josh was going to have the better life didn't just hurt him it shattered his heart.

Well, if he didn't like where his life was heading, I guess I had just given him an eye opener. Now he could do something about it.

I hated it when people put others down because in their head they thought they were better. Just moments ago Kyle thought he was better than Josh. Why? Because he judged value on material things. On what society thinks of you. And on the opinion of narrowed minded people.

I took my eyes off Kyle and as I turned on Josh's lap I saw his expression. He looked just as shocked as his brother, maybe even more. He had heard every word I had said, and I think he just didn't know how to react. I knew Josh; he wouldn't think that one word I had just said was possible of happening.

But I knew different. I knew he would get all those things. Why? Because Josh had a good and pure heart and when he decided he was ready to open it up to a woman, she was going to be one hell of a lucky girl and she would be giving him all those things I've listed.

Josh didn't see it, but I did. And so would the woman that he let into his life.

I put my hand on his cheek. “So where is this electric blanket? And I’m totally claiming the right side of the bed.” I smiled at him, hoping that he would snap out of just staring at me.

The shock slowly disappeared from his eyes and the emotion painted in his eyes/ I had never seen before. Not in his eyes, or any man’s eyes. I didn’t know if it was amazement, hatred, love, or disappointment.

I couldn’t help but grin. Truth was, Josh was going to have a great and successful life. Society might not approve of how he lives it, or how he earns money, but Josh would be happy, and that is all that mattered. Isn’t that what everyone wants, happiness?

I opened my mouth, ready to pull him from this state, but my phone buzzed on the table. I reached for it. Then I saw his name and nearly rolled my eyes. He still wasn’t getting the whole silent treatment I was giving him. I unlocked my phone, opening up Bax’s message.

Babe I’m so fucking sorry. Just tell me what I need to do to get u back.

My eyes ran over Bax’s words a couple of times. I had blocked him out for over a week. I had told him I didn’t want anything to do with him, and yet he wasn’t ready to give up on me.

I hit reply just as the phone was snatched out of my hands. I frowned and it took me a second to realize what had happened as I looked at Josh, my phone clenched in his hand, and an expression I did know—jealousy.

“Um, Josh, you have my phone?” I was very calm about it, casual, like we were fooling around, when really he was being a control freak.

He had given me reason after reason this morning why I shouldn't go back to Bax. And all day I hadn't reached out to Bax because I couldn't get “what would Josh think” out of my head.

I wondered what it would take for Josh to snap out of the state I put him in by me telling the truth to his brother about him, and the life he was going to have. But I hadn't expected him to go straight into jealousy.

It wasn't like Bax would ever come in between our friendship. Maybe I needed to tell him that?

“Josh, give me the phone,” I said calmly and put my hand out. “You and I had this discussion this morning. And we both know where we landed on the subject.”

I was not going to rehash this morning fight with Josh in front of Kyle and Kayla and within earshot of his parents.

“Nah. The answer to his question is nothing. You hear me, Soph? Nothing he can do.” Josh never told me off or talked to me like he was in control of my life or anything. Actually, Josh never cared what anyone did with their life as long as it didn't impact his.

So why the fuck did he just say that like, he didn't just care, but I couldn't argue with him?

“Josh give me the phone.”

“No.”

I scoffed. I couldn't believe it.

That was when I heard Kyle laughing.

I turned to look at him. “Why are you laughing? Something snap you out of the depressive life you are living?”

“My brother has competition for you.” Kyle pointed a finger at Josh with a wide grin. “How does it feel, big brother, to finally meet a girl out of your league? Soph might think you are a better man than me, but you still aren't man enough to have her.” Kyle looked at me with hope. What the hell was wrong with him?

“Josh, give me the phone. Don't you have somewhere you need to be tonight anyway?” I reminded him of the busy night he did have planned this morning.

“Yeah, that was until I realized something.” He kept clenching my phone, so tightly I was waiting for the screen to start to crack.

“Let me guess, Soph is more important than another night on the piss at the strip clubs?” Kyle piped into the conversation.

I turned and threw a glare at Kyle. “Shut up, Kyle. We all know I'm not important enough to stop anyone's plans. I'm nobody, remember? I'm not the woman you drop plans for. I'm not the woman you do anything for. You said I was a nobody, and you were right.” I turned my attention back on to Josh. “Now give me the phone.”

Josh's eyes hardened and well off me “See what you fucking

did?” Josh yelled across the table at his brother. “You happy with yourself?”

Josh completely ignored me. Instead, he started yelling at Kyle. “You are fucking toxic. I meant it when I said you stay out of her life. That means no talking to her.” Josh was yelling and even his parent’s looked up from the kitchen to see what the problem was.

Kyle narrowed his eyes at Josh. “You can’t ban me from talking to Soph! She was mine to begin with!”

“There you go again, forgetting that you are in her past not future!”

“And there you go again, hoping to be in her future!” Kyle snapped back at Josh just as quickly. “Soph and I will always have more than whatever fucked up relationship you have with her.”

“Oh for Christ Sake!” I roared and slapped Josh’s arm off me and got up. “You both are acting like I matter! I don’t!” I never yelled, but here I was screaming at them “So stop fighting! You are brothers!” God, I wasn’t worth an argument. “I don’t have one fucking idea why you two want to compete on who will know me better when we all know there is nothing about me that anyone would want!”

I didn’t get it. I didn’t get what they were talking about when they were saying futures and pasts and shit. I wasn’t in anyone’s future because I wasn’t worth a second glance. I wasn’t even worth a first glance. I was a nobody. No one important. And as much as I went on about everyone contributing to the world, I knew my mark wouldn’t be great, inspiring, or deep. It would be a scratch.

“Sophia dear, are you ok?” Louise said from the kitchen.

No. I wasn't ok. But I didn't need Louise's pity.

I forced myself to take a steady breath and turned to face Kyle and Josh's parents. “Thanks for dinner, Louise and Jed. I'm heading out now.” And with that said, I walked behind Josh's chair and through the house.

Bax wasn't a guy that would love or respect me. I knew that. But I also knew I wasn't worth being loved and respected. Sex. That was all I was getting from Bax and that was all he was able to give me. And while I had sex with him, it filled some need inside me. It gave me all I needed.

I picked up my keys for my car from the foyer table and opened the front door and closed it swiftly behind me.

Josh and Kyle would make up. They were brothers. I don't know why they were suddenly thinking I was a rag doll in between them. I wasn't. I wasn't worth a fight.

Kyle would get a trophy wife. Maybe Kayla.

And Josh would find the love of his life.

And when they both did that, they would realize how pointless it was to fight with each other, especially over me.

As soon as I was not living in the same house as them, they would forget all about me.

I was walking down the garden path when I heard the front door close.

“Soph!”

I picked up my speed.

“Soph!”

I just pressed the button to unlock my car and my lights flashed. I opened the driver’s side door and then Josh’s hand went to the corner and shut it.

I wanted to groan. Couldn’t he just let me leave? His hand was still on the door and he was trapping me between the car and him. I could feel his strong body behind me, pressing into my back. I was breathing sharply and trying my best, my very best, to not show how upset I was.

“Sweetheart, please turn around?”

I crossed my arms and kept my back to him. I would not turn around. Then his hand went off the door and I took my opportunity. I uncrossed my arms and my hand went to the door handle, and just as I opened it his hand forced it shut again.

I huffed frustrated.

“Sweetheart, I’m not letting you go to him.” Josh’s words were firm, yet soft, which made me frown and I turned around.

“Why?” I looked up at him, and he was just staring down at me, again with a tint in his eyes that confused me.

He took a step towards me, closing the small gap between us. I took one back.

“Because.”

“That’s not a reason.”

“I’m not going to be the one that drives you into his arms.”

I rolled my eyes. “You aren’t.”

“You are going to him right now because of me.” Josh pulled his hand off the car and his hand went to my side, he dipped his head. “I’m sorry for upsetting you.”

Josh never said sorry. He didn’t believe in the word sorry. So I knew right now he was only saying it cause he didn’t know what else to say.

I shook my head. “Don’t do that. Don’t say sorry when you don’t mean it.”

“I do mean it.”

I scoffed and couldn’t help myself. I pushed him firmly back. “Piss off, Josh.”

Josh grabbed my hands, trapping each one in one of his strong hands. “Sweetheart. I mean it. I’m sorry. Now please don’t run from me.” I heard the change in his words, pain crept into them. Like me leaving would hurt him.

I stopped and looked at the situation. Josh was standing here saying sorry. He never said sorry. He was standing here stopping me from going to a man that Josh thought wasn't worth my time.

He didn't want me to run from him. He thought he was driving me into another man's arms. What was he scared of? Why did him thinking he was driving me to another man bother him so?

I didn't have an answer.

Josh did realize that if I left tonight to go to Bax, it wouldn't change mine and his relationship, right?

Ok, I didn't have an answer for that either.

"Soph." Josh's pulled my hands and forced me to come to him. "Please don't leave."

"If I do, what does it matter? It's not like me going to him will affect our friendship. I'm thankful you came home when you did, but that doesn't mean I'm expecting you to stay for the night."

Yeah, I gave him an explanation. His night didn't have to change. I'm sure his phone hadn't stopped ringing since he left his friends. His phone was always ringing.

"It fucking matters." Josh's words were sharp. "Fine, I tried talking to you, you leave me no choice."

I frowned and then squealed as he threw me over his shoulder.

Chapter Twenty

Soph

I knew Josh was strong. He looked like a walking UFC beast. So I wasn't surprised that he was carrying me like I weighed nothing. I squirmed. I wiggled. I yelled at him. And he ignored all of it.

He even walked us past his parents who were in the foyer and they didn't seem to care that Josh had me over his shoulder like I was doll he just pick up and carry around!

To say I was furious with him when he shut his bedroom was an understatement. And mind you, he was assuming I wanted to be near him and didn't mind being carried to his bedroom!

My feet hit the floor, and as soon as I got my balance I pushed him hard on each shoulder.

"How dare you just carry me around like that! Who the hell do you think you are just to carry me away from my nights plans?" I wanted to punch him, but I knew I would be the one that ended up sore. I would have a sore fist and he would end up laughing.

"Calm down, sweetheart." He didn't seem fussed that I was furious.

I took a step towards him and pointed a finger into his chest. "I'm leaving and you can't stop me." I was serious. I was leaving. I wasn't staying here just because he had dragged me here. He might have carried me in here, but I had legs and could walk out, which was exactly what I was going to do.

I made one move to go around him and he blocked me.

“Sweetheart, I’m not letting you go to him.” He said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

What was with men thinking they could tell me what to do? Kyle always told me what to do. It was because of him I learned to rely on him in my life, like he was the gravity to my world. Bax thought it was acceptable to declare to the world I was his and had me wearing a top that told everyone I was hooked up with a biker, and it was serious.

And then there was Josh, who thought he could stop me from going out. First he took my phone and then, when I went to leave, he literally picked me up and carried me back in the house.

My eyes narrowed at him. “Josh Andrew Hawkins, if you know what is good for you, you will get out of my way.” My words gritted as they came out, the anger I was feeling was overwhelming. I was sick of people telling me what to do, how to feel. I was learning everything from new.

I was hoping my threat would cause Josh to step out of my way and let me go. So I was surprised when he took a step towards me, his hands spreading out on my cheeks, cupping my face.

What was he doing? Had he gone mad? Why was he looking at me like that? He had that weird look in his eyes again that was there after I listed all the reasons his life was going to be better than Kyle’s. Again I was thinking, if I was any other female and he was giving the current look he was giving me to them, they would think Josh was in love with them. Hell, you would think all of a sudden Josh’s life depended on you.

I opened my mouth to question him on it, but he moved quicker, his lips covering mine. At first I wasn't sure what to do. Push him away, pull him in? I was shocked for longer than a second. I had been kissed before, but I had never felt this electric spark through every one of my blood vessels before.

Suddenly I snapped out of the shock and I wanted my blood vessels to explode by this electric spark he was giving my body.

My lips moved against his, and I felt the corner of his lips twitch up for a second, like he was pleased I wasn't pushing him away but demanding more.

I would have to say, when it came to being intimate it wasn't natural. I was always nervous at first. Then my brain would drown out the nerves. But this time I wasn't nervous at all.

It hadn't been my brain that drowned out the nerves.

I didn't have nerves to begin with.

It was like my brain switched off as soon as his lips landed on mine, and my body took over.

He lifted me up, my hands locking around his neck while our kiss went up a notch from being demanding, to complete raw need. It was like his need for me overcame him. My legs had just wrapped around him when he bit my bottom lip, causing me to gasp, and he took the opportunity to explore my mouth. He wasn't gentle and he sure as fuck wasn't soft.

And I loved it.

His hands went to my top, and our kiss broke when he took it off, and then before it even hit the floor his lips were back on mine.

I knew where this could be heading, so why the hell wasn't I panicking or stopping him?

His hands were exploring my skin while he held me up with his body. He slowly lowered me to the bed, and his lips went off mine, and he kissed along my jaw and slowly he started to kiss down my neck.

It was like he was worshipping me. Each kiss was more intimate.

I couldn't stop myself from arching my neck to him. I was so lost in the feel of his lips on my skin I hadn't realized his fingers had unclipped my bra until he was dragging the straps down my arms. I knew I should be nervous. I knew I should be experiencing warning signs. But I wasn't.

As soon as my bra was out of the way, his kisses started to go lower.

“Josh?” I managed to say. I had to stop him before he did something he would regret in the morning. “You need to stop.” My fingers were running through his hair. I wouldn't lie, I loved his lips on me. I loved how my body reacted—the pleasure that flooded my blood stream—I hadn't felt like this before, so it was going to kill me when he stopped.

He ignored me and, if anything, his kisses got more intense, firmer, and lower. I knew where he was going and it sent wave after wave of need through my body.

Suddenly I didn't want him to stop. I knew he should. But as his kisses got lower, I didn't want him to stop. I knew it was selfish, and I knew that if we had sex right now our friendship would be ruined, but I needed him. Now.

His lips went off me, and I realized my words of telling him to stop may have just registered, "Soph, I have to tell you something. It's not fair on you if I don't. Especially considering where I want you and I to head."

I was still high on the pleasure he had just given me to really listen to whatever was so important. I nodded my head and opened my eyes, but seeing his serious expression made me lean up.

"Josh, are you ok?" I couldn't stop myself from asking. He looked scared.

He unlocked my hands from around his neck, linking them with his, his eyes still on me. "I just don't want to lose you, Soph, and I know once I tell you this you are going to want nothing to do with me."

I saw the pain in his eyes for a split second before he masked his expression.

"You know how I know Bax?" He sounded so hesitant, like he was about to tell me something so important that he was positive I wouldn't take it well.

I nodded my head. But before he could say another word, I leaned up and kissed him on the lips, this time soft, gentle. Pulling back, I saw more pain in his eyes. I unlinked one of our hands, my

hand going to his cheek.

“Stop looking so worried, there is nothing that will result in you losing me.” I was honest. I didn’t care about his criminal record. I didn’t care that he most likely was still adding to that record.

“You can’t say that until you have all the facts.” He dismissed what I said. “I know you, I know once I tell you this you are going to think all I did was lie to you and I know how much honesty means to you.”

He was right there, honesty meant a hell of a lot to me. But still, I already knew Josh had secrets. I knew he hadn’t been in a position to tell me them, but it would seem tonight he was going to open up to me.

“You don’t have to tell me anything, Josh. I understand there are parts of your life you can’t share.” I tried to gently tell him. I didn’t care. I understood completely. “Just because we are going to have a one-night stand, doesn’t mean you have to open up your soul to me.”

“That’s just it. I don’t want a one-night stand. I want you to know what you are getting into with being with me.”

“Being with you?” I frowned. What was he trying to imply?

He opened his mouth, but there was a banging on his door. I heard the door knob twist and I clenched my eyes shut. Just fucking perfect.

But the door didn’t open. I exhaled slowly. Josh must have locked it.

I opened my eyes in time to see Josh glance at the door, but then his attention was back on me, his eyes running down me. He had me topless and willing to have sex with him, but he was the one stopping us.

“You are so fucking perfect, Soph.” He kissed in between my breasts. “Which is why I won’t settle for one night.” He looked up serious. “I need you to know everything, and if then you still want this I’ll promise not to hurt you. Fuck, I’ll promise you anything.”

Now there was a banging on the door. Whoever it was wasn’t giving up.

Josh groaned. “Don’t move ok. I just need to tell whoever it is to fuck off.” Josh pulled away from me completely, and as soon as his hand left mine I felt like I was missing something.

In case it was Josh’s parents, I sat up and searched the floor for a top, putting the first one that my hand found.

“What the fuck do you want, Kyle?” Josh’s tone was anything but nice. I think he was more pissed off with Kyle because it had pulled Josh from me.

“I need to speak to Soph.” Kyle didn’t even seem fazed by how Josh spoke with him. “I’m guessing she is in there with you.”

I gulped. Why would Kyle want to speak to me?

“Fuck off, Kyle.” Josh went to slam the door in Kyle’s face, but Kyle stopped him.

“Let me rephrase that: Soph’s parents want to talk to her. They’ve been trying to get a hold of her all night, but you took her phone.”

Immediately I was up. My parents would only call Kyle if something was wrong, seriously wrong. They never called me when they were overseas. Maybe on the odd time when I had accidentally set the house alarms off. But that was it.

I squeezed in between Josh and the door.

“Did they tell you what was wrong?” I wasn’t hiding my panic. “Did they say why they called?”

Kyle looked somewhat smug;y at me. “No they didn’t. Said you would only understand.” Kyle handed me the phone. “It’s on mute. Didn’t want them hearing you fucking my brother.”

I rolled my eyes, but right now who and who I wasn’t having sex with wasn’t important.

I put the phone off my mute and put it to my ear. “I’m sorry I haven’t had my phone on me—”

I started to explain but Dad’s rushed voice cut me off. He was speaking so fast and in two different languages, which is something he would always do when he called. It would be English and whatever language of the culture he was currently in.

“Ok, Dad, slow down and speak English,” I said, unable to make sense of anything.

Then Dad spoke very clearly. And my mind was focused on two

words: Ryan and lock up.

“Ok, Dad, I’m leaving now.” I hung up and handed Kyle back his phone.

“Everything alright, Soph?” Kyle asked, sounding concerned.

I was back in Josh’s room searching the floor for my car keys; as soon as I found them I grabbed my shoes and darted out between them.

I turned just as I was about to bolt down the stairs to look at Josh. “I’m sorry, Josh, but I have to go.” I couldn’t tell him why. I couldn’t even explain what was happening if I wanted too.

I saw all the questions he had, but I didn’t have time to answer them. Instead, I ran down the stairs. The same two words ringing through my mind...