

BESTSELLING LESBIAN ROMANCE AUTHOR
MELISSA TEREZE

WHO
ARE
YOU?

IN
THE
DARK



IN
THE
DARK

MELISSA TEREZE



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“I love you as certain dark things are to be loved, in secret, between the shadow and the soul.”

— Pablo Neruda

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Pieces of Me

Contents

[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)
[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Chapter 19](#)
[Chapter 20](#)
[Chapter 21](#)
[Chapter 22](#)
[Chapter 23](#)
[Chapter 24](#)
[Chapter 25](#)
[Chapter 26](#)
[Chapter 27](#)
[Chapter 28](#)
[Chapter 29](#)
[Epilogue](#)

[SIGN UP TO WIN!](#)

[Did you enjoy it?](#)

[About Melissa Tereze](#)

[SOCIAL MEDIA](#)

[Also by Melissa Tereze](#)

Chapter One

THE EARLY AFTERNOON SUN BEAMED THROUGH THE LIVING ROOM window, warming Jo's usually cold house. She sat perched on one end of her old, worn corduroy couch, her legs tucked beneath her as she yawned. Considering her best friend Ada was only sorting out a cuppa for them, she was making a tremendous racket in the kitchen, a racket Jo could just about tolerate these days. Working from home for the last six months meant she preferred her own solitude. The moment someone stepped in and threatened that, Jo wanted to close the curtains and pretend she wasn't home.

"Could you make any more noise?" Jo called out as she shook her head. "The dead can't hear you. You may need to pick it up a bit!"

Ada came strolling through with two cups. "Oh, pipe down. We don't all spend our lives holed up in the box room upstairs."

Jo snorted. "It's a bigger box room than yours."

Silence settled over them for a few seconds, just the quiet clink of Ada setting down the cups reminding Jo that she wasn't alone. She didn't mind being alone, she'd always been satisfied with her own company, but she would admit that she'd been spending too much time alone lately. If she was noticing it herself, then something had to change. It wasn't normal to be so isolated at thirty-five. Not when Jo had the friends that she did. Ada was usually getting ready to hit the town with 'the girls' by now, while Jo was winding down after an early finish on a Friday afternoon.

"Work keeping you busy?" Ada asked as she reached for her cup and cradled it in her hands. "I haven't heard from you since last weekend, so something is keeping you busy."

“Yeah. Work is...work, I guess. It’s always busy.” Jo had been working for an insurance company for the last six months. Prior to that, she’d worked with her ex-boyfriend. She’d loved her job in the city, working for an international banking company, but seeing Callum and *her* around the place made her miserable, so she’d quit. Just like that. “I have a photography gig next week, though. That’ll be a nice change.”

“Oh! That’s amazing.” Ada regarded her with a genuine smile, but she’d always supported Jo in anything she did. Photography was her one true love, but it didn’t always pay the bills. “It’s been a while since you had paid photography work.”

“I know, but we’re coming out of winter, and people are generally more outdoorsy for the next six months or so. The lull over the colder months is common, really.”

“Yeah. I couldn’t think of anything worse than getting married when it’s pissing down with rain and hail.”

Jo lifted her cup and tipped it towards Ada with a smile. “The day *you* get married...” She cocked her head towards the sash window behind her and grinned. “I’ll show my arse out that window.”

Ada had always been a commitment-phobe. No matter who she met, she found a reason for it to not go any further. Jo kind of loved that about her, but surely they’d both have to settle down at some point. Everyone else in their friendship group was getting married or giving birth, while Jo and Ada went about life without a care in the world. At least, that was how Jo had approached things recently. If it made her happy, she would do it. If it didn’t, she wasn’t leaving the house.

“I think after everything you went through, it’s put me off for life.” Ada sank back onto the couch and sighed. “Besides, I don’t seem to be able to find a woman who wants a second date lately, never mind a wedding.”

“Tough out there?”

“All I’m saying is...don’t get your hopes up when it comes to dating again. The entire pool of people is just grim.”

God, that was a depressing thought. The idea of dating *and* the idea of meeting someone who couldn’t satisfy Jo. “Well, I’m good as I am. I haven’t once thought about dating since Callum broke up with me.”

Ada visibly shuddered. “Heard anything from him?”

“Callum? No. He’s in Southeast Asia with Thea. They’re backpacking, I believe.”

“You’ve been stalking his social media?” Ada’s eyes widened. “Babe, you need to let him get on with his life. He was sleeping with Thea and then coming home to you. Fuck him. Just...not literally, ever again.”

“I haven’t even got him on any of my social media. Amelia told me the last time I went over for coffee.” A thrill ran through her at the mention of Amelia. Ada had no idea the thoughts she’d had when it came to Callum’s mum over the years, but Jo wouldn’t *dare* go there. That was a disaster waiting to happen. Even so, Jo hadn’t expected to remain friends with Amelia, but she was a firm believer in being fair when it came to a breakup. Amelia was lovely. She’d always welcomed Jo into her home without a second thought, and honestly, she was better company than Callum had ever been. She saw no reason at all to cut contact with her. “She’s still not happy with him and how everything went down.”

“She’s probably feeling humiliated that he could do what he did to you.” Ada lifted a shoulder. “I don’t imagine many mothers want to know they’ve raised a son like that.”

While Jo appreciated what Ada was saying, she didn’t really care anymore. She’d done her grieving for the life she’d had with Callum, and now Jo was ready to see what came next. She couldn’t change what had happened, so why bother thinking about it? “Enough about Callum. What are your plans for the weekend?”

“Well, tonight I’m going to be having the best sex of my life...and then it’s going to take me all weekend to recover.”

Jo peered at her best friend over the rim of her cup, her eyes narrowed. “Like...you’ve scheduled sex or...?”

“Yep. Nine tonight.” Ada said that as though it was the most normal thing in the world. “I’ve been looking forward to it all week.”

“Well, then. You...have fun and all that.”

Ada gasped as she lowered her cup to the coffee table. “You should come with me!”

“Please don’t take this the wrong way, but I don’t really want to have a three-way with my best friend, if it’s all the same. You’re gorgeous, and you’d make the perfect girlfriend, but I think I’ll just stay here and let you do you...or whoever it is that’s doing whatever they’re going to be doing to you.” Jo waved a hand between them. “You catch my drift.”

“Not *with* me.” Ada rolled her eyes. “Come to Satin with me...then get your groove on with someone else.”

“You want me to come to a sex club with you?” Jo didn’t quite know how to take that. Did she *need* a sex club to restart her life? Or did she just need to stop falling for the wrong people?

“Sure. Why not? And it’s not called a sex club. It’s a private, intimate gathering for women who...want something a little different.”

“It’s women only?” Jo lifted a brow, her interest piqued suddenly.

“You think I’d go somewhere where men are swinging their dicks around? No thanks.”

Jo shifted on the couch, wanting to know more about what entering this club entailed. “Tell me more. What do I have to do to get in there?”

“Um, sign up for a membership and have a reference. That’s where I come in.”

“Y-you’d do that for me. Give me a reference?” Jo didn’t know why she was suddenly so interested in Satin, but she was just going with it. For so many months, she’d sat alone and questioned her worth, even when she knew Callum didn’t deserve her. For so many months, she had dreaded the mere thought of joining a dating site or heading out to a bar to meet someone. If Jo could have some hot, consensual fun, then why not grab it with both hands?

“Of course I would. We’ve been best friends since that morning in nursery when you pissed all over my foot.”

“I was four, for the love of God!”

“I know, but even then, I just knew you were my kind of person.”

Jo smiled. “I guess we evened out when you threw up all over mine during uni on that night out. We can call it quits now, right?”

Ada shifted forward and took Jo’s hand. “Come with me, please? Do something for yourself and have a night out that you’ll *never* forget.”

Jo swallowed, but it wasn’t anxiety she was feeling. No, it was excitement. The thrill of the unknown. Her life had been so...routine lately that this could surely only be a good thing for her. And if she came away from it having not enjoyed herself, at least she could say she’d experienced it. “Okay. What time should I be ready for?”

“I usually head to a bar nearby for a glass of wine beforehand. It helps to loosen you up, especially if it’s your first time there. So should we say... seven? I’ll pick you up in a cab.”

“I’ll be ready and at the door.”

JO HAD NEVER SEEN an entrance like it in her life. Sleek and black, definitely polished by the minute, and of course...no sign to indicate what lay behind it. She hesitated for a moment as she quickly ran her fingers through her hair, praying this wasn't a huge mistake she was making. It didn't feel as though it could be a mistake, and Jo generally went with her gut when it came to something new. All she'd felt up until this moment was exhilaration. For what she was about to face, for how she would feel after it, for a new experience she was more than entitled to.

"Ready?" Ada asked, flashing a filthy grin.

Jo steadied herself, mustering up a confidence she wasn't sure she possessed. God, she was way out of her comfort zone tonight. "As ready as I'll ever be."

As Ada pressed the buzzer, the door opened with an elegance Jo hadn't expected when it came to sex clubs. Though the truth was, she'd never stepped foot inside one before, so it would be wise not to judge so early on. As they moved inside, the chaos of the city faded away. Jo followed her best friend, taking in the interior of the corridor, only to end up in a reception area that looked more like a boutique hotel lobby than anything else. Velvet couches were dotted around, with marble tables separating them to make each seating area feel individual and intimate.

The woman behind the desk greeted Ada by name, and then she gave Jo an understanding smile. "Good evening."

Jo stepped towards the desk, helped along by the squeeze of Ada's hand. "Hi."

She *had* considered filling out her membership when she'd arrived, but Ada had insisted she take care of it via the online form. So, she had. Jo had spent most of the afternoon telling Satin every last thing they could possibly need to know about her. Ranging from what she enjoyed in the bedroom... to any potential allergies, followed by various identity checks.

Jo was grateful that Ada had pushed her to apply for a membership online, because now she didn't have to waste any time filling in forms. There was just something about this place that had her raring to go. What that would mean for the night ahead, Jo didn't know, but she was eager. She was excited, and she was ready to enjoy herself.

Two pendants were placed on the desk in front of them. A red one and a silver one. Sensing that Jo was questioning what they meant, Ada leaned in and said, "Silver means you're new here. Nobody will approach you unless you want them to. Red is for those of us who have been coming here for a while and want to experiment or...explore."

Jo nodded, thankful for the information. Even though she was happy to be here, she didn't want to make a fool of herself by doing something wrong. If Ada could walk her through it all before the night really got going, Jo would find her feet, and the rest would be history. "Got it. Thanks. I'll take the silver one for the time being."

She followed Ada through into the main lounge, the red pendant around her best friend's neck catching the light as mellow music played throughout, calming whatever hint of nerves Jo did have. The space was luxurious, the velvet and marble theme continuing throughout the club. The guests, some in their best dress and others in robes or lingerie, seemed to be at home here. Some chatted amongst themselves, while others had taken full advantage of the stylish beds around the room, curled up with one another as though sex and desire were the only languages spoken here. *Oh, it is.* Jo thought to herself, taken aback by just how relaxed everyone appeared to be.

As Jo continued on her subtle exploration of the room, Ada guided her towards an empty table in a darkened alcove near the back of the lounge. "Drink?"

"Yes, thank you." Jo lowered herself to the couch with ease, trying not to stare at the couples...throuples...and whatever else people were here as, stunned that she'd taken a dive into the unknown tonight. Still, she had to admire how nobody had batted an eyelid at their arrival. Nobody had watched on or judged they were simply getting on with their evening.

Ada returned with two flutes of champagne and set one down in front of Jo. "You're safe here. You don't have to do *anything* if you don't want to."

But Jo *did* want to. She itched to know more. "This place is gorgeous." Ada settled her hand over Jo's beneath the table. Jo looked down, frowning a little, then looked back up at Ada. "What...are you doing?"

"You can be a little bit unsure, you know, Jo. You don't have to pretend that you're completely fine with this." Ada smiled and squeezed her hand. "I know you. You portray what you want people to see."

“I really am okay, Ada. If I didn’t want to be here, I wouldn’t have agreed.” Jo scanned the space again, leaning in towards her best friend. “So, which one are you meeting tonight?”

“Oh, I don’t know her. I don’t see her.” Ada cocked her head towards one of the two doors directly across from them. “My fun happens in there.”

“What’s in there?”

“Darkness.”

Darkness? What kind of darkness was Ada talking about exactly? Actual darkness...or darkness in terms of what she was into? “Darkness?”

“Mmhmm. It’s a dark room.” Ada relaxed back against the velvet couch and crossed her legs. “You can have as little or as much as you want, but you never see the woman inside the room.” Ada searched Jo’s face, but Jo was giving nothing away. “Dark rooms have been around for a long, long time. Popular with the gay community and mostly used for group sex. This club decided to put a twist on it and make it a private room. There is one further down for those who like to drop in and get involved with more than one person, but the two ahead of us are *strictly* only for two people.”

A thrill ran up Jo’s spine as she listened. Whatever was in that room sounded exactly like what she needed. No face...no attachment. No knowledge of the real woman shrouded in darkness...just fantasy. “And how do you go about booking one of those rooms? The private ones.”

Ada’s brows rose. “You’re interested? I thought you would have just sat back and taken it all in tonight.”

Jo *could* have sat back and done exactly that, but why would she? She’d paid a hefty sum to enter this building, and she was sure as hell going to enjoy herself here. “Why should you have all the fun?”

“No, I just...I didn’t think you’d be so up for this.”

“Ada, you had me at ‘women only’ this afternoon.” Jo had been an out and proud bisexual since she was seventeen, but she’d only been in one serious relationship with a woman. Gemma had decided once university was over that she was moving out of the country. Jo guessed it made sense, she *was* an interpreter, but when they’d been together, it hadn’t seemed like a possibility that they would one day separate. “And I think until I know what I want, this sort of thing could be ideal for me. I don’t want anything serious. I only split up with Callum seven months ago.”

“You want access to one of those rooms? I mean, you’re sure?”

Jo nodded as she sipped her champagne. “I’m sure.”

“Okay, then I’m going to get you a form.” Ada grinned as she rose to her feet. “The smoking hot women in there like to know what you want. No need for small talk, you know?”

Jo swallowed as heat settled on her cheeks. She had spent a lot of time with her own body recently, but the desire burning in her right now would suggest she hadn’t had sex in ten years. Whatever was about to happen in that room...she was ready. She sat back and crossed her legs, gazing back up at Ada. “What are you still standing there for then?”

“Oh, I was just giving you a minute to come to your senses. You usually do.”

“My senses are just fine tonight.” Jo stroked a fingertip up the stem of her flute and smiled. “I’m ready for the form.”

Chapter Two

JO STEPPED INTO THE DARKNESS, THE HEAVY VELVET CURTAIN FALLING behind her as though it was sealing her in and protecting her from the outside. She had been instructed to undress and change into a satin robe some ten minutes ago, and now here she stood, the blackness before her threatening to nudge her nervous excitement towards fear.

She hesitated when Callum's voice echoed in the back of her mind. How Jo was boring and didn't know what adventure was. How she needed to let go and learn to live in the moment. But then a presence pulled her out of that headspace when soft, sure, *confident* fingers traced over her skin.

Without a word, the woman drew her in, her warm hand gliding up Jo's arm and leaving a path of fire in its wake. Jo knew it was the idea of being in a room like this, but she couldn't say she'd *ever* had that reaction to a simple touch before. The woman had barely breathed in her space, and Jo was already soaking wet.

"May I blindfold you?" The woman asked as she brushed Jo's cheek with a feather-light kiss. The sound of her voice had Jo on edge, that sexy, sultry tone sending the hairs on her arms upright.

"Y-yes." Jo exhaled a shaky breath, surrendering control as she allowed herself to relax here. She swallowed down that ache of not being wanted as the blindfold covered her eyes, shutting out everything but sensation.

"Feeling okay?"

"Yes," Jo said a little more confidently this time.

The darkness gave her a newfound freedom, and as the woman's hands roamed her body beneath the satin she had just parted, Jo allowed herself to

be touched and admired. The stranger's lips followed the path of her fingers as they stroked over her collarbone, hot and wet against her skin.

And then Jo gasped when she felt a feather—at least she assumed it to be that—trace her sternum, then circle one aching nipple into a taut peak. When the woman's mouth closed around it, Jo instinctively reached out and threaded her fingers through her luscious hair. She felt her smile, a light moan following when she sucked harder. The feather continued on an exploration of her body, but the woman's lips traced a line up Jo's throat until they stopped just short of her own lips. "You smell delicious." The woman purred, sending Jo's mind into a frenzy. She had the softest voice, but something told Jo that this woman knew exactly what she was doing. That she knew exactly what people were expecting when they entered this room. Mind-blowing sex. "May I taste you?"

"Mm," was all Jo could manage, her legs trembling when she was guided away from the spot she'd been standing in, only to be eased down onto what she imagined to be a bed. The surface was plush, soft against her back, and then she felt the bed dip at her feet. Soft palms spread her legs, and then she felt the woman's hot breath against her thigh. "Oh, fuck."

The woman responded with a gentle bite to her inner thigh, then her fingers spread Jo's lips, gathered her wetness, and slid inside her with confidence. Jo's hips bucked, her back arching from the bed the moment she felt those hot lips envelop her clit. She didn't want this to be over, she was only just getting started, but there was something about not knowing what was coming next that had her teetering on the edge. Right now, she was lost in every sensation...and lost in the intense heat roaring from deep within her.

The relentless lashing of the woman's tongue, coupled with her slender fingers inside was too much to take. The feather traced up Jo's stomach and across her nipples until she was begging for more, gasping and trembling as one hand fisted in the sheet beneath her. Her orgasm ripped through her, shattering every opinion she'd ever had of herself. She cried out, falling apart around the woman's fingers deep inside her, enjoying the way she coaxed everything Jo had to offer. As she trembled, the woman pulled her closer, stroking Jo's hair and soothing her as she rode out the aftershocks.

For the first time in months, Jo didn't feel worthless. She felt alive. She felt wanted. Callum's betrayal faded away as she lay in the warmth of the stranger's arms, replaced by the knowledge and understanding that she *did*

deserve this. Pleasure. Jo turned her face and pressed it to the woman's shoulder, smiling against her skin. Here, in the darkness of the room, she had found something she thought she had lost.

Herself.

The woman tilted Jo's face towards her and pressed a kiss just beneath her ear as she whispered, "You taste like heaven."

Jo shivered. Nobody had ever said that to her before. At least, not like that. Callum had never touched her or looked at her like she was something to be worshipped. And then a hand slid between Jo's thighs again, coaxing a moan from her lips before she could suppress it. She wasn't done. Not even close. The fire that had taken root in her belly earlier was growing at a speed she couldn't comprehend. *Fuck! Who is this woman?*

"I want you to fall apart again," that gentle voice murmured. "Fuck, you have the most delicious moan."

Jo's breath caught. She turned towards the voice, still blindfolded and still lost in the dark, but she didn't hesitate. "Please."

The woman guided Jo to sit up, straddling her lap in a single, fluid movement. Jo's hands, trembling but eager, explored the contours of the woman's body, her bottom lip caught between her teeth when those confident hips shifted forward. Jo guided a hand between the stranger's legs, her breath catching at just how slick and ready she was. "Touch me."

Jo obeyed, her fingers stroking over her clit. The low, throaty moan she received in response spurred her on, and she quickly found a rhythm, losing herself in the pace and the wet heat building beneath her fingers. The woman rocked against her hand, and when her mouth found Jo's again, it was urgent...desperate. Their tongues clashed, their teeth grazed, and their hands roamed with a kind of hunger Jo hadn't known she possessed. God, every breath they took felt shared right now.

"I want you inside me again," Jo hadn't planned to say that out loud. Truth be told, she hadn't even known she'd wanted it. But the moment she'd felt that aching emptiness between her legs, she knew she needed it all over again. "Please..."

The stranger reached for something—Jo felt the movement and heard a faint rustle away from her—and then she was being eased back onto the bed, the satin robe still clinging to her shoulders. The mattress dipped, and then Jo felt the delicious pressure of something firm teasing between her soaked lips.

“Breathe,” the woman whispered, her voice thick with desire.

Jo breathed in and opened herself to whatever was about to happen. And then the exhilarating slide of the strap filled her inch by inch. Her fingers clutched the woman’s waist, guiding her deeper, anchoring Jo to the moment.

The rhythm started slow, and those long, deep thrusts had Jo almost seeing stars behind the blindfold. She arched her back as every stroke ignited something new, but every grind of their hips only sent her closer to the edge all over again.

“Harder!” Jo begged. “Please, fuck me harder.”

The woman obliged, driving into her with impressive control, the sound of skin slapping against skin echoing softly in the enclosed space. One hand slipped between them and found Jo’s clit again, rubbing tight circles in time with the thrusts that were now relentless.

Jo shattered again. Only this time, it was violent. Her cry tore through the room as her body writhed beneath the stranger, her limbs trembling uncontrollably as pleasure ripped through every inch of her. The woman fucked Jo through her orgasm, dragging every ounce of sensation from her spent body until Jo was drenched in sweat and slick with satisfaction.

When the movement slowed and finally stilled, the woman eased out of her, lay down beside her, and pulled Jo into the curve of her body. Nobody in this world had *ever* given Jo such a night to remember. She also suspected nobody could ever top what she’d just experienced.

Trying to remain composed, Jo allowed herself to be swept up in the afterglow and everything she was feeling.

For the first time in years, Jo didn’t feel like someone waiting to be chosen. In this room, with this woman, she already had been.

THOUGH AMELIA’S hand was steady as she traced gentle circles over Jo’s bare shoulder, her mind was racing. She hadn’t meant for this to happen. Certainly not here, and absolutely *not* like this. With Jo blindfolded, and anonymity protecting Amelia in this moment. But as soon as Jo had stepped into the club and ultimately chosen to spend her evening inside this dark room, Amelia had known what the outcome would be.

She allowed herself a moment to soak up what was happening here. The knowledge that Jo's body was pressed against her. Amelia had held this secret for so long that it felt as though the guilt eating away at her was second nature now. All those nights lying awake, her mind conjuring up Jo's laughter and her gorgeous smile. It was forbidden *and* ridiculous, yet those thoughts were never quite gone.

And now Jo lay here, wrapped up in her arms, with no idea who she was in this room with. Amelia's stomach lurched. The longing, the wonder, and the guilt were all tangled up inside of her. She had dreamed of touching this woman for so long, and now that it had happened, Amelia warred with herself. She couldn't reveal who she was. Not now, and not here.

Jo shifted a little, her fingers lightly brushing the inside of Amelia's wrist. "Thank you," Jo whispered, unaware of who she'd given herself to. "I really mean that."

A deep ache settled in Amelia's chest. She had spent the last six months wondering if she could confess everything, and even now, she still didn't know the answers. Instead, she pressed a kiss to Jo's hair, lingering as she inhaled her scent. God, she'd craved a moment like this. "You're so beautiful."

She recalled the years she'd known Jo, watching her in the kitchen with Callum. She had always seemed so bright and full of life. Amelia had told herself it was only admiration, that what she felt was some strange maternal pride along with happiness for the woman her son had chosen to be with, but when the breakup came—so ugly and desperately sad—Amelia had mourned the loss of Jo in her daily life far more than she cared to admit. Yes, they still met up now and then for coffee, but *this* was where she wanted to be with Jo. If she couldn't have anything deep and meaningful with her, then she would allow herself this.

Jo sat up a little, and though Amelia couldn't see her face, she knew she was smiling. "Can I take off the blindfold now?"

Panic rose throughout Amelia. She had been coming into this room for many years now, so why did she wonder if Jo would be able to make out her facial features? She couldn't, it wasn't even possible to see a hand in front of her face, but the darkness had a funny way of playing tricks with you.

"Of course." Amelia was careful to keep the tone of voice she'd used when Jo entered the room. It was clear she hadn't realised who it was

speaking, and if that kept the mystery for a while longer, then Amelia would do whatever she could to maintain this...alter ego. "This is your first time here?"

"It is," Jo said into the darkness, her voice as soft as ever. "I couldn't have picked anyone better to experience my first time here with."

Amelia let her hand wander over Jo's bare thigh, her skin still hot to the touch. For a moment, she allowed herself to pretend that this was okay. That Jo was hers, no lines had been crossed, and no consequences were on the horizon.

But reality quickly set in again. Amelia had always been the careful one. The quiet one. She'd watched Jo fall in love with her son, and then she'd watched him break her heart, never daring to be forthcoming with how she felt. But here, in the darkness, she found Jo's lips again. The kiss was gentle, lingering...and Amelia was savouring what she knew she may never have again. This impossible moment with Jo Bleasdale.

Jo pressed closer, her hand wrapped around the back of Amelia's neck as she kissed her with a little more fire this time. When she drew back, she whispered, "I feel like I know you." God, that voice...those lips. Could Amelia be honest? Jo sighed. "Even though I don't."

Maybe you do, Amelia wanted to speak that out loud, but the consequences remained firm in her mind. If she did come clean, Jo would probably cut contact with her. Lately, coffee with Jo was the only thing she looked forward to. "Will you be here again?"

Jo smiled against Amelia's lips and said, "What do you think?"

She enjoyed it more than I thought she would. Amelia didn't know what to do with that information. Would Jo be back here solely for her again, or was she happy to give herself to anyone who was in this room? Jo didn't seem like that kind of person, but what did Amelia know? She had only been the woman who had admired her from afar for several years. "I'd like to see you in here again..."

Silence settled over them as they held one another, wrapped up in the shadows...and now secrets. Amelia memorised the feel of Jo's body against her, the taste of her skin, the tightening of her walls as she came undone around Amelia's fingers. A shiver ghosted up her spine, and then came the disconnection as Jo slipped out of Amelia's arms. "Maybe you will."

And just like that...Jo was gone, walking out of the curtain and leaving Amelia alone in the dark. Only this time, the room seemed darker and far

lonelier than it ever had before. If she closed her eyes and focused, Amelia could still hear Jo's breathy moans as she writhed and arched beneath her.

Amelia sat painfully still, letting the cool air in the room brush over her flushed skin. She wished she'd said what she wanted to say. What she *needed* to say. She lifted a trembling hand and touched her lips to where Jo had just kissed her. She could still taste her. She could still feel the sensation of Jo's arms wrapped around her in the dark. So many years of wanting her, pushing it down, hiding it all away...it had just grown exponentially.

Tonight had been reckless, and to many, it would have been unforgiveable. But Amelia hadn't been able to stop herself the moment Jo shivered under the touch of her fingertips. She knew what Jo had been going through since the split, and she had wanted to comfort her. To remind her that she was beautiful, and that Callum had never known what he had when he was with Jo. She'd wanted to make her feel cherished and wanted. Amelia had also selfishly wanted to take something for herself, too. And Jo had given it so freely. She had put her trust in the person behind the curtain. Amelia pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes, willing her tears to remain at bay.

It would be the easiest thing in the world to rush out after Jo, to stand before her and tell her it had been Amelia in this room. To say...*I wanted you, and I always have*. But that would shatter everything between them, and Amelia wasn't willing to risk it. It had been a fantasy for Jo, the unknown of the dark room in the club, and Amelia would be wise to remember that.

Above all else, Jo was vulnerable. She was hurting. The last thing Amelia wanted was to confuse her and make her question what had happened in the room. To...question herself. None of that was necessary. Not right now.

And so, Amelia had decided. She wouldn't tell Jo. Not yet, and maybe not ever. Jo was on a journey of discovering a new life for herself, and Amelia owed her the space to find what she was looking for. Tonight was a secret she would keep close to her chest. But even as she tried to convince herself, Amelia knew she would replay every moment of this night for a long time to come. Every touch, every gasp, every whispered word.

She rose to her feet and dressed in silence, moving slowly as she mulled over everything in her mind. When she finally stepped out into the hallway,

choosing to exit via a side door, the cold immediately gave her some kind of clarity. She felt lighter as the cool air brushed her face, her clammy palms beginning to settle down.

And as she turned for the direction of home, she promised herself that she would keep Jo safe from this secret. At least...for now.

Chapter Three

WITH A DEEP SENSE OF DREAD SITTING IN HER STOMACH, AMELIA paced the kitchen floor, going over everything in her mind. She'd spent the last hour trying to take a normal breath, but the storm raging inside her showed very little sign of breaking. Evelyn—or Evie, as she preferred—was on her way over. She'd been summoned by Amelia's trembling voice when she'd called her a little while ago. She didn't know if she could say the words out loud that needed to be said, but she did know she couldn't carry this alone.

Evie was her best friend and her anchor. She was the one Amelia always turned to when the ground felt as though it might split open beneath her feet. She was also the one who had introduced her to Satin, and the only other person who truly understood what that place meant. Satin wasn't just a club; it was a sanctuary and a place to lose yourself. Or, in Amelia's case, find someone you never meant to.

Just relax. Jo has no idea it was you.

Right now, that single thread of certainty was all Amelia had to hold onto. Everything else was a mess in her head. Her memories, her hopes, her fears. They all whirled around at an unnecessary speed. Still, Jo had put Amelia's mind at rest. Her cheery text message this morning, confirming their weekly coffee, hinted that Jo was unaware of the identity of the stranger in the room last night.

And now, as Amelia tried to breathe and find some semblance of calm, she allowed her mind to dangerously wander back to last night. She imagined the feeling of Jo's silky blonde hair running through her fingers, and the shape of her hip beneath Amelia's palm. The impossible sweetness

of Jo's arousal. She'd discovered so much about Jo last night...what made her cry out in ecstasy, what made her tremble and come undone against Amelia's tongue.

A shiver rolled through Amelia as she lowered herself into a seat at the dining table. The quiet of the house did little to relieve her of the filthy thoughts running through her mind, but she would survive this. She had to. Still, the longer she waited for Evie, the more her mind replayed every second, every gasp, every strangled whisper. Last night had been short, almost too brief for Amelia's usual hunger, but Jo had given her a memory that felt as though it would last a lifetime. It was seared into her, and as a result, Amelia had woken this morning and reached for the toy in her bedside drawer before she had fully opened her eyes.

The doorbell startled Amelia up out of her seat. She rushed down the hall, her heart hammering, and forced the door open. She dragged Evie inside, slamming the door shut and locking it in fear of Evie running out and not helping her through this.

"What's going on? You sounded terrible on the phone earlier." Evie's worry was written all over her face, but her voice was as gentle as ever. "Love?"

"Go through to the kitchen. I'd offer you a glass of wine but, well, I'm not sure I'm in the right headspace for alcohol right now." Amelia gestured down the hallway, then followed Evie and her confident stride. Usually, confidence bounced between them like a spark. Today, Amelia felt as though she didn't possess an ounce of it. No, she felt as though everything bright and bold inside of her had drained away. "I've just made coffee. Would you like some?"

"Oh, go on. I promised myself less caffeine, but something tells me I'm going to need it." Evie winked and offered a soft, understanding smile as she took a seat. "No plans today?"

"No, thankfully." That was a lie. Jo would be here soon, but Amelia chose to keep that tucked safely away for now. "Will you be at *Satin* tonight?"

"No. I thought I'd spend the weekend at home. Last week was quite the experience."

Satin. That word always caused a jolt of something wild and dangerous deep inside of her. Evie had been the one to show her its shadowy corners

and secret doors, and she'd quickly learned that she preferred the privacy of the dark room. "Too much for you?"

"Not in the moment, it wasn't. But the next day...fucking hell. I had *no* idea I was so flexible or capable of so many orgasms in one night." Evie's nonchalance was so familiar that it made Amelia's shoulders loosen just a little. "You should give the public room a try if you have the stamina. Not knowing what's coming is quite something."

"Oh, I shouldn't. Satin is the reason I asked you to come over. It seems I can't even behave myself in the private room, never mind the public one."

Concern settled over Evie's features. "What...happened?"

"I was there last night. It was a quiet night in terms of those of us attending, but I wasn't bothered whether someone shared the room with me or not. There were plenty of toys to hand if it ended up being a lonely night."

"Okay." Evie frowned as she searched Amelia's face. "So..."

"Someone *did* want to share the room with me." Amelia's throat dried as she carried two coffees to the table. She forced herself to meet Evie's eyes as she sat down. "You won't believe who came in."

"Who?"

"Callum's ex-girlfriend."

Evie reacted with a sharp gasp, her hands gripping the edge of the table as her eyes widened with shock. "J-Jo? *That* ex?"

"Yes. That ex." Amelia wished that Evie wouldn't be so dramatic. Every slight reaction made it harder for her to speak, so the dramatics made her want the floor to open up.

"I bet she was disappointed when you revealed yourself, and you went your separate ways." Evie sighed. "But I wouldn't worry. These things happen. Probably more than either of us realise."

"We...didn't go our separate ways, Evie. We had mind-blowing sex, cuddled, and I think we agreed to see one another again there."

Evie's hand slowly slipped from the table, her face draining of colour. "You're not serious. You can't see her again, Amelia."

"I know." Amelia's voice threatened to break when emotion welled in her throat. She pressed it down and continued. "The reason she wants to see me again is that I didn't tell her it was me in the room. And I know, *I know* I should have, but I couldn't face the rejection."

"You didn't tell her?"

“No.” Amelia propped her chin on her fist. “I thought about coming clean once we were laying there, but we’re friends, Evie. She’s coming over this afternoon for coffee, like usual. If I’d told her, I probably wouldn’t see her ever again.”

Evie’s brows drew together, her concern palpable in the air around them. “Surely she knew it was you. Your voice alone would give it away.”

“Not when I used a different voice.” As Amelia said that, tremendous guilt settled deep inside of her. It hadn’t felt like a deception in the moment, but now...now it felt as though that was all it had been. And worse, it had tainted what should have been the most beautiful memory. “Should I tell her, or just never go to Satin again?”

“See how it goes when she comes over today. She could walk in here and tell you she knows it was you and that the sex had been amazing.” Evie drew her coffee closer. “But if she comes here and doesn’t mention the fact that it was you, then yes, I would consider telling her the truth. At least then, if you *do* end up in the room together again, it’s because you both want it, and she doesn’t give a fuck that you could have been her mother-in-law.”

“Right.”

“I know you, Amelia. You’re going to beat yourself up about this until you make a decision. I don’t want you to do that. Satin is about letting go and experiencing whatever it is you want to experience. I never want it to become a negative in your life. Not if it brings you joy.” Evie gave her a knowing look. “And I’d also like to remind you that the membership states that you may come across people you know at the club. Jo would also know that. You’ve done nothing wrong here, Amelia.”

Oh, it had brought her so much joy. Last night had been dazzling and unforgettable. But now shame had crept in, threatening to steal the memory away. As for the membership rules, none of that made her feel any better right now.

“Are you going to tell Callum?”

Amelia arched a brow. “I don’t think Callum would like to know that his mother frequents a sex club, do you?”

“Maybe you could mention it in some other way. Just tell him you had a one-night stand with his ex. Blame alcohol or something.”

The sheer horror Amelia felt about that hit her square in the chest. “Absolutely not!”

“Love, you’ll have to come clean about all of this at some point. He was with Jo for three years. The poor thing thought he was going to ask her to marry him.”

Amelia sighed as she stared into her coffee, willing herself not to cry. She’d made such a mess of everything, but she *couldn’t* regret last night. No matter how hard she tried. Right now, Callum was the least of her concerns. And even if it was her biggest concern, there wasn’t a single universe where she’d *ever* tell him about this. “Don’t remind me. I still hate what he did to her. And Thea...she’s *nothing* compared to Jo.”

“But look at it this way.” Evie shifted closer, her eyes glistening with a familiar mischief as she leaned in. “If he hadn’t cheated and pissed off travelling, you wouldn’t have been deep inside his ex last night.” Evie winked, but her smile faded when she realised Amelia didn’t share in her enthusiasm. “Oh, come on! You can’t say what happened wasn’t incredibly hot. Knowing it’s forbidden...”

“If I didn’t feel so guilty, then yes, I’d agree with you. But right now, I feel...terrible.”

“If you hadn’t known who was going into that room, you’d be none the wiser. Don’t beat yourself up about this. Just...consider if it’s something you should do again.” Evie’s hand was warm and supportive as it covered Amelia’s. “We meet all kinds of people at the club. It’s not ideal that on this occasion it was Jo, but it’s not the end of the world.”

“She probably won’t go to the club anymore. I don’t even know if it was with a friend or whether she stumbled upon it. But it’s not the type of place I ever imagined seeing her at.”

“There you go. She probably turned up not realising what the place was.”

Even though Amelia nodded in agreement, she *didn’t* agree. It was impossible to just stumble upon Satin. Even if Jo hadn’t known, she still had to sign up, sign waivers, and do everything anyone else with a membership there had to do. Mistakes like that did *not* happen at Satin. “Maybe, yeah.”

“It’ll all blow over. This kind of thing always does.”

Amelia curled her hands around her cup, wondering if *anything* could ever be that simple again. But maybe Evie was right. Maybe Amelia had to wait and see what the atmosphere was like when Jo arrived here later today. Until then, she would continue to worry...and go out of her mind.

Chapter Four

WITH A SPRING IN HER STEP FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE CALLUM HAD fucked her over, Jo practically glided up Amelia's garden path, a sense of freedom pulsing through her veins. The sights and sounds of the world around her were sharper than usual. Even the sky seemed brighter, regardless of the grey clouds rolling in. Had the world noticed that she was finally crawling back out of her shell? God, she hoped so.

Jo knocked loudly as soon as she reached the front door, her body thrumming with a nervous anticipation. She didn't know how much she would give away while she was here, but Amelia had always been more of a friend to her than anything else. There had never been an ounce of judgement from her in the days since Callum had left, just a patience and understanding that made Jo feel as though she could be open and honest about anything she was feeling. It was an odd feeling since the very woman Jo often sat around spending time with was the very same woman who had given birth to the devil in Jo's life. She still struggled to shake off the conflict, that unusual collision of the past and present whenever she stepped through the door.

She may be his mother, but she's fucking hot!

That thought had Jo's insides churning with a mixture of embarrassment...and thrill. She'd lost count of the number of times she'd caught herself staring at Amelia, often lingering on the delicate lines between her brow or the way her mysterious brown eyes lit up when she laughed. Jo didn't think she'd ever been caught, but if she had, Amelia had always been gracious enough to keep it to herself.

For the first year with Callum, Jo had struggled to keep her wits about her in this house, more often than not tiptoeing around her own desire. But as her relationship with Callum solidified, she'd chosen to draw a line under her attraction to Amelia. It resurfaced now and then, more so in the last six months as her life fell apart, but Jo knew how to let things go. And fooling around with Amelia? That was something she'd absolutely let go of. It was a dangerous game that could ruin the only safe haven she had left.

Bouncing nervously on the balls of her feet, Jo breathed a sigh of relief when the front door finally swung open. Amelia stared back at her, something flickering in her eyes, and cleared her throat. "Come in."

Jo stepped through the door, the familiar scent of Amelia's home enveloping her and ultimately comforting her. She slipped off her coat and made her way into the living room, trying not to overthink. But given the events last night with her mystery woman, Jo was finding it hard to do anything other than overthink. Her mind had been going a mile a minute since she'd retreated from the darkened room. Had each touch meant something to her, too? Not likely, but Jo could pretend for a while longer since it had made her happy in that moment.

She didn't know what plans Amelia had for the weekend, but Jo had already sorted out hers. Tonight, she was heading back to Satin. Ada may join her, or not, but Jo didn't care. She'd be there regardless. The dark room and its secrets had lit something inside of her that she hadn't felt in years, and tonight she wanted more. This time...hot, raunchy, and reckless.

"Usual coffee?" Amelia poked her head around the door, her lips pulled into a tight smile that Jo hadn't expected.

"Yes. Thanks." Jo's response was automatic, but Amelia was gone before she could say anything else. Something about her seemed off. Distant, perhaps. Was there something Amelia needed to talk about? Jo hoped she knew that she could do so with her. Jo owed her far more—Amelia had been there for her from the moment Callum had left—but she didn't want to push. She chewed her lip, debating whether to ask if Amelia was okay, and then she wandered towards the kitchen. She found Amelia hunched over the sink, the kettle whistling on the opposite counter. "Hey, you okay?"

Startled, Amelia spun around. "Yes, why?"

"I don't know. You don't seem yourself today." Jo's brows drew together with concern as she watched Amelia, noting the tension in her

shoulders and the careful way she held herself. “If today isn’t a good day for you, we can hold off on the coffee and have it another day instead.”

“No, no. I’m fine.” Amelia’s usual bright white smile appeared. It was so effortlessly beautiful, and just as distracting as ever. Jo forced herself to look away, her mind flashing back to a thousand moments she’d imagined crossing that forbidden line. *Not today. Not ever*, she scolded herself. She may have thrown caution to the wind last night with a woman she’d never met before, but Amelia was off-limits. She couldn’t break the rules here.

“How’s your weekend been so far?”

“Mine?” Jo frowned, thrown for a second by the question, and then she smiled. Oh, she smiled wider than she had in a long time. “I don’t know where to begin.”

Amelia leaned back against the counter, watching Jo with curiosity. “Oh?”

“Ada came over yesterday afternoon. She invited me to a club last night, and instead of sitting around at home, I decided to bite the bullet and have some fun.”

Jo could feel the excitement building as she spoke, barely able to contain herself. For the first time in months, the words were going to pour out of her without a second thought. She wanted Amelia to know that she was *finally* clawing her way out of the dark...even if she was also crawling towards it, so to speak. But the two could never compare. The darkness shrouding her mystery woman was exhilarating and enticing. The complete opposite of what she’d been living with.

She paused for a moment, contemplating whether she should ask Amelia out to dinner. Not for anything untoward, Jo wasn’t that brave, but because she wanted to go out and enjoy herself with a friend who had dropped everything to console her in recent months. Then her heart started to race with nerves at the mere suggestion of dinner.

She’d avoided it before. Jo was afraid of putting Amelia on the spot, and of letting her feelings show too clearly. But something deep inside of her today made Jo feel brave. The faceless, nameless woman at Satin had helped her to let go of something heavy, and now Jo was in a place where she was willing to risk whatever she had to in order to have a much more fulfilling life. That fulfilment came in the form of dinner with Amelia. Something light and easy with someone she cared about.

“I’m glad you decided to take a chance and have some fun. I couldn’t tell you the last time I went clubbing.” Amelia moved around the kitchen with the same sexy sway of her hips that always made Jo’s breath catch, and then she landed in front of Jo and handed her a steaming cup of coffee.

“It...wasn’t a normal club,” Jo said, taking the cup. She made her way back to the living room, settled herself on the couch, and caught Amelia’s eye. “It’s a certain type of club. More...intimate, you know?”

“Intimate?”

Jo closed her eyes, unable to fight back a grin. “Amelia, she took me to a sex club!” There it was. The truth laid bare. “Sorry, but it’s easier to just come out and say it instead of talking in riddles. I just...I feel as though I’m going to burst if I don’t speak to someone about it.”

“Oh, I’m not easily offended. Don’t worry.”

Jo watched Amelia closely, searching for a hint of judgment or shock, but she gave nothing away. How could Callum’s mum—pristine and proper Amelia Loughlin—not react to that? “Really?”

“Really.”

“So, can I talk about it with you...or would you rather I didn’t?”

Amelia shifted and brought her cup to her lips. “You *know* you can talk to me about anything.”

“Okay, so...Ada mentioned this dark room. There’s a few of them at the club, but two of them are private. So, no group sex, basically.” Jo studied Amelia, but she seemed as comfortable as ever, simply nodding along. “I chose the private room. I’m not into sharing. When I’m with someone, I want their full attention on me.”

“Understandable.”

“There was a woman in the room. I didn’t see her face, but my God.” Jo closed her eyes, her skin tingling at the memory.

“My God...what?”

“Let’s just say it was an interesting encounter.” Jo laughed as she held up a hand. She knew when to quit while she was ahead. Amelia was open-minded, but Jo didn’t want to test the boundaries of their friendship. “That’s all you need to know.”

“You didn’t see her face? Doesn’t that bother you?”

“No. Not at all. People go to the club for all different reasons.” Jo shrugged as she sank deeper into the couch. “To be honest, not seeing her just added to how unbelievably hot it all was.”

“Huh. Interesting.”

“Look, I know it’s not for everyone, and I know this is probably completely overstepping by even talking to you about it, but I’m just shocked at how much I enjoyed being there. I’m...heading back tonight.”

“She must have been quite something if you’re going straight back for seconds.” Amelia rubbed a thumb up and down the handle of her coffee cup, a faint smile playing on her lips. “I didn’t know you were bisexual.”

“It’s not something I’ve ever felt the need to broadcast, but yeah... I’ve always been attracted to women.” Something in the air shifted between them. Jo hoped Amelia wasn’t upset that she hadn’t told her about her sexuality. It just wasn’t something that had ever come up in conversation before. *She’s a lesbian. How has it never come up before?* Jo quickly shifted on the couch and settled beside Amelia. “Hey, I know it’s been a rough six months or so for me, but I wanted to thank you for being there through it all.”

“You needed a shoulder. I have two.”

“I know, but I didn’t expect you to stand by me when he left. I expected you to take Callum’s side. And rightfully so.”

“My son is an idiot who lost the best thing that ever happened to him,” Amelia said as her hand covered Jo’s. The warmth of her touch sent a shiver up Jo’s arm. “If he can’t see that, then that’s on him. But *I* wasn’t going to cut you from my life just because he made several stupid mistakes.”

“Well, I appreciate that. I appreciate *you*, Amelia.”

Amelia’s cheeks flushed, but it hadn’t been Jo’s intention to embarrass her. Still, it had needed to be said. It was important to Jo that Amelia knew she had saved her on more than one occasion lately. She deserved to know she was appreciated.

“I mean it. I don’t know what I would have done without you.” Jo sat back and slowly drew Amelia’s hand into her lap. “And you’ll be pleased to know that I won’t be coming here anymore to offload on you. You saw me through the worst of it, and after last night, I’m ready to live my life and enjoy it how I see fit. No more wallowing. No more locking myself away.”

Amelia nodded slowly, staring down at her cup. “You don’t need me now...therefore, you won’t be coming over anymore.”

“Oh, no. That’s not what I’m saying. Not at all.” Jo turned fully to Amelia and smiled. So many times over the years, she had wanted to reach out and touch Amelia, to let her fingers glide through that gorgeous dark

hair. They gazed back at one another, and as Amelia's dark eyes met hers, Jo felt that pull all over again. "Hey, I'm not abandoning you. *Never*. I just want you to know that life is changing for me. That I'm happy again."

"And it's all because of this mystery woman at a sex club?"

Jo let out a breath, her eyes wide. "Yeah. I guess it is."

"Then I hope you continue to enjoy those moments with one another." Amelia squeezed Jo's hand before gently pulling away, but her touch would linger in Jo's memory. It often did when they were this close to one another. "What time are you heading there? Do you have time to stay a bit longer?"

"Oh, I'm not booked into the room until eight. Decided to take care of that this morning before I moved from my bed." Jo laughed, shaking her head at her own impulsiveness. But maybe impulsiveness was good. It certainly beat sitting at home expecting life to just change by itself. "I was worried someone else would book in before me."

"It sounds to me like fate if the room was available for you again tonight." Amelia winked as she rose from the couch and disappeared into the kitchen.

"Hey, Amelia?" Jo followed, hovering in the doorway when her nerves threatened to get the better of her. "Did you want to head out one night and get dinner together? This week or next...whenever you're not snowed under with work?" Amelia's dedication to her work—a property developer for the local council by day, a house flipper by night—meant she was rarely available at the drop of a hat, but Jo was in no rush here. She had all the time in the world to sit around having dinner with Amelia.

Amelia turned, her brows lifting with surprise. "Me? Why?"

"My way of saying thank you for being there for me." Jo tried to sound casual and as though her heart wasn't hammering in her chest. If this woman wasn't basically her ex-mother-in-law, she may have tried her luck long ago. But she was, and Jo had to remember that. "If you'd rather not, that's okay. But I wanted to offer anyway."

"I'd love to go out for dinner with you. Just let me know which evening suits you, and I'll make myself available."

"Oh. Great. Yeah, that would be lovely." Though Jo was shocked Amelia had agreed, she wouldn't show it. "You're not just doing this because you think you have to, are you?"

Amelia slowly sauntered across the kitchen and stopped in front of Jo. When she lifted a hand and brushed her fingertips across Jo's cheek, it took

everything within Jo not to lean into her touch. “Relax. I *want* to have dinner with you.”

Jo swallowed down whatever the fuck she was feeling, the touch burning her skin while Amelia’s perfume sent her dizzy. As Amelia drifted back into the living room without another word, Jo stood frozen for a moment, the kitchen suddenly holding a million memories. She’d spent so many hours in here, crying and feeling lost...certain she was unlovable. But something had shifted. The air didn’t feel so miserable here anymore. No, it felt electric...maybe even hopeful. She didn’t want that to change. The softness of Amelia’s fingertips had felt too good against her skin. But most of all, they’d felt...familiar.

She’s never touched you like that before. It can’t possibly be familiar.

Chapter Five

FIXING HER LINGERIE ON HER HIPS, AMELIA STARED BACK AT HERSELF in the mirror of the bathroom attached to the private room. For the last several years, she'd booked dark room two every Friday and Saturday night—and she'd booked them a week in advance. It was her way of unwinding without worrying about attachment. She was fed up with waiting for her dates to call back, and she was fed up with not knowing where she stood with people—at least, that was what she told herself and anyone else who asked—so when Evie had suggested Satin, Amelia had jumped at the prospect.

She would admit that it wasn't the wisest idea in the world to be here tonight, but Jo had seemed so happy and full of life this afternoon when they'd had coffee. She'd seemed like the old Jo. The very Jo that Amelia had fallen for in the weeks and months after Callum had brought her home. Even if she was setting herself up to get hurt, she couldn't let Jo down tonight.

But she *could* keep her wits about her.

If there was one hint of Jo knowing Amelia was the woman in this room with her, Amelia would find a reason to excuse herself and leave.

She quickly lifted her phone and sent off a message to Evie.

Wish me luck! Jo is back at the club.

Amelia exhaled a slow, calming breath and lowered her phone with a shaking hand. While that idea of deception remained in her mind, she couldn't stop whatever was about to happen. All she'd ever wanted once Callum foolishly cheated on Jo was for Jo to be happy. If this was where that happiness resided, then Amelia couldn't change it. Of course she would

prefer to take Jo out on a date, wine and dine her, ultimately falling into bed with one another after dancing the night away...but life never went that way. *Amelia's* life never went that way. Even now, when she had the chance to tell Jo it was her who was making her happy, she just couldn't do it. Because it wasn't that simple, and it never would be.

Her phone buzzed on top of her belongings.

Forget about who she is and just have fun. That's what the club is all about. Neither of you are doing anything wrong, I wish you could understand that.

Amelia frowned. Evie had been the one who told her she had to come clean to Jo. Why the sudden change of heart?

You wanted me to tell her the truth.

Amelia chewed her lip when Evie started to respond.

I did. But I've had time to think about it since I got home. Jo is there willingly, and so are you. If being alone together in that room gives you both the pleasure you're looking for, it's nobody's business but your own. All I ask is that you keep it to that room and then you won't get hurt. Call me tomorrow x

Amelia smiled when she reread the message. Evie was right, and she'd been doing this far longer than Amelia had. They were two consenting adults, and that's where it ended.

The light above the changing room door flashed twice, reminding Amelia that Jo would be in the room within the next few minutes. She powered her phone off, fixed her hair—though she didn't know why—and entered the darkness, eagerly anticipating Jo's arrival.

After a couple of minutes, the heavy velvet curtain pulled back, and Jo's familiar perfume filled the air around them. Amelia took a deep, inconspicuous breath, clenched and unclenched her hands, and stepped closer. "You came back..."

"I would have been a fool not to," Jo said, stepping forward and placing her hand on Amelia's stomach. When she did, the muscles contracted on contact. "I didn't know if you'd be here or not."

"If I hadn't been?"

Jo's breath washed over Amelia's lips as she pulled her in close. "I would have left."

A rush of blood went directly to Amelia's head at that admission. Jo *only* wanted to see her. Nobody else. *Fuck, you're in trouble here.* "I'm sure

you could have found someone else instead of me.”

“The way you touch me?” Jo smiled against her lips, one arm now wrapped around her waist. “No. Just you.”

Amelia slipped Jo’s robe from her shoulders, wishing she could see her beautiful blue eyes in this moment. While she felt the sincerity in what Jo was saying, she knew Jo’s eyes would have cemented what she was feeling without the need for words. “Tell me, Jo...” Amelia waited a beat, hoping to sense what Jo was feeling at the use of her name. “Who are you in the dark?”

Jo’s breath caught when Amelia guided her towards the chaise along the opposite wall to the bed. Amelia had memorised every square metre of this room within the first few weeks of being here, so now, she could see the layout in the dark. She lowered Jo, then dropped to her knees as she spread her legs.

“Well?”

“In the dark...I’m me.” Jo spoke barely above a whisper, sending a shiver down Amelia’s spine. Here, Jo felt like herself. Here, she knew she was safe. That meant a great deal to Amelia. “In the dark, I don’t see the flaws, and I don’t think about what the man I loved didn’t see in me.” Jo reached out and traced her fingertips over Amelia’s lips. “Here, in the dark, I feel wanted.”

Amelia wanted to cry. She pushed Callum from her mind, leaned in, and kissed the nape of Jo’s neck. “You’re beautiful, and you deserve to be happy.”

“What’s your name?” Jo asked as she lowered a hand and forced Amelia’s bra over her nipple. She dipped her head, tracing a path down to the already hardened bud, and sucked it into her mouth.

“O-oh, shit.” Amelia clenched her jaw. It wasn’t often that the women who came into this room wanted to pleasure her first. But Jo... Oh, she was something else entirely.

“I need a name,” Jo whispered as she blew gently against Amelia’s nipple. “I need to know who I’m going to come for.”

Amelia leaned in and captured Jo’s lips in a heated, passionate kiss. The benefit she had here was that Jo had no idea just how hot and steamy it could get in these rooms. She didn’t need to hold back, and she didn’t need to go slow. This club was all about fantasy, desire, and ultimately... pleasure. She threaded her hands through Jo’s hair, slipping her tongue into

her mouth without a second thought. Amelia drew back, breathless, and whispered, "Lia."

Why? Because it was the closest thing to her own name without making it so obvious.

"Beautiful name for a beautiful woman." Jo leaned back but brought Amelia in with her. Their bodies pressed together, but Amelia needed more. She needed to be on top of Jo, inside her too, while familiarising herself with everything this woman was. She didn't know when it would be the last time, so she had to anticipate *this* being the last time...until it wasn't.

"You want the same as last night?"

Jo held Amelia's chin in her hand. "I want to touch you."

Amelia practically melted against Jo. She would love nothing more than to climb into bed tonight knowing this woman had been inside her again. But was that the right thing to do? Amelia pondered it for a split second, but ultimately, her arousal took over. She rose to her feet, removed her lingerie, then lowered herself on top of Jo.

"You're wet," Jo whispered into the silence of the room. "And I'm dying to feel you."

"Trust me, I've been wet since the moment you walked through the curtain." Amelia rolled her hips against Jo. "It's hard not to feel that way when I know how beautiful you are."

Jo gripped Amelia's hips and forced her own up against her. "Fuck."

As Amelia repositioned herself, she felt Jo's slender fingers probing between her legs. She straddled her, offering her a little more access, and threw her head back when Jo entered her without a second thought. "Oh, God, Jo. Y-yes!"

"I don't know what turns me on more. How tight you are...or hearing you moan my name." Jo sat up and took a nipple between her lips, sucking gently and rolling the tip of her tongue over it.

Amelia ground down against Jo's fingers, her breath coming in short, sharp bursts as each thrust hit that sweet spot. Her head fell forward, her lips brushing Jo's temple. "Don't stop. Please, don't stop."

Jo added a second finger and curled them, as though her body knew Amelia's and they'd done this a hundred times before. "You feel perfect." Jo moaned, her voice rough against Amelia's throat. "So *fucking* perfect."

Amelia whimpered as her fingers tightened in Jo's hair. "You're gonna make me come."

“That’s the point.” Jo kissed a path across Amelia’s collarbone, her free hand drifting up the length of Amelia’s back. “Go on. Give it to me.”

With her eyes squeezed shut and her body writhing above Jo’s, Amelia gave in to the building wave about to crash through her. Her climax hit her hard as she cried out Jo’s name in sheer ecstasy. Her thighs trembled around Jo’s hips, her fingernails digging into her shoulders as she held on for dear life. “O-oh, fuck!”

Jo slowed her pace and kissed the underside of Amelia’s jaw, soothing her with soft touches and slow kisses. “That was beautiful.” Amelia felt Jo smile against her. “*You* are beautiful, whether I can see you or not.”

Still panting, Amelia reached down and guided Jo’s hand out of her. She kissed her knuckles tenderly before bringing Jo’s fingers to her own lips. She sucked them into her mouth, slow and intentional, listening for Jo’s reaction in the darkness.

“Jesus.” Jo groaned, her grip tightening around Amelia’s waist. “You’re going to ruin me.”

Amelia smiled to herself and pushed Jo down flat against the chaise. “I believe I’m almost there.” She shifted to kneel between Jo’s legs and lowered her mouth to Jo’s inner thigh, pressing gentle kisses to her skin as Jo spread her legs further.

“Y-you don’t have to—” Jo’s breath caught when Amelia slowly licked the length of her pussy. “Shit.”

“I want to,” Amelia whispered, aware that her voice was close to breaking. “I don’t know when our last time will be...so, I want to. I *need* to.”

Amelia buried herself between Jo’s thighs, one arm looped around to hold Jo in place, the other bracing her weight. She licked and sucked; her rhythm unrelenting as the tip of her tongue circled Jo’s clit just the way she knew Jo liked it. It didn’t take long for Jo to start falling apart, not when her body arched, and her hands buried themselves in Amelia’s hair.

“Lia...” Jo’s voice cracked. “Oh, fuck, yes. R-right there.”

Amelia moaned against her, the vibration making Jo cry out louder. Jo’s thighs clenched around Amelia’s head as her orgasm ripped through her, but Amelia kept up her pace, drawing every last shudder and gasp from her until Jo finally collapsed back onto the chaise.

Silence followed as Amelia gently pulled herself up and lay beside Jo, wrapping one arm around her waist and pressing a soft kiss to her shoulder.

Jo reached out blindly and curled her fingers around Amelia's.

"That was..." Jo's words were languid in her post-orgasmic haze.
"Incredible."

Amelia tucked her face into Jo's neck. "You're incredible."

"Can I stay a while longer?"

"Of course you can."

They lay there, tangled up in each other. A part of Amelia wanted to break the silence, to confess who she was, but fear held her back. For now, this was enough. For now, she would be Lia. The woman Jo came to in the dark, the one who made her feel wanted and safe.

For now, that *could* be enough.

Until she had the courage to be Amelia again.

Chapter Six

STILL FEELING THE EFFECTS OF BEING IN THE DARK ROOM, JO LOWERED herself to one of the plush, velvet couches in the main lounge. Her legs felt like they barely belonged to her anymore, her senses still dulled by lust and the delicious disorientation that came from surrendering herself entirely to someone else's touch. She leaned back against the curved armrest and scanned the softly lit space. The ambience here was mellow—the music gentle, the lighting golden and low, casting hazy glows along the floor and highlighting sequins and satin dresses as women passed by. It was a stark contrast to the shrouded thrill of the dark room.

Maybe one day, once she felt more confident in herself, and whatever this new part of her identity was, she'd switch pendants. But for now, the colour she wore suited her. Safe. Cautious. She wasn't ready for more attention, and frankly, she didn't want it. Not when Lia's touch still lingered on her skin. The ache between her thighs, the racing pulse in her neck, the tingle on her lips. God, Lia had ruined her for anyone else tonight. Maybe for good.

It's a sex club. It doesn't mean anything...

Jo lifted her whiskey from where it balanced on her knee, watching the amber liquid catch the light. She took a sip, welcoming the burn that followed. It grounded her while she tried to understand why she was still sitting here. Maybe it was to stretch the night out a little longer, or maybe it was to delay the solitude that would settle in once she got home. Winding down alone felt like the right end to an already surreal evening. This night had somehow outdone the last. Lia—insanely hot, devastatingly attentive Lia—was everything Jo didn't know she needed.

Part of Jo wanted to see her face. She wanted to know who she'd been wrapped around, breathless and bare, but then that would destroy the mystery. That would make it real. And if it became real, maybe it wouldn't be perfect anymore.

"May I join you?"

A familiar voice pulled Jo from her thoughts. She frowned slightly as she brought her whiskey to her lips. That voice...there was no way. It couldn't be.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

Jo turned, and sure enough, there she was. *Amelia*. Standing just to her left, stunning and self-possessed, her gaze curious as she stared down at Jo. Her eyes widened as panic flared deep within. "W-what are you doing here?"

Amelia lifted a shoulder and smiled. "You spoke so highly of your experience. I had to see what all the fuss was about."

Jo shifted, trying to remain or at least *look* composed as she gestured to the empty space beside her. Her stomach fluttered, not just from the shock, but from the way Amelia looked tonight. The black dress she wore hugged every curve, her makeup unsurprisingly flawless. Then Jo lowered her eyes and saw it. The pendant nestled against Amelia's cleavage. Red. Bold. Possibly dominant. *Oh, shit.*

"You seem eager," Jo said, trying to keep her voice level as she nodded to it. Her mind raced with the knowledge that Amelia had a membership here. It was also a complication she hadn't imagined. The idea of running into her, of possibly doing more than just talking if boundaries blurred...it sent Jo's brain into a spin. "Been here before?"

"No. This is my first time." Amelia looked away as she said that. Jo noted the hesitation. She wasn't sure she bought what Amelia was saying.

"How did you know where to find the place?"

"It's the only women-only sex club in the city." Amelia turned back to her, sipping her wine as though they were simply catching up. "Have you just arrived?"

"Oh, no. I'll be leaving soon." Jo offered a small smile, trying to appear nonchalant despite her racing pulse now hammering in her ears.

Amelia smirked against her glass.

Jo narrowed her eyes. "What are you smirking at?" She was too aware of their surroundings. The teasing and seductively gentle music, the scent of

perfume and wine lingering in the air. This wasn't a place to flirt. Not with *her*.

"I wondered why you seemed so...relaxed when I arrived at your table." Amelia's eyes swept down Jo's body. "You've had your fun."

"Y-yeah." Heat settled on Jo's cheeks. It was no secret why she was here, and certainly no secret what she'd been doing, but to have Amelia so calmly acknowledge it...it made Jo feel exposed in a way she hadn't expected.

Amelia leaned in, her breath hot against Jo's ear. "May I just say that you look *much* happier when you've just had a mind-blowing orgasm."

Jo's pulse skyrocketed as she clenched her thighs together. "T-thanks."

"Seems to me that the woman you've been with is quite something."

Jo lowered her gaze and took her bottom lip between her teeth as she tried to gather herself.

"Tell me about her." Amelia's thigh brushed hers, bare skin against bare skin, and Jo's breath caught. "All I've wanted over the last several months is to see you happy, Jo."

Emotion swelled in Jo's chest. "Thank you. That means a lot."

"You know how I feel about it all," Amelia said, her voice softening. "But you're moving on, and I, for one, am very happy to know that."

"She's...I don't know." Jo stared down into her glass, watching the liquid sway as she weighed up the pros and cons of being truthful with Amelia. No matter what, she *was* still Callum's mum. "Her name is Lia. She told me that tonight." Jo's voice shook. "I know it's just the idea of being in that room and the fantasy of it all, but it's like she knows exactly what I need. Tonight, she made me feel so wanted that I'm struggling to think of anything else."

"You may say it's just the fact you're here, doing whatever you're doing, but have you thought that maybe she's interested in you?"

"It's a sex club, Amelia." Jo kept her voice low, conscious of the people around them. The last thing she wanted was to sound ungrateful or judgmental of the space that had offered her so much. "I'm pretty confident she was attentive because it's what she does. I'm also going to bet she's here every night...giving *any* woman that walks into that room whatever they desire."

"You do realise that those rooms are hired out for ordinary people to use, right?"

Jo frowned. “No, she’s definitely some kind of *domme*. She’s far too confident to be an ordinary person who walked in off the street. I’ve *never* met anyone like her before.”

Amelia cleared her throat. “That’s...not the type of club this is, Jo.”

“I’m sorry?”

“The whole pendant thing and the rooms...they’re purely to make the less confident people feel more comfortable here. This isn’t a BDSM club.”

Amelia held up a hand. “I mean, if people wish to partake in that lifestyle, that’s perfectly fine here, but ultimately, it’s just a club for women to meet other women.” Amelia smiled, her tone calm and...matter-of-fact. “Yes, some women prefer to be in the dark rooms because it adds an element of mystery, but down the line, you *are* likely to come face to face with...Lia, did you say?”

Jo’s stomach flipped. The possibility of *seeing* Lia—of learning who she was—was a dizzying thought. Hopeful and terrifying all at once. “Nah. You’re fucking with me.”

Amelia lifted a shoulder. “Okay.”

“Wait! How do you know these things? You said you’ve never been here before.”

“A little white lie, so you didn’t go running out the door the moment I sat down next to you.” There was something different in Amelia’s eyes now. As though a confession was on the horizon. “I’ve been to this club *many times* before.”

Jo felt like she’d been punched directly in the face. “R-right. I didn’t know that.”

“Why would you? I don’t exactly pour you a coffee and tell you who I fucked the night before, do I?”

That mental image hit Jo like a train. Refined and graceful Amelia... saying *that*? Jo’s mind raced while her body reacted in a way she *really* didn’t need right now. She could practically feel that sultry voice in her ear. “Yeah, uh...this feels odd. This isn’t the Amelia I know.”

“No, I know. You only know the one who sits at home wishing she had something more in her life. The one who puts everyone else before herself. The one who is all about family, friends, and commitments. The one who works herself into the ground.” Amelia regarded Jo with a wry smile. “I’m sorry if this is too much.” She placed her glass on the table and shifted

towards the edge of the seat. “I shouldn’t have come over here to you. This isn’t the relationship we have.”

Jo reached out instinctively, her hand landing on Amelia’s bare thigh. The contact was *exactly* how Jo imagined it would be. Electric. “Hey, no. I don’t want you to leave me alone at this table.”

“I should. I don’t want to make things feel strange between us.”

“Is this Amelia as fun as the one I already know?” Jo asked as she lifted a brow, her hand remaining in place.

Amelia looked down at Jo’s hand, a bright smile settling on her beautiful lips when she eventually looked back up at Jo. “I’d say she’s more fun than the one you already know.”

Jo cocked her head towards the other side of the room. “Then you should go to the bar and get us some fresh drinks. It’s Saturday night, and we should be enjoying ourselves.”

“I wouldn’t be offended if you’d rather we didn’t sit around here drinking together...”

“Well, I *would* be offended if you decided to leave me alone.”

Amelia leaned in and pressed a kiss to Jo’s cheek. Soft, slow, *devastatingly* good. A shiver worked its way down Jo’s spine, her whole body catching fire in its wake. God, she *prayed* Amelia hadn’t noticed.

“Thank you for not judging me for being here.”

Jo gave Amelia’s thigh a gentle squeeze. “You know I’d never.”

As Amelia rose from the couch and made a beeline for the bar, Jo wasn’t entirely sure what she had just invited in. Had the ground just shifted beneath them? She *had* touched Amelia before, but it had been nothing more than a shoulder squeeze, or a hug, or a hand held in comfort. But this? This felt charged in a way Jo hadn’t prepared for. It wasn’t lost on her that Amelia had kissed her cheek as though it was the most natural thing in the world. Like she belonged here. Like maybe Jo wasn’t the only one whose world had tilted tonight.

She watched as Amelia leaned over the bar, her hair catching the golden lights above, those lips enchanting to watch as she placed their order. And then Jo caught the pendant that glinted red against her chest.

She sipped the last of her whiskey, the slow burn no match for the rush of heat dancing beneath her skin. Maybe it was the sex. Maybe it was still Lia. But maybe not.

Oh, you’ve fucked up here!

Amelia returned with two fresh glasses—wine for herself, another whiskey for Jo—and took the seat beside her again, this time sitting just a little closer than before. Their knees brushed, but Amelia didn't move away. "I hope this one's strong enough," she said, handing Jo the glass with a small smile. "You looked like you needed it."

"I do," Jo murmured as she took it from Amelia. "Thanks."

They both drank in silence, the music around them low and rhythmic, the pulse of the place still beating steadily even as the night crept on. The other women nearby were talking in clusters, some flirting and laughing, others making their way towards the various rooms, or returning from them with contented, slightly dazed expressions. Jo knew her own face probably looked similar. Still a little dreamy. Still *very* overwhelmed.

She knew Amelia was studying her. She could feel those eyes searching for *something*.

"You're quiet," Amelia said.

"I'm just thinking."

"About Lia?"

Jo nodded, staring at the closed door of the dark room she'd left some thirty minutes ago now. "She makes me feel like...someone new. Not just sexy. Not just desired. But like I'm *allowed* to want things again. Things I thought I'd locked away."

Amelia turned slightly towards her, cradling her wine glass in one hand, the other resting on her knee. "Then I'm glad she's part of your story, even if it's only a chapter."

That surprised Jo. The one thing she hadn't expected was for Callum's mum to be open to the idea of Jo getting her kicks with strangers. It just didn't seem like who Amelia was. But then again, Jo had only ever known her *as* Callum's mum. It had only been a recent development—a few months at best—that they'd crossed the line into a full-blown friendship. "You really mean that?"

Amelia regarded her with a gentle smile. "Of course I do. Watching you sit in the shadows of your life for the last several months...it's been hard."

Jo looked down into her drink. "You've seen me like that?"

"Every time you visit."

A lump rose in Jo's throat. She didn't know what to say to that, so she sipped her drink instead. Her hand trembled slightly as she set the glass back down on the table. "I'm okay. I've *been* okay." That wasn't quite the

truth, Callum had stripped away who Jo was the moment he left her, but she hated feeling so vulnerable around Amelia. She didn't want to come across that way. The woman was drop-dead gorgeous, for the love of God. "Life moves on, right?"

Amelia reached out and placed her hand over Jo's. Just for a second. Just long enough to remind her that she was here, that she saw her...even when Jo *had* been lost. "I think maybe you're not meant to be in the shadows, Jo."

"Please don't." Jo laughed. "I might start crying and ruin my reputation."

Amelia slowly drew her hand away, but it didn't move far. "Wouldn't be the worst thing."

Jo shifted and faced her fully. "Why are you really here tonight?"

"Because I wanted to be." Amelia didn't look away. No, that stare pinned Jo in place.

"Because I mentioned it once? Or because you were already planning on it?"

Amelia hesitated and eventually cleared her throat. "A little of both. I wasn't sure if I'd actually walk in...until I saw you sitting here."

Jo exhaled slowly. She wasn't quite sure what to make of that comment. "And now that you've seen me?"

Amelia's voice dropped lower. "Now I don't want to leave."

Jo swallowed. Her thoughts were a mess between flashes of Lia's hands on her body, Amelia's lips on her cheek...and the very look she was giving her now. She couldn't sort Lia from Amelia. She couldn't tell if she was in over her head or exactly where she was meant to be in this moment. And the silence that had settled between them wasn't helping either.

Finally, Amelia broke it. "Don't worry. I'm not sitting here expecting a thing from you. We don't even have to talk about anything if it's too much. I just...I like being here with you. Even like this."

Jo wrinkled her nose. "Even with my post-orgasm haze and sweaty thighs?"

"*Especially* with your post-orgasm haze and sweaty thighs."

Jo laughed, almost choking on it as she glanced around the room. "You're terrible."

"I know." Amelia grinned.

Jo turned back to her glass. It was clear there was a connection between them—one Jo was now beginning to realise had existed prior to this evening. She side-glanced at Amelia, aware that this question could change everything. “Do you ever wonder if things would have been different... were you *not* Callum’s mum?”

Amelia’s smile faded slowly. “All the time.”

And then Jo felt it. That same twist in her gut that had once belonged to confusion whenever she thought about Amelia. To grief at the idea of never seeing her again, once Callum had cut ties with Jo. To the longing she had buried but never quite let go of.

“I don’t know what any of this means,” Jo admitted, her voice barely audible. “Or what the new me is capable of.”

“You don’t have to,” Amelia said softly. “You just have to let it exist.”

Jo relaxed. Maybe she didn’t need to have all the answers tonight. Maybe she could sit here, a little drunk and a little overwhelmed, next to someone who knew her too well...and just be happy. Maybe, for once, Jo could spend the evening *not* in her own head.

She leaned back, her thigh pressed to Amelia’s. For the first time in a long time, Jo didn’t feel broken.

She felt *alive*.

Chapter Seven

AMELIA STOOD AT THE WINDOW IN HER LIVING ROOM, A BEAUTIFUL spring day beginning outside. Children rushed past on their way to school, excitement buzzing in the fresh air as they skipped hand in hand with their friends, but Amelia barely registered it. Her thoughts were too loud.

Three days.

That's how long it had been since she'd felt Jo's warmth pressed against her, and ultimately the evening they'd spent together once the antics of the dark room had concluded. And in those three days, Amelia hadn't slept properly. God, she'd been lucky to get more than three hours unbroken.

Whenever she closed her eyes, every sound Jo had made that night echoed in her mind with a startling clarity. The laughter and the breathy moans. It was *all* etched into her mind.

But it wasn't just the club that haunted her.

It was everything. Everything Jo *didn't* know.

Amelia closed her eyes, pressing her forehead against the cold pane of glass. She could still feel Jo's hand on her thigh; she could still recall the exact moment their skin had touched, and something between them had shifted post-dark room. The Jo she had sat with three nights ago wasn't the guarded, anxious woman she'd spent months consoling. This Jo—*her* Jo—was slowly emerging from the wreckage of who she'd been with Callum, who she'd become because of Callum's mistakes and abhorrent attitude towards her, and Amelia had been there to witness it.

No, not just witness it.

She had helped pull her from the darkness.

God, if she ever finds out...

Amelia's stomach flipped as the weight of that truth pressed hard against her chest. But it was a familiar ache now. It was something that was slowly eating away at Amelia. Because Jo *still* didn't know.

Every whispered command. Every brush of fingertips. Every held breath. It was all Amelia.

Her hands curled into fists at her sides. Not from anger, but from need. From guilt. From the gut-twisting ache of wanting to tell Jo everything but knowing she couldn't. Not yet.

I'll never see her again.

Amelia knew that was the truth. She knew that the moment she came clean, Jo would flee, and that would be the end of not only the dark room, but of any kind of relationship with Jo. Platonic or something else, it didn't matter. It would be gone. That much was clear from the question Jo had asked on Saturday evening.

"Do you ever wonder if things would have been different...were you not Callum's mum?"

She pulled herself away from the window, moved into the kitchen, and poured herself a cup of coffee. The house was too quiet. She'd turned the television on and off three times already this morning, unable to concentrate on anything longer than a minute. It wasn't just a distraction—it was emotional overload. She had spent so long believing she could compartmentalise this...*her*, but Jo made everything bleed together.

Those two nights in the club had completely wrecked her resolve.

Because it hadn't just felt easy. It had felt *natural*.

Jo had looked at her—not as Callum's mum and not as someone tied to her past—but as *herself*. And when Jo had smiled at her...God, when she'd reached for Amelia's hand and asked her to stay, Amelia had nearly lost her grip on reality entirely.

She hadn't intended to speak to her that night. She really *had* meant to slip in, explore the space beyond the dark room, and then leave. But then she'd seen Jo, sinking into the velvet couch with that dreamy, dazed look that only *she* had put on her face, and Amelia had been drawn in like a moth to a flame.

It should have made Amelia feel guilty.

Instead, it made her ache.

She took a sip of bitter coffee, then set it down and paced the kitchen. She *had* to figure out what happened next. She would only drive herself

insane if she didn't.

Her phone buzzed on the counter. She turned it over and caught Jo's name lighting up the screen.

Are you okay? You've been quiet since Saturday.

Amelia stared down at the screen, unable to think up a response. She could lead with something entirely random, but she was worried that Jo would see through it.

So, she would try to get out of her head and respond in a way she usually would.

Hey. Sorry. I didn't realise we were approaching mid-week. I've been busy. How are you?

She hit send, and three dots appeared almost immediately. Jo was texting her back.

I'm good. I was just thinking about the other night...

Amelia placed a hand to her chest and smiled.

I've been thinking about the other night, too. It was nice.

She lowered herself into a seat at the dining table, her mind racing with the potential response she could receive.

But then Jo's message came through, and Amelia's pulse started to race.

It was more than nice. I felt really close to you. Like...weirdly close. If that makes sense?

Amelia swallowed. More than nice? What was she supposed to do with that? Was this Jo's way of hinting at something? God, she hated not being in control of situations like this.

It makes perfect sense. I felt the same.

She threw her phone onto the table the second she sent the message. What the hell was she doing?

For months, Amelia had been Jo's safe place. She had been the one who offered support and silence, depending on what Jo needed and when she needed it. But now she had become the one who offered control, pleasure, and escape in a dark room without expectations.

If she had learned anything during the course of the weekend, Amelia had realised she wanted more. She didn't want to only exist in Jo's life in fragments, either as the person from her past or the woman she didn't recognise in the dark. She wanted *all* of it. The conversations, the laughter, the quiet moments between touches. She wanted Jo in the light.

But telling her now...what if she felt betrayed?

What if everything they'd shared became tainted by deceit?

When she finds out why you use that dark room, she'll run anyway.

Amelia rubbed at her temples. She hadn't meant for this to happen. When Callum had left Jo, when everything had crumbled, Jo had looked lost. As though she hadn't anticipated a life without Callum in it. Amelia had hurt for her, wanting to help her through in any way she could, while pushing her own feelings for Jo aside. She had loved her from afar, knowing the consequences of speaking out.

But then the dark room had come into play.

Amelia knew what she should have done the moment she realised it was Jo Bleasdale booked into that room. She knew what she should have done the second she felt Jo's warm skin beneath her fingertips.

She should have left.

But she hadn't.

So now, here she was. In love with a woman who would never forgive her if she knew the truth. A woman who deserved so much more than what 'Lia' could offer her within the confines of the darkness.

As Amelia lowered her head to her hands, her phone buzzed again.

I keep thinking about Lia. Who knew a faceless woman could be so addictive!

Amelia's breath caught as she looked down at the screen. She wanted to respond to Jo with 'she's sitting at home right now drinking coffee and thinking about you, too', but she couldn't. Instead, she just stared. Revealing who she was would cost Amelia everything, and she couldn't afford to lose everything right now. Jo was the one slice of happiness Amelia had allowed herself in a long time.

Casual. Go for casual.

Amelia squared her shoulders, determined to deal with this and then move on with her day.

I guess you'll be seeing her again then...

One day soon, Jo would want more than the mystery. She would ask to meet Lia, to...see her face. And rightfully so. Amelia just didn't know whether that day would be the beginning of something or the end of everything.

So, she would prepare for the worst.

That was generally the direction her life took anyway.

JO SAT cross-legged on the rug in her living room, a half-empty glass of red wine cradled between her palms as Ada sprawled across the couch in front of her. They hadn't had the chance to catch up since the first night at Satin, but Jo knew that was the reason for Ada's visit. She'd known her best friend long enough to note that twinkle in her eye when she was on the prowl for information. But this was nice. It was safe. Jo had lit candles just before Ada had arrived, wanting the evening to feel chilled. They hadn't had a night like this in a while. Just her and Ada with no distractions.

Ada popped an olive into her mouth and chewed slowly. "So, I've been patient, but I *need* details. Did you enjoy Satin? Are you addicted yet?"

Jo laughed as she sipped her wine. "I don't know about addicted."

"That's not a no." Ada arched a brow.

Jo sighed, then smiled as she brought her knees to her chest and rested her chin on them. "It's a lot. But good. I mean, I was a little nervous the night you took me, but then somehow, I ended up back there the following night."

Ada sat up straight. "Wait, seriously? You went back *alone*? On night two?"

"Yeah. I don't know what came over me. I think I just...needed to feel that again. The safety. The anonymity. And her."

Ada tilted her head. "Her?"

Jo hesitated and lowered her wine glass. "Lia. That's what she told me her name is. She's the woman I've been...well, seeing isn't quite the word, but you know what I mean."

Ada leaned forward, her eyes narrowed. "You found someone in the dark room worth going back for?"

Jo nodded slowly. "Yeah. That first night, it was like she knew exactly how to touch me. How to make me feel things I didn't think I was capable of anymore."

Ada grinned. "And you've seen her again since then?"

"Both nights I've been there, yes." Jo's palms grew clammy not only with the thought of Lia, but Amelia, too. "It's like my body just knows when she's in the room. I've never experienced anything like it. She makes me feel...wanted. In a way that isn't just about sex."

"Sounds like more than a casual club fling, Jo."

“It feels like it,” Jo said. “But then I remind myself that it *is* a club. And she probably does this with other women all the time. I mean, that’s what she’s there for, right?”

Amelia had already put that idea out of Jo’s mind on Saturday night, but she would still throw it in Ada’s direction and see if she had a different opinion.

“Maybe. But maybe not. Some people go there to find a connection and not just orgasms.”

“Yeah.” Jo gave that a moment to settle. She didn’t know if she wanted Ada to agree with Amelia or not, it only made things more difficult for Jo, but she was grateful for her best friend’s honesty. “Amelia has a membership at *Satin*.”

Ada almost fell from the couch at that. “W-what?”

“Yeah. I was just as surprised.”

“Amelia.” Ada’s eyes widened. “Like...Callum’s *mum*, Amelia?”

“The very same one.” Jo leaned back on her hands. “She turned up while I was having a drink on Saturday night. Said she was curious after I told her about it. We ended up sitting around chatting for a while.”

Ada lifted a hand, confusion etched on her face. “Wait, you sat and had drinks with your ex-mother-in-law at *Satin*.”

Jo laughed. “I know. It sounds crazy, doesn’t it?”

“How was that?”

Jo bit her lip, mulling over the easiest way to describe it. Ada would jump to conclusions—she often did. “Surprisingly nice. Easy. She was...wearing a red pendant, though.”

“No fucking way!” Ada shook her head in disbelief. “Red? She’s bold.”

“Tell me about it. I mean, I know she’s attractive—God, she looked amazing that night—but seeing her *there* in that dress, all confident and self-assured... It threw me.”

Ada studied Jo from across the room. “You’ve always had a soft spot for her.”

“That’s not what this is.” Jo shook her head. She didn’t need Ada to put any kind of ideas in her head. Jo was already up in the air as it was. “It just...surprised me. That’s all.”

“Have you heard from her since?”

Jo sighed. “Not really. She’s been quiet. I sent her a message earlier, just asking if she was okay, and she said she’s fine. She’s been busy.”

Ada gave her a look.

“What?”

“You seem a bit sad that she hasn’t been in touch much since.” Ada braced her elbows on her knees and searched Jo’s face. “So I have to wonder *why* it matters to you so much.”

Jo looked down into her wine. “We’ve always got along. Even when Callum left me, that didn’t change. In fact, I’d say it only grew stronger. Our friendship...you know?”

“Mmhmm.”

“Sitting with her, not thinking about him or what he did to me...I don’t know. I just felt like the old me again. She made me feel like myself again.”

Ada reached down and squeezed Jo’s hand. “I’m glad you felt like that with her. You deserve to be happy and find whatever you’re looking for. He doesn’t deserve any more headspace from you.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Sensing that the air was about to get a little heavy, Ada laughed and lifted her brows. “So...just to clarify, you’ve been having intense, anonymous sex with a woman in the dark room, while also bonding with your ex’s mum in the lounge...all in the same night?”

Jo winced. “When you say it like that, it sounds like I’m having some kind of crisis.”

Ada shrugged. “I didn’t say it was a *bad* crisis. Honestly, it sounds kind of epic. But Jo...” Ada paused. “Does it not seem a bit weird that Amelia could have been there the same time you were with Lia? Like, in the same building?”

Jo groaned. “I hadn’t really let myself go there, but thanks for putting it in my head.”

“Hey, I’m just the messenger.” Ada sprawled out on the couch again. “But seriously. Do you think Amelia’s into the club for the same reasons you are? Do you think *she’s* into the dark rooms, too?”

“Maybe, I don’t know. We didn’t talk about our likes and dislikes as we lounged around the sex club, Ada.”

“Oh for the love of bastard God! Do you not understand what I’m trying to say?”

“Eh?” Jo frowned. She clearly *wasn’t* understanding what Ada was trying to say.

“Do you think Lia and Amelia could be the same person?”

Jo's head snapped up. "What?"

Ada shrugged, completely unbothered that she'd just laid that out. "I mean, you imply that the chemistry with Lia is unlike anything you've known. But then you talk about Amelia in the same breath with the same kind of awe...having only had a drink with her that night. It just made me wonder."

Jo shook her head, even though she was battling with the idea of it. "No. No, that's not possible. Lia is younger than Amelia. I think. It's hard to tell, but her voice feels different to Amelia's, too."

"Everything feels different in the dark, Jo."

"It's *not* Amelia."

"Okay," Ada said, but she didn't sound convinced. "I'm just saying that Satin's not that big. And if you keep seeing the same woman over and over again..."

"I'd *know* if it was Amelia." Jo picked up the wine bottle and topped their glasses up. She felt the heat creeping onto her cheeks, but no...it couldn't be. It *wouldn't* be. "It's not Amelia, and even if it was...Fuck, that's a rabbit hole I don't want to go down."

"Why not?" Ada asked, as though it wasn't even an issue.

Jo looked up at her, frowning. "Because she's Callum's *mum*. Because I could have been her *daughter-in-law*."

"*Could* being the operative word."

Why the hell had Jo even told Ada about Amelia and her membership? "That doesn't make it less complicated."

Ada softened. "Jo, you've said it yourself. Whoever was in that room... they made you feel wanted. I don't *ever* recall you saying anything similar when you were with Callum. Shit, I don't even remember you saying it about anyone before him."

"I know." Jo hated that Ada was right. And now, she hated how part of her wondered. Perhaps the next time she visited the club, more specifically the dark room, she could listen more closely to the voice in the darkness. Maybe for clues, inflections...something. Anything. "I just...it can't be her," Jo said to herself rather than to Ada.

"Okay. Then tell me what you're going to do. About Lia. About Amelia. About *all* of it."

Jo drained the last of her wine, the warmth of it doing little to ease the sudden flutter of anxiety in her chest. "I don't know."

Ada lowered herself to the floor, sat beside Jo, and wrapped an arm around her shoulder. "Do you want Lia outside of that room?"

Jo swallowed. "I think so."

"And do you want Amelia outside of that club?"

Whoa. Jo wouldn't answer that. Not yet.

"Look, just promise me one thing..."

Jo turned her face to Ada. "What?"

"That you'll consider whatever is happening here. Whoever *she* is, *wherever* it leads...you deserve to be happy. You deserve to be desired, and you absolutely deserve to be chosen, rather than thrown away by some little prick who thought he'd found something better."

Jo barely managed a smile, but she nodded anyway. "Okay."

Ada leaned back with a grin. "Good. Now finish your wine and tell me everything Lia's done to you in the dark room. In detail."

Jo laughed, the tension in her chest beginning to fade for the first time all night. "You're...I don't even know what to say."

"There's plenty to say...about Lia."

Perhaps Lia was a safe choice in terms of conversation. Jo didn't have to wonder if it was Amelia, not right now. No, she would do that later when she was alone, and she could freak out about it all without her best friend witnessing it. *Later*, she could question fantasy and reality. *Later*, she could try to figure out the woman she touched in the dark and the woman she already knew in the light. Now wasn't the right time. "Fine. Get another bottle from the kitchen."

Chapter Eight

AWARE THAT SHE HADN'T ACTUALLY BEEN INVITED OVER TO AMELIA'S, Jo took a hesitant step towards the front door, her stomach knotted in a mess of nerves and second guesses. The late-afternoon sun warmed her face where she stood on the garden path, but inside, a storm was brewing. She only hoped it wasn't showing on her face.

Her conversation with Ada the night before hadn't helped to clear the fog in her mind. It had only stirred up wild thoughts that Jo knew better than to entertain. Jo wanted to believe Ada was just clutching at straws with her wild theory that Amelia and Lia might somehow be the same person. It was impossible. *Absurd*. Jo had known Amelia for nearly four years. She knew her laugh, her mannerisms, the way her voice changed when she said something tender. No amount of darkness in a room could disguise those things.

She lifted a hand and pressed the doorbell, her pulse quickening ever so slightly. As she waited, she bounced subtly on the balls of her feet, trying to dispel some of the tension residing in her chest. She didn't make a habit of showing up here unannounced—Amelia wasn't the kind of woman you imposed on—but after their unexpected meeting at Satin on Saturday, Jo couldn't keep away. She needed to see her face. She needed to look into those deep, thoughtful eyes and reassure herself that Amelia wasn't pulling away.

The door swung open faster than she expected, making Jo flinch. “Hi.”

“Jo.” Amelia's voice was low, her brows knitting as she instinctively pulled her silk robe tighter around her body. Her gaze flicked past Jo's

shoulder as she scanned the street. “I...is everything okay?”

Jo caught the flustered energy instantly. Her stomach sank. Had she interrupted something? “Sorry, yes. I was just in the area, and I thought I’d drop by.” The lie left her lips easily, despite the guilt that followed. She’d parked a few streets away on purpose and had even chosen running clothes to make the lie more convincing. “If you’re busy, I can just head home.”

Amelia hesitated as she visibly swallowed. “No, it’s okay. I’m just not really decent at the minute.”

“No problem. I’ll see you soon, okay? Just give me a call if you still want to get dinner at some point. Or just our usual coffee if you’re feeling up to it.” Jo smiled and turned away. She didn’t know what she was more embarrassed about—Amelia answering the door in a robe, or the fact she’d concocted an excuse to come over in the first place.

“Jo, wait!”

She stopped at the garden gate and turned, shielding her eyes from the sun. “Yeah?”

“Come in. I’ll just run upstairs and change. You can put the kettle on.” Amelia opened the door wider and offered a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I didn’t expect you to be here. I’m sorry.”

“Really, it’s okay.” Jo lifted her hands, not wanting to add any more discomfort to the situation. “Call me, okay?”

“Please. Stay.”

The urgency in Amelia’s voice stalled Jo, so she quickly lowered her gaze to her shoes. Bright white running trainers that were barely worn. She’d slipped them on as part of her made-up jog, but now she felt ridiculous. “I feel like I’ve completely blindsided you by showing up, and I don’t want you to think you have to invite me inside.”

Amelia tilted her head as a sincere expression crossed her face. “You’re *always* welcome here. You know that.”

Jo gave a tentative smile and stepped back up the garden path. As she passed Amelia in the doorway, the faintest trace of her perfume drifted over Jo’s senses. Warm, sensual, *unmistakably* her. A shiver whispered down Jo’s spine before she could stop it. She turned suddenly in the hallway. “I won’t stay long. I just wanted to drop in and say hi.”

Amelia nodded slowly, but something flickered in her eyes. “Before Saturday, you wouldn’t have apologised for coming here, and you certainly wouldn’t have insisted on not staying for long.”

Jo jammed her hands into her pockets and balled them into fists, the fabric crinkling under her grip. She didn't want to admit how much had shifted since Saturday night, but her world *had* tilted. "Yeah, I know."

"So, why don't you take a seat in the living room, get your bearings, and I'll be right down."

Jo nodded. "Sounds like a good idea."

As Amelia's soft footsteps crept up the stairs, Jo stood in the hallway, suspended between comfort and distance. She knew this house. She knew the exact way the light filtered through the blinds in the morning, the creak in the second stair, the tea mugs stacked haphazardly in the cupboard above the sink. She'd made dinner here, laughed in the kitchen, cried once in the bathroom when things with Callum had gone so terribly wrong. This place had been a refuge. And now? Now it felt like someone had changed the locks while pretending everything was the same.

She made her way into the living room and perched herself on the edge of the armchair. Her heart rate hadn't quite settled, but she pressed her palms to her knees to ground herself. Jo didn't need to worry here. It was Amelia, for God's sake!

She looked up to find Amelia standing in the doorway, dressed now yet barefoot, her dark hair tucked behind one ear. Her eyes were searching—Jo didn't know what for—but they were, and it was intense.

"Feeling better now?" Amelia crossed the room in a few elegant strides and lowered herself to the couch opposite Jo, curling one leg under herself. "The colour is back in your cheeks."

"I'm fine. I *was* fine when I got here." Jo gestured vaguely between them. "To be honest, I was worried I'd interrupted something I shouldn't have."

Amelia's brow lifted with a hint of amusement. That familiar look that always did things to Jo. Things she so often tried not to think about. "I'm sorry?"

"It's three in the afternoon. I didn't expect you to answer the door looking flustered, wearing your robe. I...thought you had company."

"Me? Company?" Amelia laughed, and it instantly settled Jo. "I couldn't tell you the last time I 'had company.'"

There was something behind those words. Something bordering on sorrowful. Jo caught it, and it left a small ache in her chest. "Why is that?"

"Why is...what?"

“You go to Satin, but I never hear of any dates you’ve been on. You enjoy spending your time there...yet I never see you with another woman around town.” Jo’s throat bobbed before she said what was really on her mind. “Is it because you’re not out?”

Amelia gazed back at Jo with surprise. “Jo, I’ve been out for over twenty years. The reason you never see me with another woman or hear about dates is because those opportunities are few and far between.”

Jo snorted, breaking any remaining tension with a roll of her eyes. “If that’s the case, there’s no fucking hope for me.”

“Oh, you’ll be just fine. I wouldn’t worry.”

“No, I mean...if you can’t find a woman or set up a date, then I have no chance.” Her voice dipped, not quite playful anymore. “Seriously, I find it hard to believe that *you* struggle to find a date.”

“Perhaps I don’t just throw myself at the first woman I see.” Amelia’s response was measured and cool, but her gaze didn’t waver. Not even for a split second.

Jo looked away first, pretending to straighten the hem of her running jacket. “So what you’re saying is you’re just very...selective?”

“You could say that.”

Jo looked back at Amelia and caught the spark dancing in her eyes. She leaned back on the couch and stretched her legs out casually in front of her. “Selective is good,” Jo said, watching Amelia from across the room. “It implies high standards. A...strong sense of self. Refined taste, shall we say?”

Amelia arched a brow. “That sounds dangerously close to flattery.”

Jo couldn’t fight the smirk working its way to her lips. “Would that be a problem?”

“It depends,” Amelia said as she slowly rose to her feet and took a seat beside Jo. “Is it flattery for the sake of it...or are you hoping to get something out of it?”

Jo laughed quietly and looked down at her hands. She hadn’t expected Amelia to be sitting so close to her, even if she was doing so casually, her legs crossed and her hands clasped in her lap. “I think if I was trying to get something out of it, I’d be doing a much better job.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Amelia uncrossed her legs and leaned forward, her elbows now resting on her knees. “You’ve always had a way with words, Jo.”

The intimacy in Amelia's voice startled Jo, the flirtation too, but she could bite back if she wanted to, and in this moment...she *did* want to. She tilted her head, searching Amelia's face. "Yeah? You saying that because you believe it, or because you're being kind?"

"I don't do kind for the sake of it." Amelia's voice dropped. "You know that."

Jo *did* know that. She knew Amelia could be devastatingly honest, even when it stung. "I know. I just...guess I'm not used to you looking at me like that."

"Like what?"

Jo hesitated. She wasn't sure if she should say it. But then again, this—whatever this was—had been building since Saturday night now. "Like I'm not Callum's ex. You looked at me the very same way on Saturday night at Satin."

Amelia sat back slowly, her face unreadable. "You've *never* just been Callum's ex to me," Amelia said. "And since we're being honest, you've been on my mind since Saturday. Before then, actually."

Jo's entire body heated under Amelia's gaze. "I must have made quite the impression at the club."

Amelia gave her a look. It was half-amused and half...dangerous. Oh, those eyes *always* had the potential to be dangerous. "I'm not talking about the club, Jo."

Oh. She leaned forward and mirrored Amelia's posture. "Then what *are* you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the woman who makes me laugh even when I've had the day from hell. The one who brings wine over when she knows I need to unwind and talk. The woman who makes excuses to 'be in the area' but shows up in running clothes that look *suspiciously* clean."

Jo groaned as she covered her face with her hands. "Busted."

"*Completely,*" Amelia said as she drew one of Jo's hands away from her face. "But it's cute."

Jo peered at her through her fingers. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I'm flattered." Amelia dragged a hand through her hair. "But I'm not entirely sure it's a good idea."

Even though Jo knew Amelia was speaking sense, it didn't hurt any less. She smiled and lowered her hand. "I know."

“But we don’t let this come between us, okay?” Amelia placed a hand on Jo’s knee, firing up that familiar ache she felt around this woman. “I don’t want to lose you just because I can’t have you.”

Just because I can’t have you.

Those words played on repeat in Jo’s mind, emotion clawing at her throat. Why did she have to fall for the one woman she *knew* she shouldn’t fall for? It would be hard to maintain this now that she knew Amelia felt the same way Jo did, but she had to try. Amelia meant too much to her. “Don’t worry, I’m not going anywhere.”

With a squeeze of the knee, Amelia drew her hand away and smiled. “Cuppa while you’re here? You must be parched after the marathon you ran...”

Okay, Jo was never going to live this down. She knew that by the look in Amelia’s eyes. “Yes. An ice pack, too. I think I pulled something.”

THE DOOR CLICKED SHUT behind Jo. Amelia stood frozen in the hallway, her hand still resting on the doorknob, her breath and legs trembling. Her heart had started to race again, not from panic, but from the ache that Jo’s presence had left behind. A presence that Amelia never wanted to be without, but a presence she knew would become a dangerous game if she wasn’t careful.

She took a breath, then another, but it didn’t settle her.

The throb between her legs hadn’t lessened, not even with Jo sitting mere feet away for the best part of an hour, oblivious to what she’d interrupted when she’d initially called by. When Jo had arrived, Amelia *had* genuinely been flustered. Not because she wasn’t dressed, and not because she hadn’t expected company. No, she’d been flustered because she’d been lying right there on the very same couch, her silk robe parted, her fingers slick and buried deep inside of her, while her thoughts swam with memories of Jo’s mouth and her breathless gasps in the dark room.

She wasn’t sure she’d even heard the doorbell at first. Once she’d realised that someone had rang it, her heart pounding, her legs trembling, and her orgasm cruelly abandoned, it had taken every ounce of discipline not to scream in frustration or come undone right there.

She should have let Jo walk away.

But then Jo had turned back, the sunlight catching the strands of hair around her face, those blue eyes soft and uncertain, and Amelia's resolve had melted instantly. She'd invited her in because she *needed* her.

And now she was gone again.

This time, she'd left Amelia with a million different thoughts rushing through her mind. Jo wanted her. Jo had shown up here with an excuse just to see her. But Jo...couldn't be the one. Amelia's chest ached with the weight of it all. She wanted Jo, of course she did, but the thought of explaining everything to those around her—Callum more so than anyone else—had dread sinking to the pit of her stomach.

But that could wait. Because right now, Amelia still needed a release.

She pushed away from the door and crossed the hallway slowly, her body taut with need and her breath shallow. Amelia felt raw, as though she'd been stroked to the edge without ever being touched. Because Jo had been *right there*, her eyes soft, her voice low with flirtation.

She stepped into the living room and looked at the couch. The same one where Jo had sat just minutes ago, her legs crossed and her face flushed from more than just her pretend jog. Her laughter still lingered in the air, and if Amelia wasn't imagining it, her scent clung to the cushions.

She lowered herself to the couch and forced her shaking fingers down the front of her pants, her hips already shifting forward to meet her touch. Her fingers found slick heat, and as she groaned, her head tipping back, Amelia closed her eyes and surrendered to the need that had been clawing at her since Jo walked in.

"F-fuck!" She rubbed slow, teasing circles as her hips rocked up to meet her hand. Her free hand drifted up, cupped a breast, her fingers teasing her nipple into a hard peak until her breath caught again.

She wants me.

Amelia pictured Jo on her knees between her thighs. Jo's mouth, so curious and hungry. That filthy little smirk wiped away the moment Amelia buried her hand in Jo's hair and guided her exactly where she needed her. Her rhythm quickened, and her mouth fell open as the heat burned deep in her belly.

"Jo."

God, her name tasted insanely good on Amelia's lips.

“Oh, fuck,” Amelia breathed as her hips rocked upwards, intense pleasure curling in her stomach. The pressure built quick and hot, her body tightening as she drew closer, caught in the helpless gravity and severity of everything she couldn’t have.

She came hard, her body shuddering against the couch as her muscles clenched and her walls squeezed her fingers. But she didn’t stop. Amelia stroked herself lightly, riding out the final waves of her orgasm.

When the room fell silent, Amelia lay spent, aching, and lonelier than she wanted to admit.

If she didn’t come clean about the dark room and Lia soon, she wasn’t only going to lose Jo, but she would lose her mind, too.

Chapter Nine

SLOUCHING BACK IN HER SEAT AT HER DESK, JO BROUGHT HER COFFEE cup closer, bypassing the sandwich she'd made this morning and kept covered until now. It was time for lunch, time to rest her brain and her eyes for the next hour, and then she could get on with the afternoon while *impatiently* waiting to end her shift. She hadn't slept much at all last night—not after her afternoon with Amelia—but she hadn't felt so conflicted about it all as today had worn on. Jo couldn't do anything about how she felt, neither could Amelia, but they could move on from it and pretend no kind of conversation had happened.

As she sipped her coffee and eyed her phone, Jo lifted a brow. A new message had come in. Amelia had texted her while she was collecting her lunch.

Did you still want to get dinner at some point or is it better if we don't?

Jo chewed her lip and rocked back in her seat. She would love nothing more than to have dinner with Amelia, but the suggestion had been thrown out there before they'd spoken yesterday. In fact, Jo had suggested dinner before they'd bumped into one another at the club.

Undecided. What do you think?

She glared at the screen. A little voice inside her whispered that it wasn't fair to dismiss Amelia all of a sudden, but Jo was still fantasising about someone she hadn't even seen in the light, and she needed to visit Lia again soon. On the flip side, she had to question whether it was wise to spend the evening enjoying a candlelit dinner with Amelia.

Oh, you know you want to.

Jo *did* want to, but she was worried that the more time they spent together, the more likely it would be that Jo would start to pull away. And that wasn't fair to Amelia. They'd flirted a little on Saturday, that had continued yesterday, and then it had all been over the moment they'd agreed it wasn't a good idea to get involved with one another.

Her phone buzzed.

I think that we can manage. I'm sorry if I've made things difficult between us after yesterday. I shouldn't have opened my mouth.

Jo smiled faintly. Amelia had *nothing* to apologise for. If Jo wasn't such a coward, she would have told Amelia just how attracted she was to her long ago. She took a bite of her sandwich, chewing slowly as she typed her reply.

You're right. We both agreed to not let it come between us. When were you thinking?

She sat back and watched the ellipses appear and disappear again. This weekend was fully booked for her, but midweek was a good option if Amelia was available. Jo could work around her.

This weekend?

Jo winced. Of course. The one weekend she couldn't do.

Now, did she tell Amelia she would be at Satin, hoping to spend a few hours with Lia, or would that be better kept under wraps after their talk yesterday? While nothing had occurred, Jo didn't believe discussing her sex life with Amelia was wise anymore.

This weekend isn't ideal for me. I have a photography job on Saturday morning and early afternoon.

Hopefully, that would be enough.

Okay, but what about Friday or Saturday evening?

Jo groaned and took another sip of her lukewarm coffee. Perhaps it was easier to just be upfront.

I was hoping to drop by Satin on either of those nights. I'm just not sure which night yet.

Her finger hovered over the send button for a moment. She didn't want to hurt Amelia, but she didn't want to lie either. With a breath, she hit send.

The read receipt popped up almost instantly. Amelia was already typing.

Jo didn't know why she was holding her breath, but she was. For some reason, what Amelia thought of her mattered more than she cared to admit.

I see. Say no more. Enjoy your weekend and I'll see you when I see you.

Shit.

Jo closed her eyes and tipped her head back against the chair, sighing. That came off cold. Dismissive. And maybe Amelia had every right to be, but Jo hated that she'd disappointed her. She hated it even more that Amelia could think she didn't want to spend time with her.

Jo bit her lip, her fingers already moving across the screen.

Wait. That sounded terrible. I do want to have dinner with you, I really do, but I'm worried if I don't go back to the club, I'll miss my chance to spend time with Lia again.

There. That was the truth, laid bare. And it sounded...awful. She winced at her own message, waiting for Amelia to reply.

Please. You don't have to explain. I'll catch up with you soon, okay?

It was polite. It was reasonable. And it didn't sound like Amelia at all. Not the Amelia who smiled with her eyes. Not the Amelia who touched her arm when they spoke, or who laughed too easily when Jo was around.

Jo dropped her phone face-down on the desk and pinched the bridge of her nose. Why was she obsessing about a woman in a room at a club when she could be spending time with Amelia? She knew exactly why. Because if she wasn't obsessing over Lia, she would be obsessing over Amelia. And that just wasn't an option. Amelia had already made it clear yesterday over coffee that whatever *this* was between them, it couldn't happen. Jo was Callum's ex-girlfriend. Amelia was his mother. And no matter how electrifying the flirting between them felt... Amelia wasn't ready to risk anything more.

Jo lifted her phone again and swallowed.

I'm sorry.

Sorry for choosing Lia over Amelia. Sorry for finding Amelia so irresistible in the first place. Sorry for letting herself fall into this tangled mess of forbidden attraction.

Amelia's reply came moments later.

Me too.

Jo stared at her phone until her vision blurred and the screen dimmed. She tapped it to bring it back to life, as if the words may have changed or offered some kind of direction. But they hadn't. They were just two small

words filled with everything and nothing. A quiet agreement that hurt more than it soothed.

She set the phone down again and reached for her sandwich. She wasn't hungry anymore. She hadn't been since yesterday, if she was being honest. Not since the moment Amelia had sat beside her, those warm brown eyes flickering with something that looked so much like regret.

Jo dragged a hand through her hair, frustrated at herself for letting this spiral. She'd known that Amelia was off-limits. From the moment she'd caught herself watching her at family gatherings, admiring the graceful way she moved, or how her voice dipped into something soft and low when she was being kind. Back then, Jo had chalked it up to admiration. Appreciation. But it hadn't been that. Not even close.

She turned back to her screen, pretending to focus on work, but all she could see was Amelia. Laughing with a glass of wine in her hand or helping Jo to fix a crooked frame on her wall in the days of her moving into her new place, or sitting beside her at the edge of the couch with her fingers far too close to Jo's own.

She wanted her. She wanted *more*.

And that was the problem.

Part of her wished it was possible. She wished she could rewind the clock and be someone Amelia could be with without guilt and without family history shadowing everything. If Callum wasn't her ex. If Amelia wasn't his mother. If they'd met in another lifetime, then yes...she would have wished for a different outcome.

Jo exhaled slowly, pressing the heels of her hands into her eyes. It was madness. All of it. She had somehow found herself tangled up in a faceless woman in the dark, chasing something electric and anonymous, while trying to fight her feelings for Amelia, too.

God, it was a mess.

And it was a mess Jo wasn't sure she could handle.

THE WINE WAS ALREADY open by the time Ada had arrived, her lipstick slightly smudged and a mischievous grin tugging at the corners of her

mouth. She'd stepped inside, kicking off her boots and throwing her bag to the stairs, then dropped down onto Jo's couch with a dramatic sigh.

Jo, curled up at the other end of the couch in her oversized hoodie and leggings, handed her a glass without a word.

"God, I needed this." Ada groaned and took a sip. "Busy week. What's your excuse?"

Jo tried to smile, but she just couldn't do it. If she couldn't be honest with her best friend or try to figure everything out in her head, then she had no hope of ending the ridiculous thoughts running through her mind. She tucked her legs under herself and glanced down at her wine. "Emotional whiplash."

Ada leaned back and grinned. "Ah. Lia?"

"No. Not Lia." Jo shook her head. "God, it would be so simple if it *was* Lia."

Ada frowned. "Amelia?"

Jo blew out a breath. She had no idea what direction this conversation was about to head in, but she *had* to tell Ada. She needed someone to talk through it all with her. "Yeah. Amelia." Jo didn't dare look up. She couldn't. God only knew the look on Ada's face right now.

"O-oh."

"Yeah. Oh. That was the reaction I expected...I think."

"Okay. So...are we talking 'Amelia is really supportive and gorgeous, and I have a harmless crush' kind of thing, or...?"

"We're talking..." Jo set her glass down and ran a hand through her hair. "I can't stop thinking about her. And I don't think it's harmless anymore."

"Wow." Ada blinked, her wine glass paused halfway to her lips. "And we're still talking about the Amelia I think we're talking about? As in *Callum's mum* Amelia?"

"Yep. Still the same Amelia." God, every time Jo said her name or allowed herself a moment to think about Amelia, her heart ached. "It's a mess, right?"

Ada set her glass aside. "Okay, first of all, I *cannot* believe you've kept this from me. This isn't a new development, no way. But secondly...I'm not judging you, if that's what you're thinking. I mean, she is *ridiculously* attractive. And classy. And kind of sexy in that terrifying older-woman-who-knows-everything way."

Jo laughed, but her face fell just as quickly. “It’s not just that. It’s how easy she makes everything feel. Like I can just be myself with her.” Jo swallowed as she shook her head. “She’s been there for me from the moment he kicked me out of the house. God, I even stayed at her place until I found something suitable for me. It’s just...that’s not what this is about. It’s not because she’s been supportive. It’s...I’ve been into her since I met Callum.”

“Then it’s a shame you didn’t tell him to fuck off back then and climb into bed with his mum instead. Maybe you wouldn’t have had your heart broken.”

Jo had to agree. Looking back, she should have been braver. “Maybe.”

Ada tilted her head. “Has something happened between you two?”

Jo hesitated as she chewed the inside of her cheek.

“Jo.” Ada pressed.

“No, not like that,” Jo said quickly. “But there’s been...flirting. A few moments. Like, *actual* moments between us.”

She told Ada everything. From their talk yesterday, to the lingering looks, the barely-there touches, and how Amelia had struck up the flirting on Saturday night for the first time. Honestly, it felt as though fate had dropped them into each other’s orbit that night, even if they were both trying to pretend otherwise.

“And then she texted me earlier today, asking if we should still do dinner, even after our talk,” Jo said, pulling her knees closer to her chest. “Like...like she was hopeful. Or maybe she was just trying to smooth things over. I don’t know anymore.”

Ada watched her carefully. “Do you want there to be something more with her?”

Jo sighed. “Yes. God, yes. But how could there be?”

“Well, you *are* single. It’s not like you’re sneaking around behind anyone’s back.”

“I know, but I spent over three years with the potential to be her daughter-in-law. You can’t just erase that, Ada. And I don’t want to mess up the only good connection I have with someone. Losing her...it’s not an option for me.”

“It sounds to me like she was just trying to say the right thing yesterday.”

Jo looked up with a frown.

“I mean, she’s texting you about dinner after you’ve both said it shouldn’t go there. She’s still reaching out. That’s not nothing, and it’s *not* how someone who thinks it’s a bad idea would usually behave. There should be less contact, not more, in the way of arranging dinner plans.”

As if on cue, Jo’s phone buzzed.

She hesitated, then picked it up. It was a message from Amelia.

I’ve just walked past that tiny Mexican place you like on Hill Street. The one with your favourite taquitos. It made me think of you. Hope work didn’t drain you too much today.

Jo’s heart clenched.

It wasn’t flirtatious, and it wasn’t romantic. But it *was* personal. Kind. And for Jo, it may as well have been a handwritten letter sealed with a kiss.

She handed her phone to Ada without saying a word.

Ada read it, then whistled low. “That woman does *not* make it easy, does she?”

Jo groaned inwardly. “Nope.”

“She’s thinking about you.”

“I know.”

Ada leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees. “Can I ask something, and you won’t throw me out?”

Jo arched a brow. “I’m sure whatever it is, you’ve probably asked worse.”

“What scares you more? That nothing will happen...or that something will?”

Jo picked up her wine glass again and stared into it as though the answer could be hiding at the bottom. “Both,” she finally admitted. “If nothing happens, I feel like I’ll always wonder. You know, did I let something real slip through my fingers because I was too scared to take a chance? But if something *does* happen...”

“You’ll be opening a door that doesn’t close again,” Ada finished gently.

Jo simply nodded, aware of the emotion working its way up her throat.

“Yeah.” Ada sat back with a sigh. “That’s a lot.”

“It is.”

They sat in silence, sipping wine as the weight of Jo’s confession settled in the room. It was a gorgeous evening outside, the light remaining a little

longer with each passing day as spring started to bloom, but in here...where Jo was constantly in her own head, it felt heavy and uncertain.

Ada slid a hand over Jo's. "You know, you *are* allowed to want something good, even if it's complicated."

Jo swallowed the lump in her throat, blinking repeatedly as she looked down, her thumb swiping idly across the rim of her glass. "I think I'm just tired of everything feeling wrong. I'm tired of wondering if I'll be enough for someone again someday...and when I'm not thinking that, I'm tired of everything feeling like a risk."

Ada squeezed Jo's hand. "Maybe that's how you know it's worth it. When it feels like a risk"

Jo laughed. "God, when did you get so wise?"

"Please. I've been giving good advice since I was ten." Ada shrugged. "No one listened then either."

Jo rested her head back, grateful for Ada and the honesty she always brought out of her without really trying. That was the true sign of a strong friendship.

Jo's phone buzzed again, her stomach somersaulting as she reached for it.

Another message from Amelia.

And I just wanted to say that I'll miss you and our coffee catch-ups if I've ruined everything and you don't want to see me anymore. You're the only person who makes me laugh most days. So, if you can find some time in your schedule over the next few weeks for dinner or even just coffee, let me know. I can put what I feel for you aside. No pressure x

God, that stupid little x.

Jo pressed her phone to her chest and closed her eyes for a moment.

"Another sweet one?" Ada asked, bringing Jo from all thoughts of Amelia.

Jo nodded. "Yeah."

"So what are you going to do?"

Truthfully, Jo didn't know what to do. She would always want to spend time with Amelia, that was a given, but now she had to decide if that was time as friends...or as something more. Surely if they both felt whatever the hell they seemed to be feeling, then maybe it *was* a risk worth taking. "I don't know yet," she said. "But I think I need to see her."

“It *will* be okay, you know.”

Jo managed a smile, but inside, nothing felt okay. “I guess time will tell.”

Chapter Ten

WOUND TIGHT AS SHE EASED ONTO ONE OF THE VELVET COUCHES, JO closed her eyes and tried to focus on *anything* other than Amelia. She'd struggled all day. The early evening hadn't been much better. But she was here now, seated beside Ada in the soft, low-lit calm of the club, praying she could forget, even if only for a couple of hours.

Her only hope now was that Lia would be where she usually was. In the dark room.

But even that didn't feel certain tonight. Jo hadn't filled out her usual paperwork on arrival. She hadn't brought it to the table either. The hesitation had crept in the moment she'd stepped through the door, and now it sat heavy in her chest.

She still felt awful for blowing Amelia off, for...choosing this place over a quiet dinner somewhere warm and familiar with someone who knew her. And maybe that was the problem. Amelia *knew* her. Lia didn't.

"There's no use being stuck in your own head in here, Jo," Ada said, leaning in and squeezing her knee. "Relax and enjoy yourself. You should be used to switching off in here by now."

Jo exhaled, trying to shift the weight from her shoulders. "I can't get her out of my fucking head, Ada."

Ada offered her a soft, knowing smile. "You need to let one of them go."

God. That thought made Jo miserable instantly.

How was she supposed to let Amelia go after everything they'd shared lately? The comfort, the connection, the things said. And how could she let Lia go after the most mind-blowing, anonymous encounters she'd ever

allowed herself? After finally feeling seen, in some strange way, without being seen at all?

Why did it have to be this way?

"I don't know how to do that," Jo admitted. "I don't know if I *can* do that."

"Well, you have to do *something*. This isn't healthy."

Oh, Jo knew that. She knew it deep in her gut, in the way her heart ached every time she thought about Amelia's face, or the sound of Lia's voice in the dark. It didn't change the fact that she felt like she was moving forward for the first time in months, instead of being stuck in the same old cycle of guilt and shame and not being enough.

And it was all because of two women she couldn't have.

"Things will be okay. I've been through worse."

"In that case," Ada stood, brushing invisible lint from her dress, "I'm going to get you the dark room form and another drink."

Jo looked up, grateful for her best friend's steady presence, even when her own mind felt like quicksand.

"Same again?" Ada asked.

"Yes, please."

Ada returned a few minutes later, carrying two drinks and no slip of paper. She set the drinks down first, then offered Jo a small smile.

Jo frowned. "What?"

"Apparently." Ada sat back down and cleared her throat. "No one's taken the dark rooms tonight. Not a single person signed in."

Jo froze. "Wait, what?"

"Yep. Even the receptionist was surprised. I asked twice in case she hadn't heard me right the first time."

"So, Lia's not here." Jo's fingers tightened around the base of her glass when Ada shook her head.

The ache that followed was immediate and disorienting. Jo hadn't expected to feel *actual* sadness at not seeing Lia. And now she was left with an emptiness she couldn't reason with. She wasn't just disappointed. No, she felt foolish...untethered. As though she'd bet on something that never really existed in the first place.

And maybe it hadn't.

Jo leaned forward, her elbows braced on her knees. "I've been pining over a woman I don't even know, Ada. Not really. I don't know what she

looks like, and I don't know her real name. I don't know *anything* beyond the sound of her voice and the way she makes me feel for an hour at a time in the dark."

Ada's gaze was fixed firmly on Jo.

"I've been choosing her over Amelia," Jo whispered as she shook her head. "Avoiding dinner, avoiding a real connection, just in case Lia showed up." Jo scoffed as she sat back against the couch. "What the fuck am I doing?"

"You're not doing anything wrong," Ada said as she took Jo's hand. "You've been hurting. You simply reached for what gave you comfort."

"It's not just about comfort anymore." Jo stared down at her drink. "I keep thinking that maybe if I just get one more night with Lia, I'll figure it all out. Maybe she'll say something, or I will, and I'll finally understand why I can't get her out of my head."

Ada frowned. "Do you think it's about her...or about avoiding Amelia?"

Jo flinched. Because that was the real question, wasn't it?

She inhaled a shaky breath. "I should have said yes to dinner with Amelia. I've been putting her off and telling myself it's for the best, but it's not. I miss her. She's just that kind of woman."

"Then maybe it's time to ask yourself why you're holding back."

"You know why, Ada." Jo's voice cracked. "Because she's Callum's mum, and if I get this wrong, I'll lose her. I *can't* lose her."

Ada's gaze softened.

"I've spent so long trying to convince myself it's Lia that I want because she doesn't come with any history or consequence. She's just a feeling and a fantasy. Something that doesn't tip over into my real life. But Amelia?" Jo swallowed. "She's real. She matters most." She glanced down at her glass and sighed. "When you told me nobody had booked a room tonight, I felt empty. Like I'd wasted something. As though I'd put all this hope into a woman who doesn't even know me outside of that room."

Ada leaned in. "Maybe Lia was just the safest choice for you. Maybe she was just a way for you to feel in control."

Jo nodded slowly. "And Amelia is the risk."

"The risk that matters."

Jo stared at the ceiling, blinking back the tears in her eyes. "She makes me feel seen, Ada. Not just in the moments that are easy, but in the hard

ones, too. Like she understands me even when I'm a mess. And I *know* this is all messy. I *know* it's complicated. But I keep thinking about her hands around her coffee cup, or the way she looks at me when I say something stupid, and I just—" Jo laughed quietly. "She's important to me. More than I've wanted to admit for a long time."

"Do you think she feels the same?"

"I don't know," Jo whispered. "Maybe. Maybe not. Sometimes it feels like she does, but she pulls back, too. Like she's scared of it just as much as I am."

"Then maybe you need to be the brave one," Ada said, regarding her with a small, encouraging smile. "Someone has to be."

Jo nodded slowly, but that ache remained in her chest. What if it was already too late?

She picked up her phone out of habit, not expecting anything. But as she unlocked it, her breath caught. Amelia had sent her a message.

I was sitting here thinking about how I reacted to you earlier in the week when you turned down dinner. I'm sorry. I don't know if you decided to go to Satin tonight or not, but I hope you get out of it what you need. Be safe x

Jo stared at the screen, the words blurring slightly as they settled in. The message was simple, soft...and far too personal. She closed her eyes. Of course the one woman she was trying to stop thinking about was the one who sent her that kind of message when her guard was already down.

"Another message?" Ada asked.

Jo handed her the phone in silence.

"Well, you certainly have your work cut out, trying to figure all of this out. I don't envy you." Ada sank back on the couch and sighed. "But I'm here for you, and I always will be."

Jo exhaled a calming breath and leaned her head back against a cushion. "I know. I appreciate it."

AMELIA SAT cross-legged on the couch, a half-finished glass of red in one hand, her phone resting on the cushion beside her as the wind howled outside. The TV played something she wasn't watching, purely for the

background noise and to stop her from going over everything in her mind. Tonight, she'd made a decision to *not* attend Satin. Tonight, she had made the decision to *not* be Lia.

Her laptop was still open on the coffee table, plans for a derelict townhouse sitting on the screen. Another renovation. Another 'opportunity'. She'd spent most of the week reviewing surveyor reports, hiring contractors, and finalising the deal on a converted Victorian terrace she'd been eyeing for months. The bones were good, and the area was even better. It was close enough to the centre but still quiet, tucked away behind a row of mature trees and garden walls.

It should have excited her; this was the kind of project she loved sinking her teeth into, but lately, even success felt flat. All she ever seemed to be doing was working or...wasting time. At Satin. In the dark.

She drew in a slow breath and swirled the wine in her glass. She wasn't proud of what she'd been doing there, but she wasn't ashamed either. She'd spent years pushing herself to be composed, professional, and respectable. Someone that people—especially her son—could rely on. But that came at a price. No one ever asked her what *she* wanted. Least of all Amelia, herself. But she only had herself to blame. If she hadn't allowed her past to dictate her future, she could have been in a much different position.

And now? Now, she was fifty-four and sleeping with strangers in the dark, clutching at a connection she should never have allowed.

Jo.

It had been three days since Jo had chosen the club over dinner. It had been three days since Jo had chosen Lia to spend the evening with rather than Amelia. And while Amelia had told herself she was okay with that, that she had no right to be upset...the truth was far messier.

She didn't want Jo to pick Lia.

She wanted Jo to pick her.

But that wasn't possible, was it? They'd agreed. She had drawn a line under whatever was simmering between them because it was the right thing to do. Because it would have been selfish not to. Because Amelia couldn't face the potential tremendous loss if they went there, and she ultimately fucked it all up with Jo.

Only everything was blurred now. Lines had been crossed, and words that couldn't be unsaid had been spoken. And then, after telling herself she

would lessen contact with Jo this week after being blown off when it came to dinner plans, she had stupidly sent her a text an hour ago.

Amelia reached for her phone. As she lit up the screen, a new message appeared.

If you're free tomorrow evening, I'd really like to do dinner with you after my shoot. I'll be finished by four. Let me know x

The world stopped moving for a second, and her wine glass stilled in her hand. She read the message again, then again, and finally a fourth time, just to be sure she hadn't imagined it. The little *x* at the end undid her completely.

Jo wanted dinner.

Jo...*was* choosing her.

Amelia sat back slowly against the cushions, her phone clutched in both hands. She wanted to reply immediately. She wanted to reply with something along the lines of '*God, yes, of course. I'll cancel everything, I'll cook, I'll buy wine, I'll take you anywhere you want to go*', but she knew she couldn't.

Because this was nothing more than dinner between two people.

So, she had to play it cool and keep it neutral. This thing between them... It *couldn't* flare into something more.

Still, her fingers trembled slightly as she typed out a response.

That sounds lovely. Just tell me when and where and I'll be there.

No kisses at the end. No gushing enthusiasm. Just calm, casual, and friendly.

But then her chest tightened as she set her phone aside. Because she knew it would never feel that simple with Jo ever again.

She wasn't Lia tonight. She was herself. And Jo was choosing her.

As Amelia swallowed, she realised that changed everything.

Chapter Eleven

JO ADJUSTED THE LIGHT STAND FOR THE THIRD TIME AND STEPPED back to check the shadows against the brick wall she'd chosen as the backdrop. It helped that the late-afternoon sun had slanted through the tall windows of the studio space, casting flattering highlights across her client's soft curls.

Malandra had arrived on time, full of charisma and ease, dressed in a burnt orange jumpsuit and cream sandals. She looked every bit the confident, modern-day self-help guru she marketed herself as—a blend of approachable wisdom and undeniable presence. Perfect for the website she was about to launch.

Jo, on the other hand, felt anything but composed.

She shifted the camera strap across her shoulder and offered a tight smile. "Okay, I want to get a few more headshots before we move to the lounge setup. You doing alright?"

"More than alright," Malandra said as she tucked a curl behind her ear. "You're good at this. I've never felt so relaxed having my picture taken."

"Good," Jo replied with a smile as she checked her focus. "That's the goal."

They moved through a few more shots—shoulders turned slightly, a softer expression, chin a little higher—and Jo fell into the rhythm of it all. Photography had always calmed her and given her something to focus on that wasn't herself. But today, even the lens couldn't distract her for long.

Her mind kept drifting to the message that had come through last night while she was at Satin. To the dinner plans waiting for her just a few hours away. To...Amelia.

“I hope I’m not overstepping,” Malandra said during a pause, brushing out any creases from her jumpsuit. “But...are you seeing anyone at the moment?”

Jo’s brows lifted.

“Sorry.” Malandra laughed. “I always ask people questions like that. It’s the therapist in me. Or maybe just the nosy bitch in me.”

Jo smiled as she lowered her camera. “I guess the honest answer is...it’s complicated.”

“That usually means one of two things.” Malandra tilted her head, curiosity settling in her eyes. “Either someone was involved, or someone’s *still* involved, and you’re not sure what to do about it.”

Jo hesitated. “Something like that.” She didn’t owe this woman anything personal, but somehow it was easier talking to a stranger. Malandra wasn’t part of her world. She didn’t know about Callum or the tangled, aching truth of Amelia. She also didn’t know about Lia. “Let’s just say I’ve been doing a lot of thinking lately...and not much sleeping.”

Malandra smiled. “It sounds to me like your heart is being pulled in different directions.”

“Yeah.” Jo looked back at her client, surprised by the accuracy. “Exactly that.”

They stood in silence for a moment, just the hum of the studio lights filling the space between them. Then Malandra stepped down off the backdrop area and straightened her shoulders. “Well, for what it’s worth, you strike me as someone who deserves to be chosen. Not just needed or wanted when it suits people.”

“T-thank you.”

Malandra offered a soft, playful smile as she stepped closer. “And if your heart ever finds some breathing room, I make a mean margarita, and I know how to dance.”

Jo blinked repeatedly, caught off guard. “Wait, are you—”

“Yes.” Malandra grinned. “I’m asking you out on a date.”

“Wow. That’s...really flattering.”

Malandra lifted a brow. “But...”

“I’m not in the right place,” Jo said, more certain of that than she had been about anything else in weeks. “I’ve got someone I need to be honest with. And maybe someone I’ve already been dishonest with.”

Malandra nodded. “Good answer.”

They finished the shoot a little while later, and Jo sent Malandra off with a promise to deliver a batch of previews by the end of the following week. But even as she packed up her gear, the weight of the evening ahead pressed firmly against her chest.

Dinner.

With Amelia.

She hadn't stopped thinking about it all day. Actually, not since she'd sent the message last night, and not since Amelia's unmistakably warm reply. *Just tell me when and where and I'll be there.* Jo hadn't suggested a restaurant yet. She hadn't even chosen an outfit. Because a part of her was still terrified that she'd walk into dinner and see a goodbye waiting in Amelia's eyes.

And another part—a deeper, braver part—hoped she'd see something else.

Something that resembled a beginning.

THE RESTAURANT WAS QUIET, tucked between a florist and a record shop on a sleepy corner of the city that Jo barely remembered existed. It was the kind of place Amelia would choose, though. Elegant without being showy, and dimly lit with white candles on every table. It even had those cute little handwritten menus clipped to reclaimed wooden boards.

Jo had arrived earlier than she'd needed to, then spent ten minutes pacing up and down the pavement outside, her heart in her mouth. When she'd finally stepped through the door and given her name, the server led her to a table in the far corner. It was private, intimate, and candlelit. Not exactly what Jo believed was right at the moment, but she could still appreciate a beautiful setting.

As she wrung her hands and settled them on top of the table, the door opened.

Jo saw Amelia before Amelia saw her. Her hair was swept back into a loose twist, a navy silk shirt tucked into tailored high-waisted trousers. The simple earrings she wore caught the light, and then Jo noted Amelia's expression. Was she...nervous, too?

God, Jo hoped so. At least then she wouldn't feel alone.

“Hey,” Jo said, standing as Amelia approached the table.

Amelia smiled, but it was nothing like the usual smile she had for Jo. “Hi.”

They kissed each other’s cheeks briefly—just a brush of skin, but enough to make Jo’s stomach somersault—and sat down.

The server came over for their drinks order, effectively breaking the silence, and then he left again...and that heavy quiet settled once more.

Amelia cleared her throat and looked up from her menu. “I wasn’t sure if you still wanted to meet me.”

Jo swallowed. “I wasn’t sure if you’d say yes.”

“Yet here we are.” Amelia sat back in her seat and laughed.

“Yeah.” Jo nodded as her fingers curled loosely around her napkin. “Here we are.”

It wasn’t easy to sit across a table looking back at Amelia. Not because Jo didn’t want to, but because the longer she did, the harder it became to keep her composure. Everything about Amelia—the way she carried herself, the subtle grace in her movements, the warmth beneath the caution in her eyes—set Jo on edge in the most beautiful yet maddening way.

Jo chewed her lip, then shook her head as she said, “I’m sorry.”

Amelia frowned. “For what?”

“For the other night. For choosing the club and Lia over dinner with you. I shouldn’t have done that.” God, Jo couldn’t believe how stupid she’d been. Right now, she was just grateful that Amelia hadn’t turned her down in return.

Amelia searched her face. “You were honest about it. That’s more than most people would have been.”

“That doesn’t make it okay.”

When the space around them fell silent again, Jo thought that Amelia wasn’t going to respond to that, but then she leaned forward slightly, her hands folded neatly on the table. “I don’t blame you. We said we wouldn’t let this get complicated.”

“It’s... I...” Jo took a breath and exhaled it slowly. “It’s already complicated, Amelia.”

Amelia simply nodded.

“I’ve spent weeks trying to separate how I feel about you and how I feel about...everything else, but I can’t. You’re always there in my head.”

Amelia looked away and visibly swallowed. Jo caught the flicker of something as it settled on her face. Pain, maybe...or fear. "I don't know what we're doing," Amelia admitted. "I don't know *how* we do this."

"Me neither."

Silence again. God, Jo *hated* silence. She'd spent so much time alone in it since Callum had broken her heart. So, she focused on Amelia, wanting dinner to be as pleasant as possible. She just wished the small furrow between her brows would eventually smooth out before the night was over. It had been there since the moment she'd sat down.

"I had a shoot this afternoon," Jo said, trying to ease the weight between them. "My client...she asked if I was dating."

Amelia smiled faintly. "And what did you say?"

"I told her it was complicated." Jo hesitated. "She asked me out."

Amelia's brows lifted a little at that.

"She was lovely. Smart, gorgeous, confident..."

A shadow crossed Amelia's face, but she managed a slight smile. "Did you say yes?"

"No. I told her I wasn't in the right place."

Amelia looked down at the table, her expression unreadable.

"Because I'm not." Jo leaned in. "Because I can't stop thinking about you."

"Jo—"

"I don't expect anything from you, Amelia. I know what we agreed, and I'll respect that, but I will admit that I wanted to see you tonight purely because I miss you." Jo's voice almost betrayed her. "You've always been there, and you've always cared. You've always made me laugh and smile when life doesn't feel great. You just...I miss you, okay?"

Amelia visibly swallowed.

"I know we can't be together. I know that I'm not lucky enough to be with you, even if you said you didn't care about the fact that I used to date Callum. But I can't change how I feel, and while I know I should avoid moments like this for my own sanity, I don't want to risk pushing you away or losing you."

Amelia reached for her water and took a slow sip. "This...scares me," she said that so quietly that Jo had to wonder if she'd meant to say it out loud at all. "I've built a life that doesn't make space for this kind of thing."

“I’m not asking you to make space for any of this...for me. I do, however, have to stop pretending that this isn’t real.”

Amelia focused on the glass in front of her, something shifting in the air, and then Jo saw it. Beneath the composure and beneath the careful restraint...feeling. Raw and deep feeling.

“I didn’t think I’d ever...” Amelia trailed off, exhaling slowly. “I never imagined it would be *you*.”

Saddened by what she was about to say, Jo dipped her head and caught Amelia’s eye. “Don’t worry, it won’t be.”

The server reappeared with their drinks, a notepad in his hand as he looked between them. Neither of them had paid any attention to the menu, so Jo quickly lifted it and ordered a few sharing dishes between them.

When the server stepped away, Amelia’s hand drifted across the table. Jo didn’t reach for it, she wasn’t sure it was a good idea, but then Amelia’s fingers brushed against hers, and she closed the gap without a word. Tonight, she would enjoy this dinner, and tomorrow, she would prepare to let go of each and every feeling she had for Amelia.

THE DRIVE to Amelia’s was quiet, but thankfully not in a tense way. It felt as though they were both simply wrapped up in their own heads, and that was okay. Jo’s hand rested lightly on the gearstick, her heart continuing to race erratically. It always did when she was around Amelia. Dinner had been calm and reflective, and in places...sweet. But now, as the night closed in around them, the air inside the car grew thicker and heavier. Honestly, Jo didn’t know the next time she would see this woman. If she didn’t learn to let go of the things she would never have soon, it would be a long time.

She pulled up outside Amelia’s house and cut the engine. “Can I walk you to the door?”

Amelia glanced over, one hand on the door. “You don’t have to.”

“I’d like to.”

They stepped out of the car together into the cool night air, that ever-present hint of spring lingering even though the temperature was set to drop a few more degrees before the end of the night. Amelia walked ahead

slightly, her keys already gripped tight in her hand, and Jo followed. Right now, she was torn between wanting this moment to last...and knowing what could never be.

When Amelia reached the door, she paused and turned around. Jo stopped just behind her, suddenly aware of just how close they were. A foot apart, if that. All Jo knew was that she was close enough to see the faint pulse in Amelia's throat.

"Thank you for tonight," Amelia said with a hint of a smile. "I wasn't sure what to expect."

"Me neither, but thank you. I had a lovely evening with you."

Amelia's gaze lowered to Jo's lips for the briefest of moments. Jo felt her stare, her breath catching when she realised what was potentially happening here. She hadn't expected this, not tonight...not now. But here they were, standing in the dark, neither of them knowing what the right thing to do was.

Amelia inched closer. When her fingertips grazed Jo's sleeve, the contact seared through the fabric like a brand. Jo's breath caught, her heartbeat thundering in her ears, until...

"I shouldn't," Amelia whispered.

Jo's throat tightened. "You didn't."

Instead of retreating with a goodnight as Jo had expected, Amelia drifted nearer still. They hovered a whisper apart, sharing the same air... dangerously close. Amelia's scent—vanilla and something uniquely her—enveloped Jo, and in that moment, nothing mattered more than pressing her mouth against those full, inviting lips. *Once*. Just to know.

The wanting clawed at her insides. This nameless, forbidden thing between them.

Then her pulse skittered, and shame followed right behind.

This was Amelia. Callum's mum. The woman who had held her through her worst days and offered her space when no one else had. The woman who trusted her. Jo couldn't risk fucking it all up if they overstepped. She *wouldn't* risk it.

So, she stepped back enough to break the moment. "Amelia..."

Amelia's eyes closed as her hand fell away from Jo's arm.

"I'm sorry," Jo said, her hands shaking at her sides. If she could be certain that this would be the best thing for her, she would be inside kissing

Amelia already, but it wasn't possible to be certain of something that had the potential to be soul-destroying in the end. "I can't."

Amelia nodded slowly, but Jo noted the pain in her eyes as they opened. Why did things have to be this way? Why did Amelia have to be Callum's mum? "That's okay. I understand."

Jo half-turned and nodded towards her car. "I should go." She moved towards the gate, pausing when she reached the edge of the path. "But I did mean what I said earlier. About not wanting to pretend anymore."

"I know."

"And I know it won't change anything, but I can't lie to myself any longer."

Amelia nodded, regarded Jo with the smallest of smiles, and slipped inside the house.

Jo stood alone beneath a streetlamp, her emotions swinging between want and regret. She had no idea how to tackle any of this or how to make it better, but she knew she had to try. Amelia meant the world to her, she had for some time now, and Jo knew she should be happy with her friendship. After all, it was that friendship that had kept her going in recent months.

Just go home and regroup tomorrow.

AS THE DOOR clicked shut with a strange sense of finality, Amelia pressed her forehead against it and closed her eyes. She didn't know how long she would have to pretend that what had just happened hadn't gutted her, but she would try. For Jo's sake, not her own.

She stepped back, locking the door as she did so, and moved through the silent house she didn't quite feel she belonged in tonight. That had happened a few times recently. Amelia just seemed to feel out of place. No, she felt empty.

She kicked off her heels and poured herself a glass of wine, immediately taking it into the warmth of the living room. She folded herself into the corner of the couch, one leg tucked beneath her, and stared down at the phone in her hand.

Amelia hadn't meant to get that close at the door. She certainly hadn't planned it. But when Jo had looked at her like that, when her breath had

hitched, and her lips had parted, it had felt impossible *not* to close the gap between them. It seemed as though they were caught in a tangled web that neither of them could break free from.

But Jo had resisted *just* in time.

And now Amelia didn't know where that left them.

She stared at the screen, at the messages they'd exchanged the night before. Her heart beat a little harder, and her throat constricted. Amelia knew what she had to do. She opened a new message, her fingers trembling as she typed.

I'm going to step back out of your life, Jo. I think you need space away from me, and I think you're too much of a sweetheart to admit that. So, I'll do it for you. Be safe and take care of yourself x

Amelia's thumb paused over the send button as her eyes burned. But then she sent it, stupidly waiting for a response even though one likely wouldn't come. Hadn't Jo told her tonight that she didn't want to risk losing what they already had? Hadn't that been one of the reasons she knew they couldn't go any further? Yet here Amelia was...making the decision for her.

A tear slipped down her cheek before she could stop it.

She brushed it away, angry with herself for ever letting it get this far. She was too old and too careful for this. She was too guarded to be crying over someone who deserved the most incredible love. A love Amelia likely couldn't offer. But that didn't stop the tears falling onto her blouse as she curled further into the couch, her phone clenched in her hand like it was the only thing anchoring her.

The screen lit up suddenly.

No. Please don't step back. I just need some space to work through things in my head. I'm not running, and I'm not asking you to run either. I just need some time to think x

Amelia didn't know what to make of the message, but she felt a little more positive as she reread it. She couldn't offer much, but she could offer the bare minimum.

Take all the time and space you need x

That response felt both too much and not enough, but Amelia didn't dare add anything more. She didn't trust herself not to say something she couldn't take back. So she placed her phone on the cushion beside her, rolled onto her back, and stared up at the ceiling.

Jo needed time.

And Amelia would wait for the outcome.

Chapter Twelve

THE MORNING LIGHT WAS ALREADY POURING THROUGH THE CURTAINS when Jo opened her eyes. She lay still, the duvet half hanging off the bed, her hair sticking to the back of her neck. Her flat was silent, no surprise there, just the sound of the heating coming to life as the radiators filled with water. It was far too early for a Sunday morning, but sleep had been hard to come by all night. Instead, Jo had lain awake with everything she didn't want to feel.

She sat up slowly, her elbows braced on her knees as she lowered her head to her hands. Her phone was still on the nightstand, where she'd eventually placed it down sometime after midnight. After she'd stared at Amelia's last message long enough to memorise it.

Take all the time and space you need x

She closed her eyes and bit her lip. The guilt from last night hadn't subsided, and she didn't imagine it would any time soon. How she'd almost kissed Amelia. The way she'd leaned in, wanting so badly to taste her lips, only to step back like a coward. The hurt in Amelia's eyes as she'd turned to leave.

God.

Jo hadn't wanted to pull away, not really, but the moment had come out of nowhere, and she'd panicked. Because there was *so much* weight behind what they were doing. There was so much history and so many consequences. She didn't want to mess it up. She couldn't bear to be the reason Amelia regretted anything.

But now, with the sun creeping across the wooden floor and the guilt settled firmly in her belly, Jo wasn't sure if pulling away had protected

either of them. All she knew was that she missed Amelia, and that last night had changed something between them.

She made her way into the kitchen barefoot, flicked the kettle on, and stood by the counter. As she folded her arms and stared at the tiled splashback, she knew the answer. She wanted Amelia. Not in a fleeting way and not just sharing dinner or having drinks at the club. She wanted the mess, the depth, and the terrifying vulnerability of more. And that was what she wasn't sure she was ready for. Not because she didn't care, but because she cared too much.

Jo made her tea and carried it to the window, cradling the mug in both hands. The world was already awake outside, but Jo barely had the strength to move today. She heard a dog bark in the distance as a couple walked past with takeaway coffee, and everything just seemed...normal. Ordinary. Safe.

You need to get out of your head and live your life!

Jo had spent so long chasing distractions—first in the dark, then in denial—and now that she'd finally stopped running, everything hurt that little bit more. Perhaps she should have just left well enough alone. Maybe she never should have agreed to dinner with Amelia. Nothing seemed clearer this morning. Not really.

She set her mug down and reached for her phone, opening the message thread with Amelia. No new messages. Just the last thing Amelia had written. Still there. Still waiting.

Take all the time and space you need x

Jo exhaled a deep breath. Maybe it was time to stop being afraid of what she wanted.

Maybe it was time to choose.

Just...not yet. Not right this very minute.

She opened a new message and chewed her lip.

I'm sorry if I hurt you last night. I'm still figuring my feelings out and I feel terrible for what I did to you. I hope you can forgive me, and I hope you can believe me when I say that I wish things could be different x

She didn't press send. Instead, she saved it to her drafts and set her phone back down on the table. Today was going to be about honesty. With herself, if nothing else. And maybe, tomorrow, she'd be ready to send the message.

PACING THE KITCHEN FLOOR, Amelia held her phone tight against her ear, wondering if opening this can of worms was going to be worth it. She needed to talk, and Evie was always the one who gave her sound advice. Well, most of the time.

The call connected on the third ring.

“Amelia?”

“Hi,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“You alright?” Evie asked, concern laced in her tone. “You don’t usually call me on a Sunday unless something’s fallen through...or you’ve bought a new building without telling me.”

Amelia wanted to laugh, but it didn’t seem appropriate right now. She moved into the living room, dropped down into the armchair in the window, and sighed. “No. It’s not property related.”

“I see.” Evie cleared her throat. “Is this about Jo?”

Amelia pinched the bridge of her nose as she closed her eyes. “Yes.”

“I was wondering when you’d call.”

“I’m in over my head.”

“Because she kissed you?” Evie guessed.

“She didn’t.” *But God, I wish she had*, Amelia thought.

“O-oh.”

“She almost did,” Amelia said, pressing her fingers to her temple. “We were at my door after dinner and...God, Evie, it was right there on offer. It would have happened if she hadn’t pulled back.”

Evie continued to listen.

“I can’t blame her. She was being responsible.” Amelia said. “She was probably doing the exact thing *I* should have done weeks ago instead of letting any of this happen in the first place.”

“You mean...the Lia situation?”

The reminder of the dark room made Amelia’s stomach lurch. “I still haven’t told her. She has no idea it’s me.”

“Okay,” Evie said slowly. “And what’s your plan?”

“I don’t *have* a plan. I have an emotional disaster and a woman who makes me feel like I’m twenty years younger and twice as stupid as I was back then.”

Evie chuckled. “That bad, huh?”

“I lied to her, Evie.”

“You didn’t lie. You withheld.”

Amelia clenched her jaw. “That’s splitting hairs, and you know it.”

“Well...yeah, but we both know why you did it.”

Amelia leaned her head back against the armchair. The sky outside was painfully blue, but inside, it was more miserable than it had ever been. “I didn’t want to give her a reason to run,” she said. “And I was afraid that if I told her the truth, that I was Lia, she’d feel betrayed. Violated, even.”

“She might still feel that way when she finds out the truth, but it could go the other way, and she might finally understand that she’s never actually had to choose between two people.”

That thought had haunted Amelia all night.

“She’s been trying so hard to be decent,” Amelia whispered. “To do the right thing. And all the while, I’ve been there, in both spaces, letting her think she’s torn between two women when it’s just been me. God, what kind of person does that?”

“One who’s lonely. One who finally let herself feel something real again.”

Amelia covered her eyes with her hand. “I’m such a fucking coward.”

“No, you’re not.”

“I thought I could keep it separate,” Amelia went on, “and then I realised she was starting to fall for me, *Lia*, and I still said nothing. I thought maybe I could stop. Just pull back and let her make her choice. But then she asked me to dinner and...I wanted her to choose me. Not the anonymity. Not the fantasy. Me.”

“And she did.”

Amelia let out a shaky breath. “I don’t know how to fix it.”

“You tell her,” Evie said matter-of-factly.

Amelia’s chest ached at that. “And risk losing her?”

“You risk losing her either way, Amelia. But at least this way, you’re being honest. You’re giving her the chance to choose you *fully*. She deserves that.”

Running a hand through her hair, Amelia closed her eyes and took a moment to consider her options. It was easy for Evie to tell her to be honest, but Evie wasn’t the one who would lose everything when it all turned to shit. “I don’t know how.”

“You start by telling her the truth...and you do it soon. Before the space she’s asked for turns into distance that neither of you knows how to tackle.”

Amelia swallowed down her emotions. She could already picture it now. Jo’s face when she revealed that she was Lia. The hurt, the pain, the confusion in those beautiful blue eyes. Perhaps Amelia should just cut all ties with Jo and hope she never found out the truth. It certainly seemed easier as she sat here thinking. “I’m terrified,” she finally admitted. “But I brought this on myself, and I have to face the consequences.”

“If there are any consequences.”

“Oh, there will be.” Amelia scoffed. She knew better than to imagine any other outcome. “Trust me...there will be a lot of consequences.”

THE SUN HAD SHIFTED to the other side of the house by the time the late afternoon had come around. Amelia had found herself chasing it all day, moving from room to room to feel the warmth on her face, and now here she sat...in the quiet of her office, curled up in her armchair with her second untouched coffee of the day. She’d spent the last hour rehearsing the conversation in her head, fear continuously rising from deep within.

Jo, I need to tell you something. You haven’t been torn between two women. It’s just been me the whole time. I’m Lia.

God, each time she went over it in her head, it sounded worse than the last time.

The panic had started to creep in just after her call with Evie. Telling Jo the truth seemed brave in theory—perhaps empowering, too—but now, the closer she got to *actually* doing it, the more it felt like striking a match in a house full of petrol.

Amelia’s stomach dropped when her phone started to ring on the arm of the chair.

Jo.

For a moment, she just stared at the screen. She wasn’t ready; she wasn’t prepared. But letting the call ring out felt worse. That was a kind of cowardice she wasn’t willing to live with.

She answered on the fifth ring. “Hi.”

“Hey,” Jo said, hesitation noticeable in her tone. “Is...this a bad time?”

“No, of course not.” Amelia shifted in her seat. “Is everything okay?”

There was a pause on the line, but Amelia understood. Neither of them knew what was going on lately. Jo didn’t need all of this, though. She was supposed to be moving on from Callum, living her life and enjoying herself, not worrying on a call to Amelia.

“I needed to talk to someone.”

Amelia’s breath caught. *That always seems to be me.* “What’s on your mind, Jo?”

Jo sighed, and Amelia could almost hear her fidgeting on the other end. The nerves, the hesitation, all of it was probably wrapped up in a box with a neat little bow on top. “Last night’s been playing on my mind. You, me... you know?”

“Yes, I know.”

“It scares me,” Jo said. “Not because I didn’t want it. But because I did. Too much.”

Silence settled between them. It wasn’t uncomfortable, but it was a silence that seemed loaded with so many emotions.

“I’ve been thinking about how ridiculous all of this is,” Jo continued as she laughed. “You’re my ex’s mum, for God’s sake. I mean, even saying that out loud feels like some kind of joke.”

“Yeah,” Amelia said quietly. She didn’t want to be a joke to someone. Not even Jo if it meant she could have her. “I’m sorry about that.”

“And we both agreed, didn’t we? That it would be downright stupid to get involved.”

“Very stupid,” Amelia echoed, trying to figure out if Jo was hoping to convince herself...or both of them. Because while Amelia knew people would talk, it no longer felt like a stupid idea to be involved with one another. Not when Jo looked at her the way she did. Not when they’d almost kissed. Amelia couldn’t recall the last time she’d stood on her doorstep and allowed a moment like that to take over her, but last night it had almost happened.

“And yet,” Jo went on, “I keep wanting to.”

Amelia closed her eyes and rested her head back. God, this was a complete mess.

“But I won’t. I *can’t*. I think that maybe friendship is the only thing I can manage with you right now. And honestly? I’m lucky to even have that.”

Amelia's throat tensed. She wanted to tell Jo she could have more, but what right did she have? Not only had she been the one to lay out some kind of invisible line they couldn't cross, but she wasn't being entirely honest either. Not where it mattered most. "I don't know where we go from here, but I'd *never* want to lose your friendship."

"Me neither." Jo sighed, then said, "At least I still have Lia."

Amelia's pulse stuttered. "I'm sorry?"

Jo laughed, almost in a self-deprecating manner. "You know. The dark room. The thing I do when I'm *not* being emotionally responsible."

A thousand words rushed to the tip of Amelia's tongue, but they instantly died there. "R-right."

"She makes it easier," Jo murmured. "Not to think. Not to feel too much. I know that sounds messed up."

"It doesn't sound messed up, Jo. If that's what you need, then that's what you need."

"It's not sustainable, and I know that, but right now, it's enough. Until I'm ready for something...real."

Amelia's fingers tightened around the edge of the armrest. The urge to confess surged up like a wave, wild and brutal, but desperately needed. For both of their sakes.

Tell her. Tell her before she says something that breaks you.

But then Jo laughed again, and it was music to Amelia's ears. "She said the funniest thing last time. About how my breath gives me away. That even when I say nothing, I say everything."

Amelia smiled through the sting of tears in her eyes. She remembered saying that. She remembered *every* breath Jo had taken in the dark...and she would carry those moments forever. Hidden and unspoken. Because here, right now, hearing the affection in Jo's tone for a woman she didn't even realise was Amelia...Amelia knew she couldn't tell her. Not when Jo had just told her that *Lia* was helping her survive the space between heartbreak and healing. If she told her now, Jo would feel betrayed. It would ruin them. All of it.

"Amelia?" Jo said softly. "You've gone quiet."

Amelia gripped the edge of the armrest tighter, steadying her voice before she replied. "I'm here. Just listening."

"You okay?"

She nodded. "Yes. I don't want to miss anything you're telling me."

Jo let out a nervous laugh. "You always say things like that. Like I'm worth listening to."

"You are," That came out before Amelia could stop it.

"Can I tell you something? You probably think I'm out of my mind, but to me...it's everything."

Amelia prepared herself for whatever was coming, inhaling a deep, inconspicuous breath. "Of course. You can tell me anything."

Jo exhaled, but there was something in the way she did it that made Amelia brace herself.

"I think the only place I've felt anything close to peace lately is in that dark room. With her. With...Lia."

That name twisted like a knife through Amelia's heart.

"I know it's weird." Jo scoffed. "You know, finding comfort in a stranger? But it doesn't feel like she's a stranger. Not really."

Amelia stared out the window, allowing Jo whatever space she needed to say everything out loud. She would separate herself from Lia for a moment and try to understand what was going through Jo's mind.

"There's something about her. The way she touches me and listens without speaking. The way she waits until I'm ready. It's like she knows the exact shape of the ache I've been carrying."

Amelia pressed a hand against her sternum, trying to steady the slow breaking of her own heart. God, she couldn't keep this up for much longer. Not without hurting herself in the process.

"She makes me feel like I'm the only woman in the world," Jo whispered. "Like I matter. Like nothing I've been through changes that."

Amelia bit the inside of her cheek so hard that it brought tears to her eyes.

"She never pushes, and she never asks me to be anything other than what I am in that moment. I don't have to explain myself. I don't have to be brave. I can just...*be*. And for an hour, maybe two, I get to stop pretending that I'm okay when I'm not."

Amelia closed her eyes. She remembered every moment. Every breath. The way Jo had leaned into her touch as though it was the only thing anchoring her to the earth. The way she'd pressed her forehead to Amelia's collarbone once, so quietly and so trustingly, that Amelia had wanted to cry right then and there.

“And the strangest part?” Jo said, her voice laced with both wonder and confusion. “I don’t even know what she looks like, I couldn’t pick her out of a lineup, yet she makes me feel more than anyone else has in years.”

Amelia’s throat burned. Even if she’d wanted to respond, she couldn’t. Jo Bleasdale was breaking her piece by piece without even knowing it.

“I know I’m using her as a crutch and I know it can’t go on forever, but it’s all I can handle right now.”

“You’re not using her,” Amelia somehow managed. “You’re surviving. There’s a difference.”

Jo fell silent for a moment. “Do you think she knows that? That I’m not using her to be cruel...but to find myself again?”

Amelia let out a shaky breath. “I think she does.”

“That’s the thing that gets me. She stays when she could choose someone else. *Anyone* else. But...she chooses *me* again and again.”

Oh, I’ll always choose you again and again. Tears fell freely down Amelia’s face.

“I wish I could tell her how grateful I am.” Jo’s voice broke. “That she’s held me together more than she’ll ever know. That until I met her, I was hanging on by a thread.”

Amelia tried to speak, but her voice caught in her throat.

“And I know it’s not real. Not in the way life is real. We don’t talk. There’s no aftermath and no responsibility, but in those moments when it’s just us...it feels more honest than anything I’ve ever had, Amelia.”

It took everything within Amelia not to cry out loud. Because it *was* real. And it *was* her. And Jo had no idea. She wanted to scream her confession. She wanted to beg Jo to see her. But how could she? How could she destroy the one space where Jo still felt safe? And worse...how could she risk losing both versions of herself in the same breath?

“I’m sorry,” Jo said suddenly. “I didn’t mean to go on like that. I don’t know why I’m even telling you all this.”

“Because I’m listening,” Amelia whispered. “That’s what friends do.”

“You’re right. Thank you. I appreciate it.” Jo sniffled and sighed. “I should get going. I have some prep to do for another shoot in a few weeks. I need to source a studio.”

“Take care of yourself, Jo. You know where I am if you need to talk.”

Amelia ended the call with a trembling hand and stared at her reflection in the window. She looked like someone she didn’t recognise anymore. And

all she could hear was Jo's voice, still echoing in her head...

She chooses me again and again.

Chapter Thirteen

WITH HER EYES BARELY OPEN, JO SLUMPED DOWN ONTO THE COUCH and powered the TV on. She was supposed to be seeing Ada tonight, but after a long day working, she didn't have the energy to entertain anyone. She knew what Ada was doing. She was trying to keep Jo busy and keep her mind off everything going on in her life, but she was okay. She would always be okay.

You've been through worse.

And she really had.

During those weeks and months after her split from Callum, Jo had woken up every morning wondering what the hell she was doing with her life. In the immediate days after, while she slept in Amelia's spare room, Jo cried herself to sleep, the tears starting all over again the moment she opened her eyes. Amelia hadn't mentioned the puffiness or the redness—she was a sweetheart like that—but Jo knew everyone around her had noticed the state she was in.

But this was different.

This was exciting...and terrifying.

Exciting because she had Lia and their shared darkness each weekend, and terrifying because she knew her feelings for Amelia were only growing stronger. Dinner had been great a few nights ago, but it hadn't helped Jo in her quest to *only* be friends with her ex's mum. Add in the stupidity of nearly kissing Amelia, and everything was constantly rattling around in her head. Just this morning, she had woken up thinking about Amelia. Was she okay? Did she have a busy day at work coming up? Could Jo take back the need for time and space?

She groaned as she kicked her feet up onto the couch, lay lengthwise, and mindlessly flicked through the channels. It was midweek, so she'd be lucky to find anything worth falling asleep to, but background noise would do. She didn't have to be up early tomorrow—it was her day off—but a good night's sleep wouldn't do her any harm right now.

Her phone buzzed in the middle pocket of her hoodie. Jo had hoped Ada wouldn't remember they had plans this evening, but her best friend rarely forgot anything. Working through several excuses in her mind, Jo pulled her phone out, yawning as she glanced at the screen.

Only it wasn't Ada.

It was Amelia.

Hi. I know it's last minute, but I'm heading to Satin for a few hours and I wondered if you wanted to meet me there for a drink or two...

Jo swallowed, her stomach somersaulting at the mere thought of being at Satin again with Amelia. Part of her had wanted to bump into her there last weekend when she was with Ada, but she was glad that hadn't happened. Because dinner with Amelia the following night had been what she'd wanted more than anything. If she had to choose between a cute restaurant or a sex club, she would always choose the restaurant with Amelia Loughlin.

She chewed her lip and mulled it over. Responding immediately could give Amelia the wrong impression. Even if there was no *wrong* impression to give anymore. Jo wanted her...regardless of the fact that it could never happen.

Midweek? That's new for me. I didn't even know it was open midweek.

That wasn't accepting the invitation, but it wasn't declining it either.

Midweek is great. It's much more relaxed. A few of the girls I know will be there. You're welcome to join us if you'd like x

There Amelia went again with the little kiss at the end of her message. Jo shouldn't enjoy the way it made her stomach flip, but she did. She always would.

I'll see how the rest of the evening goes. It's been a long day. If I don't show, have a great night x

She added her own kiss, hoping it showed no animosity between them after the incident on the doorstep a few nights ago. Their dinner had been

lovely, what had followed not so much, but they hadn't spoken a lot since. Jo had created that distance, but now she didn't want it to be there.

Her phone buzzed again just as she was about to bring up Ada's number.

Okay. I'd like to see you, but if you've had a busy day, then rest x

God. Why did Amelia have to say something like that? Did she realise every interaction between them made Jo's heart thump a little harder? Was it intentional? Jo hated not knowing.

She quickly called Ada before she could respond to Amelia, holding her breath until the call connected.

"Hi, gorgeous face!"

"Hey." Jo breathed out. "I know we were supposed to be spending the evening together, but I'm not feeling up to it."

"Oh, don't worry. I'm only just getting in from work myself." Ada's heels clicked in the background, followed by the thud of her bag hitting the floor. "You okay? You've been quiet this week."

"Yeah, I'm okay. A little dazed from being with Amelia on Saturday night."

"How was dinner?"

"It was great. Most of it felt no different than usual when I'm over at Amelia's." Jo smiled up at the ceiling, remembering the gorgeous blouse Amelia had worn. "She looked amazing. I felt like a slob compared to her."

"At least she made an effort," Ada said as the kettle whistled in the background. "And I'm sure you looked gorgeous, too."

Jo didn't think she had, but Amelia had said so as they were leaving the restaurant, and that was enough. "Anyway, um...I don't want you to think I'm letting you down tonight. I was already going to cancel with you before I got the text, but Amelia's invited me to Satin with a few friends."

"Oh?"

Jo rolled her eyes. She had yet to inform Ada of what had happened on Saturday night, but she wasn't ready to discuss it all yet. Ada would put thoughts and ideas into her head that she couldn't deal with right now. So, as far as her best friend was aware, *nothing* had happened, and nothing would ever happen. "It doesn't mean anything. She's only invited me for a couple of drinks."

"And...you're going, I assume?"

“I don’t know. I’d love to spend a few hours with her, but is it a good idea?”

“Well, you already know how I feel about you and Amelia, so I doubt I’m going to talk you out of it the way you’re expecting me to.”

Jo sighed. “Do people go there *just* to drink on occasion, or am I being completely oblivious?”

“No, they do. Not everyone wants to have sex. Some just go to unwind with like-minded people. And I know I don’t really know Amelia, but she doesn’t strike me as someone who would want to fuck you in a club, Jo. If she’s into you the way you’re into her, I think she’d be much more comfortable with a moment like that at home...in her bed. Or yours.”

Jo sat up and groaned. “Thanks for putting those thoughts in my head!”

Ada snorted. “Yeah, because they weren’t *already* there before I mentioned it.”

“I’m not making a mistake going tonight, am I?”

“You’re just living your life, Jo. Whatever it results in, embrace it. I hate knowing you sit home alone night after night.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Jo was lying to herself and to Ada, but she didn’t have the headspace for an intense or emotional conversation tonight. Not if she was meeting with Amelia at the club. Everything blurred together when she was in that kind of mood. “I’m quite happy sitting at home.”

“Correction. You *were* happy sitting at home. But since you started going to Satin, you’ve changed. That light is back in your eyes.”

Jo smiled. She was glad Ada had noticed, even if it didn’t always *feel* like she was doing any better. “You can thank Lia and her insane orgasms for that.”

“Mmhmm.”

“What does that mean?” Jo narrowed her eyes, already sensing a shift in Ada’s tone. “Ada?”

“You’re sure you’re happier because of Lia?”

“Of course I am. If you knew what she was like in that room, you’d understand why I’m happier.”

“That’s...not what I’m saying.”

Jo frowned. “Then just say whatever it is you’re not trying to say. I know I’m lying on the couch doing fuck all, but I can think of other things to do instead of deciphering cryptic Ada tonight.”

“I don’t think Lia’s the reason you’re happier. I think *Amelia* is.” Jo stilled, but Ada continued. “And I want you to know that if that *is* what’s happening, you’ve got my full support. You’re my best friend. I want you to grab life...and Amelia, if that’s what you need.”

Jo’s throat constricted. “I wish I could.”

“You can.”

“I appreciate that you’ve got my back, but she’s the one who said it wasn’t a good idea in the first place.”

“And yet here we are.” Ada laughed. “Discussing whether you should go and meet her tonight.”

Jo closed her eyes as her shoulders sagged. “I shouldn’t go, I know that, but the last time I blew her off, I think it hurt her.”

“You mean when she initially mentioned dinner last week, and you chose the club instead?”

“Y-yes.” Jo still felt terrible for choosing Satin over Amelia, even if the end result had been them sharing dinner with one another. “Maybe I’m just reading into something that isn’t there, though.”

“So, what’s stopping you tonight? It’s just a few drinks, as you put it.”

Jo opened her mouth, but nothing came out. What *was* stopping her? Fear? Hope? The realisation that maybe she wasn’t torn between two women at all, but just terrified of what it could mean to fall for the one she could actually see? “I don’t know,” she whispered. “I really don’t know.”

“Do it, Jo. Go along and enjoy yourself.”

Jo chewed her lip, aware of the butterflies unexpectedly fluttering around in her belly. “Okay. I’ll do it.”

JO PAUSED at the entrance to Satin, thankful for just how discreet it was this evening. For some reason, she felt as though she was doing something terrible...something she shouldn’t be. She took a breath as she looked up at the buzzer to the side of the door. Amelia was inside, and Jo was just about ready to lose her mind, knowing she would likely be lounging there in a gorgeous dress, that red pendant sitting safely around her neck.

She may already be busy. You have to prepare yourself for that.

Jo didn't want to imagine seeing Amelia with another woman. She didn't want to imagine what Amelia was capable of at the club. If she could just pretend that Satin was nothing more than a generic bar this evening, she may just find the courage to step inside.

She hadn't texted Amelia to say she was coming. She wasn't even sure why. Maybe it was cowardice...maybe it was curiosity. Maybe it was the hope that if she turned up unannounced, she could finally see what this place and Amelia looked like when she wasn't expecting her.

Jo stepped inside, the familiar scent of expensive perfume wrapping around her immediately. It was a strange feeling to know that a simple scent could calm you in an instant. The woman at the desk greeted her with a soft smile and a nod of recognition. It wasn't busy, but there were enough people lounging, drinking, and laughing in quiet corners to fill the space with a gentle buzz.

She didn't know what she was looking for. Not really. Until she saw her.
Amelia.

Laid out on one of the wide, velvet-draped beds in the main lounge area, her long legs crossed at the ankle, a flute of champagne dangling from her fingers.

Wearing lace.

Lingerie. Black. Delicate. *Unforgiving.*

Jo's heart lurched in her chest as though someone had just shoved her from behind. Amelia's robe had slipped off to reveal the full line of her thigh, the curve of her waist, and the elegant dip of her collarbone. Her hair was loose tonight, cascading over one shoulder, and her smile—directed at the woman beside her—was lazy, warm, and so fucking dangerous.

Jo's stomach flipped. She should leave. She should turn around and walk out the door before Amelia looked up. Before she saw her. Before she ruined *everything*. But Amelia's gaze shifted and landed right on her.

Oh, God. This can't be happening.

Time folded in on itself, and Jo's feet refused to move. Her brain screamed *go*, but her body was frozen, caught up in the gaze of a woman she had *never* seen like this before. Not Amelia the mother. Not Amelia the friend. Not even Amelia the flirt.

This was something else entirely.

Amelia held her gaze from across the room, something unreadable flickering in her expression. Then, *so fucking slowly*, she uncrossed her

legs, murmured something to the woman beside her and sat upright, her robe now pooled around her.

Jo's mouth ran dry when Amelia gestured for her to come closer. She didn't know how or when her feet had started moving, but now she was walking one step at a time, until she was standing a few feet away from the bed where Amelia still sat, her bare thighs glowing gold in the soft light and her body *devastatingly* unreal.

"Jo," Amelia gazed up at her. "I didn't know you were coming."

Jo swallowed. "N-neither did I."

A smile tugged at the corners of Amelia's mouth. "You look a little surprised."

"I-I—" Jo blinked repeatedly. "I've just never seen you like this."

Amelia tilted her head. "Is that a bad thing?"

Jo didn't answer because if she did, she would say something entirely inappropriate, and she *had* to keep her wits about her tonight. Still, as she reminded herself of that, she refused to look away from the thin strip of lace crossing Amelia's chest, or the flushed skin of her throat...or that sensual confidence in her posture.

Tonight, Amelia was something else. Something out of bounds. Something untouchable. And yet...Jo *wanted* to touch. With *every* breath in her body.

Amelia stood slowly, her robe draped across the bed behind her. She reached for it and wrapped it around herself, tying it loosely at the waist. It didn't help, though. It *barely* dulled the image already seared into Jo's memory.

"Would you like a drink?" Amelia asked as she stepped closer. "You've gone very quiet."

Jo nodded, still trying to find words she could confidently say out loud. "Sure. Yeah."

"This way." Amelia brushed past her, barefoot, as she led them towards one of the small booths near the back of the lounge. A low table, plush seating, and a little more privacy.

Jo followed her like a woman sleepwalking through a dream.

As they sat down, Amelia called a server over and ordered for both of them before turning back to Jo with that softness in her eyes. "You don't have to stay, you know."

Jo knew she didn't, but there wasn't a chance she was leaving. "I don't want to leave."

"Even after seeing me like that?"

Jo looked away, laughing quietly to herself. "*Especially* after seeing you like that."

"I didn't mean to shock you." Amelia smiled, but it was laced with sadness. "I'm sorry."

"You didn't."

"I think I did, but you forget this place is part of my life, too."

"I don't forget." Jo turned to her, their knees almost touching under the table. "I just never imagined..."

"What?"

"That you'd look so at home in it." Jo shook her head. "O-or that I'd want to crawl across the bed and drag you into the nearest private room." She scrubbed a hand down her face when Amelia gazed back at her, quite clearly shocked. "Sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"It's okay. I think we're past the point of pretending, aren't we?"

Jo's heart ached. God, she would give anything to be sitting here with Amelia under different circumstances. She *wanted* to be Amelia's. "It's just...you look incredible, and I didn't expect to react like that."

"Jo—"

"And now I don't know what the fuck I'm doing here. Because I told myself I was fine with friendship. But then you looked at me like that, while dressed in...very little, and I don't feel fine anymore."

The server arrived with two drinks, placed them down, and left again. Part of Jo wished she'd stayed, even if only to give Jo a moment to compose herself, but no...she was all on her own with this one. She picked up her glass and stared down into it. If she didn't, she would find herself salivating over Amelia's cleavage.

"Maybe we're not meant to feel fine."

Jo looked up and frowned.

"Maybe that's the point. Maybe it's *supposed* to feel like this. Scary, uncertain, maybe even messy."

Jo's fingers curled around her glass. "It already *is* messy."

"Perhaps it is." Amelia nodded. "But it's also real."

Jo swallowed. "I don't want to lose you, Amelia."

"You won't."

As Amelia slid her hand over Jo's and squeezed, she gazed into those dark eyes and sighed. "I almost didn't come tonight."

"But you did."

Jo felt something shift inside her. It felt as though a line had been drawn and immediately crossed. Amelia had wrapped herself in silk, lace, and confidence, but beneath it all, she was still the same woman who had held Jo when she couldn't stop crying. The same woman who texted little kisses. The same woman who said *I'll be here* and meant it.

Jo knew then, even if she couldn't act on it tonight, even if she couldn't let herself unravel any further in public...that she was in serious trouble.

Because she didn't just want Amelia. She was starting to *need* her.

Chapter Fourteen

AMELIA COULDN'T REMEMBER THE LAST TIME A SINGLE LOOK HAD undone her the way Jo's had. That moment—those first seconds when their eyes locked across the room—was *still* playing on a loop behind her calm expression. She sipped her drink slowly, her robe tied tightly around her waist now, her legs crossed with a deliberate composure she wasn't sure was working. Inside, she was anything other than composed.

Because Jo had looked at her like she was something forbidden.

Something dangerous.

Something...wanted.

Amelia shifted slightly in the booth, trying to relax her shoulders and to keep the ache in her belly from spreading further down. Jo was still sitting beside her, her face a little flushed, her eyes darting to Amelia's thighs and then away again. She was pretending not to think about it, but Amelia could feel the tension building between them.

God, she wished they would just take the risk.

One date. One night in the real world.

It wouldn't solve everything, but it would mean something. Amelia had never asked for much, not from anyone, but tonight, she would give *anything* to be with Jo.

For Jo to choose her boldly, regardless of what they'd agreed, like she had done in the dark.

Because that was what haunted her most. The knowing.

Amelia hadn't been able to stop thinking about the last time they were together in the dark room. The way Jo had kissed her without hesitation and pushed her back against the wall with that desperate hunger that hadn't

needed words. Amelia had felt every tremble and every whispered breath. The way Jo had moaned into her neck when she gripped her hips. The way her mouth had moved lower, slow and teasing. And then the moment Amelia had felt Jo's tongue between her thighs, so certain of what she was doing and what she wanted, she'd all but come undone.

She could still taste her. She could still feel Jo's breath on her skin, the hot drag of her lips, and the rhythm of her fingers curling just right. And tonight, sitting here with her, pretending that nothing had ever happened between them, was torture.

Amelia pressed the rim of her glass to her bottom lip, trying to cool the fire that had started to rise again. She needed to think about something else. Something safe. She cleared her throat. "I meant to ask...how busy are you this week?"

Jo's head shot up, caught off guard a little by Amelia's questioning. "Why?"

"I wanted you to do a shoot for me."

Jo's gaze switched between Amelia's lips and her cleavage. "Oh, I-I...I don't think that's a good idea."

"I have a property near completion," Amelia said, realising where Jo's mind had just gone. "Big place. Beautiful character. I think it'll go fast once it hits the market, but the staging company I usually use is behind on the visuals."

"O-oh." Jo laughed. "You want me to shoot it?"

"If you're interested, then yes. I'd love you to shoot it."

"Yes, of course. That would be great." Jo shook her head as she looked down into her glass. "I thought you meant something else at first."

Amelia's lips curled into a slow, knowing smile. "No. Not lingerie shots."

Jo, a little flustered, said, "Right. Of course."

"But now that you mention it..." Amelia let the tease hang in the air for a second before softening. "I'm kidding. It's just a house. Five beds. South-facing garden. It'll be lovely once it's finished."

"I'd love to. Really." Jo relaxed slightly, though the blush hadn't left her cheeks. "It's funny. This feels like the first normal conversation we've had in a while."

"It's not exactly easy to stay on-topic when we're in *this* place," Amelia said quietly, gesturing to the low-lit space around them. "I'm sure you

agree.”

Jo smiled. “Yeah. I keep forgetting it’s not just a dream.”

“And it never has to be.” Amelia stroked her fingers over the back of Jo’s hand. “Forget everything we’ve said and just remember that.”

Jo’s eyes locked onto Amelia’s again, and for a moment, it felt like everything else had fallen away. The people, the music, the ambience... none of it mattered in this moment.

But then Amelia looked down, pretending to adjust the sleeve of her robe. She wasn’t ready to say what she needed to say. Not yet. Because wanting Jo had never been the problem.

It was keeping her...*after*.

After Amelia’s past. After the truth. After the dark.

After all of it.

THE CONVERSATION HAD DRIFTED into silence again, but Amelia didn’t mind. Sitting with Jo like this—close, calm, her fingers toying with the stem of her glass—it was more than she’d expected tonight. But she’d noticed that Jo wasn’t still. She kept glancing around the lounge, her eyes subtly scanning the space as though she was looking for someone. She’d look away when she caught Amelia watching, but her attention always returned to the same quiet corners of the room.

Amelia watched her for a moment longer, then said, “Are you looking for someone?”

Jo hesitated. Her eyes darted away again, and this time she didn’t try to hide it. “I’m just...” She exhaled through her nose and gave a shrug. “I keep wondering if she’s here.”

“You mean Lia?”

Jo nodded. “It’s not even a Friday night, and she’s probably not the type to hang around midweek.”

Amelia forced her face to remain neutral, even as her stomach twisted.

“I just...I don’t know,” Jo continued, her voice barely above a whisper. “I’ve been *dying* to be alone with her again. All last week and now this week. It’s like something about her just—” She cut herself off and huffed a laugh. “God, listen to me. I sound obsessed.”

“You don’t.” Amelia shook her head. “It makes sense.”

“It’s more than just the sex,” Jo said quickly, as though she was trying to defend herself. “I mean, the sex is *incredible*, but it’s the way I feel when I’m with her. I can let go and forget that I’m broken. The connection is... intense.”

God, Amelia wanted to reach out and pull Jo into her arms. She wanted to do so much more than sit here, pretending to be the concerned mother of Jo’s ex. Right now, she didn’t give a fuck who she was to this woman. She just wanted to be her everything.

“I miss that. I miss her,” Jo murmured, her eyes lifting once more towards the far hallway that led to the private rooms. “I keep thinking that if I can just be with her again, I’ll stop feeling like this. This...stuck.” Jo visibly swallowed and shook her head. “I think I must have fucked up the last time I was here.”

Amelia’s brows drew together. “I’m sorry?”

“The night I came here...last weekend, she wasn’t here. She hasn’t been here since, I don’t think. Or...she knows I’m likely to be around and she doesn’t want to see me in that room anymore.” The pain in Jo’s eyes was almost too much for Amelia to take. “Even the faceless woman who sleeps with strangers all the time knows I’m not good enough. I’m a real fucking catch, aren’t I?”

Amelia could feel her heart pounding in her throat, her skin prickling with shame. The woman Jo longed for—the one who made her feel whole, desirable, and safe—was sitting right beside her. And she was nothing more than a fucking coward.

“I guess I just wish I could have had one more night with her, but I knew it was too good to be true. Maybe that’s why I came here tonight. Maybe I was using meeting you as an excuse, while hoping she would be here. But she’s not, I checked before when you went to the bathroom. Nobody is in those rooms tonight.”

For a split second, Amelia considered it. She *almost* stood up, walked to the reception, and booked the dark room under her alias. She could have found a reason to leave Jo sitting here while she changed into the version Jo was so desperate to be with. She could invite her in and touch her. She could make her forget and give her what she needed. She *could* be Lia again, just for tonight.

But something inside her recoiled.

It felt different now. More deceptive than it had ever felt before. It no longer felt like just a fantasy or an escape. No, it felt cruel. Because Jo *wasn't* choosing her. She didn't know who she was choosing at all. And Amelia couldn't live inside that lie anymore.

She looked over at Jo again, took in the furrow between her brows, the restlessness in her body and the way she kept pressing her thighs together subtly under the table like she was trying to calm the ache without drawing attention to it.

She was so alive, yet so vulnerable.

But Amelia couldn't bring herself to become the lie again. Not tonight. Not when it would mean keeping Jo in the dark just to feel wanted. She drew in a steady breath. "Maybe tonight's just not meant for that."

Jo smiled weakly. "Yeah. Maybe not."

But she didn't sound convinced.

Amelia wanted to reach across the table and take her hand. To say, 'She's not here tonight because she's sitting right in front of you', but her throat closed around the words.

She'd initially told herself she was protecting Jo. Now, it felt like she was just protecting herself.

THE KEY SCRAPED against the lock twice before Jo realised her hand was shaking. She let out a breath, pushed the door open, and stepped into the stillness of her flat. The light in the hallway was too bright, so she turned it off immediately, opting for the warm, low glow of the side lamp in the lounge.

She stood there for a moment, staring into the room, her pulse pounding in her ears. She slipped her coat from her shoulders and threw it to the couch, her heels quickly following. She didn't even bother turning on the TV. It was a waste of time.

She didn't need a distraction. She needed...God, she *needed* Amelia.

Jo had spent the entire taxi ride home trying to think about anything else. She'd rolled the window down, asked the driver to turn the music up, but nothing had helped. Nothing had erased the image of Amelia lounging on that bed in her black lace lingerie, her robe discarded and her long legs

crossed like she didn't have a care in the world. Like she wasn't absolutely wrecking Jo's mind, body, and soul without even trying.

Jo had never seen her like that before, and now she could never *unsee* it.

She walked slowly into the bedroom, losing her dress as she reached her bed. She climbed onto the mattress and lay back, placed one hand over her eyes, and settled the other low on her stomach.

What the fuck are you doing?

It didn't matter what she was doing. Her body was restless and starved, and Jo *needed* a release.

She slid her fingers beneath the waistband of her underwear, teasing her lips without going any further. She needed time to enjoy this. She needed to sink in slowly. Fuck, she needed to let that image of Amelia fully reveal itself in her mind.

That soft, glowing skin. That black lace cupping her breasts and hugging her hips. The way she sat up and looked at Jo as though she'd just won a game Jo hadn't even realised she was playing.

Her touch. Her mouth. Her quiet confidence.

Jo's fingers moved lower. She exhaled sharply as she brushed them over her clit, already dripping wet...already *aching*. Her hips shifted, her back arching slightly as she dragged her fingers in lazy circles, chasing the relief she hadn't even known she was craving until she'd stepped into the club and saw her.

"Amelia," she whispered into her painfully lonely bedroom. "O-oh, fuck. Y-yes."

The sounds and smells in the room blurred as Jo's breath quickened and her thighs opened a little more, her fingers slick with need. She pressed harder, faster, her other hand fisting in the sheet beneath her, her head tilting back against the pillows as her pulse thundered in her ears.

It was wrong. It was *so* wrong. But all she could see behind her closed lids was Amelia in black lace, her legs spread just enough to undo her completely.

"Fuck," Jo whispered as her body jerked under her own hand.

She was close, right on the edge, and the thought of Amelia's voice in her ear, low and steady as it urged her on, tipped her further.

She moved faster, her breath hitching as her stomach tightened. Fuck, she was going to come harder than she had in a long time. Nights with Lia included. As she sank two fingers deep inside herself, her phone buzzed.

Jo froze, her entire body trembling and begging for release. Her phone vibrated again, so she reached blindly for it on the bed, knowing full well it would be Ada. She'd want the gossip. She *always* wanted the gossip.

But the name on the screen wasn't Ada.

It was Amelia.

Jo stared at it, her body on fire and her thighs still trembling from where she'd hovered just a breath from release.

She didn't have time to think. She answered it, almost whimpering as she did so. "H-hello?"

"Jo?"

Jo pressed her fingers harder against her clit, desperate, reckless, but unable to stop even if she tried. "Y-yes?"

"I'm sorry...is this a bad time?"

"N-no." Jo bit her lip as she sank back inside herself. "No. It's not a bad time."

"You just sound..." Amelia's voice faltered, then softened as she said, "Are you okay?"

Jo closed her eyes, her hips rocking in time with the hand she couldn't keep still. "I'm...fine."

There was a pause on the line, and then a light gasp from Amelia. "Jo, are you touching yourself?"

Jo didn't answer. She couldn't. The silence said enough; she was certain of it.

"Oh, God," Amelia breathed...moaned. "That's..."

Jo let out a broken whimper as she pressed her head back harder into the pillow. "I couldn't stop thinking about you."

"Jo..."

"I-I came home." Jo panted, forcing her fingers deeper. "And I couldn't stop seeing you in that fucking lingerie. I tried to forget. But it's just...you. It's *always* you. You're not a woman to forget."

Amelia let out a shaky breath on the other end of the line. "Jesus."

Jo gasped as she spread her legs wider, her fingers pounding inside of her. "I was already close when you called. I almost didn't answer."

"Why did you?"

"Because it was *you*."

The softest moan escaped Amelia's lips. "Let me help you."

“N-no. This...isn’t right.” Jo took her bottom lip between her teeth and listened to every breath Amelia took. “Please, tell me to stop.”

“I can’t do that, I’m sorry.”

Jo scrunched her eyes shut tighter. “Why? Why can’t you tell me that I shouldn’t be doing this? Why can’t you tell me that I disgust you and what I’m doing is going to end everything we’ve ever shared?”

“Because,” Amelia whispered. “I’d give *anything* to be there with you right now, fucking you myself.”

The heat that had been building inside Jo had now spread like wildfire. “N-no, please.”

“Touch your pussy for me, Jo.” Amelia whimpered. “Go on. I’ll bet you’re real tight and aching to come.”

“F-for you.” Jo was in a state of euphoria now. It didn’t matter what happened next; they’d well and truly crossed the line. So, she would enjoy this, knowing she could never have the real thing. “Can I come...for you?”

“Oh, it would make me *so very happy* to hear you come for me.”

The tension snapped through Jo’s body in a violent, breathless rush, her back arching off the bed, her hand stilled against herself as the waves of release rolled through her.

“Mm. That’s it. Give it to me.”

Her mouth fell open, but no sound came. Just a sharp intake of breath, a whimper that barely made it out, and a rush of heat that left her blinking up at the ceiling, completely ruined.

She could still hear Amelia’s breath on the line as her body relaxed into the mattress. Steady. Listening. Most definitely aroused.

“Feel better?” Amelia asked.

“I-I can’t believe you’re even still on the line.”

“Oh, I’m here,” Amelia said, her voice hoarse and laced with desire. “I’m definitely still here.”

Jo let out a strangled laugh and covered her eyes with one hand. “Well, none of *that* was supposed to happen.”

“Are you sorry that it did?”

“No.” Jo hesitated. “Just...a little embarrassed.”

“Don’t be. You sound fucking *beautiful* when you fall apart.”

Jo’s heart clenched as a beat passed...then another. Still, neither of them spoke.

Not until Amelia said, “Get some sleep. I’ll speak to you tomorrow.”

They had so many things to discuss, but Jo knew exactly what Amelia was doing. She was giving Jo space to process whatever the hell had just happened. So she simply smiled and whispered, “Okay, goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Jo.”

The call ended, and Jo lay there in the dark, her heart still racing and her soaked fingers resting gently over her bare stomach. She didn’t know what *that* had been, but she did know that she was in deep.

And getting out wasn’t going to be easy.

AMELIA STARED at the screen as the call ended, her hand still wrapped tightly around her phone as though Jo’s voice may somehow whisper through again if she held it long enough. But the silence that followed was absolute. She swallowed and set her phone down on the coffee table, her fingers trembling as they released it. Her chest was rising and falling in slow, uneven breaths, like she’d just run a mile uphill without stopping, so she leaned back on the plush couch cushions and closed her eyes.

What *the hell* had just happened?

Her thighs were pressed together tightly beneath the robe she’d changed into when she got home, the soft black silk still clinging to her skin. She hadn’t even taken off the lingerie she’d worn at Satin. Not after seeing Jo. Not after that look in Jo’s eyes when she’d walked in and caught her with another woman on the bed.

Amelia had spent the rest of the night trying to pull herself back together. To...try and stay cool. And then Jo had answered the phone like that. Breathless, shaky, and undeniably aroused. She’d known straight away what Jo was doing. Or rather...what Jo *had* been doing before she’d picked up.

But she hadn’t expected the honesty. She hadn’t expected *that*. Jo’s voice in her ear—panting, desperate, raw—was now etched into her mind.

I couldn’t stop thinking about you. I tried to forget. But it’s just...you. It’s always you.

Amelia pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes and forced down a groan. Her entire body throbbed with arousal, but she didn’t move. She couldn’t. She was too caught up in everything the moment had meant.

Because it hadn't just been phone sex. It had been Jo, and it had been real.

That woman—that complicated, tender, *brilliant* mess of a woman—had spent over an hour talking about Lia with Amelia...and Amelia, she was just sitting there holding the mask, pretending it wasn't burning her fingers every time she slipped it into place.

She sat forward and rested her elbows on her knees, dragging a hand through her hair. She couldn't stop thinking about Jo's voice. The way it cracked as she fell apart. The whimper that had slipped out before she'd tried to swallow it back.

The way she'd whispered, '*because it was you.*'

Did she mean it? Did she know? No, she couldn't possibly. Jo still thought she was chasing two women. She still thought Lia was the escape, the freedom, the release.

But it was Amelia's mouth she moaned for whenever she was in that room. It was Amelia's hands that had made her come in the dark. And it was Amelia's voice in her ear...her breath against her throat.

All this time, Jo hadn't really been falling for Lia.

She'd been falling for her.

Amelia stood up abruptly, needing to do *something* to silence the rush of emotion building in her chest. She crossed the living room and paced into the kitchen, flicking on the kettle with more force than was necessary.

This couldn't keep happening. She couldn't keep showing up at Satin, she couldn't keep hoping that Jo would look at her like she meant something more, and she couldn't keep holding her breath every time her phone lit up with a message.

And yet...she didn't want to stop.

She braced herself against the counter, her fingers gripping the edge tightly. Her eyes burned, her body ached, and her heart...God, her heart felt full.

She wanted Jo. Not in the dark and not with secrets. Just...Jo. Maybe that was the most terrifying part. Because if she told the truth, she could lose her forever, and if she didn't? Then maybe she could keep her. But at what cost?

The kettle clicked off behind her, but Amelia didn't move. She stood there, her arms braced on the counter, and her head bowed. Then, for the

first time, she whispered out loud into the silence of her kitchen, “I’m in love with her.”

Those words hung in the air, dangerous but undeniable.

And with them came the smallest, most brutal truth of all.

Loving her doesn’t make this right.

Chapter Fifteen

JO LAY STILL AS SHE BLINKED HER EYES OPEN SLOWLY. HER HEART WAS already pounding before she'd even fully woken up or moved an inch, and she was sweaty under the covers. Embarrassed. Actually, she was fucking mortified. She sat up suddenly, her chest tightening as the memories of last night surged to the front of her mind in an unforgiving rush.

The sound of Amelia's voice when she realised what Jo was doing. The sexy little moans from them *both* as Jo did the unthinkable. *Go on. Give it to me.* Jo shuddered and clamped her thighs shut.

"Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck!" She pressed the heel of her hand against her forehead. "You are fucking crazy! It's official! You've lost the fucking plot!"

What the hell had she done?

She reached blindly for her phone, checking to see if Amelia had messaged. Maybe a follow-up, a sarcastic remark, anything...*something* to take the edge off what had happened.

But there was nothing there.

No new messages. No missed calls. No dots typing.

Jo's stomach roiled. What on earth had she been thinking?

Well, she hadn't been thinking, and *that* was the problem. She'd been swept up in the way Amelia had looked while they were at Satin, in the way her mind wouldn't stop circling back to that fucking lingerie, or the tilt of her mouth, or the shadow of her thigh...

She'd let her body take over, and now she couldn't undo any of it.

She groaned and flopped back against the pillows, dragging the covers over her face. Maybe if she held it there for long enough, she'd suffocate

and die. That seemed like the best outcome right now.

But the guilt was too distracting.

Because she hadn't just gotten herself off. She'd let Amelia hear every second of it, she'd asked if she could come for her, and Amelia hadn't hung up.

"Jesus fucking Christ."

There was only one person she could call.

She flung the covers off, rushed into the kitchen, and hit Ada's name on her phone. It was barely six in the morning, but she didn't care. She paced barefoot across the tiles, one hand in her hair as she waited for her best friend to pick up.

"Jo?" Ada sounded groggy and full of sleep. "Are you okay?"

"No, I'm not. I... Fuck. Are you alone?"

"Um...yes. What's going on?"

Jo's mouth moved, but no words came. How was she supposed to explain this? How was she supposed to say, 'I moaned Amelia's name as I came on the phone with her, and now, I want to walk out in front of a bus?'

Ada, as usual, filled the silence with gentle coaxing. "Jo, babe, what's going on? Just breathe and tell me what happened?"

"I did something really fucking stupid," Jo finally blurted out. "Ridiculously stupid!"

Ada sighed. "Okay...what kind of stupid are we talking about here? Are we talking 'texting the ex at 2am' stupid, or 'accidentally slept with your boss' stupid?"

"Neither. It's so much worse than that."

Jo heard the rustle on the line as Ada said, "Okay, I'm up, and I'm listening."

"I took your advice and went to Satin last night."

"Okay..."

"I didn't tell Amelia I was going to show up, but when I got there, she was in the main lounge...lingerie and everything...with another woman."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"No, don't be sorry. The moment she saw me, the other woman was the least of her concerns." Jo recalled the moment Amelia had excused herself, ultimately spending the remainder of her time with Jo instead. "She just... she was lounging there like she wasn't the hottest fucking woman I've ever seen in my life."

“Oh, you went there, didn’t you? You had filthy sex with your ex’s mum!”

“No, I didn’t.” *At least not quite*, Jo thought. “I came home, but I couldn’t get her out of my head. Not her face, or her body... Nothing.” Jo cleared her throat. “Then she called me.”

Ada inhaled sharply. “She called you?”

“Yeah.”

“And...what did you say?”

Jo winced. “Well, it uh...it was more about what I was doing rather than saying.”

“Oh, my God!”

“I, um...” Jo chewed her lip. “I was...already midway through.”

“Jo!”

“I *know*.” Jo knew exactly what she’d done. She’d fucked it all up because she couldn’t control her desires. “Believe me, I know.”

“Just to clarify, she called you while you were—”

Jo cut Ada off. She couldn’t bear to hear her say it out loud. “Yes!”

“And you answered?!”

“I couldn’t help it, Ada. I was so focused on thinking about her that the moment that phone rang, I wasn’t even thinking. Not like a normal, sane person, anyway.”

“D-did she know what you were doing?” Ada’s voice held a hint of concern, but Jo understood. This was a lot for anyone to hear. “She surely didn’t.”

“She had an idea, which I then confirmed.”

“Wait! She stayed on the line? While you were sorting yourself out... she stayed on the line and listened?”

“Yeah.” Jo groaned and slid to the floor, resting her head against the kitchen cabinet. “I think I’ve lost my mind.”

“Well, what happened then?” Ada sighed. “You what? You just finished, said ‘good talk’, and hung up?”

“S-she was enjoying it, Ada. She asked if she could help me.” Jo foolishly allowed her mind to wander. “God, it was the hottest fucking thing in the world.”

“Wow. I don’t even know what to say at this point, other than...wow.”

“I feel like such an idiot.”

“Don’t,” Ada said quickly. “You’ve been holding all this tension in for ages. I’m not saying that was the healthiest outlet, but I also get it. I’m not surprised it happened.”

Jo closed her eyes. “I crossed a line.”

“Maybe, but it sounds like Amelia stayed on that call for a reason.”

“Please don’t,” Jo whispered. “Don’t give me hope.”

“I’m just saying...she’s not a prude. If she was uncomfortable, she’d have hung up. But she didn’t. In fact, she encouraged you. She’s just as much to blame, babe.”

“I don’t know what to do now. I can’t go back to pretending we’re just friends.” Jo scoffed. She’d lasted precisely five minutes pretending she could be friends with Amelia. That was dead and buried with no chance of resurrection. The woman had told her to come for her last night, so no, any hope of a friendship was completely gone. “I can’t do it.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t.”

Jo rubbed at her face, feeling exhausted and wrung out even though she’d only just woken up. “You make it sound so simple.”

“I’m not saying it’s simple, but maybe it’s time you stopped trying to convince yourself that you only want to be her friend.”

Jo’s heart ached deeply. She really didn’t know where she went from here. She had apologies to make, she knew that much, but she didn’t know if she could actually call Amelia to give that apology. She certainly couldn’t bring herself to meet face-to-face. “I think this is where I cut ties, Ada. I don’t want to, the thought of not seeing her anymore kills me, but...I can’t ever look at her again.”

“Oh, babe.”

“I have some thinking to do. Can I call you later?”

“Of course.” Ada yawned. “And Jo?”

“Y-yeah?”

She felt Ada smiling down the phone. “You didn’t fuck up. Everything will be okay.”

Jo hung up and stayed on the floor, her phone limp in her hand and her eyes fixed on nothing. Maybe it would turn out that Ada was right, but in this moment, she still felt like she was falling into the abyss.

And the only one who could catch her was the one she’d already lost her grip on.

AMELIA WAS STRETCHED out on the couch in her home office, laptop balanced on her thighs, barely a paragraph into the project proposal she'd meant to finish this morning. She hadn't been able to concentrate since she'd woken up, and even sleep had been hard to come by during the night.

She'd replayed it a dozen times in her head. Every breathless word and every broken moan. The way Jo had whimpered her name. She wasn't sure if it was the most erotic thing that had ever happened to her or the most emotionally reckless.

Oh, it's both, and you know it.

The buzzing of her phone on the armrest snapped her out of her daze, and for a second, her stomach flipped. Jo's name blinked across the screen.

Amelia hesitated before answering, her pulse quickening as it connected. "H-hi."

"Hey." Jo's voice was littered with nerves. "You got a minute?"

"Of course I do."

Jo cleared her throat. "I needed to call you about last night."

"Jo." Amelia let her head rest back against the cushion. "It's really not necessary."

"No, let me say this. Please, I need to say it."

Amelia sighed. "Okay. Go on."

"I'm sorry. *So* sorry. I crossed a line, it was inappropriate and impulsive and I...God, I don't even know what I was thinking."

"You were thinking that you needed to come," Amelia said, a smile working its way to her lips. "Which, by the way, is absolutely okay."

"Jesus, Amelia!"

"I don't know what the big deal is." Amelia's tone softened. She *never* wanted Jo to apologise for something so beautiful. "And please, don't apologise again."

"You're not angry?"

"I'm not sure I have it in me to be angry with you. You caught me off guard, but...angry is something I'm definitely not." Amelia smiled as she trailed her fingers around the rim of her mug. "Sometimes a woman just needs to get off. I'm flattered that I was on your mind while you did."

Jo groaned on the other end of the line. "You're not helping."

"I'm not trying to."

Even though Jo sounded as though she was at her wits' end, Amelia could feel her smiling.

"I think we need to talk, Amelia. Properly and seriously."

Amelia nodded. "I agree."

"I just don't know what this is anymore. We agreed this couldn't go anywhere, but the way I'm feeling and the things I'm doing...I mean, last night was—"

"Intimate," Amelia offered gently.

"Yeah," Jo breathed out. "Exactly. It was intimate."

They sat in the quiet for a moment with the truth hanging between them.

"I want to talk, but this week is chaos. I've got two viewings on Tuesday, I need to be at the architect's office for extension plans on Wednesday, and I have a final inspection at a property on Thursday."

Jo laughed. "I get it. I work all week, too."

"Friday? I could do Friday."

Jo groaned. "I'm at the studio all day on Friday, but I could come by after. Unless you're at Satin..."

"No." She would rather do this away from Satin. Being there only seemed to get them into trouble. "No, I'll be home. Come here. We'll talk, uninterrupted."

"Okay. I'll come over on Friday."

That silence descended again, but it didn't feel like it usually did. It seemed loaded with a multitude of feelings and emotions.

Amelia toyed with the string on her hoodie, hoping they could smooth this all out and move on. "I meant what I said about not being angry, Jo."

"I know, but it's still a lot."

"It is." Amelia allowed herself a small smile. "But maybe it's time we both admitted that it's been a lot for a while now."

Jo laughed softly, and something in Amelia's chest relaxed at the sound of it. No matter what, they would be okay. Because if nothing else, they cared *deeply* about one another.

"Thanks for picking up last night," Jo said, the hesitancy in her voice less obvious the longer she remained on the line. "Even if it was...you know?"

"Unexpectedly orgasmic?"

"For the love of God! I'm never going to live that down, am I?"

Amelia smirked as she said, "Oh, not a chance."

They stayed on the line for a few more seconds, the comfort they often found in one another returning in waves.

And then Jo was the one who took the lead in ending the call. "I'll see you Friday, then?"

"You will. Absolutely." Amelia would love to see Jo sooner, even if it wasn't to talk but to simply be what they'd always been to one another. A steady presence of support. "If anything changes, let me know."

"I will...and Amelia?"

Amelia's brows lifted a little. "Mm?"

"I don't regret it."

Oh, you have to find a way to make this work. Amelia's pulse picked up a little. "I'm glad. I don't regret being the one on the call with you."

As the call ended, Amelia placed her phone down and took a breath. She had no idea what was coming, but she knew Friday couldn't come soon enough.

AMELIA SET her cutlery down on her plate, her appetite fading as the quiet of her house grew louder around her. The simple yet comforting pasta she'd made had barely been touched, and her glass of red wine was almost full. She didn't feel like drinking tonight. Not with her head already this clouded.

The call with Jo had gone better than she'd expected it would. Honest and clear...even a little more normal by the end. But still, the conversation echoed in her mind. It wasn't what *had* been said that lingered. It was what hadn't.

She gathered her plate and headed into the kitchen. The dishwasher was still half-full from this morning's breakfast dishes, so she stacked her plate on top, shut the door, and flicked the kettle on just to feel like she was doing something.

And then her phone buzzed. The vibration rattled gently across the worktop, drawing her attention to it immediately.

Jo.

Her name lit up Amelia's screen *and* her face like a flare.

Hey. Just wondering if you still wanted me for the photography thing?

Amelia wiped her hands on a tea towel and picked up her phone, staring at the message for a moment. It was innocent enough, but something stirred inside of her. She couldn't resist.

The property shoot or the lingerie one?

She hit send before she could back out, her pulse racing a little faster. A smirk tugged at her mouth as she moved into the living room, her phone still *firmly* in her hand.

Jo would likely squirm her way out of it with a clever comeback and an eye-roll emoji.

But then her phone lit up again.

I mean, I'm up for taking photos of you in lace. I can't promise the lens won't crack, though!

Amelia's breath hitched. That wasn't squirming, and it absolutely wasn't avoidance. That was Jo biting back. *Oh, God.* Her thumb hovered over the screen as she stood in the middle of the room, stunned. She hadn't expected Jo to rise to the bait. Not with that level of certainty in her tone. There was humour, yes, but it was laced with something else entirely.

Confidence. Flirtation. Desire.

Amelia slowly lowered herself to the couch, one leg tucked under her, and typed back.

I may just hold you to that.

Jo didn't hesitate. Her reply was instant.

Maybe I'm hoping you will.

Amelia stared at the message. Her body answered before her mind did, that subtle ache low in her stomach returning with sharp clarity. She could still hear the way Jo had moaned for her the night before. The way her voice had broken around Amelia's name.

And now this? She'd been expecting space and avoidance. For Jo to be Guarded. Instead, she had a woman on the other end of the phone who *wasn't* playing innocent anymore.

She ran a hand through her hair, her pulse racing in her throat. This thing between them wasn't cooling off. It was catching fire. And maybe, just maybe, Jo wasn't as afraid of the flames as she thought she was.

She stared at Jo's last reply and grinned. "Oh, you're in so much trouble."

Amelia's fingers tightened around her phone. There was no way she could rein herself in. She could see Jo in her mind's eye, curled up on her couch or sprawled across her bed, hoodie sleeves tugged over her hands, chewing her lip as she sent that message. That mixture of confidence and vulnerability. That spark of mischief she never let anyone else see.

With a slightly shaky breath, Amelia typed back.

You know I'd be honoured to lie in lace while you snapped pictures of me. Maybe I'll even let you pose me.

She swallowed, desperate for Jo to respond.

Fuck! You're going to kill me.

Amelia smirked, biting her bottom lip as her heart started to race furiously.

I would never. Imagine the fun I'd miss out on. Still, death by lingerie sounds like quite a pleasant way to go, don't you think?

Amelia was playing with fire, and she knew it, but right now, she didn't care. Something had shifted between them last night, and before Jo came to her senses, she wanted to have a little fun.

I'm more concerned about trying to keep my hands off you during a shoot like that. That's definitely the end of my career right there.

Amelia's cheeks flushed as her breath caught.

So don't. I won't tell if you don't...

Regret flared in her chest the moment she sent the message, but before she could type out a retraction or something safer, Jo replied.

You're not playing fair tonight.

"Oh, she's going to be the very undoing of me." Amelia shook her head, still playing the game even though she knew she could tame it.

No, I'm not.

There was an unexpectedly long pause. So long that Amelia stood from the couch and paced the floor, and then her phone vibrated again.

But I'm not stopping you either.

A laugh escaped her lips. She returned to her seat, her legs suddenly unsteady. Amelia's thoughts spiralled in a thousand different directions, but *all* of them started and ended with Jo.

Tell me, Jo. What would you shoot first? Would I be standing, sitting, or laid out across the bed?

Amelia's heart was hammering now. This had initially been a hint of flirtation, but now? Oh, now she was practically squirming where she sat,

craving friction as her clit throbbed.

Laid out, obviously. You'd be giving me that look that absolutely fucking ruins me time and time again.

Jesus Christ!

Amelia splayed a hand across her chest and steadied herself. This, whatever it was, was a dangerous game. Nobody had ever made Amelia feel this way before, and though she'd dreamt of someone like this for a long time, she hadn't imagined it would be Jo for a single second.

You're going to make me dream about you tonight, you know that?

Amelia lay lengthwise on the couch, casting her mind to the potential of this going further. Did she care about Callum and what he'd think? Not particularly. He had no right to criticise anyone after having an affair behind Jo's back. But she understood that Jo was a little more reserved when it came to that specific issue.

I hope you do. I dream about you most nights lately.

Amelia's heart ached at that confession. Why couldn't Jo be here right now, in Amelia's arms, saying these things to her face? *Because that's not what you share with her...*

You're dangerous, but I appreciate your honesty x

As Amelia considered placing her phone down and cooling this off, her phone lit up.

I fear my honesty is all I can give you. The rest...what I really want...I'm not so sure.

And just like that, Jo reminded Amelia that she couldn't have what she truly wanted. A life with the only woman she had paid any attention to in as long as she could remember. While they were dancing along the edge of something potentially beautiful, there was a devastating drop waiting at the end.

Just so we're clear, the photography gig is for the house I'm finishing up.

It was all Amelia could offer. She'd just been on the highest of highs... only to be brought back down to earth with one hell of a thud.

I know. I'll see you Friday. We'll discuss the shoot then. Goodnight, Amelia x

Amelia pressed her phone to her chest and closed her eyes. For the briefest of moments, it didn't matter how complicated, risky, or dangerous this felt. Because it felt equally as good and as real.

Goodnight, Jo x

Chapter Sixteen

JO HADN'T PLANNED ON SEEING AMELIA TODAY. NOT IN THE MIDDLE OF Church Street, and not when she looked like she'd barely slept the night before. Yet here she was, hiding across the street, wondering whether she should slip off down one of the alleyways until the coast was clear.

She tugged the collar of her jacket higher, tucking a flyaway strand of hair behind her ear as she slowed her pace near the entrance to one of the beauty shops, the heavy bag on her shoulder digging into her skin. She needed to pop into the camera shop around the corner, but now all she could do was freeze.

Because there she was...heading towards her, completely oblivious to the fact.

Amelia.

Striding down the high street like she owned it in her heels, expensive tailored overcoat, and that luscious hair catching in the wind in that way that made Jo forget her own name. She wasn't sure what she'd expected after days of not seeing Amelia in person, but it wasn't this.

Amelia, flushed from the cold, her cheeks pink, her eyes lit up as though she'd just come out of a *very* good meeting. Because she had, hadn't she? She'd mentioned something about meeting with an architect for a new place and a development she was working on. She recalled the brief mention of being on site throughout this week. As Jo gazed at Amelia, she couldn't love that look on her face any more than she already did.

Jo could have turned and ducked into the bookshop, pretending not to have seen her, but her feet betrayed her. She stood there, her heart situated in her throat, her face burning as Amelia caught sight of her.

The smile she wore wasn't a casual, polite one. No, it was as real as they came.

Still, Jo felt as though the pavement was going to swallow her whole the moment Amelia made a beeline for her.

As she watched her approach, Jo suddenly became acutely aware of *everything*. The weight of her phone in her coat pocket, the memory of that phone call still vivid in her mind. Her own voice in her head and the moaning as she breathlessly said Amelia's name when she came.

Fuck!

And then there was the text exchange. The lingerie, the lace...the photo shoot. Jo nearly groaned out loud. She cast her gaze to the ground just as Amelia reached her.

"Jo," Amelia said, a little surprised but as light-hearted as always. "I didn't think I'd be bumping into you."

"Yeah." Jo tried to meet Amelia's eyes, but it was a struggle. "The city's small when you need it not to be, huh?"

Amelia tilted her head. "Are you okay?"

Nope. Not in the slightest. "Yeah." Jo gestured at the bag on her shoulder. "Just got some bits to pick up. Lenses and that. For a job next week."

"Ah." Amelia tucked her hands into her coat pockets, the wind catching her scarf and whipping it around her collar. "I've just come from a site meeting. I feel like I've been out in this wind for hours."

"You look...gorgeous."

Shit. She hadn't meant to say that out loud.

A slow smile curled on Amelia's lips. "Thanks."

Jo's eyes darted down the street, praying she could find an escape route if this conversation became any more awkward. "So, um...we're still on for Friday?"

"Absolutely. If you still wanted to talk."

Jo exhaled a shaky breath. "Yeah. I do."

When they both fell silent, Amelia's gaze lingered, searching Jo's face. "Are you sure you're okay?"

Jo nearly laughed. Not because it was funny, but because all of this was absurd. "I'm not gonna lie," she muttered, briefly finding Amelia's eyes and then looking back down at the pavement. "It's weird seeing you after that call."

“Hey.” Amelia stepped closer and lowered her voice. “I get it. It was... unexpected.”

“I mean, I know we’ve been playing around with words. But that wasn’t just words, was it?”

“No.” Amelia’s silky voice sent the hairs on the back of Jo’s neck upright. “It wasn’t.”

Jo nodded, her mouth running dry, and every nerve ending buzzing from the mere fact that she was standing a foot away from Amelia. “I’ve been panicking about it since it happened. Maybe I’ve even been avoiding you.” Jo swallowed. “I’ve never done anything like that with someone I wasn’t, you know, sleeping with.”

Amelia reached out her hand and stroked her fingertips up the inside of Jo’s wrist. “I don’t want you to feel embarrassed.”

Jo laughed, even though her stomach was doing somersaults. “It’s a little late for that.”

“You also don’t have to justify anything to me or explain why it happened.”

Jo gazed fully at Amelia, appreciating what she was saying. “Maybe not, but I feel like I should. It’s just been a lot to handle lately. That night with you at Satin just tipped everything over the edge.”

Amelia closed her hand around Jo’s and squeezed gently. “Friday is just to talk. To...figure out where we go from here. That’s all.”

“Thank you. I need that.”

“Me too.” Amelia stepped back. “I think it could be good for us.”

As they stood there, both clearly unsure of how to end it and how to walk away, Jo felt it again. That magnetic pull, the one that always intensified around Amelia. The same one that had her hand between her thighs while they whispered filth down the phone to one another just a few nights ago. The same one that had her teasing Amelia over text about photographing her in lace.

And now here they were, face to face, surrounded by shoppers and buses and the wind...and the intensity of it all still crackled between them.

Jo let out a steady breath and relaxed her shoulders. “I should go.”

“Okay.” Amelia leaned in and hugged her with one arm. “Text me when you’re home?”

“I will.” Jo nodded, already turning away before she said or did something she couldn’t take back. “See you Friday.”

Jo rushed off down the high street, not once looking back for fear of seeing something she couldn't handle. Perhaps Amelia smiling at her, or chasing after her, or just those sultry eyes and that smile begging her to stay and keep talking.

Still, as she continued on, she felt Amelia's eyes on her all the way down the street.

ADA WAS ALREADY CURLED up on Jo's couch by the time Jo had finished making tea. It hadn't taken much convincing to get her over there, just a single text telling her she needed to talk. Ada's reply had come not even a minute later, threatening not to show unless Jo had chocolate Hobnobs in for her. But that was Ada. Always finding humour in those moments when Jo felt as though she was falling apart. Jo set two cups down and sat beside her, sighing heavily.

"Are you going to tell me what's happened?" Ada glanced over, concern written all over her face. "Or do I have to interrogate you?"

Jo wrung her hands in her lap. "I bumped into her."

Ada didn't need to ask who. The conversation always revolved around the same woman lately. "Oh, shit! How bad was it?"

"It wasn't bad. Not really." Jo reached for her cup and cradled it in her hands. "It was a shock, though. I didn't know how I'd feel the first time we saw one another again, but Amelia was...lovely. As always."

"So, you spoke to her then? Like, you had an actual conversation?"

"Yeah, we spoke. Once I'd got my head around how fucking good she looked and managed to pull myself together, anyway."

Ada nodded slowly, sensing the weight behind Jo's words. "And?"

"And I could barely make eye contact with her."

"Oh, Jo." Ada sat forward and took her hand. "I know it probably doesn't help at all, but it was bound to feel weird when you saw her again."

"I kept seeing her in that robe," Jo whispered. "Every time she spoke, I kept remembering her voice on the phone the other night..."

Ada winced and handed her a biscuit. "Eat. You're spiralling."

Jo took it and laughed. "Sorry. Spiralling seems to be what I'm good at lately."

“Don’t be sorry. That’s a normal reaction when you’ve essentially had the most erotic phone call of your life with your ex’s mum.”

Jo groaned and buried her face in her hands. “God, don’t say it like that.”

“I’m just stating facts.” Ada sighed. “However you look at it, that *is* what happened, babe.”

Ada was right, Jo knew she was, but it didn’t help at all when she reminded Jo of who Amelia had always been to her. Yes, she was a friend, and she was a confidant, but first and foremost, she was Callum’s mum. It didn’t matter which way you flipped it; that was *exactly* who she was. Jo peeked through her fingers. “It’s all such a mess.”

“Is it, though?”

Jo brought her hand away from her face and glared at Ada.

“I mean, yeah, it’s complicated. I get what you’re saying.” Ada lifted a brow. “But messy? No. I don’t believe it is. Not unless you *make* it messy.”

Jo sat back and dragged a hand through her hair. “We’re meeting on Friday to talk. I have two days to sort myself out and somehow find the ability to function like a normal human being around her.”

“Good. That’s...yeah, that’s good.” Ada sipped her tea. “And about time, too.”

“She specifically said just to talk and that’s all. Which makes me think that we’re both aware it could turn into something more if we’re not careful. That’s what scares me. How quickly both of us seem to unravel when we tell ourselves we won’t.”

“Jo, you’ve always been brave,” Ada said gently. “But I think this time, you’re scared because you actually want it. You *want* her.”

“I don’t just want her.” Jo’s voice broke. “I think...God, I think I’m a little bit in love with her.”

“It’s about time you admitted that.” Ada’s eyes softened. “And now I have to ask...why shouldn’t you be allowed to feel that way?”

“Because of Callum, obviously.”

While Jo loved and appreciated Ada for her constant support, she couldn’t stand to hear the simplicity of it all. It wasn’t simple, it would *never* be simple, and the sooner people realised that, the sooner Jo could fall apart and actually *fully* realise she could never have Amelia Loughlin. No matter who she was or wasn’t, no matter what they did or didn’t feel for one another...it just *couldn’t* happen. Not in this lifetime.

“Callum,” Ada said with a scoff, “is a cheating asshole who lost the right to have a say in *anything* about your life when he climbed into bed with that fucking yogi who believes you can survive on fresh air and that positivity pays the fucking bills! Don’t you *dare* let him keep you from finding someone who actually makes you feel good about yourself again.”

Jo pressed her lips together as emotion welled in her throat.

“If Amelia wants you, and you want her, then who exactly is being hurt?” Ada asked. “Because from where I’m sitting, *nobody* is being hurt. You’re both consenting adults. The only problem is the story you’re telling yourself in your own head.”

Jo swallowed. “I just...I don’t want to make her life harder.”

Ada gave Jo a knowing look. “From what you’ve told me, I think she can handle herself just fine.”

“She can handle herself, you’re right, but that doesn’t mean I want to upend everything and see her fighting with Callum. He’s her son, regardless of what you and I think of him. He’s all she has.” Jo didn’t know Amelia’s background, they’d never been close enough for her to ask those sorts of personal questions, but aside from Amelia’s best friend, Jo couldn’t recall a moment when any family members had been around. Even in those days of getting to know Callum, he refused point-blank to discuss his dad. Jo didn’t have a name for him, she’d never come across a photograph of him, and Amelia hadn’t brought him up in any conversations. “I’d never forgive myself if we started dating one another and Callum cut her from his life.”

“This is tough, and I know you feel like you’ll never have that happy ending, but people adapt. Sure, Callum is going to lose his shit when he finds out, but really...Amelia is entitled to sleep with whoever she wants. And that includes you, too.”

“I’ve been hiding behind Lia because it was easier, but seeing Amelia today? It made me realise that I can’t pretend that what I’m feeling is just lust anymore. It’s not about the sex or the fantasy. I want to be near her. I want to know what her day was like and spent the evening alone with her, just...wrapped up in her arms. I want to see her in that fucking lingerie again and not have to pretend that I’m unaffected by it all.”

Ada grinned. “Yep. Definitely sounds like love to me.”

“Alright!” Jo let out a shaky laugh. “Don’t push it.”

“I think that Friday could be a turning point for you both. And if it’s not? You’ll figure it out. You always do.”

Jo leaned against her and rested her head on Ada's shoulder. "Thanks for being here. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Always." Ada draped an arm around Jo and kissed her hair. "Now, finish your tea and let's find a film where nobody has sex with their ex's mum."

Jo snorted. "I think you're safe. That sort of storyline is mostly reserved for porn."

"Well, you know...I'm not opposed if you need to pick up some pointers."

For the first time today, Jo felt herself relax and accept that whatever would be, would be. She couldn't change the direction of her fate, and she couldn't change how she felt, but she could hope for a good outcome just for tonight. Still... "There isn't a hope in hell that I'm sitting here watching porn with my best friend!"

AMELIA HAD BEEN CURLED up on the couch since she'd finished dinner, a glass of wine untouched on the side table, her eyes glazed over as some soap opera played quietly in the background. She wasn't watching it, couldn't possibly even say what it was called, because her mind, as usual, was firmly on Jo.

Every moment of their unexpected meeting earlier lingered. The way Jo had looked at her as though she was some kind of storm she didn't know how to weather. The way she'd flushed, stumbled over her words, and tried so hard to play it cool but failed. Amelia had barely slept since their call at the weekend, she'd just about managed to function when it came to work... and now here she was again. Stuck and miserable. Whenever she closed her eyes, Jo's moans played on repeat. When she sat in the silence, she imagined too vividly what it would be like to have her again, in person, her body trembling and her breath hot and heavy against Amelia's neck instead of through a phone.

She'd tried to shake it off since the moment it had all happened, but those thoughts and those memories just wouldn't leave her. They were seared into her memory, and right now, Amelia's greatest fear was that it would be all she'd have left of Jo once the truth was revealed.

When her phone buzzed beside her, she reached for it immediately.

It was Jo.

Hey, I hope you got home okay. I was wondering if you could help me out. Ada says there is a section on the website for Satin that tells you if the dark rooms have been booked for the evening. She's having issues logging in to check, so I was hoping you would have some idea of where I'd find it. She said something about a portal. It was nice seeing you today x

Amelia sat up straight, her heart in her throat as she stared down at Jo's message. It didn't matter how many times she reread it; the content remained the same.

Then another message came through.

I'm tempted to just show up there this evening if the room Lia usually uses is booked and hope it's her in there x

Amelia's breath caught.

Jo wanted Lia tonight, and Lia—*Amelia*—wanted Jo.

She had no right to want that. Not now. Not after everything they'd shared lately in the light of day. But still, Amelia's fingers were already moving. She opened the members' portal and checked the schedule. The dark room was free.

Amelia stared at the empty time slot, her pulse pounding in her ears. She shouldn't do it, she *knew* she shouldn't, but she couldn't bring herself to leave well enough alone and log out of the app. If she had *any* self-control at all, she would simply text Jo back and give her some bullshit excuse about how the dark room was closed tonight, perhaps encourage her to rest and stay at home. Instead...she clicked the link and booked the room for nine-thirty. Two hours from now and enough time for Amelia to pull herself together...enough time for Jo to make her way across the city if she decided to.

Her hands were shaking as she logged out of the portal and brought Jo's messages back up. God, what the hell was she doing?

The member's portal is a separate app. I've just checked for you and the dark room is booked this evening.

She placed her phone down and pressed her palms into her thighs, trying to steady the ache building behind her ribs. This wasn't fair. It wasn't fair to *her*, and it definitely wasn't fair to Jo. But it was the only way she could have her. It was the *last* time she could have her. Because once

tonight was over and Friday came around, Amelia would be forthcoming with the truth. No matter what Jo said to her, no matter how much she wanted to be Lia for Jo, Amelia couldn't do it anymore.

It means so much that you've just done that for me. Knowing what we know now, knowing we want more with each other but can't...that was incredibly selfless of you x

Amelia swallowed as a tear slid down her cheek. None of this was selfless. Amelia was a selfish bitch. But when Jo was with her as Lia, she wasn't guarded. She wasn't afraid of the future. She allowed herself to feel. She let Amelia touch her, and worship her, and whisper things in the dark that she'd *never* say in the daylight. And Amelia lived for those moments. She *clung* to them. Because *in* those moments, she wasn't someone Jo had to avoid loving. She was just someone Jo wanted.

Tonight is the beginning of the end.

Her phone buzzed again.

I mean it, Amelia. Thank you x

Amelia exhaled a deep breath and closed her eyes. The lie sat heavy in her chest, the pain of knowing what she was doing made her body physically ache, but she would get her comeuppance on Friday night...and she accepted that.

I hope tonight is what you need. Take care heading out into the city x

She cleared her throat and set her phone down on the coffee table in front of her. She should start getting ready, but Amelia found herself unable to move.

Another message.

I would have invited you along for a drink, but if she's there, I can't have you both in my headspace at the end of the night. I'm already struggling. I'm sorry x

Amelia placed a hand to her chest and sobbed quietly into the silence of her living room. Jo was forthcoming with her feelings, while Amelia continued to lie.

She didn't reply. She couldn't. Because what exactly would she say?

Actually, that booking? That's me. It's always been me.

But that truth wouldn't give her Jo. Not the way Lia could. She leaned forward, locked her phone, and forced herself to focus on what Jo needed tonight. Whether Amelia wanted to back out or not was beside the point.

She'd already made her decision. And now, she would spend the next two hours craving Jo Bleasdale.

Chapter Seventeen

THE TAXI PULLED TO A SLOW STOP OUTSIDE THE ENTRANCE TO SATIN, its sign softly illuminated in the haze of the evening drizzle. Jo stared out of the window, her hands gripping her phone tight, her heart hammering the way it had been since she'd left her flat. Jo knew she'd made a split-second decision to come here without knowing if Lia was around or not, but she didn't care. She would rather risk it being someone else than missing out on a few uninterrupted hours with a woman who reminded her of how it felt to be wanted.

There was just something about tonight that wouldn't let her stay at home. She'd tried. God, she'd tried to reason with herself and convince herself that this wasn't good for her, but her body and her mind had other plans.

She handed cash to the driver and stepped out, using her clutch bag to protect her hair as she walked towards the entrance. She didn't even bother checking if she had mascara under her eyes or if her lipstick was still decent. She didn't care. All she could focus on right now was seeing Lia.

When she was granted access and stepped inside, the club was quieter than usual. Midweek always had that muted hush about it. Instead of the loud chatter and clinking glasses that came with the weekend, Jo was offered softer music and that seductive low hum of people who had come here to escape their lives for a few hours. She pulled her shoulders back as she passed the reception desk with a smile and headed straight for the lounge.

But as she stood to the side and scanned the area, her nerves hit her full force. Lia could be sitting somewhere in this room, and Jo wouldn't know it

was her. It was ridiculous, really. She had built a fantasy on breath, hands, and darkness.

She looked down at her phone still in her hand and quickly called Ada.

“Hey, you.” Ada’s warm voice did very little to help with Jo’s nerves. “Everything okay?”

“No,” Jo whispered as she moved to a quieter corner near the hallway that led to the private rooms. “I’m here. At the club.”

“O-oh. I thought you couldn’t find the portal to check availability? Is Amelia with you?”

“No, she just checked for me. The room is booked, so I had to come here.”

Ada groaned. “Jo—”

“I had to, Ada.” Her voice cracked. “I can’t explain it. I *need* her. Instead of sitting at home going over everything with Amelia, I could be here instead...losing myself in Lia.”

“But you’re going to sit down with Amelia on Friday.”

“It’s not the same,” Jo snapped. “Lia doesn’t make me question everything. She doesn’t have history with me. She just lets me be. And I can’t stop thinking about her. I’ve tried, Ada. I’ve tried to get them both off my mind, but really, it’s Amelia I have to let go. Lia is just a fantasy, and she’s someone I *can* have. Being with her makes me happy. Why should I stop myself from being happy?”

“I just... I’m worried about you. I don’t like seeing you like this.”

“Lia is the only thing that makes me feel grounded right now. I know that sounds ridiculous, but I have nothing else.”

Ada sighed softly. “It doesn’t sound ridiculous. It sounds like you’re confused and clinging to something that gives you even an ounce of peace.”

Jo leaned back against the wall and closed her eyes. “Exactly.”

“Okay,” Ada said. “Then just promise me you’ll be careful. I don’t want you to lose sight of what really matters.”

Jo frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I think you know.”

Ah. Amelia.

Her face flashed uninvited across Jo’s mind; how stunning she’d looked the last time they were here together, draped in lace and sipping champagne.

Jo shook her head, hoping those thoughts would scatter. She wasn't here to get Amelia off her mind tonight; she was here to enjoy whatever she could have with Lia. "I've got to go. If she's in that room, I don't want to miss her."

"Okay. Call me later, please. Just so I know you're alright."

Jo took a breath and calmed her racing thoughts. "I will."

She ended the call and turned for the corridor leading to the dark room check-in area. Her palms were sweating, her head was filled with so much potential, but she didn't even know if Lia would be the one greeting her. Still, her gut told her she was in there.

And if Jo was lucky...tonight would be theirs.

AMELIA SAT on the edge of the bed, the low ambient lighting casting only the faintest red hue over the sheets, barely illuminating her skin. She'd forgone lingerie tonight. Instead, she wore a soft silk robe and nothing underneath, her hair pinned up loosely while her heart beat in that rhythm it often did around Jo. Erratic yet beautiful.

The main door behind the curtain was locked, and it would remain that way until seconds before the light flashed to alert Amelia to Jo's presence. Until then, she had time to back out. Until then, she could sit here quietly, wondering what on earth she was doing with her life.

Because the moment Jo stepped inside, she would no longer be Amelia, and she hated herself for it. Not because she didn't want to give Jo what she needed—she did, more than anything—but because every time Jo walked into this room and whispered Lia's name, Amelia died a little inside. It was one thing to pretend in the beginning, back when it was fun and curious and anonymous. But now, after the dinners and the texts, after the near-kisses and the phone call...it felt more like lying than ever before.

The light above the door flashed twice, the room descended into darkness, and the heavy velvet curtain pulled back slowly. Amelia held her breath as Jo entered, and then she caught the scent of her perfume and almost lost her mind.

"Lia?"

“Hi.” Amelia switched into the tone she’d used whenever Jo was in this room with her. “It’s good to have you here again.” Jo moved through the dark, and Amelia rose to meet her, taking her hand and pulling her in closer. “You’re tense.”

“Yeah, I...I definitely need this tonight.” Jo exhaled a shaky breath as she laced her fingers with Amelia’s. “I didn’t put it on the form, but can we do something a little different this time?”

Amelia frowned. She hadn’t expected any kind of curveball tonight. “Of course. What did you have in mind?”

“Could we try some roleplaying?”

Huh. That’s new. Amelia wasn’t opposed to the idea, though. “If that’s what you need, absolutely. Was there something in particular you wanted to try?”

“Y-yes.” Jo’s voice wavered. “There’s this woman that I can’t have. Her name is Amelia. Would you...be her for me?”

Amelia froze where she stood, one hand curling into a fist at her side. Jo’s words echoed around the room, but Amelia’s heart clenched so violently in her chest that she was sure she was going to cry.

Still, Jo stepped forward, entirely oblivious to who she was speaking to. “She’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, but we can’t be together. It’s complicated, and I just...fuck, I *want* her more than anything.”

Amelia tried to steady her breathing, but she was on the brink of falling apart.

“I see her,” Jo whispered as her fingers brushed the hem of Amelia’s robe. “When I close my eyes, when I’m touching myself. I see her in every woman who isn’t her...and I can never have her.”

Amelia couldn’t take it anymore. She needed to silence Jo right now before she said something that would ruin the moment completely. Given that this was the last time she’d ever be with Jo like this, she couldn’t risk that. Not when Jo was opening up to her and almost begging her to be... well, herself. She reached out a trembling hand and pulled Jo into her arms. “I can be whoever you want me to be, Jo.”

Jo’s mouth brushed Amelia’s ear. “I crave to touch her. I ache to watch her fall apart for me. I want to bury my face between her legs and make her beg. But most of all, I want to tell her she’s not too complicated or too off limits. I want her to know that she’s the only woman I think about, and it’s driving me fucking insane.”

Amelia was drowning in everything Jo had just said.

The ache.

The truth.

The unbearable sweetness of it all.

She guided Jo down to the mattress and straddled her waist. “Maybe she knows already, but since we’re not so sure, maybe you can show me what she means to you.”

Jo moaned as Amelia leaned down and captured her mouth with a kiss that was *nothing* like Lia’s usual kisses. It was deeper, hungrier, and messier...and it was filled with everything they weren’t saying.

Jo’s hands gripped Amelia’s thighs, roaming up beneath her robe. As Jo’s mouth found her neck, Amelia let out a shaky breath and said, “Tell me what you’d do to her if you could. All of her. Don’t hold back.”

“I’d undress her slowly,” Jo whispered. “I’d pin her down and kiss every last inch of her body...but tasting her is all I want to do. It keeps me awake at night, imagining her pussy on the tip of my tongue.”

Amelia’s hips rolled instinctively.

“I’d hold her down and fuck her slowly, gazing into her eyes while she came for me.” Jo whimpered when Amelia sucked on her neck. “I want her to lose control just once. I want her to feel worshipped. She *deserves* to feel worshipped.”

Amelia let out a choked breath. “What does this woman mean to you, Jo?”

She heard Jo swallow, she felt her briefly pause, and then... “She means the world to me. I-I’m in love with her.”

Before Amelia had time to process what Jo had just said, her lips were on her again, rougher this time. As though airing that confession had sparked something inside of Jo. Amelia pushed it to the back of her mind, refusing to let the words settle into the fragile corners of her chest. Not here. Not now. Later, she would collapse under the weight of them. Later, she would cry herself into silence. But right now, she was Lia, and Jo was pressing her back into the mattress with kisses that tasted too much like desperation and need.

Amelia arched into her, her robe slipping open with little resistance. The brush of Jo’s palms against her bare waist made her tremble, and then Jo froze as she whispered, “God, you feel like I imagined she would.”

Amelia closed her eyes as she murmured, "Then take what you've imagined." She guided Jo's hand higher, over her ribs, until her fingers found the curve of her breast. Jo moaned low in her throat as she brushed her thumb over Amelia's nipple.

"I'd never stop touching her," Jo whispered against Amelia's collarbone. "I don't think I *could* ever stop touching her."

Amelia's nails dug into Jo's back as her robe fell open fully. She wanted to tell Jo she didn't have to stop. She wanted to scream that she was here—the woman she loved was right here—ready to be touched, to be devoured, to be adored. Instead, she lifted Jo's chin and kissed her, then drew back and said, "Show her, Jo. Show *me* everything."

Jo hesitated, her hands trembling as they slid down Amelia's body and parted her thighs. The dark pressed in thick and unyielding, but Amelia could feel the worship in Jo's touch, the tentative reverence of a woman finally claiming a fantasy she thought could never be real.

Jo shifted lower, pressing open-mouthed kisses down Amelia's stomach. Every time Jo's lips touched her skin, Amelia felt another shard of her heart splinter. She knew this couldn't last, she knew the lie of it would crush them both, but she couldn't pull away.

"Fuck, you're perfect," Jo whispered as her lips traced the inside of Amelia's thigh. "*Amelia* is perfect."

Amelia bit down on her own wrist to stop the sound that wanted to tear out of her throat. Her own name falling from Jo's lips in a whisper that trembled with devotion was almost unbearable.

And then Jo's mouth found her, soft and slow, as though she was savouring every second. Amelia's hips bucked, and her breath caught on a sob she barely disguised as a moan. "T-tell me what you'd say to her now," Amelia gasped, her fingers threading into Jo's hair. "While you're tasting her, what would you say?"

Jo groaned, the vibration shooting through Amelia like a lightning strike. As Jo slowly released her clit, she said, "That I wish she was mine. That there's nothing wrong with wanting someone you can't have." Jo's voice broke as she eased two fingers inside Amelia. "That I'd never hurt her and that I love her too much to ever let her go."

Those words undone her. Amelia's back arched off the bed, her thighs tightening around Jo's shoulders. She tried to breathe and stay in control,

but Jo's mouth was relentless, her confession pouring out with each thrust of her fingers.

Amelia came hard, a broken cry muffled against the pillow. She clutched at Jo's hair, at her shoulders, trying to anchor herself to something solid as everything inside her unravelled. Jo coaxed every last tremor out of her, lowering her mouth again and licking her slowly through the aftershocks, then she kissed the insides of Amelia's thighs with something dangerously close to tenderness.

Amelia dragged her up, needing her close and to feel Jo's weight on top of her. She kissed her with a fierceness that bordered on painful, whimpering as she tasted herself on her lips. "God, I've missed being in here with you."

Even in the darkness, Amelia could feel Jo's eyes on her. "I thought I wouldn't see you again when you didn't show up over the last couple of weekends."

"I'm sorry." Amelia wanted to tell Jo that she *wouldn't* see her again, but she couldn't break her heart. Not right now. "Let me make it up to you."

Jo's breath hitched when Amelia slid down her body, forcing her robe open in one impatient motion. She spread Jo's thighs apart and pressed a kiss to the soft skin just above her pussy, then another lower, until Jo was trembling.

"Would you like to come now?"

Jo's gasp fractured into a moan the second Amelia's tongue touched her. She devoured her slowly, aware that this was the end, her trembling hands holding Jo open as if she was the most precious thing she'd ever touched. And in truth, she was.

"F-fuck, yes!" Jo bucked helplessly, her hands tangling in Amelia's hair. "O-oh, Amelia. You feel so fucking good."

Amelia's chest constricted. She hadn't expected Jo to still be roleplaying, and quite frankly, it caught her off guard. Instead of being in her own head, she pushed two fingers deep inside Jo, curled them just right, and sucked her clit into her mouth until Jo was crying out.

"I-I... Oh, fuck!" Jo's body convulsed as she shattered around Amelia's fingers. "I-I love you."

Those words broke Amelia into pieces. She held Jo through her orgasm, her mouth and hands unrelenting until she was a trembling mess, her body slick with sweat and her chest heaving with every ragged breath.

Amelia slid up and gathered Jo in her arms, kissing her anywhere her lips could reach. She shouldn't have, but she couldn't stop herself.

Jo clung to her, whispering between gasps, "If I had her, I'd never let her go. I'd keep her safe, I'd—"

"Shh." Amelia stroked her hair and swallowed down a sob. "Maybe she already knows."

Jo's hand stilled against Amelia's spine. "You think?"

Amelia closed her eyes. "I think she feels it."

She couldn't say more. Not when the truth balanced so precariously on the edge of her lips. Instead, she held Jo tighter and breathed her in, knowing this was the last time she'd ever get the chance to.

And if tonight was the end, then at least Jo had said the words Amelia had dreamed of hearing.

Chapter Eighteen

THE MORNING SUN FILTERED THROUGH THE BLINDS, SMACKING JO square in the face where she lay curled up in a hoodie and pyjama shorts. The TV was blank, her mind was *almost* blank, and for the first time in a couple of weeks, she felt at peace. Even though she wasn't sure she'd slept much, her body *felt* like it had been asleep.

She couldn't believe how accommodating Lia had been last night with her request. Jo didn't know if she could be someone else for the sake of another woman's fantasy, but she hadn't been put in that position, so it didn't matter. What mattered was that she was content and marginally happy this morning. At least, she was if she didn't think about moaning 'I love you' into the darkness last night with Amelia on her mind.

She brought the blanket up to her chin and sighed. Her thighs ached in the best way, her lips were swollen from Lia's kisses, and her chest still fluttered when she thought about what she'd asked for...and what Lia had given her in return. A mind-blowing experience while pretending to be Amelia for her.

Jo groaned into the blanket. What the hell was wrong with her? It felt as though she'd crossed a line that didn't really exist, and Lia had gone there with her without even hesitating. She had slipped into the role so easily, whispering all the things Jo wished Amelia would say, while touching her the way she imagined Amelia would if they ever had the chance.

Jo's stomach flipped.

It had been hot, but fuck...it had been equally devastating. The way Lia had taken her apart, the way her lips had moved over Jo's body like she was

memorising her...and Jo had let it happen while pretending—*needing*—to imagine it was someone else.

Now, with her hair a mess and the faintest bruises showing on her thighs from Lia's grip, Jo didn't know whether to cry or laugh. She wanted Amelia, it was no secret, but what the hell did it say about her when she was walking into the dark for someone else just to feel her?

Her phone buzzed from the coffee table as Ada's name lit up the screen.

"Hey."

"Well, good morning," Ada sang, far too chipper for this hour. "Why do you sound like you've just committed a crime?"

Jo rolled onto her back and pressed the heel of her hand to her forehead. "Because it sort of feels like I did."

"Oh no." Ada's voice flattened. "What did you do?"

"First of all, I was right, and Lia *was* at the club. Secondly, she agreed to roleplay with me."

Ada giggled. "I love you so much, but knowing you roleplayed with some stranger in the dark is hilarious. I'm sorry, but it is."

"Why? What's so hilarious about it?" Jo frowned. She didn't need this today. "You go in there and let strangers do fucking all kinds of things to you, but when I ask someone to roleplay, it's hilarious! Fucking thanks."

"N-no. I didn't mean it like that." Ada sighed. "But before you came to Satin with me, you never would have just blurted something like that out. It's not a criticism, not at all, I just didn't expect it."

"Fair enough." Jo curled further into the couch, her face half-buried in the blanket. "Sorry."

"I could have worded it better. That one was on me."

Jo chewed her lip. "I...asked her to be Amelia."

The line went silent. Whatever mood Ada had been in seconds ago, it had all but vanished. And then... "You've lost your mind, babe."

"Yeah. Tell me something I don't know."

"But..." Ada cleared her throat. "It's also kind of genius."

Jo's brows drew together. "Wait, what?"

"I mean, if you can't have Amelia in real life, why *not* use the anonymous sex goddess to pretend it's her?" Ada snorted. "You've created the ultimate fantasy scenario. I'm both impressed and slightly horrified."

Jo groaned. "I feel awful about it."

"Why?"

“Because I have to meet Amelia tomorrow to talk about everything, and I’m terrified I won’t be able to look her in the eye without picturing her on top of me.”

Ada cackled. “Well, that’s one way to spice up a serious talk.”

“Don’t,” Jo warned, though she couldn’t help the laugh that escaped her. “Please, don’t.”

“I’m just saying, if the conversation goes south, you can always go back to Lia and ask her to be Amelia forever.”

Jo forced the blanket harder against her face. “Oh, my God!”

“I mean, it solves your problem if nothing else.”

“Seriously, stop now.” Jo flung back the blanket and sat up. “This isn’t funny, no matter how much I wish it could be.”

“Oh, come on. This is hilarious.”

“No, it’s a mess, and it’s getting worse by the day.”

“You’re right,” Ada agreed, “but that’s very on-brand for you at the moment.”

Jo shook her head and sighed. “I don’t know what to do, Ada. I really don’t. We said we’d discuss everything and talk properly, but I can’t exactly sit there and tell her I roleplayed with Lia last night, can I? I know she’s into the club scene, and I know she’s probably filthy when she’s there, but this is different. This is me admitting that I wanted Lia to be her. It’s fucked up, is what it is.”

“Let’s not forget that this is the same woman who helped you get yourself off just last weekend on the phone. I think she may just surprise you.”

Jo looked down at the plush carpet beneath her feet. “It’s the not knowing that has me tied up in knots. Her reaction, what’s going to come of the talk at all, whether she’ll be gone from my life by tomorrow night.”

“I know,” Ada said. “But I think you’re both ready for this conversation, and whether it ends up with you together or apart, at least you’ve been honest.”

Jo’s chest ached. “You’re right. The talk needs to happen no matter what.”

“Tell you what, I’ll come over on Saturday morning and be there for you either way. *If* you end up coming home.” Jo could feel Ada’s grin from across the city. “And if you don’t come home and it all goes far better than

you're expecting...then I guess I should prepare myself for you to be less available in the future."

"Let's just take it one step at a time, yeah?"

"One step at a time."

AMELIA WRAPPED her hands around her cup, staring out the window onto the high street. Her cappuccino had gone cold long ago, the milk forming a thin film on the surface, but she couldn't bring herself to order another. She wasn't here for the coffee. She wasn't sure why she'd come here at all. The little cafe in the city centre was one she rarely used. It was too open and too exposed with its floor-to-ceiling windows and pale wood tables. But that had appealed to her this morning. After a night hidden in the dark, pressed skin to skin with a woman she couldn't have, Amelia needed light and brightness. She needed to breathe.

She hadn't slept for a second. Her mind had played back every moment on a loop, each one more vivid than the last. Jo had laid herself bare last night. She'd whispered Amelia's name and confessed to being in love with her under the guise of some harmless roleplay.

Only it wasn't harmless.

Amelia had felt every word as they'd settled in her chest. Her hands had shaken when she'd arrived home, her knees had buckled in the shower, and she couldn't stop remembering the things Jo had said. How much she wished she could have her. How she would never hurt her. How...she loved her.

And Amelia—grown woman with her life together—was sitting in a coffee shop like a teenager who didn't know how to face the girl she liked.

She was supposed to be seeing Jo tomorrow, but a part of her wanted to go there now. To drive to Jo's flat, knock on the door, and just ask her outright. Did you mean it? Do you love me? Did you know it was me last night? Of course, she couldn't do that. She was barely holding it together as it was. The risk of getting the answers she didn't want was too high.

"Jesus Christ."

A voice to the side of Amelia caught her off-guard, pulling her from her spiralling thoughts.

She frowned and looked up.

Ada.

Jo's Ada. Her ever-present, ever-wise, ever-sarcastic best friend. The last person Amelia was ready to deal with today.

"Hi." Amelia managed a smile as she sat up a little straighter.

"Fancy seeing you here." Ada grinned as she pulled the chair out opposite. "Mind if I join you?"

"No, of course not." Amelia waved a hand to the empty seat, trying to mask the tremble in her fingers. "Be my guest."

Ada sat and gave Amelia a good, long look. "You look like shit."

Amelia lifted a brow. "That bad, huh?"

"Mhmm." Ada tilted her head, something knowing in her expression. "Didn't sleep?"

Amelia hesitated. "No."

"Weird." Ada picked up the menu but didn't read a word of it. "Jo didn't sleep either."

The weight of that name in the air pressed down on Amelia's chest. She didn't know how much Ada knew, but it was likely far more than Amelia hoped.

Ada looked up. "She's still in a bit of a daze, to be honest. You have that effect on her."

"I'm not sure that's a good thing," Amelia said as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "I don't want to make things harder for her. She's still getting over Callum, I think."

Amelia knew that was so far from the truth: Jo hadn't uttered her son's name in months now, but it was all she could offer. She wasn't the kind of woman who discussed her personal life with other people. That included Jo's best friend.

"Well." Ada closed the menu and leaned her elbows on the table. "Slight hiccup with that plan, given you had her moaning your name on the phone last weekend."

Amelia nearly choked on her breath. "She *told* you that?"

"Of course she did." Ada grinned. "You know Jo. She overshares when she's feeling guilty. And she was feeling *very* guilty."

Amelia's cheeks burned. She wanted the ground to open up. "Fucking hell."

"Relax. I think it's great."

Surprised, Amelia lifted her brows. “You do?”

“I think you’re *exactly* what she needs.” Ada shrugged. “Even if neither of you seems capable of saying it out loud.”

Amelia reached for her cup and forced a sip, wincing as the cold liquid slid down her throat. But she’d needed it, regardless of how disgusting it was.

Ada cleared her throat. “You know what’s funny, though?”

“W-what?”

“Back when Jo first went to the club...there was that occasion when you showed up for the first time while she was there.” Ada narrowed her eyes. “I had this crazy theory that *you* were Lia.”

Amelia stilled. Right now, she couldn’t even blink.

“And now that I’ve said it out loud and seen your face...” Ada angled her head. “I don’t think it’s a crazy theory at all.”

Amelia’s voice caught in her throat. “I-I...”

“You’re not denying it.”

“I...” Amelia shook her head. “I can’t talk about this.”

“Because I’m right?”

Amelia was too stunned to even breathe, never mind answer.

Ada sat back and folded her arms across her chest. As Amelia stared back at her, she noted something protective flickering in her eyes. “You need to tell her.”

“I can’t.”

“You *have* to.”

“I *can’t*, Ada. If I do, she’ll never forgive me.” Amelia forced down a swallow as her throat ran dry. “It was just supposed to be fun. A fantasy. I didn’t think she’d come back the next night for more, and I certainly didn’t mean to fall for her.”

Ada lifted her handbag and leaned forward again. “But you did.”

Amelia nodded once as she lowered her gaze to the table. “Y-yes.”

Ada calmly rose to her feet and tucked her chair back under the table. “Then for God’s sake, tell her before she falls in love with a woman who doesn’t exist.”

AMELIA SLID into the driver's seat, her breath fogging the interior as she closed the door. Her keys slipped from her fingers as she tried to slot them into the ignition, her entire body trembling with the fear of Jo finding out the truth from someone who *wasn't* Amelia.

"Fuck," she gripped the steering wheel, her eyes locked on her reflection in the rear-view mirror. Her face was pale, her eyes were dull, and in that moment, Amelia didn't recognise the woman staring back at her.

Ada knew.

And now that she knew...how long until Jo did?

She'd lost control of the one thing she'd told herself she could handle. Playing a role at Satin had started as something she'd needed in order to feel remotely worthy, but it had turned into something far more dangerous and far more intimate. And now she was trapped between two versions of herself, neither of which Jo really knew, not fully.

But Ada knew enough, and Amelia knew Ada would protect Jo to the ends of the earth.

That left Amelia with no choice now. She would have to tell Jo the truth. Not in a rushed text. Not over a phone call. But face-to-face. The way it should have been from the beginning.

She exhaled a shaky breath, finally managing to start the car. Still, she didn't drive off. She couldn't do that until her thoughts had quietened.

She reached for her phone instead, pulling it from the centre console and unlocking it with a quick swipe. She was about to text Jo to see if she was available now when her phone buzzed in her hand.

Hey, I'm really sorry but I don't think tomorrow's going to work anymore. Something's come up. Hope you don't mind x

Amelia's fingers froze above the screen. No. Not now. She reread the message, trying to breathe through the sudden pinch in her chest. Her thumbs hovered over the keyboard as a thousand questions lined up. What came up? Was she okay? Was she backing out? Had Ada already told her everything?

She hit dial. It rang once...twice...and then her phone vibrated again.

Another call was incoming.

Callum.

Her heart sank so hard and fast that it made her dizzy. She hadn't heard from her son in weeks. Not since his last smug text from a bamboo bungalow in Thailand. But that worked for her. She was still pissed off with

him over what he'd done to Jo, but Amelia guessed he knew that, and that was why communication was minimal.

She answered, her voice brittle. "Callum?"

"Mum." His voice was unusually serious. Flat, even. "Hiya."

"Is everything alright?"

"Yeah. Well...no. Not really."

She sat back, one hand still on the wheel. "What's going on?"

"I'm coming home."

Amelia frowned. "You're what?"

"I booked a flight this morning. I'll be back on Sunday."

"Is something wrong?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line, then came a heavy sigh. "Thea and I broke up."

Amelia's lips parted, but she said nothing. There was nothing *to* say. Any hope of her and Jo working on what they were building had just been stomped on.

"She left me in Laos. Packed up and flew home without me."

"Oh, Callum...I'm sorry." God, of all the times when she wished he'd stayed with Thea.

"It's fine. It's for the best." He cleared his throat. "Actually, I've been thinking a lot...about Jo."

Amelia's fingers tensed around her phone.

"I know I fucked things up, but I want to try again with her. I *need* to try again. I still love her." Amelia's world tilted, even as Callum kept talking, completely unaware that he was ripping his mother's heart out of her chest. "I know it's probably too late, but I have to at least tell her. In person. She deserves that. So yeah...I'll be home on Sunday. I just wanted to give you a heads-up."

Not only would her son be returning, but he would also likely be staying with Amelia. When he'd split up with Jo, he'd given up their rented home outside the city. But that was the least of her concerns right now.

Amelia couldn't breathe.

He was coming back...for Jo. He was going to try and fix everything. To put their past back together. To win her back.

And what exactly was Amelia going to do? Tell Jo the truth now—after everything they'd shared, everything Jo had confessed last night—and watch her walk away with the very man she'd barely gotten over?

Amelia's *son*.

Amelia swallowed the rise of nausea climbing up her throat. "Well, thanks for calling and letting me know," she managed. "I'll see you when you get home."

"Thanks, Mum. I'll see you soon."

The silence in the car felt unbearable after that. As though every emotion she'd locked in her chest had finally started leaking out through the cracks. Amelia sat there, staring down at Jo's text, wondering what the hell she was supposed to do now.

Because for the first time in this whole twisted mess, she *really* didn't know.

Chapter Nineteen

JO WAS CURLED UP ON THE COUCH WITH A HOT WATER BOTTLE PRESSED to her lower back and a mug of peppermint tea going cold on the coffee table. She hadn't intended to cancel tomorrow, but something about the way her emotions had caught up with her today made it impossible to think straight. She wasn't ready for *that* conversation. Not while she was still aching from the night before.

It had been stupid to let Lia in again, and it had been even more stupid to ask her to play the role of someone Jo knew she could never have. But in the moment, it had felt right. It had felt necessary. Safe, somehow. Because it wasn't *really* Amelia, and it was never going to be.

Only now, *everything* was more tangled than ever.

She'd tried to sleep it off throughout the day, she'd tried to eat something too, but Ada's comments about pretending Lia was Amelia if things didn't work out between them had left Jo stuck in a loop of fantasy and reality that made her feel borderline unhinged.

A knock at the door startled her. She sat upright, glancing at the time on her phone. It was almost 9 p.m. Ada wouldn't show up unannounced this late in the evening, so that only left one person Jo could imagine standing on the other side of her door.

She crossed the room and opened it.

And there she was.

Amelia.

Hair slightly windblown, cheeks a little flushed from the chill in the air, her coat open over a form-fitting black jumper and jeans. She looked like the embodiment of every complicated feeling Jo had tried to push down

since the moment she'd allowed what she felt for her back into her life again.

"You said tomorrow was no good," Amelia said, shifting from side to side. "But I couldn't wait."

Jo's breath hitched.

"I was worried something had happened," Amelia added. "When you cancelled, I-I thought maybe—"

"I just needed some space," Jo cut in as she gripped the doorframe. She wasn't sure whether to let Amelia in or hide behind it. "I...wasn't expecting you."

"I know, but I needed to see you."

Jo swallowed. There was something in Amelia's tone and the look in her eyes that told Jo she should let her inside. Something wasn't right, and Amelia had been there for her, so now it was time to return that favour. Jo stepped aside. "Come in."

Amelia passed her with a quiet 'thank you', removing her coat and hanging it up on the hook next to the door. She moved like she'd done it before. Like she knew the rhythm of Jo's home. And she did...she'd helped her move in here just six months ago.

Jo closed the door and turned to face her. "Is everything okay?"

"Not really." Amelia paused in the middle of the living room, searching Jo's face. "But I thought it could be if we talked."

Jo nodded, but her heart had started to pound. "Do you want tea or something?"

"No. I just...I want to talk."

"If this is about me cancelling tomorrow." Jo dropped down onto the couch and picked up her lukewarm peppermint tea. Maybe she should have opted for camomile with the hope it would calm her. "I can only be honest and say that I feel like I've *completely* lost my grip on what I'm doing."

Amelia sat beside her, leaving a respectful space between them. "I know what you mean."

"I went to Satin last night to be with Lia so I could stop thinking about you *again*." Jo closed her eyes and pulled her bottom lip between her teeth. If she didn't, she was going to sob in Amelia's arms. "I thought it would do me some good, that I could put everything into a little box and the two wouldn't cross over."

"But they've crossed."

Jo nodded as her throat constricted. "And it's messing with my head."

Amelia's gaze was steady, but Jo couldn't look into those gorgeous eyes. Half of the time, they were the fucking problem. "What would you do if the two were the same?"

Jo's head snapped around. "What?"

"If...what you had with Lia and what you're beginning to feel for me weren't two separate things."

"I-I don't know." Jo's stomach flipped. "But what I do know is that I can't stop thinking about you. I wake up thinking about you, I fall asleep picturing you, I wonder how to ask when I need you..."

Amelia's eyes softened, but they quickly glossed over like she was holding back more than she could say. "You don't *ever* have to ask when you need me."

Jo smiled weakly. "I do. Because it's not fair. You're Callum's mum, and I'm—" She gestured helplessly. "I'm me. A constant fucking mess."

Amelia reached across the small space between them, her fingers grazing Jo's. "You're *not* a mess. You're just scared."

Jo laughed, though none of this was funny. Not in the slightest. "Terrified, more like."

"Me too," Amelia admitted. "But I'd rather be scared *with* you than keep pretending none of this is happening."

Jo relaxed a little. "Even if I keep running away?"

Amelia nodded. "Even then."

The weight of Amelia's words settled deep in Jo's chest. She'd wanted someone to say that for years. That they'd stay, even when she panicked. Even when she disappeared into herself. But before Jo could reply, her phone buzzed on the table.

Her heart dropped when she saw the name.

Callum.

The blood drained from her face. She reached for her phone, her thumb hovering over the screen, but she didn't answer. She couldn't. Not when she was sitting here, stupidly in love with his mum.

Instead, she turned to Amelia, her eyes wide with conflict. Amelia stared back at her, and in that look, Jo *knew* what Callum was calling her for. Something neither of them was ready to face.

AMELIA WATCHED the colour drain from Jo's face, her slender fingers clenched tightly around her phone as Callum's name blinked back at her. Any warmth or hope between them had just vanished the moment they'd been interrupted. It felt as though the air had shifted. Hardened. Amelia could see it in Jo's posture, in the way her shoulders tensed, in the glassiness of her stare.

Her own pulse rushed in her ears.

While she had come here to tell Jo about Callum and about Lia, she'd hoped they could have talked about the future beforehand. At least then, it may have softened the blow when it came to being honest about who she was at Satin. But there was no putting it off now. Especially not after the call Jo had just missed. It was time to come clean...and then lose the only woman she'd ever really cared about.

"I should have called you the second he called me," Amelia said softly, her voice barely audible over the sound of her own heartbeat. "He called me when I was getting ready to head over here."

Jo slowly placed her phone face down on the coffee table and turned to her. "H-he's coming back, isn't he?"

Amelia nodded. "Thea broke up with him."

Jo stared down at her hands and picked at her fingernails. Amelia wanted to reach out and take them in her own, but she couldn't bring herself to do so. Because what came after their conversation about Callum was going to be the end of everything here. Amelia couldn't leave this flat tonight with Jo's skin lingering on her palms. She wouldn't survive it.

"He said he wants to see if anything's still there between you."

Jo scoffed. "No thanks. I never want to see him again."

"I'll speak to him when he gets home. Tell him you've moved on," Amelia wanted to take that burden from Jo. "I'll make it clear that it's not a good idea." *You selfish bitch!* Amelia knew why she was offering to be the mediator in this. Because she wanted Jo for herself. "But I thought you should know. Before he shows up at your door pretending he's the answer to your heartbreak."

Jo sank back on the couch. "So, what does this mean for us?"

This was the moment she'd been dreading. A moment she had imagined over and over, in every possible version, but *nothing* she'd rehearsed felt right. Nothing could cushion the blow. "I don't think there can be an 'us,' Jo."

There it was. The silence in the room was deafening. Jo didn't flinch, she didn't speak, and her jaw was set so tightly that Amelia was worried it might snap.

"I'm trying to do the right thing," Amelia's voice broke. "For once, I'm trying to keep us *both* from getting hurt."

Jo looked back at her, tears slowly trickling down her face. "So this is it? After trying to figure out if we could *ever* possibly be together...that's it?"

"It has to be."

"R-right."

"But that's not all," Amelia's stomach was roiling over and over again. "There's something else you need to know."

Jo sat up straight. "There's more?"

Amelia nodded slowly. She couldn't look the woman she secretly loved in the eye ever again. "It's about Lia."

That name. It physically shifted something in the room.

Jo frowned. "What about her?"

"I...*am* Lia."

Jo glared, every emotion crossing her face as she frowned further. "What?"

"I'm Lia." Amelia's throat burned, and her heart... Well, she wasn't sure it was still in her chest. "I've been her the entire time. From the very first night in the dark room."

"No." Jo slowly rose to her feet, her hands shaking at her sides. "You're joking. Ada's put you up to this and really...you're joking."

"I'm not."

"What the fuck, Amelia?! You...you let me—" Jo's voice cracked with disbelief. "I've said things to her, done things...to *you*, thinking...*Jesus Christ*."

"I know," Amelia rose to her feet and stepped closer to Jo. "I know, and I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" Jo paced as she ran her hands through her hair. "You lied to me. You let me pour my heart out to someone I thought was a stranger while you sat there in the fucking dark, pretending it wasn't you."

"I never meant for it to go this far."

"But it did!" Jo snapped, the fury in her eyes intense. "You listened while I said all those things. You let me say them. You let me fuck you and

talk about you...while you pretended to be someone else.”

“I was trying to give you what you needed.”

“You have no idea what I needed!”

Amelia stepped back, stunned by the venom in Jo’s voice, but she didn’t blame her. Oh, no. She’d earned this. “I thought it would help you,” Amelia whispered, every memory she had with Jo flashing before her eyes. “I thought maybe it was better that way. Safer.”

“Safer for who?” Jo’s voice trembled. “For you?”

“I didn’t want to lose you.” Amelia’s hands shook, but she continued. “I couldn’t stand the idea of not having you in some way. I know I should have been honest the first night you walked into that room, but...I couldn’t stomach the thought of losing you.”

Jo looked at Amelia like she didn’t recognise her anymore. She glared from across the room, disgust etched on that beautiful face. “You’ve already lost me.”

And with that, Jo turned towards the door.

“Please, Jo.” Amelia’s voice broke as tears spilled down her cheeks. “Please, don’t walk away from me.”

The door opened, then slammed shut. Amelia stood alone in Jo’s flat, her chest hollow.

Lia was gone. Jo was gone. And now...all she had left was the glaring truth and a tremendous guilt.

JO GRIPPED the steering wheel so hard that her knuckles turned white. She hadn’t even started the engine; she didn’t know where she was going or what she was doing. Her flat was right there in front of her, but it felt like the last place in the world she could go right now. She couldn’t face Amelia.

Lia...is Amelia.

That confession repeated over and over in her mind, as if saying it enough times would make it make sense. As if repetition could dull the betrayal. But it didn’t, it only sharpened it. Every time the thought landed, it cut deeper.

She'd told Lia private and intimate things. Things she would *never* have said to Amelia if she'd known it was her in the dark room. And she'd meant every word. Every desperate whisper, every aching moan...every time she said she wanted Amelia, she'd meant it.

And all that time...Amelia had known.

Jo let out a strangled sob as she slammed her fist down on the steering wheel, her whole body jolting with the force of it.

How the fuck had this happened?

She leaned forward and rested her head against the leather, her breath ragged as she tried to calm down. She was shaking. Not just her hands, but her legs, her stomach, her chest, too. Her *entire* body was caught in this storm she hadn't seen coming.

Amelia. Her friend, her ex's *mum*, the woman who'd held her after her breakup, the one who had made her tea and stroked her hair while she cried into her lap. The woman who'd become her safe place after *everything* had fallen apart.

And now? Now she was the woman Jo had begged to fuck her in a dark room. The woman she'd touched and tasted and poured her heart out to, not realising it was the same person who sat across from her day in, day out, pretending she didn't know.

It was all a lie.

Every moan in the dark, every stroke of her hand, every time Lia had pulled her close and whispered, 'I've got you', it had all been Amelia, and Jo hadn't known. She hadn't been given the fucking choice to know.

Her eyes burned as she looked out through the windscreen. She blinked repeatedly, not allowing herself to cry. If she cried, she'd fall apart completely, and if she fell apart, she didn't know how or if she'd ever put herself back together.

She reached blindly for her phone on the passenger seat, her fingers trembling as she opened her contacts.

Ada. The only person she could stomach right now.

The call connected almost instantly. "Hey, babe. You alright?"

Jo tried to answer, but all that came out was a shaky exhale.

"Jo?"

"She lied to me," Jo whispered as her bottom lip trembled. "It was her. Lia was Amelia."

"O-oh, fuck."

“Yeah.” Jo wiped at her face when a single tear fell. “Oh, fuck.”

“Okay,” Ada said gently. Jo could hear her shifting, as though she was sitting down. “I know you’re spiralling, but...can you talk me through it? What happened?”

Jo closed her eyes. “She came over and told me Callum’s coming home. Something about him wanting to try again with me. And then...she told me the truth. That it had been her all along.”

“She just came out with it?”

“Y-yes. It’s been her the whole time, Ada. Every time I touched Lia...it was Amelia.”

Ada let out a slow, controlled breath. “Jesus.”

“God, I feel sick.” Jo pressed a hand to her chest. “I feel like I’ve been fucking violated. I told her things in that room I didn’t even know *I* felt until they came out of me.”

“Jo...”

“Oh, God.” The realisation suddenly sank in. “I told her I loved her. During the roleplay, I told Lia I loved Amelia. And she didn’t even fucking stop me!”

“Do you want me to come over? I can be there within the hour.”

“No. I’ll be okay. I don’t think I can face anyone at the minute.” Jo pressed her forehead to the steering wheel again and sighed. “I don’t know if I’m angry or humiliated or heartbroken. I just know I feel like I’ve lost something I never really had.”

“Jo, listen to me for a minute, okay?” Ada cleared her throat. “What she’s done is fucked up, it really *is*. She took your consent and turned it into her fantasy. That’s the first thing I want you to remember. Consent. You signed that form to go into that room, *knowing* it could potentially be someone you knew. It says it in the small print, and I know you—you *don’t* miss the small print.”

Jo winced. Ada was right. Jo had spent over forty minutes online reading through all the Terms and Conditions, the nondisclosure agreement, and everything else that came with a Satin membership.

“But,” Ada continued, “I also think she did it because she didn’t know how else to be close to you. You’ve been so clear about what you *can’t* have with her because of who she is, so maybe she thought this was the only way.”

“That doesn’t make it okay.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Ada agreed. “But it does mean you need to decide whether you can forgive her or not. It means you need to give yourself some time to sit and process before you make any decisions.”

Jo let her head fall back against the seat, her gaze fixed on the graffiti-covered lamppost across the street. “I don’t know if I can.”

“And if you can’t, that’s okay.”

“I don’t know who she is anymore, Ada.”

Ada sighed. “Maybe Amelia doesn’t know who she is anymore either.”

Jo closed her eyes and swallowed. She knew she had a lot of thinking to do, but right now, she was angry. Far too angry to sit and have a conversation with Amelia, and far too angry to see any kind of reasoning as to why she’d done it. “I think I need to lie down and be alone for a while.”

“I know.”

Jo lifted her head and glanced at her living room window. Unless Amelia had left via the back exit and scaled several garden fences, she was still in there. “Can I call you tomorrow when I’ve got some sleep? *If* I can sleep.”

“You know you can,” Ada said. “And Jo?”

“Yeah?”

“If I find out that you’re considering taking Callum back, I *will* kill you.”

Jo snorted. “Trust me, I’d *never* consider taking him back.”

“Well, at least we can agree on something right now. Get some rest, and when you want to talk, you know where I am.”

For the first time in weeks, Jo didn’t feel turned on. She didn’t feel those intense butterflies, she didn’t feel giddy with the promise of something forbidden and electric, she just felt...tired. So fucking tired.

AMELIA SAT on Jo’s couch, trembling. She hadn’t moved since she’d left. She’d simply lowered herself to the couch when the front door slammed shut, then sat in the silence ever since. There had been no car engine firing up, and no speeding away from the kerb...just the oppressive stillness of a flat that was drenched in fury and heartbreak.

Amelia hadn't cried in years. Not since her life changed some twenty-odd years ago and she'd become numb. She hadn't even cried when Callum left for Southeast Asia without a proper goodbye. But now, she sobbed with her hands pressed to her face as broken gasps shook her whole body.

Her chest ached, her head pounded, and she couldn't breathe properly.

How had she let it get this far?

She should have told Jo weeks ago. She should have been honest from the start. But every time she thought about confessing, of risking even a sliver of what they had, fear had overruled her honesty.

And now, Jo hated her.

She lifted her head as the door opened. Jo stepped inside with a clenched jaw and glassy eyes, her keys still in hand. The moment Amelia saw her, she got to her feet and wiped at her cheeks with the back of her hand.

"Jo, I—"

Jo's mask slipped for half a second, but she quickly forced it back into place. Amelia watched it happen in real time. "I want you to leave."

Amelia's heart broke again. "Please, just listen to me."

"There's *nothing* you can say that will make this okay."

Amelia stepped forward instinctively, her arms half-raised before she lowered them to her sides again. She was desperate...exposed in a way she hadn't been in decades. When Jo took a step back, Amelia's tears threatened all over again. This woman couldn't stand to be in the same room as her, and Amelia only had herself to blame. "I didn't plan for any of this to happen. You were hurting and I just—"

"You lied to me for weeks, Amelia."

"I know, and I hate myself for it."

Jo's voice broke. "You let me say things in that room. You let me do things. You knew it was you, and you still let me—" She cut herself off and turned her back. "I can't even look at you."

"I didn't do it to hurt you. I *never* wanted to hurt you." Amelia chanced a step closer again, placing a careful hand on Jo's shoulder. "Please believe me when I say I never wanted to hurt you."

"You've made me feel like a fool." Jo spun around. "I trusted you. I trusted *Lia*. And you...you kept up this lie, and I didn't know who the hell I was talking to."

Amelia took a breath, knowing that brutal honesty was the only way she would get through to Jo, but even that didn't feel like a possibility right now. "I was scared, okay? I didn't think you'd want me if you knew it was me. I thought that maybe a part of you could be free in that room without the weight of who I am. Who *we* are to one another."

Jo scoffed. "So you thought deception was the answer?"

"No," Amelia whispered. "I thought it was the only way I'd get to be close to you. The only way you'd let me in." She wanted to reach out and touch Jo's face, to feel that skin against her own, even if only to ground her, but she wouldn't dare. Instead, she would say what she had to say, and then she would leave. "I know I've hurt you, and I know you'll never forgive me, but I have to live with that now. That's a pain I'm not sure I can carry, but I deserve it."

"I don't know who you are."

"Maybe you don't, not anymore, but I will say that I finally know who *you* are. Behind the pain and the anguish, away from the torment and the hurt Callum caused you...you're the most beautiful woman I've ever had the pleasure of knowing." Amelia lifted a hand and stroked her thumb against Jo's cheek. "In that room, you were yourself. In that room, you valued yourself, and you didn't let what he did to you affect you. Seeing that, being a part of something so beautiful and transformative...I feel *privileged* to have been the one in that room the night you walked in."

Amelia leaned in and kissed Jo's cheek, lingering for a moment longer. "I hope you continue to rebuild yourself, Jo. I hope you find the love of your life and thrive in ways you never would have done with Callum...or me. You deserve something extraordinary, and though you won't see me again, I *will* be cheering you on. I'll be out there, waiting for the day when I hear you're married, or you've just moved into a beautiful new home with your partner."

Jo looked away and folded her arms across her chest, blinking back tears.

"I'll go, but please know that I'm so very sorry for hurting you." Amelia didn't want to go; she wanted to fall to her knees and beg for forgiveness, but Jo wasn't hearing her, and Amelia knew she never would. "I'd say I'm always here if you ever need anything, but I know you won't take me up on it. So, all I can really say is that I hope you'll be safe, and don't let this experience with me ruin your relationships moving forward."

Amelia walked to the front door and took her coat from the hook. Her heart felt painfully heavy, her limbs numb, and as she turned and took one final glance at Jo, she knew she'd fucked it all up. "I love you." Tears slid down Amelia's cheeks as she put that out into the world. "Not as Lia and not because of Satin. I love *you*, Jo. I have for a long time, even when I shouldn't have."

Jo didn't look at her. She didn't move, she didn't speak, she didn't give any hint of a reconciliation in the future. So, Amelia turned the handle and left Jo's flat, her chest caving in as she landed on the doorstep with tears running down her face.

As the door closed behind her, Amelia knew that she'd lost Jo once and for all.

Chapter Twenty

AMELIA HADN'T PLANNED TO COME TO SATIN TONIGHT, BUT TWO DAYS of silence from Jo had been more than enough to unravel her. The way Jo had stood in the middle of her flat and barely looked at her...it replayed over and over, stuck on a brutal loop Amelia couldn't escape. She'd tried to sleep, but she couldn't. She'd tried to work and failed. Her hands seemed to continuously tremble whenever she typed out the planning permission email she knew needed sending, and her throat seized up whenever she picked up the phone. Everything in her life had been so carefully ordered before Jo, and now it was all falling apart.

When Evie had called her a few hours ago, Amelia had been soaking in the bath, crying into the bubbles surrounding her. She had claimed she wasn't crying at all, insisting she was merely thinking, and that had been the moment when Evie had told her to think like the rest of them...in a pair of heels, and a dress that would make the entirety of Satin salivate on Amelia's arrival.

So now, here she was. Lounging sideways on a velvet couch with a drink in her hand and the familiar spark that often ignited in her chest when she was at the club. She wore a gown with a split that finished high up her thigh, a deep burgundy colour with a Bardot neckline, ruched detailing cinching at the waist for that sculpted silhouette look that Amelia preferred. As she looked down, she realised the edges of her lace lingerie were just about visible. She hadn't intended for them to show, but then again, she hadn't intended to do much...except for forget.

The woman beside her, Emily, traced her fingers teasingly along the inside of Amelia's thigh, and Amelia hadn't even bothered to stop her. It

wasn't that she wanted to sleep with another woman tonight, but she felt hollow inside, and this attention was better than drowning.

"You're tense." Emily leaned in, her breath warm against Amelia's ear. "You want me to loosen you up?"

Amelia's eyes drifted to the shadows on the other side of the room, the familiar play of candlelight and silhouettes behind sheer curtains. The same flicker of secrets she used to love about this place. The same corner where she and Jo had once sat with drinks, before either of them had admitted they were slowly coming undone.

"I know that look." Emily's hand skimmed higher, and Amelia shivered. "You've been left wanting, haven't you?"

A pathetic smile curled on Amelia's lips. "Something like that."

"Then, how about..." Emily ghosted her lips along Amelia's jaw. "I help you forget."

Amelia closed her eyes and allowed herself to lean into the moment. Her body didn't care that it wasn't Jo, her nerves lit up anyway, so when Emily's mouth brushed hers, she didn't pull away. If this was what it took to forget, then so be it. Jo didn't want her, and she never would again. The woman she was hopelessly in love with couldn't even look her in the fucking eye.

But then...

"Amelia?"

Amelia's head snapped up, her breath catching immediately. Standing just a few feet away was Jo's best friend.

Ada's face may have been unreadable, one brow lifted, a half-full glass in her hand, but her gaze was focused firmly on Amelia.

She sat up abruptly and brushed Emily's hand from her thigh. "Shit."

Emily laughed as she pulled away. "Friend of yours, by any chance?"

Ada continued to glare at Amelia, that disgust Jo had for her in her eyes almost mirrored in her best friend's. God, that look was far more painful than Amelia wanted to admit.

Still, she forced out a breath and said, "I-I didn't know you'd be here."

"Mm. I could say the same," Ada replied, switching her gaze between Amelia and Emily. "But here you are...without a care in the world."

"I was invited," Amelia said, trying not to sound defensive and hoping Ada believed her. "Evie thought it might help."

Ada's expression *still* didn't change.

“I’m just trying to take my mind off things.”

“Yeah, it looks like it’s working. Good for you.”

That hit Amelia like a slap to the face.

Emily leaned into her again, quite clearly unable to read the room. “Are we pretending we’re *not* in a sex club, or...?”

Amelia shot her a look, her nostrils flared. “Would you give us a minute?”

“Your loss.” Emily shrugged and stood up, wandering off with her hips swaying as though she hadn’t just been dismissed.

Amelia turned back to Ada. “Before you say anything—”

“I *wasn’t* going to say anything.” Ada’s voice softened, but Amelia still felt the tension in the air between them. “You’re a grown woman. You can do whatever you want.”

“But?”

Ada sighed and tilted her head. “Jo’s on her way here.”

“S-she...” Amelia’s blood ran cold. “What?”

“She’s meeting me for a drink. I didn’t know you were going to be here. I texted her before I left my place, and she seemed fine with the idea.” Ada gave her a knowing look. “You...may want to fix your dress.”

Amelia’s hands flew to her lap. The lace of her lingerie was barely showing, but it was enough to be noticed. She suddenly felt naked and ashamed. Her stomach twisted as she smoothed the fabric down. “I wasn’t trying to...” she trailed off. “I wasn’t thinking straight.”

“Clearly.” Ada set her glass down. “I’m going to head out and meet her before she walks in.”

“Ada, please.” Amelia’s voice broke. “Please, don’t tell her I was like this.”

Ada studied her. “She’s *already* hurting, you know.”

“I-I know.” Amelia swallowed back her emotion. She had no right to play the victim here. She’d created this all on her own. “So am I.”

Ada leaned down and said, “I don’t think you’re a bad person, Amelia. But if you’re going to let Jo get on with her life, then maybe don’t be sitting here looking at her when she walks in.”

And with that, Ada turned and walked away.

Amelia sat there frozen in place, the lights suddenly too bright and the air too thick with tension to breathe. Her hands trembled as she grabbed her clutch, but she put one foot in front of the other and moved towards the

table Evie had been occupying just moments ago. She would be as inconspicuous as she could be, but Amelia couldn't leave yet. She *needed* to lay eyes on Jo for her own sanity.

WHAT THE HELL are you doing here?

Jo should have cancelled with Ada the moment she'd come to her senses. She should have told Ada she was exhausted, or made something up about needing to work late, or just said she wasn't in the mood. But the truth was, she *was* in the mood. For distraction, for noise, for *anything* that wasn't going on inside her own head.

She hadn't been able to stop thinking about Amelia since the door had closed behind her two nights ago. Watching her standing there, a mess Jo wasn't familiar with, crying as she told Jo she loved her. But then the lies quickly pushed their way to the front of Jo's mind, and the 'I love you' meant very little all over again.

She walked through the entrance to Satin, nodding at the staff and smiling at Ada, all while trying to settle her breathing. She hadn't worn anything overly revealing tonight, just black trousers and a soft silk top, her leather jacket draped over her shoulders. She looked put together, even though she wasn't.

She automatically scanned the room as she often did when she walked in here, and then she stopped, frozen in place when she noticed a familiar head of dark hair.

Amelia.

She was sitting on the edge of one of the crushed velvet booths with her back to the entrance, and she had no idea Jo had just walked in, but that didn't matter. Jo's lungs still fought for breath, her heart aching as though it had been kicked repeatedly all over the city.

Amelia wore a burgundy gown, lace visible against her thigh. One hand curled around her wine glass, and the other...was brushing against the knee of another woman beside her.

Jo's gut twisted.

The other woman leaned in, whispered something in Amelia's ear, and Amelia smiled as Jo caught her side profile. It wasn't fake, it wasn't subtle,

it was the kind of smile Jo had once seen aimed at her across the kitchen table.

She stepped back and considered her options. She couldn't do this tonight. She couldn't be here, she...*shouldn't* be here. She wasn't in the right frame of mind to see Amelia Loughlin not only in the same space as her, but with someone else. Everything was too raw in Jo's chest.

She turned, only to feel a hand brush her elbow.

"Can I buy you a drink?"

Startled, Jo looked up at the woman standing in front of her. Tall, poised, strikingly beautiful in a red halter-neck dress that matched her lipstick. "I—"

"You really look like you could do with something strong."

Jo glanced quickly to her left. Ada was chatting with someone across the room, distracted, unaware that Jo was on the brink of falling apart in the middle of a sex club. Then she looked over at Amelia's table again. She was laughing and enjoying life, so Jo turned back to her mystery woman and said, "Sure. That would be great."

"What's your poison, gorgeous?"

Jo felt her face flush. Nobody had approached her in here before, so maybe it would be nice to spend some time with a woman who had called her gorgeous, rather than pining for someone who had spent the last month lying to her face. "Whiskey, thanks."

"Great." The woman's smile deepened. "Maybe you could get us a table, and I'll be right back."

Jo exhaled a shaky breath as the woman moved towards the bar, her hands curling into fists at her sides. This was ridiculous. She should leave. She should *never* have come here. What was she even doing?

Jo was just about to head for an empty table when movement caught her eye...and then she stilled. Amelia was walking towards her.

She looked different in the club lighting tonight. More dangerous and more exposed somehow. But her face—God, her gorgeous face—wasn't playful or seductive like it had been moments ago. No, Amelia looked devastated.

"Hi." Amelia stopped a few feet away. "I didn't know you'd be here, nor did I come here expecting to bump into you, but...I wanted to clear the air so you can at least enjoy yourself here tonight."

Jo gazed back at Amelia, wondering if every time she looked at this woman, her heart would always break a little bit more. “Thanks for clearing that up.”

Amelia’s shoulders slumped. “Right, well, take care.”

Jo cast her gaze to the floor this time, catching Amelia’s thigh as she did so. God, did she have to sit around here looking like that? This was painful.

“You look great, by the way.”

Jo scoffed and shook her head. “Please, don’t. You’re sitting over there with another woman, so please, just don’t. Don’t do to her what you’ve done to me. It fucking hurts.”

“I’m sorry.” Amelia’s voice betrayed her. “I just... Me and Evie, we were just—”

“Evie?” Jo frowned. “Your best friend, Evie?”

“Yes. The woman I’m with. It’s Evie. Not...anyone else.” Amelia winced. “She brought me here to take my mind off everything.”

Jo’s mouth ran dry. “Right.”

“I can leave,” Amelia offered suddenly. “If you want me to. I don’t want to make things worse for you.”

Jo didn’t know what to say. She didn’t want Amelia to leave, not really, but she also didn’t want to stand here feeling like her chest was being ripped open, trying not to remember what Amelia’s mouth felt like against her neck.

“Jo...” Amelia’s voice broke again. “Please just say something.”

Jo lifted her eyes to Amelia’s, but it hurt. It *physically* hurt to look at her. “I don’t think I can.”

And then the woman from before reappeared at Jo’s side with two drinks in hand. She glanced between them and cleared her throat. “Everything alright here?”

Jo tensed and closed her eyes.

“Is there a reason why you think it wouldn’t be?” When Jo opened her eyes again, Amelia’s stance changed entirely. Defensive...protective. “This is a private conversation that I don’t believe you were invited into.” She swallowed and turned her attention back to Jo. “Enjoy your evening. Goodbye, Jo.”

Amelia turned and walked away, and Jo didn’t stop her. She wanted to, in some fucked up way at least, but what would it achieve? The thought of sitting down and talking to Amelia filled her with dread. The anger hadn’t

really subsided either. Not enough for them to have a sensible conversation. So, she watched the woman of her dreams return to the table Evie sat at, shaking her head as she hid herself halfway in the booth.

Whatever you do, don't hurt her for the sake of it. That's not who you are.

JO STARED down at the drink in her hand like it was going to give her answers. It didn't, but what it *did* do was give her the courage to sit in the same room as Amelia. It was the drink she would usually choose, the same brand of whiskey she usually drank in here, but tonight it tasted like nothing at all. It was just there, quenching her thirst and contributing to the hangover she would have in the morning.

Chloe, the woman she'd met as she'd walked in here, hadn't stopped talking since they'd sat down. Something about her day job and something about travel. Jo tried to nod at the right times, she tried to smile when it was expected of her, but her eyes kept drifting to where Amelia sat. That gown. Those silky, smooth shoulders. The guilt and pain on her face when Jo hadn't known how to hold a conversation with her.

She took a sip of her drink. A big one.

"Do you come here often?" Chloe asked with a teasing nudge. "I don't think I've seen you in here before."

Jo almost laughed out loud. She used to come here for Lia, but now she knew Lia had been Amelia all along, and she had to wonder if this would be her last time at Satin. While it had initially brought her a sense of freedom, it just left her feeling bitterly disappointed now.

Jo should have seen it. She should have known Lia was Amelia. The softness, the scent, the things Lia had said in the dark. The way she'd touched Jo like she *knew* her. She should have known Amelia's voice and her presence. God, Ada had even put the idea in her head weeks ago, but Jo had brushed it off, certain Amelia wouldn't do that to her.

"Not really." Jo brought her glass to her lips again.

"Oh." The woman looked slightly taken aback by Jo's lack of enthusiasm, but somehow masked it with a flirtatious smile. "Well, maybe you'll come more often now."

Jo nodded, not trusting herself to speak. She hated this. The pretending, the drinking to forget, the half-hearted deflections when all she wanted was to scream at the top of her lungs...

Why did you lie to me? Why did you have to be her?

Jo finished the last of her drink in a few swallows and set the empty glass down on the table beside her. Her fingers trembled, her cheeks were probably flushed, and her mind was beginning to spiral all over again.

"Another?" Chloe asked, tilting her head in the direction of the bar.

Jo nodded, now chasing her escape via alcohol.

As Chloe left for the bar, Jo exhaled sharply and leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees and rubbing a hand down her face. This wasn't her. This wasn't who she was. But grief made you do strange things, didn't it?

And what else could this be other than grief? It was certainly what it felt like. The aching pit in her stomach, the nausea rising in her throat, the pain in her chest where happiness and fond memories used to reside when she thought about Amelia.

They'd shared something real; she'd felt it. In every glance, every text, and every accidental brush of a hand. And in that dark room...God, she'd given herself over so freely and so fully.

But now, she didn't know who she was hurting over. Amelia, Lia, or both.

She slumped back on the couch, allowing the music to course through her body. It was nothing more than a thrum beneath her skin that kept her tethered to the moment. A rhythm to drown out her own thoughts.

Chloe returned with another drink and placed it in Jo's hand. "To new beginnings," she said, raising her glass. "And drinking whiskey with a gorgeous woman."

Jo clinked it half-heartedly and sipped. She didn't feel better, only numb, but maybe that was exactly what she wanted and needed tonight.

Jo sipped again, the drink burning a little more than the last one, and the one before that. She welcomed the sting, and she welcomed the blur it was beginning to offer. Chloe was talking about a recent holiday now, something about cocktails on the beach and falling asleep in the sun. Jo smiled, or at least she tried to, but her head was elsewhere.

Amelia. The gown, the lace, that look in her eyes when she'd caught sight of Jo.

You should have just left!

The drink was starting to hit her hard and fast, loosening the tension in her shoulders while simultaneously making her heart feel heavier than ever. The way it always did when she was on the edge of a mistake.

From the corner of her eye, familiarity caught her attention.

Ada. Thank fuck.

She was working the room the way she usually did, laughing with someone near the bar, while waving at someone else across the room. But Jo noted the exact moment Ada had clocked her. The moment her laughter faded, her brow furrowed, and her eyes landed on the nearly empty glass in Jo's hand. Ada remembered this version of her from last time.

She'd seen it once before in a shitty flat with the curtains drawn at midday while Callum's lies unravelled in real time. She'd been the one to drag Jo into the shower and hold her hair back when the whiskey came up. To tell her, over and over, "You're not crazy. He's just not who you thought he was."

Jo tried to straighten up, but her limbs weren't responding the way they should. She smiled at Chloe, vague and unfocused, and tried to act like everything was fine. But it wasn't, and Ada was already crossing the room.

"Jo," she said softly, crouching down beside her so she didn't make a scene. "Hey."

Jo stared back at her. "Hi."

Ada looked at Jo's drink, then at Jo, then at Chloe. "Could you give us a minute?" she asked politely. "Just need to have a quick chat."

"Um, sure. Yeah."

Jo didn't watch Chloe walk away. She just kept staring at her glass.

"Talk to me," Ada said, still crouching beside her, a hand now resting on Jo's knee. "Please."

"I'm fine."

"Mm, that's bullshit."

Jo laughed. "Okay, maybe I'm...a little drunk."

"You're sure about that?" Ada raised an eyebrow. "A little?"

"Seriously." Jo looked away. "It's just a drink, Ada."

"It's *not* just a drink. Not with you...not like this."

Jo bristled. "Oh, don't start."

She knew Ada was only looking out for her, but she didn't need this tonight. Why couldn't she just drown her sorrows and complain about how

dreadful she felt tomorrow morning? Everyone else seemed to be able to do that, but not Jo. Never Jo.

“Then don’t lie to me.”

“I saw her,” Jo said, her voice breaking. “She was with another woman. Well, what I thought was *another* woman.”

“I know. I saw.”

“She looks...” Jo exhaled. “She looks gorgeous.”

“And that hurts. Of course it does.” Ada squeezed Jo’s knee and sighed. “But drinking until you can’t feel your face? Flirting with someone you’re not even interested in? That’s not going to make it better.”

“I know,” Jo whispered.

Ada got up and sat beside Jo. “I’ve seen you like this before. When Callum was fucking around and gaslighting the shit out of you. You were heartbroken then, too.”

Jo scoffed. “You think this is worse than Callum?”

“I think this is *different*. Because you trusted Amelia and she broke something you didn’t even know could still be broken.”

Jo nodded slowly, swallowing down the painful lump in her throat.

“I get it, babe,” Ada continued. “I get why it’s easier to drown it. Why it feels better to flirt and pretend and have someone see you when the one you really want can’t be trusted anymore.”

Jo wiped at her face and puffed out her cheeks. “Don’t do that. Don’t be nice to me. I don’t deserve it.”

“You’re not the one who lied.”

“Maybe not.” Jo looked down at her hands. “But I let her get close. I let *Lia* get close. All this time, I thought they were different people, and I fell for *both* of them, Ada. What does that say about me?”

Ada wrapped an arm around Jo’s shoulder and pulled her in. “It says that you were ready to love again, even when you swore you never would.”

Jo closed her eyes. “And now I can’t even look at her.”

“You don’t have to, not tonight.” Ada bumped Jo’s knee with her own and smiled. “You’re coming with me. We’re having a girl’s night, and everyone else can fuck off.”

Jo shook her head. “No, I won’t be any fun. You go and do your thing, and I’ll probably head home.”

“You’re coming with me, and that’s the end of it. We’re going to sit down, and we’re going to have some water. Then you’re going to stop

trying to erase her from your bloodstream with whiskey and flirty strangers.”

Jo groaned as she lowered her head to her hands. “I feel bad for Chloe.”

“I’m sure she’ll live.”

Jo smiled as she locked eyes with Ada. “I hate you.”

“No, you don’t.”

Jo sighed when Ada pulled her to her feet and guided her away from the main area of the club. Away from the space where Amelia had once stood with a soft smile and a drink in her hand. Maybe one day this would be funny, or poetic, or just another chapter in the disaster that was Jo’s dating life. But tonight, it just fucking hurt.

AMELIA GRIPPED the edge of the sink with both hands, her knuckles white and her breathing ragged. She stared at her reflection in the gold-rimmed mirror, barely recognising the woman who looked back at her. She had mascara smudged beneath her eyes, her lipstick had faded, and the subtle shimmer of her highlighter was drowned out by the flush in her cheeks and the tears threatening to spill out again.

This wasn’t who she was. Not at Satin. She was meant to be in control here. Poised, elegant, and elusive. She was *meant* to be the woman everyone wondered about. The one who didn’t break...the one who didn’t fall apart.

But Jo had always had the power to reduce her to rubble. Even now. *Especially* now.

She turned on the tap and let cold water rush over her wrists, trying to ground herself and stop the tremble in her fingers. Her chest ached with a grief that felt too big to carry, and she hated herself for falling apart in a public space. But she hated herself more for still hoping Jo would come back into her life.

The door creaked open, and Amelia flinched. She expected nothing more than a stranger who was reaching for their lipstick or checking the straps on their heels, but it wasn’t a stranger. It...was Jo.

Her eyes were hazy, her hair a little lifeless, and her face was flushed with alcohol and pain.

Amelia froze.

Jo frowned as though she hadn't expected anyone to be inside. She was halfway through the door, her expression momentarily blank, until recognition hit and her whole body went still.

Amelia's lips parted, but the words wouldn't come. The last time they'd spoken, just an hour or so ago, she'd barely got anything out of Jo. She wasn't sure she could face that rejection again. It was too much for her heart to handle.

Jo's jaw tensed when she registered the mess Amelia was in. The tears, the shaking hands, the complete and utter unravelling.

Jo reached for the wall, steadying herself. "Sorry, I didn't know anyone was in here." Her voice was hoarse. The kind of hoarse that came from swallowed sobs and too much whisky. "I'll just be a sec."

"You're fine." Amelia quickly wiped her cheeks and stepped back to give Jo space. "It's a public bathroom. No need to apologise."

Jo hovered awkwardly just inside the door, still unable to look Amelia in the eye. "I was just gonna—" She gestured to the sink beside her and laughed. "I don't know why I came in, actually."

Amelia watched her, her heart aching to reach out and help Jo. "Are you okay?"

"No, obviously not." Jo exhaled through her nose, a little wobbly on her feet. "You don't need to babysit me or pretend that you give a fuck about me."

The silence that followed was deafening, heavy with everything they couldn't say. Everything they *used* to say with their hands and mouths in the dark was now crumbling under the weight of the truth.

Amelia considered leaving, but she couldn't. "You've been drinking."

"No shit." Jo tilted her head with a sarcastic smile. "But thanks for reminding me."

Amelia took a cautious step forward. "I'm not trying to patronise you. I just..." Her voice wavered. "I know what this is. I *know* this kind of drunk."

"Do you?"

Amelia nodded. "I used to drink like this a lot. When I didn't want to feel anything...when I wanted to forget I ever loved someone."

Jo flinched at the word *loved*.

Amelia swallowed. "You don't have to pretend with me."

"You're not serious?" Jo scoffed. "That's rich coming from you."

Amelia winced. "I deserved that."

Jo finally looked at her, her expression a storm of conflict and exhaustion. "I don't even know what I'm doing here."

Amelia did. She knew because she'd been doing the same thing. Chasing ghosts in dim lighting and hoping that alcohol and distraction may just offer some kind of relief. But it never did, not when you were in love. Not when the woman who'd shattered you was standing two feet away, looking just as broken.

Jo cast her gaze between them. "You were crying."

"Yeah. Seems to be all I do lately."

"Because of me?"

"Because of us. Because of the mistakes I've made."

Jo leaned back against the wall, her arms folded across her chest. "There is no us."

"I know, and that's my fault." Amelia blinked back tears when Jo's bottom lip quivered. "If I hadn't done what I did, if I'd just been honest and open from the beginning, I don't know. Maybe it could have all meant something more. Maybe you wouldn't be standing here, disappointed to see me in your space."

The pain in Jo's voice took Amelia's breath away as she said, "I didn't think it would hurt so much."

Amelia reached for the edge of the sink again, holding herself up. "Jo, I'm so sorry." Jo looked away, her jaw clenched. Amelia wanted to reach out, to press her hand to Jo's cheek and kiss away the hurt, but she didn't deserve that right anymore. So instead, she asked, "Do you want me to go?"

Jo just stood there, her head bowed as her fingers picked at the edge of her sleeve. It was clear she was trying to hold herself together, and it only made Amelia feel ten times worse.

"No," Jo said, her voice trembling. "But I think you should."

"Okay." She didn't ask for forgiveness, and she didn't beg for more time. Amelia simply walked past Jo with her heart in her throat, brushing her shoulder as she went. The contact was brief, but it was enough to ground her. It was enough to remind her what it felt like to be near the woman she loved. She would leave Jo in the bathroom, but not because she wanted to. She would leave because she knew that if she didn't, she'd break all over again. "Bye, Jo."

Chapter Twenty-One

AMELIA SAT AT THE BREAKFAST BAR, STILL IN HER ROBE, NURSING THE same cup of coffee she'd been clutching for the last hour. The house was far too quiet this morning, lingering with heartbreak and regret...guilt for everything she had done. The sunlight spilled in through the kitchen blinds, the birds chirped outside, but none of it mattered this morning. Amelia was officially cold and dead inside.

For the third night in a row, she hadn't slept. Her eyes were raw from crying, her heart was bruised and broken beyond repair, and every fucking corner of the house reminded her of Jo. The soft, pastel pink throw on the armchair she used to wrap around herself, the wine glasses sitting clean on the counter from that night they'd laughed over Rioja and too many olives months ago. Her world had shrunk down to the space where Jo had once belonged, and now it just felt empty.

When the doorbell rang, Amelia flinched. She wasn't expecting anyone, so she waited for a moment, listening, *hoping* maybe it was a delivery. But when it rang again, longer this time, more impatient, she dragged herself to her feet and walked down the hallway.

She opened the door slowly.

And there he was.

"Hey, Mum."

Callum stood on the doorstep, his rucksack slung over one shoulder and his hair longer than it had been the last time she saw him. His tan popped from his time in Southeast Asia, and his smile was still the same. Boyish, charming, and utterly fucking clueless.

Amelia's stomach twisted. She'd forgotten this was the day he flew back. To be honest, she'd forgotten *everything* that wasn't Jo. "Oh," she said, stunned. "You're here."

He grinned and stepped forward, wrapping her up in a tight hug that she couldn't quite return. "Flight got in early. Thought I'd surprise you."

Amelia forced a smile and patted his back awkwardly. "You did."

He stepped inside, dropping his bag by the door like he still lived here. Which, he didn't. No way. Amelia couldn't share this space with him. He hadn't lived at home for at least ten years now. "Thought you might have done something with the place while I was gone. You know, kept yourself busy."

"I have enough to do without ripping my home apart."

He turned back to her, his brow furrowed as he took in her pale face and tired eyes. "You okay, Mum?"

No, I'm not. And you being here just makes everything ten times worse. She cleared her throat. "Fine. Just a rough few days."

Callum didn't press, but he studied her for a moment longer before rubbing his hands together. "Right. So, what's the plan? I was thinking of heading over to see Jo later. Thought I'd start with an apology, y'know? Clear the air a bit."

Amelia froze, but her hand clenched into a fist at her side. "I don't think that's a good idea."

Callum frowned. "Why not?"

"She doesn't want to see you."

His eyebrows lifted, and a bright smile appeared. Her son had never been one to listen when someone was telling him *not* to do something, and that clearly hadn't changed. "You've spoken to her?"

Amelia swallowed. "Yes. I let her know you were coming home."

"When? I mean, I know you two have always been friends, but I thought that would have sort of died down when I...you know?"

"We've been in touch."

Callum leaned back against the wall and folded his arms across his chest. "Well, if she's talking to you, she'll talk to me."

"No," Amelia said, her voice firm. "She won't."

"Why? Because of Thea? I told you, that's over. That was a mistake—"

"You made a choice, Callum. Jo spent months trying to recover from the damage you caused." Amelia's voice wavered, but she held her ground.

“She’s doing well now. She’s rebuilding her life. She doesn’t need you showing up and dragging her back.”

Callum scoffed and pushed off the wall. “You don’t get to decide that.”

“I do when she’s asked to be left alone.”

“Let me guess.” He narrowed his eyes. “She’s asked you not to give me her address?”

Amelia hesitated. She hadn’t spoken to Jo about Callum since the night everything had fallen apart, but if she told Callum the truth—if she gave him her address—he’d go there. He’d knock on her door, disrupt the fragile remnants of Jo’s heart, and probably push her further away than Amelia already had.

But the real truth of it all was that Amelia selfishly wasn’t ready to see Jo back in his arms. Not after everything they’d shared recently. Not after the club, and the kisses, and the roaming hands...that voice as it whispered, *I love you in the dark.*

So, she lifted her chin and said, “Yes. She made that very clear.”

Callum’s face fell. “You’re serious?”

“I’m sorry, but I won’t be a part of dragging her through anything more than she’s already endured.”

Callum stared at her, visibly shaken by Amelia’s lack of support in this. “I came home to make things right.”

“You came home because Thea left you.” Amelia’s eyes softened, but only slightly. “If you want to make it right with Jo, do it by respecting her wishes. By giving her space. You hurt her. That doesn’t disappear just because you’ve had time to get your end away elsewhere and now you’re back with your tail between your legs. I raised you better than that, Callum!”

He scrubbed a hand through his light brown hair, frustration bleeding into his voice. “I just thought...maybe she missed me.”

Amelia scoffed. Most people wouldn’t agree with her stance on this, even if Jo wasn’t firmly in her life, but she wouldn’t stand by while any man—her son included—hurt and disrespected another woman. It just wasn’t who Amelia was. “She deserves better.”

Callum finally stepped back towards the door, accepting that he was on his own with this. “Fine. I’ll find her address myself and get a cab.”

“Callum!”

“Thanks for the warm welcome, Mum. It’s fucking great to see you, too!”

The door slammed shut behind him before she could say another word. Amelia leaned back against the counter, tears brimming on her eyelids all over again. She’d basically just sent her son away, and yet, all she could *still* think about was Jo.

JO SAT ON THE FLOOR, her back against the couch and her knees pulled up to her chest, the curtains half-drawn to block out the midday sun. She’d left the club last night once she’d found herself alone in the bathroom with Amelia, and surprisingly, it had prevented her from having a raging hangover today. She felt tired and worn out, but she didn’t feel as though she’d drank herself into oblivion.

Her phone buzzed again. She knew it was Callum. She already had six missed calls, three voicemails she hadn’t listened to, and a handful of WhatsApp messages...all variations of wanting to talk, letting her know he was back in town, and wanting to know if he could see her.

Jo let the call ring out *again*, pressing it face down into the carpet. Her heart pounded—not out of hope, and not even anger. Just...exhaustion. How many times did she have to say she was done? How many ways could she explain that the man she used to love no longer existed? And worse, how many more ways could she ignore the pain in her chest from the one person she *did* want to speak to?

She tipped her head back against the edge of the couch and closed her eyes. She hadn’t stopped thinking about Amelia since last night. The small talk at the club, the apology in the bathroom...the fucking pain of it all.

Jo rubbed at her forehead with the heel of her hand. Going to Satin had been a bad idea from the moment she’d texted Ada back and agreed to go. But seeing Amelia there—real and vulnerable in the bathroom, not wrapped in the anonymity of the dark room—had stirred something deep and dangerous inside of her, and now all she could think about was picking up her phone and texting her.

Are you okay? I miss you. I don’t know what I’m doing without you.

But she didn't. She wouldn't. Not when her chest still ached with betrayal, and not when part of her still pictured that night in the dark, her mouth on Lia's skin, her heart unknowingly falling in love with a lie.

Her phone buzzed again.

Jo let out a low groan and grabbed it before it vibrated its way through the last ounce of sanity she possessed.

Fucking hell, Callum!

She almost silenced it again, but something inside her snapped. Enough was enough.

She answered. "What do you want?"

"Jo. Thank God. I've been trying to get in touch—"

Jo rolled her eyes. "Yeah, I noticed."

"I got back this morning. I've been to Mum's. She wouldn't give me your address."

"Good." *At least she can do one thing right*, Jo thought. "Have you not taken the hint?"

"Can we meet, please? For coffee. I just want to talk."

Jo laughed. This man was out of his mind. "You think coffee is going to fix what you did to me?"

"No, I don't think that. I just...I've had time to think. To grow. I made a mistake, Jo. A huge one. I shouldn't have chosen Thea over you."

Jo got to her feet and walked to the window. She pulled the curtain back, only for grey skies to greet her. How very fitting for the heaviness in her chest. "You didn't *choose* Thea, Callum. You *cheated*. Repeatedly. And then you left. There's no choosing in that. You're just a wanker."

"I'm not that man anymore."

"And I'm not that woman anymore."

Callum's breath faltered. "So...that's it?"

"That was *it* the day I came home from work to find that you'd kindly packed my bags for me. That was *it* when you stood there with Thea by your side in *our* house and told me you didn't love me anymore."

"But Jo—"

"I'm seeing someone." Those words were out of her mouth before she even realised it. Her entire body tensed immediately. She wasn't seeing anyone, and she suspected she never would be. Because everyone always left or disappointed her in some way. Still, with Amelia, it had *felt* like

something. Something real and something more than she'd ever imagined for herself.

She cast her mind back to Thursday night, Amelia's eyes as she'd stood in her flat, tears running silently down her cheeks. The way her voice had broken when she said *I love you*.

"Oh." Callum's voice snapped her back to the moment.

"I'm not interested in going backwards. Not with you."

"Has Mum put you up to this? She didn't seem like she wanted to see me when I turned up before." He sighed. "She said you weren't interested in seeing me anymore. I didn't want to believe her."

"Well, believe her now."

"Right." His voice hardened. "Guess I'll see you around then."

Jo scoffed. "I'd prefer not to, if it's all the same."

The moment she ended the call and the line went dead, Jo dropped the phone onto the windowsill and pressed her forehead against the glass. Her body was tense, her breath shallow, but her mind...her mind was already racing towards someone else.

Amelia.

Why couldn't she stop wanting her? Why, even after all the lies and secrets, did her heart still reach for her? Maybe because Amelia had seen her for who she was and liked it. Even under false pretences, even cloaked in darkness, Amelia had made her feel alive again.

Beautiful, powerful...someone who mattered.

And now she missed her like hell.

Her phone vibrated on her recently painted windowsill.

Jo quickly picked it up, hoping and praying it was Amelia.

But it wasn't. It was the one person who was always there for her, even when she didn't know she needed someone. Ada.

You okay? I'm in the area and wondered if you needed me to come over? I'm only five mins away.

Jo stared at the message, smiling with appreciation for Ada Kilroy.

I'm okay. Just spending the day with myself. Learning to sit in the quiet without falling apart. I'll talk to you in a few days once things have settled down.

Jo sent the message, then swallowed when she quickly typed out another.

I miss her. I feel lost without her.

Ada started to reply immediately, as though she'd known Jo wasn't quite finished with what she was saying.

I know you do. Give yourself some time.

Jo closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Whatever the outcome of the next few days, she just hoped that everyone would pull through in a way that was best for them.

Chapter Twenty-Two

AMELIA STOOD AT THE KITCHEN COUNTER, HER ARMS FOLDED, HALF-listening as Callum paced the length of the room. His voice had risen steadily since the moment he'd arrived back from wherever the hell he'd been, angry and wounded, but it wasn't remorse she was hearing. It was entitlement. It always was.

"I don't understand what she's playing at," he snapped, running a hand through his hair. "She won't even talk to me, Mum. You must have said something. You must have told her not—"

"I told her the truth!" Amelia cut him off without even turning to face him.

Callum scoffed. "What truth?"

"That you made your bed. That you left a good woman with a mess of trauma and scars, and now you think you can come waltzing back into her life like it's your God given fucking right to do so."

Callum stopped pacing and threw up his hands. "I just want to make things right."

Amelia turned and trained her eyes on her son. "The world doesn't work that way, Callum. You don't get to break her heart and then expect some kind of redemption because it suits you. Jo has moved on."

He scoffed. "With you, by any chance?"

"Excuse me?"

"Oh, come on. We all know what you're like. You'll sleep with anything if it fucking moves!"

Amelia pinched the bridge of her nose and tried to count through the sheer fury she felt at her son's attitude towards her. He'd been like this for a

long time now, often allowing his anger to overtake him whenever he felt like it.

“You make out like you’ve got your shit together and you’d do anything for anyone, but really...you only care about yourself. You’ve always been that way. It’s no wonder Dad behaved the way he did!”

Oh, that hit Amelia harder than anything else she’d ever been through. Those moments when she cowered in the corner flashed before her eyes... and then came the absolute heartbreak. She hadn’t just lost Jo, she was losing Callum, too. She stepped closer and looked him in the eye. “You may think that it was acceptable for your father to beat me to within an inch of my fucking life, but don’t you dare accuse me of being to blame for it.”

“Mum, I—” Callum clasped his hands behind his neck, his eyes wide. “Fuck, I’m so sorry. I-I didn’t mean that.”

Amelia stepped closer, fury rising like heat through her chest. “You cheated. You lied. And now that your shiny new romance has worn off, you want to come crawling back? You’re more like your father than I thought. I’d say Jo had a lucky escape.”

Callum flinched. “That’s low.”

“Is it? Or is it finally the truth you’ve spent your life avoiding?” Amelia’s voice cracked, but she didn’t stop. “You think you can do what you want without consequence, that women will always wait around for you to get your act together. But Jo’s not going to wait, Callum. And she *shouldn’t*.”

“I just—”

Amelia held up a hand. She was done with this. She was done with *him*. “I think you should find somewhere else to stay. I don’t want to look at you anymore.”

Callum frowned. “Y-you don’t mean that.”

“You know what, Callum? I actually do.” Amelia stood close to the kitchen door, a habit she’d adopted a long time ago when a man raised his voice to her. “I barely survived what he did to me, I spent months in hospital going through rehab, and you think you have the right to say what he did was okay? That he was justified in his behaviour because he filled your head with shit and accused me of having an affair.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry isn’t going to cut it. I lay in a hospital bed unable to open one eye because it was so swollen, and barely managing to open the other...

continuing to work so I could provide for *you*. So I could make sure *you* had everything you needed, knowing he'd been arrested and the one person you looked up to had been taken away. *I* felt guilty for that. *I* felt as though I'd broken your world." Amelia wiped tears from her face as she looked back at her son. "But the truth was...he'd repeatedly tried to kick me, *your mother*, to fucking death."

Silence.

And then her phone buzzed on the counter behind her.

She tore her gaze away from Callum and snatched it up before he could see it, her chest tightening as she saw the name flash across the screen.

God, it was Jo.

I need to see you tonight. Please. I'll do anything to see you tonight.

Her breath caught in her throat.

"What?" Callum asked, peering over her shoulder.

Amelia's hands shook slightly as she read the message again just to make sure she hadn't imagined it. But Jo's message was there, clear as day. Amelia didn't reply. She didn't even think. Instead, she walked to the front door, snatched up her car keys from the hook, and pulled on her coat with trembling fingers.

"Mum?"

She turned to face him with one hand on the door. "I need you to leave. I'm done with you. And me? Well, I've got somewhere important that I need to be."

Callum looked bewildered as he stared back at her. "You're serious? You're just gonna—"

"I'm not discussing Jo with you ever again." Amelia shook her head. "You and I are done, Callum. Get your belongings and get out of *my* fucking house."

Amelia was out the door before the conversation could continue. The air hit her lungs, and she finally felt alive again, but her son's opinion of her remained firm in her mind. She hadn't gone back to that place in a long time, and right now, it couldn't affect the rest of her day. Jo needed to see her, and Amelia would *always* show up, fully present, when that was the case.

She slid into her car with nothing but her phone and keys on her person. No bag, no plan, no defences. Just a woman with her heart in tatters, driving

back towards the only person who'd ever made her feel like Amelia and Lia were worth loving at all.

JO HAD BEEN PACING the living room for over twenty minutes. Her phone sat on the coffee table, the screen facing up, but she couldn't look at it without feeling sick. She wasn't even sure why she'd sent that text to Amelia. It had burst out of her like a reflex—raw, desperate, *honest*—and now it was just there...hovering between them like a bomb waiting to go off.

She wrapped her arms around herself, stopping at the window to peer through the blinds for the third time in two minutes. What if Amelia didn't come? *But what if she does?*

Jo pressed her forehead to the glass and closed her eyes. She didn't know what she was doing anymore. One minute, she was furious, heartbroken, and betrayed. The next, she was aching for Amelia like her body *only* knew her.

She missed her. Not just in bed and not just at Satin. She missed the woman who, at one time, used to bring wine over and sprawl out on her couch. The woman who often challenged her to say what she really meant. The woman who looked at her like Jo wasn't someone who needed fixing, but someone who had already survived the worst of it.

Jo pulled back from the window and rubbed at her eyes. She was tired of feeling this way. Torn in two. Wishing Lia had never existed, then wishing she could fall back into that dark room just one more time.

"Fuck!"

Her flat still smelled like Amelia. Her perfume lingered in the fabric of the couch where she'd sat and cried the other night, clinging to Jo's senses as though it didn't know how to let go either. Jo sat in the very same spot, staring at her flat door. Her leg bounced anxiously as one hand tugged the hem of her hoodie down. God, she needed to pull herself together, whether Amelia showed or not.

"What the hell are you going to say if she *does* show?"

Thanks for ruining everything?

I miss you so much it physically hurts?

I don't know how to hate you properly because I still want to kiss you every time you look at me?

She scrubbed her hands over her face and exhaled a calming breath. She wasn't okay, not by a long stretch of the imagination, and if Amelia didn't turn up tonight...

Jo froze when there was a soft knock at the door. She eventually rose to her feet, her knees barely carrying her, and moved across the room. She didn't enjoy the way her heart raced, because right now, *nothing* was okay between them. She would have preferred her heart to race for other reasons.

When she opened the door, Amelia gazed back at her. She was still beautiful, and she was still as composed as ever, but her eyes were swollen, her coat was unbuttoned and hanging off one shoulder, and she looked like she'd left in such a rush that she hadn't even thought to bring her bag.

Jo's lips parted. So many things she wanted to say were just waiting to be unleashed, but they remained lodged in her throat. She hadn't expected Amelia to look so broken standing in front of her.

Jo finally stepped aside. "Come in."

Amelia stepped past her carefully, almost as though she didn't trust her legs to carry her. Her eyes skimmed the room, not quite landing anywhere, and Jo could see the tremble in her hands as she pulled her coat tighter around herself.

God, this is going to be a tough conversation.

Jo closed the door and turned around, watching Amelia as she stood in the centre of the living room, looking like she didn't belong there anymore. And maybe she didn't, but the ache in Jo's chest told her she *wanted* her to.

"I'm sorry I couldn't get here any sooner," Amelia said, not meeting Jo's eyes. "Things aren't great at home, and I just needed to pull over for five minutes to get myself together."

"What's happened?"

"It's not important. Not right now. You texted...and here I am." Amelia did look up this time, slowly, her bottom lip trembling as she locked eyes with Jo. "Is everything okay? I didn't think you wanted to see me again."

Jo swallowed. "I didn't, not really, but I couldn't stop thinking about everything."

"Look, you're not the first to want me out of your life, and you won't be the last, but if you've called me over here just to kick me while I'm down, then I have to leave. I can't deal with it right now." Amelia shoved her

shaking hands into her pockets, blinking a single tear away. “I deserve *whatever* you want to throw at me, and I *will* stand here and take the full force of it...but please, not tonight. If I have to beg you not to do this tonight, I will.”

Something in Amelia’s voice was beginning to worry Jo. This wasn’t the woman she knew. It wasn’t the woman who had always had such striking confidence. It certainly wasn’t the woman who had pretended to be Lia. “I...just wanted to talk.”

Amelia nodded and pressed her lips together. “Okay.”

“Could we do that? Talk without sniping or fighting?”

“I didn’t set out to deceive you, Jo. I need you to know that.” Amelia took a careful step forward. “The first night in the dark room, when I realised who you were, I should have walked away. I should have turned the light on and ended it before it could start. But I didn’t. I—” Amelia’s voice broke again, and Jo saw the glint of fresh tears in her eyes. “I was selfish,” she whispered. “Because for the first time in years, someone made me feel alive. *You* made me feel alive. I didn’t want to let go of that, even if it meant doing something I knew I’d regret. I *couldn’t* let go of something that had brought me joy for the first time in...what? Over twenty-five years.”

Jo listened, her arms crossed tight against her chest, her guard firmly up.

“Would it be okay if I sat down?” Amelia exhaled a shaky breath, not moving an inch until Jo nodded and followed her to the couch. “Thank you.”

“Is everything okay, Amelia? You seem...terrified.”

Amelia stared straight ahead, focusing on the blank TV mounted to the wall. “I told myself it was just sex, and that the anonymity made it okay. I told myself that you were getting what you needed, and so was I. But then you started talking and telling me things, and I just kept pretending, because I was too much of a coward to tell you the truth.”

“So, why are you okay with offering me the truth now?”

“Because I’ve lost you anyway,” Amelia whispered. “I’ve lost *everything*, including myself. Who I was building myself to be. The life I had. The happiness I’d taken so long to find. I’ve lost it all...because I couldn’t bring myself to show you who I am outside of a dark room.”

“Why couldn’t you?” Jo shifted a little closer. “You knew I was attracted to you.”

Amelia side-glanced at Jo. “We’d talked about it, but from where I was sitting, there was always a reason or an excuse. You’d flirt...and then you’d backtrack. You’d say things in one breath, and then something different in the next. To me, because of my past, I took that to mean one thing. You didn’t want *all* of me. You just wanted... I don’t know. A fling, some fun, whatever you want to call it. Even when I used Callum as a reason for us not to be together, that was nothing more than an excuse.”

“Your past? I don’t understand...”

Amelia lowered her chin to her chest and sighed. “Please, don’t make me go over it tonight. My own son has just told me what he thinks of me, and I just...I can’t go back there right now. It’s taken me so long to find myself, and I fear that I’m already losing my grip on who I’ve become.”

“None of this makes any sense.” Jo’s brows drew together as she rested her hands in her lap. “You keep talking about who you’ve become and whatnot, but I only know this. *You*. Who you’ve been since we met.”

“And it’s taken me a long time to be that person, Jo.”

“Then can I at least give you my thoughts on it all?” Jo asked, dipping her head to meet Amelia’s eyes. “If you don’t want to go back to your past, will you listen to my present? My...reality?”

Amelia chewed her bottom lip as she nodded.

“I hated you for what you did,” she admitted. “I still do in some way.”

Amelia’s shoulders folded in on themselves. “I know. I don’t blame you.”

“But I also hate how much I miss you.” Jo slowly placed a hand on Amelia’s knee. “What you did hurt me. It felt like you’d made a fool of me, and you’d played me for your own amusement.”

“It wasn’t like that.” The pain in Amelia’s voice took Jo by surprise. “Jo, I was falling for you. I *have* fallen for you. And that terrified me more than anything. Because if you knew it was me...if you knew I was the woman behind the curtain, you would have run.”

“I...don’t know if that’s true.” Jo hadn’t wanted to say that out loud, it made her extremely vulnerable, but she had to. She’d promised herself she wouldn’t hurt Amelia for what she’d done, and she’d meant it. “I think that maybe if you’d told me from the start, then we’d still be here, just without all the heartbreak.” Jo looked down, rubbing at her wrist. “But then again, maybe I *needed* Lia to be able to fall for you. Maybe I needed to learn how

to feel safe again in the dark before I could even comprehend someone in the light.”

A single tear slipped down Amelia’s cheek.

Jo exhaled slowly and shifted closer again, close enough to hold Amelia if she wanted to. “I’m still angry and confused, and I’m not promising anything.”

“I wouldn’t ask you to,” Amelia whispered. “I don’t expect anything from you other than to be kicked out of here once you’ve said what you need to say.”

Well, Amelia was about to get a shock. As was Jo when she put this out there. “But I’m not ready to lose you either.”

Amelia’s bottom lip quivered as more tears fell. “W-what?”

Jo gave a small nod, her vulnerability on the line here. While she didn’t quite trust Amelia fully now, she knew most of their time together had been genuine. And Ada had been right. Jo *had* consented to being at the club, regardless of who was in that dark room. She couldn’t let Amelia take the fall for everything, but the lies...she could potentially let go of.

Jo tentatively reached out and rested her fingers against Amelia’s wrist. The contact was brief, fleeting, but it shattered something in both of them. Amelia’s hand turned instinctively, palm up, seeking more.

“I want to try and understand you, Amelia. I want to understand why you did what you did, and why it feels so fucking hard to hate you when I should.”

Jo looked into her eyes, and for the first time in days, she saw something familiar. Not Lia. Not the stranger in the dark. Just *Amelia*. Broken and flawed, but real.

“I’ll tell you everything. No more lies. No more hiding. Just give me the chance, please.”

Jo’s fingers lingered at Amelia’s wrist, not quite holding her hand but not pulling away either. She felt the warmth of Amelia’s skin and the faint tremble beneath it, and something inside her softened. Amelia had lied, she’d played a part, but beneath the mask—behind every touch, every whisper, and every moan—she had been *herself*. Jo could see that now. And even though the hurt hadn’t vanished, it no longer felt like it was the only thing in the room. In that moment, it felt as though there was hope.

“You look exhausted.” Jo grazed her thumb over the back of Amelia’s hand. “When was the last time you slept?”

“Does it count if you were crying while doing it?”

Jo’s heart broke at that. She leaned in closer, close enough to feel Amelia’s breath on her skin. “You shouldn’t be alone tonight.”

“I don’t want to be.”

Without thinking, Jo reached out and cupped Amelia’s cheek. Her skin was warm, flushed from the rush of emotion, and as Jo’s thumb moved instinctively, tracing the tear-stained path beneath her eye, Amelia leaned into her touch and closed her eyes.

“Can I...?” Jo didn’t even know how to finish that question. It wasn’t one she’d thought she could ever ask before this moment. But she didn’t need to finish it, because Amelia was already nodding, her breath catching as she opened her eyes and focused on Jo’s lips.

Jo drew her in and kissed her. Not hard, not fast, and *nothing* like the frantic desperation of the dark room. This kiss was slow, unmistakable, and as Jo’s hand moved to the back of Amelia’s neck, her fingers sliding into the loose strands of her hair as her lips pressed softly, she felt as though life was being breathed back into her.

Amelia’s hand rested on Jo’s thigh, her touch tentative at first, as though she was afraid too much pressure would ruin the moment. But then their bodies found each other. Jo opened to Amelia slowly, tasting the faint salt of her tears, but something far sweeter beneath it. Amelia...the *real*, unmasked Amelia. It was the kind of kiss that could only happen when nothing else in the world mattered. When words had run out, and touch was all that remained.

Jo deepened the kiss, her other hand now resting high up Amelia’s thigh. She felt her body give in, not lustfully and not in a way that begged for more, but in a way that simply said, ‘thank God you’re here.’

When they finally pulled apart, Jo touched her forehead to Amelia’s.

“God, I didn’t think that would ever happen,” Amelia whispered, her voice a mixture of wonder and pain.

“I didn’t think I’d ever want it to after the last few days.” Jo stroked her thumb against Amelia’s jaw.

“What does it mean?”

Jo looked into her eyes, those same eyes she’d fallen for long before Callum had even left her. “I don’t know yet, but I think I want to find out.”

Amelia’s eyes closed as she exhaled a deep breath. The weight of everything was beginning to settle, and as Jo sat here, Amelia had never

looked so beautiful.

“Stay here with me tonight.” Jo took a firm grip of Amelia’s hand and rested back against the couch. “Just...be here with me. Please?”

Amelia removed her coat and curled up beside her. “I can’t go back home. Not if he’s still there.”

Jo knew there was a conversation to be had in the morning, but right now, she wanted to just be. She wanted to rest, relax, and hold Amelia until their eyes closed and the last few days faded away. She wrapped a blanket around them, pulled Amelia closer, and listened to the sound of her breathing even out beside her.

Things may not be perfect, but they were real, and that was more than either of them had expected to find.

Chapter Twenty-Three

AS THE EARLY MORNING LIGHT CREPT IN THROUGH JO'S CURTAINS, Amelia lay on her side, her eyes open but unfocused, watching the shadows from the swaying trees against the wardrobe door. She hadn't slept much throughout the night. Though her body was too exhausted to fight rest entirely, her mind hadn't quieted for a single second. Because she was here, in Jo's bed, and she didn't understand how.

She'd hurt this woman so much that Amelia struggled to think about it. She had done the one thing she'd sworn she'd never do...and fallen for her through the darkness. She didn't deserve what Jo had offered last night, and she didn't deserve to have her in her life moving forward. But again...she was here.

Jo was still sleeping behind her, her breath warm against the back of Amelia's neck, and her arm draped over Amelia's waist like she had every right to be there. God, Amelia wanted her to. But if she *really* wanted Jo to stay, if she *really* wanted something good and strong with her...then the truth had to come next.

All of it.

Not just the mess of the last few weeks, and not just the dark room, but the pain and ugliness that had shaped the woman Jo was still getting to know. The version of Amelia she *never* let anyone see. The one she'd buried beneath years of survival and silence.

She carefully turned beneath Jo's arm and watched her sleeping. She looked younger like this. Softer, perhaps. Amelia studied the faint crease between her brows, the long lashes resting on her cheeks, the peaceful rise

and fall of her chest. She didn't want to ruin that, but the weight of the truth was pulsing just beneath Amelia's ribs, and it *had* to come out.

She brushed Jo's arm lightly and whispered, "Hey..."

Jo stirred. "Mm?"

"I need to talk to you."

Jo slowly came around, frowning as she focused on Amelia. "W-what's wrong?"

Amelia sat up and pulled the cover around her. The only thing bringing her comfort right now was the soft T-shirt of Jo's that she wore. The faint perfume that lingered on it. It was all she needed to keep her grounded.

"Amelia?" Jo's voice was filled with sleep but laced with worry. She sat up slowly, mirroring Amelia's position where she rested back against the headboard, her frown deepening. "You're starting to worry me."

"I don't mean to. I just..." Amelia inhaled deeply. "There's something I need to tell you. Something I've never really talked about with anyone."

Jo reached out and placed a hand gently on Amelia's knee.

"It's about why I ended up at Satin," Amelia said. "Why I went to that club in the first place. Why I ever even considered the dark room."

Jo tensed slightly but nodded. "Okay."

Amelia stared down at her hands. "My ex-husband...Callum's father... He nearly killed me."

Jo's hand stiffened on Amelia's knee, but she remained silent.

"It was years ago. Decades, even. But I still remember every time he cracked a rib, every time I couldn't breathe. I remember the hospital visits...the lies I told, the sound of his boots on the stairs after a bad day. The way he'd always say he loved me before he landed a fist on my face."

She heard Jo sniffle beside her. "Jesus..."

"I didn't leave because I didn't love myself enough to," Amelia went on, swallowing the lump working its way up her throat. "I'd been reduced to nothing. I wasn't me anymore. I was just someone trying to survive the next hour, the next night, the...next excuse." She finally looked up at Jo. "I think, somewhere deep down, I thought I deserved it."

Jo shook her head, her thumb tracing slow circles against Amelia's knee. "N-no. No one deserves that."

"But when you're told for years that you're worthless, you start to believe it." Amelia sighed. "After he was arrested, after I'd spent months in the hospital, I didn't recognise myself. I wasn't sure I even wanted to."

Jo's trembling hand took Amelia's beneath the cover, squeezing tight.

"Satin wasn't about sex for me, not really. It was about control and about choosing to be seen in a way that I got to dictate. After so long of being hurt and silenced, I wanted to take something back. I wanted to be touched without fear, and I wanted to feel like I still had some kind of power over what happened to my body. I'd spent fifteen years before that locking myself away and always believing that I had nothing to give outside of my career. Then, four years ago, Evie introduced me to Satin."

Jo covered her mouth, her shoulders shaking with silent tears.

"I wasn't looking for love. I wasn't even looking for a relationship. I didn't think I was capable of it anymore. I didn't think anyone would want someone so...broken."

Jo lunged forward and wrapped her arms around Amelia as though she could physically shield her from the past. Amelia clung to her just as fiercely, letting the emotion finally break free. She had spent so many years bottling everything up, pretending that it wasn't a part of her anymore, but here...with this woman, she could be open and honest. She could *be* herself. She could show her vulnerability instead of hiding behind business suits, heels that made people drool over her, and a personality she had carefully crafted.

"I'm so sorry," Jo whispered. "I didn't know. I never thought—"

"You weren't supposed to," Amelia murmured against her shoulder. "I never let anyone see that side of me. I wear heels and lipstick and flirt like it costs me nothing. But the truth is that everything about who I am now came from that pain. It shaped me, Jo. It helped me find pieces of myself again... in the dark, at Satin, from the touch of strangers who didn't know how to break me."

"I don't want to be a stranger."

"You're not." Amelia pulled back and looked deep into Jo's gorgeous blue eyes. "You could never be."

Jo cupped her face and brushed away Amelia's tears with the pads of her thumbs. "*You* are the strongest woman I've ever met, and I *hate* that anyone ever made you feel otherwise. You're perfect exactly as you are."

"It's taken me a long time to believe that." Amelia exhaled a shaky breath. "But being here with you last night, and now this morning, I think I finally started to believe it."

Jo kissed her forehead, her lips lingering against her skin. "I want to be someone you *never* have to hide from."

Amelia closed her eyes. "I'm sorry you ever became a part of that world for me. It was *never* supposed to be that way."

"No. No more apologies." Jo held her tighter. "Right now, I just want to hold you. I just want to be here with you like this."

As Amelia curled into Jo's arms, tucked into a warmth she'd never dared dream of, she realised that the truth hadn't broken them after all. It had finally set her, *them*, free.

AS JO STIRRED milk into two cups of coffee, one hand braced against the counter as she tried to get her head around everything she'd heard this morning, she glanced towards the living room. Amelia sat curled up on one end of the couch, her legs drawn up beneath her as Jo's hoodie swallowed her frame. She hadn't said much since they'd left the bedroom, but Jo couldn't blame her. It had to have been a lot for her to put herself and her heart on the line like that.

Jo watched her from the kitchen. There was something about Amelia's stillness that felt unnatural. She wasn't used to seeing her like this. Quiet and small, clearly weighed down by things Jo was only just beginning to comprehend.

She sighed and reached for the toast, dropping two slices onto plates. She wasn't sure either of them could stomach anything more substantial right now. It had been quite the morning, and it was only nine. Still, everything within Jo ached to make this okay, to...do *something* that made it better. But how did you fix a past like that? How did you love someone through that kind of pain?

By staying, she thought. By being here.

She carried the plates and mugs through, placing one gently on the coffee table. "You okay with some toast for now?"

"Yes. Thank you."

Maybe if Amelia was feeling up to it later, Jo could treat them to lunch in the village just along the road. But for now, this was enough.

Jo sat beside her and tucked one leg under herself. "You haven't said much since we got up."

"I don't know what to say." Amelia smiled weakly. "It's been a long time since I've let anyone see me like that."

Jo's gaze landed on the faint smudges beneath her eyes, then to the way Amelia's hands were clasped tightly in her lap. She wanted to reach for her, but she didn't. Not yet. Not until Amelia wanted her to. "I'm glad you told me," Jo said. "Even if it broke my heart."

Amelia exhaled slowly and reached for her cup of coffee.

"I've...been thinking," Jo continued. "About us. About what I want, despite everything."

Amelia turned to look at her, worry present in her eyes.

"I want to be with you, Amelia. Not just in moments like this, not in the dark, I want *all* of it. The real stuff. You, as you are. The lies and mess and healing, too. I want to be with you while I figure it all out."

Amelia's fragility flickered across her face. "Y-you do?"

"I don't care how complicated it is or if we still need to talk about things. I just want *you*." Jo reached out, her fingers brushing Amelia's. "I want to know more. I want to understand everything. Now that I know the truth, it changes everything for me. It also makes sense when it comes to certain things."

A shadow passed over Amelia's features. "I don't understand..."

"Callum's dad," Jo said as she cleared her throat. "He *never* talked about him. I figured it was just old family stuff. We all have a broken relationship with someone we're related to, but last night, after what you told me...I get it now. I understand why he clammed up whenever I mentioned his dad."

Amelia looked down at their joined hands. "What he said to me last night..."

"What *did* he say, Amelia?" Even though Jo never wanted to cross paths with him again, Callum had never been cruel to her. He'd cheated, yes, but if she found out now that he'd been abusive or raised his voice to Amelia, Jo would be *very* shocked...and seething.

Amelia shook her head and sighed. "It all started because I wouldn't give him anything when it came to you. He'd tried, failed, and I think he was looking for someone to lash out at. I was the perfect option, given the fact I was already slowly breaking. When I told him you'd moved on, he

asked if that was with me.” Amelia scoffed. “I don’t know why he thought that, it’s not like he’s seen us together, but when I challenged him...he turned. Said it was no surprise that Geoff behaved the way he did because I’ll sleep with anyone.”

Yeah, that would do it. Jo was fucking *livid* with Callum now.

“I didn’t recognise him,” Amelia continued. “But I did. Because I saw *him* in my son. His tone. His disgust. That...entitlement. And for a moment, I felt like I was back in that house again, standing in front of a man who could do whatever he wanted without consequence.”

Jo’s body physically ached. “Jesus Christ, Amelia...”

“I told Callum to get out. I told him we were done. He stood there, stunned, like he couldn’t believe I’d finally told him no. And then...then you texted me.”

“I had no idea.” Jo swallowed. “I just needed to see you. I wasn’t thinking about what you could be going through.”

“I’m glad you reached out.” Amelia squeezed Jo’s hand and smiled. “Because if you hadn’t, I think I may have stayed in that place. That dark, depressing place I swore I’d never go back to.”

Jo slid closer on the couch, taking Amelia in her arms. “You’re not alone anymore.”

“I know,” Amelia whispered. “But that’s the scariest part. Because it means I have something to lose again. It’s been so long since I’ve had to worry about something like that.”

Jo regarded her with a small, sad smile. “You’re not going to lose me. Not after everything we’ve come through just to be sitting here.”

Amelia leaned her head against Jo’s shoulder and closed her eyes. “I don’t know how to do this relationship thing. Not with all the history that I carry.”

Jo rested her cheek against Amelia’s hair, but not before she left a kiss there. “Then we’ll figure it out together. Day by day.”

Jo chose not to press for any other answers. She just held onto Amelia as though she would disappear if she dared to let go. Survival wasn’t always about fighting and fixing. Sometimes, it was about sitting in the quiet with someone while they remembered how to breathe. Jo had learned that through losing Callum, and the very woman in her arms had held her together.

Now, it was Jo’s turn to weather the storm with Amelia.

WHILE THE FLAT WAS QUIET, Jo's head wasn't. She leaned against the kitchen counter, her arms folded, her gaze fixed on Amelia, who'd drifted off again on the couch. Wrapped in a blanket, her hair a mess, and with Jo's hoodie still hanging from her shoulders. She looked peaceful, but only in that way people did when their body had finally given up trying to hold everything in.

Jo exhaled slowly and glanced at the time. Almost eleven.

She couldn't stop replaying what Amelia had said. She couldn't get the pain in her voice out of her head, and she couldn't stop seeing her trembling hands as she'd described her standoff with Callum. How dare her own son spew the very venom his father once had? After everything Amelia had done for him, how fucking dare he!

Jo had tried to drift off with Amelia in her arms after breakfast, but her mind constantly raced. And now, she couldn't sit around doing nothing for another second. *Fuck this!*

She moved into the living room and crouched beside the couch, brushing a few stray strands of Amelia's hair from her cheek.

"Mm..." Amelia stirred, blinking slowly as her eyes opened.

Jo smiled. "Sorry to wake you."

"Did I fall asleep?" Amelia sat up slightly, rubbing at her eyes. "Again?"

"Yeah, but you needed it." Jo sat down on the edge of the couch. "I need to head out for a little while. Just an hour or so."

Amelia cleared the sleep from her voice and frowned. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything is fine. I promise. I just need to clear my head. Take a walk. Grab a few things since I have nothing in the fridge, and I don't want you to starve."

Amelia nodded, though Jo could see the flicker of hesitation behind her eyes. "Should I—"

"I want you to stay here. Don't go back home, not today. Not until you've had a chance to just breathe."

"Are you sure you want me here?" Amelia lifted Jo's hand and kissed the back of it. "I can go if you need some space."

“Of course I want you here.” Jo stood and fixed the blanket back over Amelia. “I want you to rest. Be in this space. Let the world fall away for a bit. You’ve earned that.” She leaned down and kissed the top of Amelia’s head. “There’s tea and coffee in the cupboard, oat milk and ordinary milk in the fridge, and a few bits if you get hungry. The password for the WIFI is stuck to the fridge door with that ridiculous llama magnet you got me a couple of years ago.”

Amelia lifted a brow. “You...kept that?”

“Absolutely. Best gift anyone has ever given me.”

Amelia smiled as she relaxed her shoulders. “Thank you. For everything.”

“I’ve got you. Always.”

Jo grabbed her jacket and phone, her hands shaking slightly as she slipped on her trainers. Because the truth was, she wasn’t just going for a walk. She was going to see Callum, and this time, *she* was the one who had things to say.

She wasn’t going to scream or shout, but she was going to look him in the eye and make sure he understood what he’d done. What he’d said. What he’d carried forward from the man who’d terrorised the woman Jo now loved more deeply than she knew how to admit.

Because Jo hadn’t been there for Amelia once before, and she wouldn’t make that mistake again.

Chapter Twenty-Four

JO STOOD ACROSS THE ROAD FROM AMELIA'S HOUSE, HER HANDS clenched into fists in her coat pockets. The street was quiet, it always was during the day, but Jo felt a fury deep inside of her she'd never experienced before. On the drive over here, once she'd called Callum to confirm where he was, she'd quickly had doubts about showing up. She didn't want Amelia to think she was meddling, they'd only just reached a point of wanting to be together this morning, but Jo couldn't sit back. She *wouldn't* sit back.

She wasn't surprised that Callum hadn't left as he'd been asked, he always did do his own thing when it suited him, but at least Jo didn't have to chase him across the city, trying to find him. Still, he had some front, sitting in Amelia's home as if nothing had happened last night.

Jo crossed the street without another thought and banged on the front door.

No answer.

She knocked again, louder this time, her pulse roaring in her ears.

A moment later, the door creaked open.

Callum stood there, shirtless and with his hair wet, surprised that Jo had actually shown up. "Jo, hi."

Jo didn't wait to be invited inside. She stepped forward, shoving him out of the way as she pushed her way inside, and spun on her heel the moment she landed in the hallway. "You're still here..."

Callum frowned as he closed the door. "What the fuck was that for?"

"She told you to leave, Callum. Why can't you *ever* do anything you're asked?"

“Where exactly am I supposed to go? I don’t have a place to live!”

Jo scoffed and stepped closer. “You don’t get to sit in this house and pretend that you didn’t treat her like shit last night. You don’t get to pretend that you’re welcome here after the things you said to her!”

“She’s my mum and this...it’s got fuck all to do with you.”

“Oh, *now* she’s your mum? Because last night, she was the woman you reduced to tears in her own kitchen!” Jo took another step towards him. “You want to act like the wronged party? You want to play the victim now that I’ve moved on and don’t want you back? Too fucking bad, Callum. She *doesn’t* want you here. I don’t want you near her after everything she told me this morning.”

Callum scoffed and folded his arms. “Why do you care? You’re not even a part of our lives anymore.”

Oh, you have no idea.

“I care because she’s been there for me. When you fucked off and left, also claiming that *I* was the problem in our relationship, she helped me through.” Jo laughed. “You know, isn’t it funny how everyone else seems to be the problem in your life, but you never take any responsibility? Doesn’t that strike you as odd?”

“N-no.” Callum snorted. “You were a shit girlfriend...and she’s been a shit mum since I walked back through the door yesterday. I mean, where the fuck is she? I’m home, I’m here...and where is she?”

“She’s away from you and your shitty fucking attitude.” Jo clenched and unclenched her hands, trying to compose herself. “Did you feel like a big man last night? Did you feel like him...trying to control her and put her down because you couldn’t have things your way?”

“I-I never—”

“You basically said she deserved what he did to her. Right here, in this house, last night. Do you have *any* idea how much that broke her? Do you even care?”

Callum looked away. “I didn’t mean it. I told her that.”

“But you *did*.” Jo’s hands were starting to tremble now. Seeing Callum in this light...she couldn’t believe she used to shed tears over him. “You basically became him. You spewed his bullshit when she stood up to you and acted like *you* were the one who’d been wronged.”

Callum’s jaw set, his nostrils flaring as he squared his shoulders.

“She didn’t give you my information because I asked her not to. It’s as simple as that. If you can’t deal with it, then that’s on you. For me, I couldn’t give a fuck if I never saw your face again. And after last night, even if there was anything still there for you, you royally fucked it up. I don’t want someone like you in my life who thinks it’s okay to not only speak to another woman like that, but his own mother. The woman who has done *everything* for him.” Jo fought back the emotion lodged in her throat. “She paid for your trip abroad. She made sure you had everything you needed so you could follow your fucking flowery Thea around the world, and you come back and treat her like that. You’re pathetic.”

“I-I need to see her.”

“You have no idea what it’s taken to rebuild herself. Finding a place where she feels safe has been difficult for her. She’s made something of herself without your dad, and you...God, I want to punch your fucking face in.” Jo took a breath and stared him straight in the eye as she said, “You didn’t just let her down last night, Callum. You broke her all over again.” Silence descended over them like a fog, but Jo wasn’t standing around watching her ex trying to feel sorry for himself for a moment longer. She could think of far better things to do with her time. Right now, Amelia was her priority. She headed for the door, her voice low as she turned back to him and added, “If you have a single shred of decency left, you’ll be gone by the time she comes back.”

Callum’s brows drew together. “Wait! W-where is she?”

A satisfying smirk curled on her lips. “Exactly where she should be. With *me*.”

Jo walked away before he could speak again, her trainers pounding the pavement and matching the rhythm of her heart. And with every step she took, she felt lighter.

She’d done what needed to be done. For Amelia and for herself.

AMELIA SAT QUIETLY in Jo’s living room, toying with the frayed cuff of her hoodie as her mind spiralled through a thousand different thoughts and worst-case scenarios. Her immediate thought was that Jo had left because of

everything she'd learned this morning, but then Amelia reminded herself of that softness in Jo's eyes as she'd leaned down and kissed her forehead.

She smiled as she lay her head back, aware of how incredibly lucky she was to have Jo in her life. She hadn't thought it possible just last night, and if she was being entirely honest with herself, she wasn't sure she quite believed it yet.

Her heart sank when she realised she had yet to break the news about them to Callum. For so long, she'd worried about him noticing the way Amelia looked at Jo. For so long, she'd wanted to keep the peace...even when he'd cheated and broken Jo's heart. But now? Now she didn't care what he thought about any of this. He would find out eventually, it was inevitable, and all Amelia could do at this point was brace herself for whatever came of it.

As she rubbed her thumb over the inside of her wrist, a method she'd used over the years when she felt anxious, Jo's door flew open, and she entered like thunder. Amelia looked up, her stomach lurching when she noted Jo's bright red face. Her jaw was clenched, her hands were balled into fists, and she stood rooted to her spot, the air around her vibrating with tension.

Amelia's heart leapt up into her throat, her body reacting before her brain could catch up. She flinched, shifting further back on the couch as Jo stared back at her. "W-what... I didn't—"

The realisation dawned on Jo as her eyes widened. "Shit. I didn't mean to..." Jo's voice broke. "I'm not angry with you, Amelia. Christ, I'm so sorry."

Amelia swallowed. "It's okay. You just startled me."

"No, it's not okay." Jo dropped to her knees in front of her, hesitating as her hand hovered near Amelia's. She didn't lower it. Instead, she pressed her chin to her chest and sighed. "You looked at me like you were terrified of me."

Amelia reached out and brushed a tear from Jo's cheek. "Hey, it's okay. I'm fine. I just didn't expect you to come bursting through the door." Her hand remained against Jo's cheek as she asked, "What's happened?"

Jo exhaled slowly, then sat beside her, closing her hand over Amelia's. "I went to see him."

"Callum?" Amelia's breath caught. "Why?"

“I couldn’t not after what you told me. After what he said to you. I called, he answered, and he was still at your place.” Jo’s nostrils flared. “After you told him to leave...he’s there, without a care in the world.”

Amelia lowered her gaze. “I’m not surprised. Why do you think I didn’t protest when you told me to stay before? I don’t want to see him, and I knew he’d be there.”

“Can I ask you something? You can tell me to mind my own business, but I was thinking on the way home in the car...”

Amelia frowned. “What is it?”

“When we spoke about your dating life last month, does it all relate back to your past?”

“Yes.” Amelia laughed and shook her head. “Pathetic, isn’t it?”

“Not at all, but would you tell me about it? I want to understand so I know where *not* to go wrong.”

Amelia’s lips parted, her mouth suddenly dry. “You really want to hear about the ways I’ve destroyed everything I’ve touched?”

“I want to know *you*,” Jo said simply. “All of you.”

Amelia guessed that it was better to continue with her honesty. If she had any hopes of keeping Jo, then it was time to lay it all bare. “There were precisely two serious relationships after my ex-husband was arrested. The first was about three years after he went to prison. I was barely standing upright emotionally, but I’d convinced myself I was healed enough to love someone.”

Jo listened, stroking her fingertips over the back of Amelia’s hand.

“Leanne. She was lovely. Soft, caring, patient with me...at first. But I was distant. I had triggers I didn’t understand back then and flashbacks that would render me speechless. I’d flinch at sudden noises, retreat at the scent of certain smells or raised voices, and she couldn’t handle it. She didn’t want to have to tiptoe around me anymore.”

“I’m so sorry,” Jo whispered.

“I don’t blame her. I wasn’t ready.” Amelia absently brushed her thumb over Jo’s hand. “And then I met Sophia. God, I thought she was the one. She was magnetic, confident. She was *everything* I’d ever admired in another woman.”

“What happened?”

“She liked control. Which worked, in some ways...for a while. Until she used that control to isolate me. She made me feel like my PTSD was a

burden, like I was lucky she was sticking around.”

Jo’s fingers tightened around hers.

“She didn’t hurt me, but she knew how to make me doubt myself. She knew how to manipulate silence and guilt. She knew how to make me feel like I was the problem.”

Jo’s jaw tensed.

“It didn’t end well,” Amelia said, staring down at their hands. “And when it did, I promised myself I’d *never* put that kind of power in anyone else’s hands again. Then years later, I started going to Satin. I needed to feel in control and safe. The dark was the best place for me.”

Jo turned her hand over and laced their fingers. “You didn’t destroy those relationships. You were surviving in the only way you knew how.”

“Maybe, I don’t know.” Amelia lifted a shoulder. “I still find it hard to believe that you’re here, knowing all of this.”

“Oh, I’m not going *anywhere*, babe.”

Tears brimmed on Amelia’s eyelids. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been someone’s babe.”

“I was into you when I met Callum. That first time we all went out to dinner together, I found it hard to look anywhere else. It was only when it became serious between me and him that I knew I had to curb whatever I was feeling.”

“Me, too,” Amelia whispered. “But...what if I mess this up too?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you mess anything up in the years I’ve known you. And if things are a little bumpy at any point, we’ll figure it out together. The way it should be.” Jo leaned in and pressed her lips to Amelia’s, lingering as she said, “I’m not scared of your past. I just want to be a part of your future.”

“This...being with someone who cares, is all I’ve ever wanted.” For the first time in a long time, Amelia allowed herself to believe that everything may just be okay. “When I told you I loved you, I meant it, Jo. I didn’t just say it to get a reaction out of you, I meant it with everything inside of me.”

“I know. I felt it.”

Amelia scooted over on the couch and lay down, pulling Jo with her. “Come here and lie with me.”

“On one condition.” Jo narrowed her eyes, but Amelia noted the smirk immediately. “Stay for dinner tonight. I’m cooking for us.”

“Mm. Try and stop me.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

AS JO MOVED AROUND HER KITCHEN WITH FAR MORE EASE THAN SHE'D expected to after the day they'd had, rosemary and garlic filled her senses. She'd chopped the potatoes just how Amelia liked them—chunky and with the skin still on—and they were now roasting away in the oven beside the chicken breasts she'd stuffed with mozzarella and sundried tomato. Her stomach growled as she wiped her hands on the tea towel and leaned over to check the timer. Eight minutes left.

She poked her head around the kitchen wall and glanced down the hallway. The bathroom door had been locked for over an hour, and Jo had heard the water running almost the entire time. She'd knocked earlier and left a clean towel and one of her favourite jumpers by the door. Amelia hadn't said much, just offering a soft, "Thank you," through the door, but Jo could tell something had shifted.

As the day had gone on, she didn't seem as haunted as she had first thing this morning. Jo had expected some kind of pushback over visiting Callum, but Amelia seemed almost relieved that Jo had taken care of that situation for her. Perhaps Amelia was just exhausted with everything going on.

Amelia finally emerged from behind the door, her skin flushed and her hair loosely tied back, those legs bare beneath Jo's oversized jumper. *Fuck me!*

Jo almost forgot to breathe, but quickly managed to save herself. Now wasn't the time to admire Amelia and her luscious, long legs. Jo knew it would be a while before they found their feet, especially given the heaviness of what today had brought.

“Feel better?” She asked, leaning a hip against the counter as Amelia wandered into the room barefoot, her expression relaxed in a way Jo hadn’t seen since everything had been put out in the open. Her eyes weren’t haunted anymore. They were...mischievous.

Amelia smiled, and God, it was devastating. “So much better.”

Jo narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “You’re grinning.”

Amelia stepped closer. “Am I?”

“Yes.” Jo angled her head. “You look like someone who’s either up to no good or someone who has just had a *very* good orgasm.”

Amelia’s laugh was low and sultry. A laugh Jo was used to, but one she hadn’t expected this evening. “Sadly, the bath was solo, but the night’s still young.”

Jo arched a brow. “Oh?”

“I’ve always enjoyed seeing you in the kitchen.” Amelia took another step closer, her gaze cast to Jo’s lips for the briefest moment. “You’re very domestic.”

“And you’re very—” Jo swallowed. “Jesus, can you stop looking at me like that. I’m going to burn dinner.”

“It’s very easy to fall back into what I know with you.” Amelia skimmed a hand against Jo’s waist, eventually settling it on the small of her back as she snaked it around. “I’m sorry you had to deal with me this morning. That won’t happen again. I don’t want it to become a part of us.” Jo’s breath caught when Amelia reached up and stroked a thumb against her cheek. “You didn’t flinch earlier when I told you about everything. You didn’t look at me like I was damaged.”

“You’re not.”

“No.” Amelia smiled. “But most people wouldn’t have seen that. They’d have looked past who I am now, what I’ve become, and focused entirely on it. That’s why I want to move forward with you. I can’t change the past, but I can put my all into being happy with you, Jo.”

Before Jo could respond, Amelia’s hand slid into her hair, her mouth on Jo’s in an instant. There was no hesitation this time. No ache of the past or a barrier of pain. Just raw, hungry need. Jo whimpered as her back hit the edge of the counter, and Amelia pressed into her with an urgency that made her knees tremble.

Jo’s fingers curled into Amelia’s hips, holding her close, her body buzzing with every drag of Amelia’s mouth...every flick of her tongue.

She'd kissed this woman plenty of times now, but never like this. Never with the full knowledge of everything Amelia had survived. It made it all the more electrifying.

Amelia tugged gently at Jo's hair, the kiss growing fiercer, deeper, until Jo was gasping against her lips and arching into her.

"Jesus," Jo whispered. "What are you trying to do to me?"

"Ruin you...in all the best ways possible."

Her thigh pressed between Jo's legs, and she lost it, her fingers clawing at Amelia's jumper to bring her even closer.

And then...the fucking oven timer beeped.

Jo groaned and lowered her head to Amelia's shoulder. "You have got to be kidding me."

Amelia regarded her with a wicked grin and nipped at Jo's bottom lip. "Well, that makes the rest of the evening all the more interesting."

"God, I fucking hate chicken."

"Baby, relax," Amelia said, pulling away just enough to let Jo breathe. Her voice was a near-whisper as she brought her mouth to Jo's ear and said, "If it makes you feel better, I fully intend to make it up to you later after I've sat beside you knowing *precisely* how wet you are."

"Fucking hell." Jo's hands slid to Amelia's waist as she steadied herself. "You know I want you, I'm dying to touch you, but are you sure you're ready for that? After everything—"

"I'm sure," Amelia said, brushing her nose against Jo's. "I don't want to disappear into the past anymore. I want tonight. With you."

Jo pressed her forehead to Amelia's and lost herself in those gorgeous eyes. She didn't care about dinner. She wasn't even hungry for food anymore. Just hungry for everything else. "Yeah. Me too." Jo quickly broke away and reached for an oven mitt, turning her back on Amelia. "Dinner first," she said, knowing her cheeks were flushed. "Then you can ruin me."

Amelia laughed and sauntered off towards the couch. She offered one final glance over her shoulder, sending a fresh wave of heat through Jo's entire body.

Oh, you'd better be ready for her later.

Tonight, it seemed, was only just beginning.

CURLED up on the couch after dinner, Jo's blanket tucked over her bare legs, Amelia appreciated the comfortable silence they'd fallen into. For the first time in days, maybe even years, she wasn't holding herself together with trembling hands. Something inside Amelia had eased, and that constant ache in her chest had dulled. Because Jo had *seen* her. She'd listened, and she cared.

And now, she lay here watching Jo tidying up in the kitchen, her bare feet tiptoeing softly across the floor, humming something quiet under her breath as her hoodie hung loose off one shoulder. Her hair was up, but a few strands had already fallen down, framing her face in that effortless way Amelia had always loved.

God, she's beautiful.

Jo looked over at her with a gorgeous smile. One Amelia hadn't seen in days. "You okay over there?"

Amelia nodded. "Oh, I'm fine. I have an excellent view."

For the first time in over twenty years, she *wanted* to be touched as Amelia. Not as Lia, not as the woman behind the curtain, and not as someone hiding in a version of herself she'd created to survive.

No more hiding.

No more lies.

Just the unfiltered truth of who she was.

"I've been thinking," Jo said as she crossed the room, her hand brushing Amelia's bare shoulder as she rounded the back of the couch. "Why don't you head back to your place tomorrow and get some things, then come back here and we'll just take it easy until that dickhead has left the town again."

That dickhead. Amelia laughed and pulled Jo into her lap the moment she landed in front of her. "You don't have to hate him for my sake, Jo."

"I already hated him. I just hate him more now." Jo stroked her fingertips against the back of Amelia's neck, sending a shiver down her spine. "How do you feel about him knowing about us?"

That was once a question that terrified Amelia, but now...not so much. "I don't think it matters what I do moving forward. My relationship with Callum is strained, it'll likely get worse, and there is nothing I can do about that."

"I'm not expecting him to jump for joy, but I'm also not willing to listen to any bullshit. He did what he did, and now that I'm sitting here in your lap...I'm glad he cheated on me."

Amelia regarded Jo with a sympathetic smile. “Jo...”

“I’m serious.” Jo lowered a hand and took Amelia’s. “I’ve wanted you for longer than I cared to admit to myself. Now that we’re here, I feel as though everything happened because it was supposed to.”

“You really mean that, don’t you?”

“I’d never lie to you.”

Amelia swallowed. She wanted to say she’d never lie to Jo either, but well...she’d already been there and done that. “I know you’ll probably find it hard to trust me after what I did to you, but that’s not who I am, Jo. Not deep down. I knew it was wrong and I spent weeks warring with myself, but every time I considered telling you, you talked to me about Lia and how much you enjoyed being with her...and I couldn’t do it.” Amelia lifted their hands and kissed Jo’s knuckles. “But moving forward, I’ll *never* lie to you again. You have my word.”

“I believe you.” Jo dipped her head and placed a kiss to Amelia’s jaw. “And thank you...for letting me in. It means the world, really.”

Amelia guided Jo up out of her lap, the blanket slowly falling to the floor between them. “You’re the only woman I’ve ever wanted to be myself with. It’s why I found it so hard to be honest. I wasn’t sure I could handle the rejection.”

“I’m sorry,” Jo whispered as she cast her gaze to the space between them. “If I hadn’t kept telling myself *and* us that it was a bad idea, you may have felt safer with me.”

“I’ve always felt safe with you.”

Jo stared at her, unmoving. Then, in the quiet that followed, Amelia reached up and fisted her hand in Jo’s hair, dragging her in close with the kind of hunger that had been simmering since the moment they’d been rudely interrupted in the kitchen.

The kiss was searing. Open, needy, and so fucking *real*.

There was no desperation...just *honesty* with every swipe of their tongues.

Jo moaned softly, her hands landing on Amelia’s waist as her fingers pressed through the material of the hoodie she’d borrowed. Amelia didn’t hesitate as she pushed Jo gently back towards her bedroom door, their mouths still tangled as they stumbled their way through the small space.

In that moment, it was *all* Amelia. Not a fantasy, not an act, just Amelia...shedding the last of the weight she’d carried for so long.

Jo's hands slid under the hem of Amelia's hoodie, her fingertips brushing her bare skin. Amelia let out a broken whimper, her breath catching as she pressed closer and backed Jo up against her bedroom door. She wanted to lose herself. She wanted to *give* herself. God, she needed to feel what it was like to be wanted. Not as a body in a dark room, but as a woman finally learning what it was to be held in the light.

"I want *you* to ruin *me*," she whispered against Jo's lips. "Not behind a curtain. Not in the dark. Right here...where I can see you."

Jo's body shuddered under her hands. "Amelia..."

"I mean it." She pulled back and met Jo's eyes. "This is the most important night of my life. I want to remember this. Every second of it. With *you*."

Jo's lips parted in a soft gasp, her eyes dark and shining with something Amelia hadn't seen before. Reverence. As though Amelia was something rare and precious. For the first time since she'd closed herself off to love, Amelia felt like she was exactly that.

Jo reached behind her and opened the door without breaking eye contact, guiding Amelia into the bedroom. The room was dimly lit, just the soft glow from the lamp beside the bed illuminating the space, and Amelia could feel her heartbeat in every inch of her skin.

Jo closed the door with a quiet click and leaned back against it, watching her.

No words.

Just silence.

That charged energy Amelia had missed.

Amelia stepped closer, her hoodie riding high on her thighs with every movement. She reached for Jo again, cupping her face and running her thumbs beneath her eyes, across her cheeks, down to the corners of her mouth. She wanted to remember every line of her face and every flicker of emotion in those eyes.

"Touch me like you mean it," Amelia whispered against Jo's lips. "Not because you feel sorry for me. Not because of everything I told you. Just... because you want to."

Jo let out the softest breath, and then she surged forward and kissed her again, her hands skimming down Amelia's arms, over her hips, one eventually settling around the back of her neck while the other was placed over Amelia's heart. "I've never wanted anything more." Jo's lips brushed

over Amelia's jaw. "I want *you*. Not the version you think I need, not the woman you had to become to survive...just *you*."

Amelia's whole body gave in at that.

Jo pushed her hoodie up and over her head, revealing the skin she'd kept hidden for so long. Not just from others, but from herself. Being at Satin didn't count, none of the people there mattered, but here...under Jo's touch, she let herself be seen fully. The scars she had come to hate. The curves that had once made her feel ashamed. The softness she had tried to turn into armour.

But Jo didn't flinch.

She stepped back, drinking her in with a look that made Amelia's knees tremble.

"You're so fucking beautiful."

Amelia pressed her hand to Jo's chest, steadying herself. "Thank you for seeing me."

"I see *all* of you." Jo gently pressed her lips to her collarbone, then slowly moved lower. "Let me take care of you."

Jo lowered her onto the bed, covering her body with kisses so full of meaning that Amelia felt tears slip from the corners of her eyes. But this time, they weren't tears of shame or fear or pain. They were tears of release.

Her body—*this body*—wasn't being used.

It was being worshipped.

Jo kissed every inch of skin she could reach, whispering things Amelia wasn't even sure she could comprehend in the moment. Affirmations. Adorations. Promises...Perhaps, or maybe just truths that had been buried under years of silence.

"I want to ruin you," Jo whispered as she hovered over Amelia. "But not in the way you think. I want to ruin all the doubt and all the fear. I want to show you what it feels like to be wanted, not because you're perfect, but because you're *you*."

Amelia reached up and pulled Jo down to her, kissing her deeper than before and giving her everything. Her breath, her body, her scars. Her story.

When her fingers pressed between her soaked lips, Amelia arched her back as a sob caught in her throat.

This wasn't anonymous. It wasn't secret. It wasn't survival.

This was *freedom*.

“F-fuck.” Amelia rocked against Jo’s fingers, aching to drag this night out until the end of time. “Oh, God.”

Her body was electric, sensitive in ways Amelia hadn’t remembered. Jo’s mouth found her collarbone, her sternum, her nipple, and as her tongue teased, Amelia felt alive.

Jo’s mouth travelled down her stomach, between the dips and curves that had always made Amelia feel less than, but tonight...every touch undid that lie.

“Fuck, I’ve dreamed of this moment for so long.” Jo spread Amelia’s lips and moaned. “You’re shaking.”

“I... It’s been a long time,” Amelia admitted, her breath ragged.

Jo paused and looked up. “Do you want me to stop?”

“N-no,” Amelia whispered, one hand now firmly in Jo’s hair. “God, no. Please, don’t stop.”

Jo kissed her inner thigh, that hot breath teasing Amelia towards the edge. “Then let me show you what it feels like to be loved.”

When Jo lowered her mouth and eased her fingers back inside, it took everything within Amelia to hold on for a second longer. She tightened her grip in Jo’s hair, thrust her hips upward, and enjoyed every single second of it.

Amelia arched with a gasp when Jo slid a third finger inside, her body responding before she could catch her breath. It wasn’t rough, and it wasn’t wild. It was slow and unrelenting as Jo’s tongue learned every reaction, every whimper, every tilt of her hips. Her hand palmed Amelia’s thigh like it was something delicate as she wrapped her lips around Amelia’s clit, and then Amelia broke. She didn’t cry because of shame this time. She cried because her body was *allowed* to feel good. She cried because Jo didn’t flinch or recoil or ask her to be something she wasn’t.

“So warm and beautiful.” Jo moaned as she drew back and locked eyes with Amelia. “And all mine.”

“F-fuck, yes.” Amelia met every thrust of Jo’s fingers, her surroundings disappearing as she gave herself over entirely to the woman planted firmly between her legs...and in her heart. “H-harder.”

Jo moved back up Amelia’s body, braced one hand to the side of her head, and hit deeper with each sink of her fingers. “I’ve always wondered what it would feel like hearing you come for me.”

“J-Jo.” Amelia’s breath grew ragged as her orgasm roared towards its peak. “It’s...I...oh, fuck, I—” Her hips lifted, and a sob escaped as Amelia came around Jo’s fingers, but Jo was right there with her, anchoring her to the moment. “S-shit. Oh, God.” Amelia collapsed back onto the bed, her chest rising and falling with broken gasps.

Jo brushed Amelia’s hair from her face with a featherlight touch and smiled down at her. “I’ve got you,” she whispered. “I’ve *always* got you.”

Amelia turned to her, half-laughing, half-crying. “Nobody has ever touched me like that before.”

“I’m not nobody, and I’ll make sure you know that every single day that we’re together.”

Their lips met again as Amelia shifted and straddled Jo, pushing her back against the pillows, her body slick with sweat. She wanted to give something back, something honest. When Jo’s hands gripped her hips and guided her movements, Amelia sank down, rolling her hips gently and grinding against Jo until their breaths mingled and their moans matched the rhythm of their bodies. It was slow, and it was real as they moved together with aching precision, two souls finding one another in a way that wasn’t about release, but about *reclaiming*.

And when Jo came, soft and stuttering against Amelia’s shoulder, she whispered her name like it meant everything. “*Amelia.*”

Not Lia. Not anyone else. Just her...here, the light.

Amelia stayed on top of her, buried in the warmth of Jo’s arms, her face tucked into the curve of her neck as the faint thump of Jo’s heart beat steadily against her cheek.

She’d never felt more seen or more wanted.

Fuck, she’d never felt more *real*.

Chapter Twenty-Six

THE EARLY MORNING LIGHT WAS JUST BEGINNING TO PEEK THROUGH the curtains when Amelia stirred, still nestled into the warmth of Jo's bed. She smiled as she listened to everything around her. The quiet breathing beside her, the occasional creak of the building as it adjusted to the rising sun. But most of all, she focused on the comforting weight of Jo's arm slung over her waist.

God, she didn't want to move.

She tilted her head and glanced up at Jo, her face soft with sleep, and those delicious lips parted slightly. Her chest rose and fell in a rhythm that calmed Amelia more than anything else had in weeks. She was so beautiful like this. Unburdened. Unaware of the time. Relaxed and free from the turmoil they'd faced both together and apart. And for once, Amelia didn't feel the usual compulsion to slip away without being noticed. She didn't feel ashamed of being seen or being held.

But reality was beginning to edge back in, and she knew she needed to go home. She had work piling up and emails she hadn't answered. She had clients waiting, and a version of herself that needed piecing back together, even if it was just for a few hours of professionalism.

She didn't want to go, but she had to.

She slowly pushed the blanket back and slipped out from under Jo's arm. She reached for one of Jo's hoodies and slid it over her naked body, bringing it to her nose as she smiled. It smelled like her. Warm. Safe. *Home*.

Creeping out into the living room, she grabbed her phone and started to scroll through the notifications she'd ignored since Friday. A reminder about her weekly check-in call with a business partner, a text from a

contractor she'd recently hired, and a missed call from Evie. Nothing from Callum, which was both surprising and unsurprising.

She sat quietly on the couch, phone in hand, trying to resist the pull of anxiety that always hit after a moment of calm. Today would be hard, not because she didn't want to face work or Callum or the world outside Jo's flat, but because she had to leave *this*. Because for the first time in a long time, she'd found somewhere that she didn't feel like a guest.

"Hey..."

That soft, gravelly voice behind her pulled Amelia out of her thoughts.

She turned to see Jo leaning against the doorframe, her hair a mess and one eye squinting against the light. She rubbed at her face, yawning, and shuffled towards the couch with the energy of someone not ready to begin the day.

God, I love her.

"You weren't in bed," Jo muttered as she dropped down beside Amelia and curled into her. "I hated it."

Amelia laughed as she wrapped an arm around her. "I didn't want to wake you."

"You should have. I had plans."

"Oh, really? And what were those plans?"

"To trap you under the covers until noon." Jo smiled against her. "Then coax you into the shower. Maybe lunch in bed after, followed by another nap. Possibly a more convincing shower the second time around. It was going to be *very* productive."

Amelia sighed and pressed her lips to Jo's hair. "Sounds like a dream, but unfortunately, I have to go home and face the real world."

Jo groaned. "No. Stay. Hide with me. You can work from here, right?"

"I can, and I will. But I need to get some things...clothes, laptop, the will to live when I eventually bump into Callum."

Jo lifted her head, her eyes half-lidded but shining with love. "Fine, but you *are* coming back tonight."

"I am." Amelia tucked a strand of Jo's hair behind her ear. "If you still want me."

Jo frowned. "Are you serious?"

"Only a little. I think a part of me still expects you to change your mind."

Jo leaned forward and kissed Amelia slowly, but with enough certainty to answer every doubt. "I'm not changing my mind, babe. I'm in this with you."

That hope bloomed in Amelia's chest once again. "I'll be back later. I promise."

Jo gripped the back of Amelia's neck and pulled her in for another kiss. Sleepy, warm, and slow. A goodbye that neither of them wanted to face.

Once Amelia had brushed her teeth, splashed her face with water, and gathered her things, she met Jo in the living room again, pouting ever so dramatically as she snuggled under a blanket. "If you're trying to make me feel bad for leaving, it's working."

"Then that means you just have to stay. Tough." Jo shrugged, but that glint was in her eye. "There's plenty of room for you under this blanket."

God, Amelia wished she could, she really did, but work wouldn't wait for much longer. She'd already had enough to get through before the shit had hit the fan. "Then save me a space for later." Amelia leaned over the back of the couch and kissed Jo's forehead. "You should get ready, too. You've got work."

"Yeah, yeah." She flopped back against the cushions. "Don't remind me."

Amelia gave her a look. "And for the love of God, brush your hair if you have any video calls today."

"Nope. If anyone asks, I had wild sex with the woman I love last night...and I'm not even sorry about it."

Amelia both softened and lit up at that. Jo hadn't outwardly said she loved her since the dark room. "I'm so grateful to have you, Jo." Amelia lingered for another moment, then slipped out of the door, her heart lighter than it had been for as long as she could remember. As she closed the door and pressed her back to it, Amelia angled her face towards the sun and smiled.

Life...is changing.

JO STROLLED AROUND HER FLAT, freshly showered and with a coffee in hand, a *very* unprofessional bun sitting on top of her head. She'd promised

herself she'd start work twenty minutes ago—she usually started earlier since she had nothing else to do with her life—but instead, she was staring at the last message from Amelia and grinning like a fool. This morning had been...delightful? Terrifyingly real? All she'd ever wanted...

Home. Already miss you x

Jo had read it seven times. Maybe eight.

She flopped down at her desk and finally opened her laptop, pulling up a half-finished gallery for a new client she was working with. The couple had insisted on a lavender filter and pastel overlays, but Jo would probably have a word with them. They looked like ghosts in every photo.

Her phone buzzed again. She reached for it instantly.

I'm bored now. Save me from myself x

Jo smiled. She couldn't believe Amelia had just spent the last two nights here at her flat with her. That was something she'd only ever imagined in her wildest dreams.

I've just sat down to work. I also need saving x

A second later, Jo sent another message.

Any sign of 'you know who' hanging around?

She hoped Amelia had been free to roam her own home this morning, but you never knew with Callum. He said one thing, then did another.

No sign of him this morning. I haven't checked if he's taken everything. I was too busy thinking about you x

Jo took her bottom lip between her teeth, fighting back the smile desperate to break out. She'd spent every second thinking about Amelia since she'd left, too.

Crazy, isn't it? Where we're at with one another now x

Jo sighed and rested back against her chair. She couldn't focus on work this morning, but at least it was her photography work and not her full-time job. She couldn't afford to start slacking there.

I prefer to call it insanely beautiful x

Jo groaned. Amelia was insanely beautiful, and she knew it. She had to.

Did you brush your hair? x

Jo laughed and shook her head.

Are you saying I didn't manage to seduce you with my feral morning look? x

God, she could sit here all day long texting back and forth with Amelia.

I'm saying if I didn't need clothes, I would have cancelled the world around me and stayed. Does that give you an idea? x

Jo's heart warmed.

Maybe you should come back over as soon as you're done there. I don't even care that I'm feeling extra needy today. It's your fault! x

Jo set her phone down, picked up her coffee again, and tried to look at the screen without instantly switching back to their thread. She managed all of five minutes.

What if you came to mine tonight? I know you're off tomorrow, so I shuffled a meeting to Thursday. We could do dinner and wine. Spend together tomorrow and maybe enjoy more of whatever last night was...

Jo's stomach fluttered. She wanted to. God, she *really* wanted to. And not just for the sex, though that had been...well, incredible. But because she liked the quiet between them...the teasing. The way Amelia looked at her like she was someone who mattered.

You shuffled a meeting? For me? I feel special x

Amelia had always been one of those women who made sure you knew how she felt about you. Only now, they meant so much more to one another than they had just a few days ago.

You are special. Don't make me come back there and tell you to your face x

Okay, that was it. Jo couldn't concentrate on anything other than Amelia for the rest of the day. Maybe she should just sit with this instead. Maybe she should just enjoy feeling wanted by a woman who meant so much to her.

I accept your offer, but you're cooking! I still haven't recovered from the risotto you made me a few months ago x

Jo exhaled a deep breath and closed the lid of her laptop.

I'll make something better. It's a date x

A date. God, a date with Amelia Loughlin.

She stared down at those words, her breath catching when they sank in. She hadn't been on a real date in a long time and certainly not one with someone like Amelia.

Can I bring anything? x

Glancing at the clock in the corner of her screen, Jo rose to her feet. This was an important evening for them, and she wanted to be ready the moment Amelia gave her the go-ahead to go over there.

Just yourself. Maybe...an overnight bag and a toothbrush x

Jo placed a hand to her chest and sighed. Amelia and an overnight bag had never gone together before today. Then she smirked, aware of just what this woman was capable of.

You planning to make me forget my own name? x

That was exactly what Jo needed. A night of sheer bliss with the woman she loved.

Only if you ask nicely x

Jo slipped off into her bedroom, smiling when she caught Amelia's scent still lingering in the air. She wasn't getting anything else done today, and honestly, the idea of seeing Amelia tonight already made everything else seem optional.

She flopped down on her bed and stared at the ceiling, the faint echo of last night still tingling along her skin. That was when Jo realised something.

She was happy, truly happy, and for the first time since all of this started, it didn't scare her.

JO LAY BACK on the couch, her phone balanced on her stomach while she waited for her call to connect with Ada. She'd spent the last couple of hours bored to tears, but she had yet to hear from Amelia. The call rang twice before Ada picked up, and Jo could already feel the suspicion seeping down the line.

"You're alive then?"

Jo grinned. "Good morning to you, too."

"No text, no update, no *nothing* for three whole days, and now you decide to call me like it's a normal Tuesday? You better have a good story."

Jo sat up, unable to keep the joy at bay any longer. "I do, actually."

"Go on..."

"I've been with Amelia," Jo said. "Like...actually been with her."

Ada let out a sharp breath. "Oh, shit."

Jo laughed. "And before you ask, it's *exactly* what you think it is."

"Jo—"

“No, listen. I asked her to come over the other night. We talked properly about everything, and I get it now. I completely understand why she did what she did and why she hid behind Lia. I’m not saying it was right, but I understand.”

Jo wouldn’t go into detail about Amelia’s personal life, it wasn’t her story to tell, but Ada wouldn’t hold that against her.

There was another pause, but this one felt different. Softer. Then... “And?”

“And I told her I didn’t want to lose her. That I want to be with her.”

“Jesus,” Ada whispered. “You’re serious.”

“Yeah,” Jo murmured. “I’m so fucking serious that I’m grinning like an idiot while staring at the mug she used this morning.”

Ada blew out a breath. “Okay, well...I mean, obviously, I have concerns. Given everything that’s happened recently, but I’ll trust that you know what you’re doing.”

Jo appreciated that. Ada had never been one to linger on something for too long. She was a firm believer in them both being old enough to make their own mistakes. “Everything isn’t as it seems with her, Ada. She’s had a terrible time since... Well, I won’t go into it. It’s not my business to share, you know?”

“No, I get that,” Ada said. “So, what about Callum?”

“He doesn’t know about us, not yet, but he’s furious with us both. Me because I won’t go back to him...and her because she told him what she thinks of him.” That was all Jo would offer when it came to the Callum saga. She couldn’t go into detail without discussing Amelia’s horrific past with her ex-husband. “He said some dreadful things to her, accused her of sleeping with me, and now he’s spat his dummy out.”

“Sounds like typical Callum, sadly.”

Yeah, Ada knew all too well the kind of person Callum was. Still, the way he’d treated Amelia was far worse than anything he’d done to Jo. Cheating on her seemed like very little when she reminded herself of his appalling attitude towards his own mother.

“As far as I’m concerned, he doesn’t exist in my world anymore.” Jo ran a hand through her hair and smiled. “Amelia is my priority, and I’m hers.”

“Fucking finally! You chose *you* for once.”

“I chose *her*,” Jo corrected gently. “But yeah. That, too.”

A long silence stretched, and then Jo heard Ada sniffle. “God, you deserve this, Jo. You deserve to be loved. Really loved. Not halfway, not hidden away, and not in a dark room. Just...loved.”

Jo blinked against the sudden sting in her eyes. “She makes me feel like I’m allowed to want that.”

“You’ve been through it, babe. I’m just proud of you for finally letting something good in. I hated seeing you so down. That’s not the Jo I know.”

Jo wouldn’t be where she was today without Ada and Amelia combined. They’d both picked her up and helped her along in different ways. “You didn’t let me down once, though. Even when I was crying on the couch, claiming I didn’t want you to be there...you stayed. You never once walked away or turned your back.”

“You’re my best friend. I could never walk away.”

“We’re having dinner tonight. I’m going over. She’s moved a meeting, and some work around that was meant to be tomorrow, so we can spend the day together.” Jo smiled up at the ceiling. “God, I’m so in love with her, Ada.”

“I know. And I think I’ve known it for a while...even if I did make out like it was a huge shock when you first mentioned her going to Satin.”

Jo frowned. “Why did you act surprised if you knew?”

“Because you were obsessing over Lia, and I didn’t want to say anything that would make everything feel worse for you. I just...I wish I’d known she was Lia so I could have put a stop to all of that dark room stuff sooner.”

Jo had wondered if Ada was certain Amelia and Lia were the same person earlier this week, but she knew her best friend, and she knew Ada would never withhold something so devastating from her. “You honestly didn’t know they were the same person while we were visiting the club?”

“Absolutely not.” Ada sighed. “Other than the fleeting idea of it at first, which I told you about, I didn’t think about it again. I didn’t think Amelia had it in her to be two people.”

“Well, maybe one day you’ll hear her story, but until then, I just ask that you trust me on this. She had her reasons, and I do understand.”

“Of course, babe. You’re not stupid.” Ada laughed. “Right, you go and get yourself ready for your night with Amelia. Call me at the weekend and if you’re not busy...which I suspect you will be, I’ll come over. You can give me all the juicy details.”

“I’ll call you. I promise.”

“And Jo?”

She lifted her brows. “Mm?”

“I’m proud of you.”

Jo exhaled slowly as the weight she’d carried for so long started to fade away. “Thanks. That means everything.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

JO KNOCKED ONCE AND LET HERSELF INTO AMELIA'S, THE FAMILIAR creak of the door greeting her. Amelia had called her thirty minutes ago, insisting she use the spare key hidden away under the plant pot in the front garden, so here she was...smiling as she stepped inside.

"Amelia? I'm here!" Jo called out as she kicked off her boots.

Amelia appeared in the kitchen doorway, barefoot, hair down, wearing a black tank top and low-slung joggers that did absolutely *nothing* to stop the heat rising through Jo's body.

"You're late." Amelia folded her arms, but her lips curled into a smile.

Jo strolled towards her, her gaze sweeping lazily around the space. "You said seven. It's two minutes past. Calm down, Gordon Ramsay."

Amelia tilted her head. "Speaking of which..."

Jo stepped into the kitchen, sniffed dramatically, then turned to face her as she lowered her overnight bag to the floor. "Where's the sizzling? The aroma of garlic and the lovingly stirred risotto?"

"No...dinner yet."

Jo lifted a brow. "No dinner?"

"There was a change of plan." Amelia leaned back against the counter. "I couldn't quite concentrate on cooking after you texted me before."

Jo crossed her arms. "The one that said, 'I can't wait to see you tonight'? Wow, I really *am* dangerous."

"No." Amelia stepped forward, her fingers brushing the back of Jo's hand. "The one where you said you were counting down the minutes until you could taste me again." Jo's breath hitched. "So, yes." Amelia leaned in,

her voice dropping lower. "I'm afraid all I managed was ordering in...while mentally preparing myself to take you against the kitchen counter."

Jo blinked. "Oh."

"Mm."

She looked down at the empty kitchen worktop, her cheeks flushing as her body responded with a jolt of desire. "That explains the lack of food."

"It also explains," Amelia murmured, dragging her fingers lightly over Jo's T-shirt. "Why you should probably take your jacket off."

Jo didn't need telling twice. She let it drop to the floor, swallowed hard, then backed Amelia up until her hips hit the edge of the counter.

"I hope you ordered something spicy." Jo slid her hands beneath Amelia's tank top and dragged her nails down her skin. "Because this is about to get very hot."

Amelia shivered. "Baby, you have *no* idea."

Jo kissed her before another word could pass between them. A kiss that tasted of hunger and home all at once. Her hands gripped Amelia's waist, pulling them flush together, and then she pressed a thigh between Amelia's legs. The sound she made, that breathless moan, had wetness gathering between her own thighs.

"Fuck, Jo..." Amelia's fingers slid into Jo's hair, tugging gently. "I missed you today." Amelia spun them, switching their positions so that it was Jo's back hitting the edge of the counter this time, her T-shirt tugged over her head in one fluid motion. "You've ruined my ability to think," Amelia whispered as she placed kisses down Jo's neck. "I had a *perfectly* normal evening planned."

Jo whimpered when Amelia grazed a thumb over her nipple. "Normal is overrated."

Amelia's hands slid lower, gripping the backs of Jo's thighs and hoisting her effortlessly onto the counter, their mouths meeting again with a ferocity that left Jo breathless.

"Right now," Amelia pulled back and gazed into her eyes. "I'm going to make you forget anyone that came before me."

Jo held Amelia's jaw in her palm and smiled. "You already have."

Amelia's eyes darkened at Jo's words. She captured her mouth again, the kiss deep and demanding, their tongues sliding together in a slick rhythm that mirrored the ache building between them. Amelia's hands

roamed up Jo's sides, her thumbs brushing the undersides of her breasts, before cupping them and squeezing hard enough to draw a gasp from Jo.

"Good." Amelia nipped at her bottom lip, then slowly moved down her throat. She sucked gently, branding Jo's skin, her delicate fingers pinching at Jo's aching nipples.

Jo arched into her touch, fisted her hands in Amelia's tank top, and yanked it up and over her head. The fabric hit the floor, leaving Amelia's breasts bare, her nipples already taut with anticipation. Her gaze lowered, hunger flaring deep inside of her as she took in the sight. She leaned forward, latched onto one nipple, and sucked hard.

Amelia moaned, her head falling back as she threaded her fingers through Jo's hair to hold her in place. "Y-yes, just like that."

Jo slowly released Amelia's nipple, a filthy grin spread on her lips as she lifted her head and watched Amelia for a moment. "You're soaked already, aren't you?"

"Maybe you should find out for yourself."

She slipped a hand inside Amelia's joggers, taking the corner of her bottom lip between her teeth when she found no sign of underwear. She teased lower, watching a range of emotions cross Amelia's face, her pussy drenched and aching for more. "Fuck, babe." Jo circled her clit, pressing firmly until Amelia bucked against her hand, a sharp cry escaping her lips. "Mm. That's it."

"S-shit." Amelia clenched her jaw, her hips rocking forward and grinding against Jo's palm. "I don't want to come until I've tasted you."

Amelia drew back suddenly and dragged Jo's jeans down her thighs, exposing her slick underwear. Amelia hooked her fingers over the waistband and practically tore them from Jo's body. Now fully bare from the waist down, Jo spread her legs wider on the counter, inviting Amelia closer.

Amelia dipped her head without hesitation, her hands gripping Jo's thighs to spread them further. She looked up, her eyes locked on Jo's as she leaned in, that breath hot and ragged against her inner thigh. "So fucking beautiful."

Before Jo could respond, Amelia dragged her tongue up in a slow, flat line from her entrance to her clit, lapping up her wetness. Jo's hands slammed against the counter, her body jolting at the first contact. "F-fuck!"

Amelia didn't hold back. She sucked Jo's clit into her mouth, swirling her tongue in tight circles as she pushed two fingers inside her aching pussy.

Jo moaned, her hips lifting to meet each lick and thrust as the kitchen filled with the delicious sound of Amelia's mouth working her over... slurping and sucking, her fingers pumping in and out without mercy.

"Babe, I-I...oh, fuck, I'm close." Jo tangled one hand in Amelia's hair, the other braced against the counter to keep her from jolting off it.

Amelia hummed in response, the vibration sending sparks through Jo's entire being. She added a third finger, stretched Jo's pussy wider, and fucked her harder. The moment her tongue lashed relentlessly against her clit, Jo's thighs trembled, and her orgasm crashed through her. Her walls clenched around Amelia's fingers, her arousal coating Amelia's hands and chin. "Mm. So fucking good."

"A-Amelia." Jo pressed a hand to the top of Amelia's head, but she drew out every shudder until Jo slumped back against the counter, gasping. "Oh, God..."

Amelia slowly eased out, licked her fingers clean, and stepped out of her joggers. "There is *nothing* in this world that makes me happier than watching you come."

Jo slid off the counter on shaky legs and turned them so Amelia's back was to it. She dropped to her knees and whispered, "Spread for me."

Amelia obeyed and parted her lips. Pink, swollen, and twitching with need as arousal dripped down, begging for Jo's tongue.

Jo dove in eagerly, lapping at her entrance before sucking her clit between her lips. Amelia's hands gripped the edge of the counter, her knuckles white as Jo's mouth devoured her. When Jo eased two fingers inside her, Amelia's moans grew louder, her hips bucking wildly as she fucked Jo's face...chasing her release.

"That's it, baby. Deeper...fuck me harder." Amelia pinched at her own nipple, twisting it roughly and whimpering. "God, you fuck me so good."

Jo added a third finger and curled them just right, her lips enveloping Amelia's clit as she tasted her fully. The combined assault had Amelia writhing, her walls squeezing around the intrusion.

Amelia tensed, her breath coming in short, sharp bursts. Jo sucked harder and fucked her deeper, until Amelia shattered with a cry loud enough

to break the windows. Jo lapped it all up, prolonging the pleasure until Amelia tugged her up by the hair and pulled her into a messy kiss.

They broke apart, their foreheads pressed together as they caught their breath, but the fire wasn't out yet. Jo needed more. She wanted *everything* Amelia had to offer. She guided Amelia back and turned her until her hands were braced against the dining table.

"Jo, I—"

"Stay there." Jo quickly reached into her overnight bag and pulled out the strap-on she'd brought with her. She stepped into the harness, set herself up, and smiled when she caught Amelia's eye. "You want this?"

"Oh, my." Amelia took her bottom lip between her teeth as she watched Jo slick the toy with her own arousal. "Fuck, that's hot."

"I said..." Jo moved closer and pressed the tip between Amelia's lips. "Do you want this?"

"Please," Amelia begged, pushing back as she whimpered.

Jo thrust forward in one smooth motion, burying the full length inside Amelia. They both groaned at the stretch, but Amelia's walls immediately gripped the silicone tight, her overly sensitive body on the brink of another orgasm. Jo set a punishing pace, her hands on Amelia's hips, pulling her back onto each deep stroke.

"Harder." Amelia reached between her legs, rubbing her clit as Jo fucked her. "Mm. Right there. Make me come again."

Jo complied, sliding one hand up and wrapping it around Amelia's throat. She picked up her pace, gave Amelia everything she had, and sent her over the edge once again. Amelia gushed over the toy, forcing it out of herself as she slumped forward, her body quaking.

"O-oh." She held herself up, gripping the table hard when Jo slid back inside without warning. "Fuck...I—"

Jo chased her own release from the friction against her clit with each thrust. When it hit, she ground deep, riding the waves while Amelia drew every sensation from her.

When they finally slowed, panting and spent, Jo pulled out slowly and wrapped her arms around Amelia from behind. She kissed her shoulder, smiling against her sticky skin. "That takeout food better be good." Jo sighed. "Because I'm starving now."

"It will be." Amelia turned in her arms, those dark eyes sparkling. "But...round two after we eat?"

Jo grinned. "Count on it."

AMELIA CURLED into Jo's side, the warm lull of wine and leftover candlelight settling between them as life out on the street drifted in through the slightly open window. The takeout boxes had been cleared away, their second glass of red still sat half full on the coffee table, and Jo's thumb was tracing lazy circles over Amelia's bare stomach where the hem of her tank top had ridden up.

After what they'd shared on Jo's arrival, it was a different kind of intimacy this evening.

Slower.

More at ease.

Like their bodies knew they didn't need to rush anymore.

"You're comfortable," Jo said quietly, her cheek resting against Amelia's temple. "I could get used to this."

Amelia lifted her head and smiled. "Us?"

"Mm." Jo touched a hand to Amelia's cheek. "Us being lazy after dinner. The whole thing."

Amelia's heart ached in a way she wasn't quite used to yet. This feeling of being held, wanted, and loved was still new. But it wasn't fragile. It didn't feel like it might break if she breathed too deeply. Jo had held her in the dark and now in the light, and somehow, the world hadn't ended. Here, she felt completely safe. "I could get used to it, too."

Amelia's hand drifted up under Jo's top, her fingertips grazing over the slope of her waist, then the curve of her ribs. Jo inhaled sharply, her hand stalling on Amelia's thigh. "I thought we were being lazy."

Amelia pushed herself up, resting her forearm across the top of the couch behind Jo's head. "I *am* being lazy." She dipped her head and kissed the corner of Jo's mouth. "I'm also very, very attracted to you."

Jo tucked Amelia's hair behind her ear. "Yeah?"

"Mmhmm." The ache that hadn't quite left her since Jo had walked through the door came back all over again. "I'm thinking that I should probably do something about it..."

Jo slid her arm around Amelia's back and urged her closer. Their lips met again, eliciting a low moan from Jo as Amelia's tongue brushed against hers.

"God, you drive me insane."

"I know," Amelia nudged Jo onto her back. "It's one of my many talents."

Jo laughed softly, her arms wrapping around Amelia's shoulders as she settled over her. "Here?"

"I like this couch." Amelia smirked. "And between you and I...I've fucked myself in this very spot thinking about you before today."

"Thinking won't do." Jo looked up at her, flushed and wrecked already, her T-shirt askew. "You should absolutely have the real thing."

Amelia moved down her body slowly, trailing kisses across her collarbone, then lower, until her mouth reached the hem of Jo's top. "I need you."

Jo sat up and lifted her arms, her nipples already tight as Amelia whipped the fabric from her quickly. She urged Jo back down, kissing along the curve of one breast, then the other, her palm pressed to Jo's hip to balance herself.

"Your mouth feels..." Jo shifted beneath her, her thighs falling open slightly in invitation. "Fuck. Just touch me."

Amelia slid her hand past the waistband of Jo's shorts, her fingers brushing the warm slickness already waiting for her.

"God," Jo gasped as her hips lifted.

"I love how ready you always are for me." Amelia kissed her way back up Jo's neck as her fingers explored with slow, deliberate pressure. She circled gently, teasing Jo's clit, then dipped lower and slipped two fingers inside with ease. "And I'm going to spend the rest of my life inside you."

Jo arched into her with a sharp breath, one hand fisting the couch cushion, the other clinging to Amelia's arm. "Y-yes!"

"You feel so good," Amelia whispered as she pumped slowly. "All of you feels incredible, baby."

Jo's thighs closed around Amelia's hand as she exhaled a low, broken moan.

Amelia filled her with another finger and pressed the heel of her hand to Jo's clit. Jo's moans turned to gasps, every sound pulling Amelia deeper

into her. She watched every flutter of her lashes, every quiver in her thighs, and every twitch of her stomach.

“Come apart for me, beautiful.”

Jo’s lips parted in a silent plea.

“Go on, let me feel you.”

Amelia kissed her again, swallowing her cries as she fucked her slowly, until Jo shattered beneath her with a hoarse cry.

Jo clung to her in the aftermath, her breath uneven and her body shaking. Amelia just held her. Not because she thought Jo needed to be grounded...but because *she* did. Making Jo feel this way was the only thing that had *ever* made her feel more real than any name or identity she’d ever worn.

“You and I...we’re going to make this work.” Jo nuzzled into Amelia’s neck and held her tight. “I can’t imagine a life without you in it. Not now.”

“Promise?” Amelia asked as she pressed a kiss to Jo’s hair. “That no matter what, we’ll come through anything we face?”

“Always.”

They lay there tangled up in one another.

No mask, no alias, and no curtain.

Just Amelia, finally loved...in full view.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

FIVE DAYS. THAT'S ALL IT HAD BEEN. FIVE DAYS SINCE SHE'D TOLD Callum to leave her home, five days since Jo had opened her door and *somehow* her heart again. And in those five days, Amelia had learned that peace wasn't loud. It wasn't grand gestures or declarations. It was this. The sunlight spilling through the blinds while Jo hummed off-key as she leaned against the kitchen counter in one of Amelia's shirts and nothing else.

"Are you even listening to me?" Jo frowned as she turned to Amelia.

"Not in the slightest." Amelia crossed the kitchen with her cup of coffee in hand. "You're very distracting."

Jo lifted a brow as she brought a piece of toast to her lips. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

"It's *definitely* not." Amelia stopped in front of her, casting her gaze to where the shirt hem barely covered the top of Jo's thighs. "Though it does make it difficult to concentrate."

Jo grinned. "On what exactly?"

"*Anything* that isn't you."

Jo set her toast down and looped her arms around Amelia's neck. "You do realise breakfast will go cold if you keep talking like that, don't you?"

"I like cold. It means things can be heated up."

Jo laughed—the kind of sound Amelia would happily live in forever—and kissed her. It was slow, indulgent...a kiss that made Amelia forget there was a world outside of this house.

Until someone knocked, and they both froze.

Jo pulled back first, her brows drawn together. "Expecting anyone?"

“No.” Amelia’s stomach lurched. It could only be one person, because only one person showed up unannounced. “It could be him. Do you want to wait here?”

Another knock. One that came louder this time.

Amelia sighed and lowered her cup to the counter. “It may be a good idea if you stay here.”

“Why?” Jo angled her head. “Don’t you want him to know about us?”

“I don’t care what he does or doesn’t know. I just don’t want him to say anything to upset you.” Amelia drew Jo in and pressed a quick kiss to her forehead. “You just enjoy your coffee. It could be anyone.”

As Amelia stepped away and crossed the kitchen, she knew it would be Callum. She could feel his negative energy seeping through her closed front door. When she found the courage to open it, her son stared back at her. He looked rough. Not physically, but as though the arrogance he always carried was thinner now and worn down to something more human. Still, the sight of him on her doorstep made her jaw clench.

“Hi, Mum.”

“Callum,” she said evenly, her fingers tightening around the edge of the door. “What do you want?”

“Just came to grab the rest of my stuff. You know, since you told me to leave.”

“I remember.” Amelia didn’t budge. “You could have arranged that through text.”

“I didn’t think you’d mind me popping by.”

“Well, I do mind.”

He let out a short laugh. “You’re still angry.”

“I’m still *furious*.”

“So dramatic.” Callum rolled his eyes and shoved his hands in his pockets. “I said *one* thing, Mum. One thing, and it wasn’t even that deep.”

Amelia wasn’t doing this. She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of another conversation. So, she tipped her head towards the stairs and opened the door wider. “Get your shit, do it quickly, and get out.”

Callum brushed past her and shot up the stairs. “Won’t be long.”

“Good.”

When he was out of sight, Amelia exhaled a deep breath and pressed a hand to her forehead. She could hear him rummaging around, and then he came back downstairs with a box and a rucksack.

The sudden clang of cups in the kitchen made Amelia freeze. Callum frowned as he looked between her and the partially open kitchen door, and then he moved closer and pushed it open.

Jo turned at the sound of the creak, still holding her cup, smiling before she realised who it was. The colour drained from her face immediately. “Callum.”

His eyes darted between them. Jo in Amelia’s night shirt, Amelia frozen behind him, the remains of their breakfast scattered across the table.

“You’ve got to be joking.”

“Callum,” Amelia started, but he cut her off.

“No. No, you can’t—” He scoffed. “You’re actually doing this? I was taking the piss when I asked last week, but...you’re sleeping with *her*? With...*that*!”

With...that?

Fury rose from deep within Amelia. “Don’t you fucking dare come into my home and speak like that!” She rushed in front of him, blocking his view of Jo, and jabbed a finger against his shoulder. “I don’t know when you changed, or why, but I’m not putting up with it.”

“S-she’s my ex!”

“I’m aware.”

“And you...you’re my *mother*!”

“Yes, Callum,” Amelia snapped. “I’m aware of that, too.”

He stared at her like she’d grown another head, and for a brief moment, Amelia almost pitied him. *Almost*. But that pity evaporated when he turned on Jo again.

“How long?”

Jo swallowed. “It doesn’t matter. You and I are over.”

“Of course it matters!” he barked. “Were you fucking her when we were together?”

“No. Sadly, I wasn’t.”

“Callum, enough!” Amelia cut in. “You don’t get to come in here and interrogate her. You don’t get to *demand* answers about something that is none of your fucking business.”

“None of my business? You’ve lost it, Mum. You’ve absolutely—”

“Stop.” Amelia’s voice rose above his, sharp enough to silence him. “I’m not doing this with you again. You won’t use me as a scapegoat for

your guilt. You lied. You cheated. You broke her heart. And now you're angry because I'm the one helping her heal."

"That's not—"

"It is." Amelia cut him off again. "You're angry because I'm doing what you couldn't. I'm loving her the way she always should have been loved."

Callum's mouth fell open. "Y-you don't even hear how fucked up that sounds, do you?"

"Oh, I hear it just fine," Amelia said, lifting her chin. "But I also know it's the truth."

Callum shook his head. "You're unbelievable. Both of you."

Amelia followed him into the hall, her pulse pounding through her fingertips. "Don't come here uninvited again. I don't want to see you."

"Mum—"

"Don't." She pointed to the door. "Leave."

For once, he didn't argue. Instead, he turned, muttering something under his breath as he stormed out.

When Amelia turned back to the kitchen, Jo was standing there, her eyes wide, and her coffee cup trembling in her hand.

"You okay?" Jo asked as she took a deep breath.

Amelia swallowed down the ache in her throat. "I think so."

Jo stepped closer and slipped an arm around Amelia's waist, resting her head against her shoulder. "I'm sorry he caused a scene."

"Don't be. He's the one who should apologise." Amelia would be waiting a long time for Callum to take responsibility. "I'm not sure he knows the meaning of the word."

"We've got each other. That's what matters."

Amelia smiled as she brushed her fingers through Jo's hair. "I've got everything I need here with you." Amelia was saddened that her son could be so cruel. Not towards her, but towards Jo. In one breath, he wanted her back...in another, he spoke to her like that.

Just like his fucking father...

Jo lifted her head and gazed back at Amelia. "You *are* okay, right?"

"I'm okay. I just don't want things to be complicated. I've waited so long for someone like you, Jo."

Jo turned to Amelia fully. "It's only complicated if we let it be. You and me...this isn't some mistake or betrayal."

Amelia's throat worked around a lump. "I just didn't expect it to happen like this. That he'd find out like that. That I'd feel..." She shook her head. "So ashamed."

Jo gently cupped her cheek. "You don't have to feel that way with me."

"But I do. I spent years telling myself I could never be seen like this. That the second someone really saw who I was—my past, my mistakes, my scars—they'd run a mile." Amelia's voice cracked. "And now I'm here, with you, and I feel like I'm just...waiting for it to be taken away. If anyone is capable of taking it away, it's Callum."

Jo stepped closer, touching their foreheads together. "I'm not going anywhere, no matter what bullshit he throws at either of us."

Amelia drew in a shaky breath. "You say that now."

"I say it because it's true." Jo kissed Amelia gently. "I love being with you, Amelia. I love who I am when I'm with you. I'm *in love* with you. And as for Callum?" She shrugged. "I'm glad he knows, and I'm glad he found out the way he did."

Amelia frowned. "You're glad?"

"Yeah. Because now we don't have to hide. We don't have to sneak around or worry about who sees us. We can go out for dinner together. We can hold hands in the street. We can just...be."

Amelia sighed softly. "Sounds wonderful."

"It is. Or at least, it should be." Jo rested her hand over Amelia's heart. "*You're here. I'm here.* That's all that matters."

Amelia nodded slowly. "Dinner sounds nice."

"Good. Because I'm taking you out tonight. We'll get dressed up and go somewhere posh."

"Oh, posh, is it?" Amelia teased.

"Well, semi-posh. I still want to be able to walk in my shoes."

Amelia watched Jo for a moment. The soft lines of her face, those heavenly blue eyes and the wisps of blonde hair falling around her face, the feel of her hand still pressed to Amelia's heart.

And then Jo reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind Amelia's ear. "Let's just live, yeah?"

"Yes," Amelia whispered. "Let's live."

Because the truth was, loving Jo didn't feel like a risk anymore. No, it felt like coming home.

AMELIA SCANNED the restaurant Jo had chosen. It wasn't a pretentious spot by any means, but it was cosy and intimate. It was exactly what Amelia needed this evening. This was the first time they'd dared to eat out together and sit side by side in public as a couple. And though Jo hadn't said it outright, the way her foot brushed against Amelia's under the table, and the way she'd pulled out her chair with a smirk and called her gorgeous, made it abundantly clear what tonight was.

A date.

Amelia toyed with the stem of her wine glass, watching the golden liquid catch the light. Jo was studying the menu with a furrow in her brow, mouthing words like she didn't want to get them wrong. She looked painfully beautiful like that. Concentrating but unapologetically herself.

It was easy with Jo. It always had been...even when it wasn't.

Amelia's heart ached quietly. Not with regret, but with memory. She thought about how far she'd come and how far she still had to go. Then she thought about how, sitting across from the woman who had kissed her like the world had narrowed to just the space between their lips, she could feel all of it folding gently into something that resembled peace.

She hadn't let herself believe this was possible. Not after him. Not after the fists and the lies and the years of trying to pretend she hadn't become invisible, even to herself. Callum's father had convinced her, piece by piece, that she wasn't real unless he said so. And when the police came for him, when she was finally freed, Amelia hadn't known how to live as a woman outside of his shadow.

So she'd created another version of herself. Something darker and controlled. A mask she could slip into and out of, one that didn't ache when it was touched. Satin gave her that. The dark room, especially. It made sense then—where it didn't hurt to be faceless, to give herself to someone who couldn't see her breaking.

But Jo had ruined all of that. She'd unravelled every tether Amelia had wrapped around her heart and made her want to be known in ways that terrified her.

And now here they were, with Jo's fingers casually grazing her knee under the table like they'd always been together.

“You’re quiet,” Jo said as she lowered her menu. “What’s going on in that head of yours?”

“Sorry.” Amelia forced herself out of the headspace she was beginning to fall into. “Just...thinking about how grateful I feel.”

Jo tilted her head. “For overpriced ravioli?”

Amelia laughed as she reached across the table and took her hand. “For you. For *this*. For feeling as though I can breathe for the first time in decades without someone scolding me.”

Jo’s smile melted her. “You’ll always feel that way with me.”

“I know.” She stroked her thumb over the back of Jo’s hand. “But it still surprises me. How safe I feel with you.”

Likely sensing that Amelia was too deep in her own head, Jo smirked and leaned in as she said, “You should feel *very* unsafe later tonight.”

Amelia lifted a brow. “Oh?”

“Well, I plan on undressing you slowly and then making you beg for mercy.”

Amelia took a sip of her wine. “Darling, if you think *I’m* the one who’s going to be begging, you’re more deluded than I thought.”

“Is that a challenge?” Jo leaned across the table. “Really?”

Amelia’s whole body lit up as she took her bottom lip between her teeth. “Always.”

They spent the rest of dinner flirting between bites, kissing between sips of wine, and laughing at inside jokes that no one else could possibly understand.

It wasn’t loud, or showy, or dramatic. It was just...real.

And as Amelia sat here, for the first time in her life, she didn’t *want* to be anyone but herself.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

ONE MONTH LATER...

THE LIGHT FILTERED in through the freshly cleaned windows of Amelia's newly renovated property, casting the most beautiful patterns across the herringbone floors. Jo adjusted her lens and crouched for the next angle, the sharp click of the shutter punctuating the otherwise easy silence that hung between them.

Well, almost silence.

"You know, if you shoot from a lower angle, it makes the ceilings look higher," Amelia said from somewhere behind her. "Just a thought."

Jo glanced over her shoulder with a smile. "Are you critiquing the professional?"

Amelia leaned against the open doorframe, her arms crossed casually, looking like every woman Jo had ever wanted. "I'm just saying that I've spent months on those beams. I want them to look like the architectural miracle that they are."

Jo stood slowly, stretching her arms over her head as she turned to face Amelia. "*You* look like an architectural miracle."

Amelia rolled her eyes playfully. "Oh, here we go."

"You love it."

"Tragically, I do."

Jo grinned and stepped closer, her camera hanging from her neck. Even now, after weeks of calling this woman hers, she couldn't help staring just a

little longer than necessary. It didn't matter what Amelia wore—today it was dark jeans and a tucked-in white shirt, effortlessly elegant—she still had Jo's heart racing. But it wasn't her clothes that drew Jo in. It was just the way she was. Steady, playful, luminous in her quiet strength. She made the world feel less like a battlefield and more like a home.

"You're doing it again," Amelia said, reaching out and smoothing a thumb against Jo's cheek.

"Doing what?"

"Looking at me like I invented oxygen."

"I don't know about you inventing it..." Jo smirked. "But you certainly know how to take it from a room with a single look."

Jo leaned into Amelia's touch for a moment. Just...a second, because the warmth of it would undo her otherwise.

"I was thinking," Jo said as she stepped back. "We should have Ada and Evie over this weekend. I've barely seen Ada since we stopped going to Satin."

"I'd love that. Let's do wine and nibbles at mine on Saturday?"

Jo nodded. "Perfect. You still up for cooking dinner tonight?"

Amelia slid her hands into her pockets. "Absolutely, but only if you help me choose. I'm thinking aubergine parmigiana or that Thai green curry you've made me addicted to."

"You're not still dreaming about that, are you?"

"Every night."

Jo grinned and lifted her camera back to her face, snapping a quick, unposed photo of Amelia. Half-laughing, those gorgeous eyes on Jo, her hair tucked behind one ear.

"I hope you're not filling the website gallery with pictures of me again."

Jo shrugged. "Too late."

"You're ridiculous."

"I'm *in love*," Jo said as she fanned herself and sighed. "Nothing you can do about it."

They spent the next hour moving through the house while Jo snapped final shots of the lounge, the terrace, and the bespoke kitchen Amelia had poured her heart into. They talked the way they often did now...seamlessly and *effortlessly*, kind of like time had rewired itself to give them more of it.

More space to be together. To *breathe* together.

Between frames, they discussed when to restock the wine rack. Then whether Ada would bring her new date to dinner in a couple of weeks. And then the most important question...whether Jo should finally update her photography website bio to say she was taken.

They were rarely apart now unless work demanded it, and even then, Jo's phone would buzz with a message. Usually something along the lines of...

Miss you already.

Come home soon.

Wearing nothing but your hoodie, FYI.

It was normal, it was all-consuming, and it was theirs.

As Jo packed up her camera gear, she looked around at the space Amelia had built from the rubble up. It was a wreck turned into a dream home. The kind of thing that mirrored the woman who'd created it herself. Quiet resilience in every corner.

Amelia crossed the room and wrapped her arms around Jo from behind, resting her chin on her shoulder. "All done?"

Jo leaned back into her. "All done."

"Good. Then I vote we stop by the supermarket on the way back and pick up some ingredients. That curry isn't going to make itself."

Jo turned in her arms and pressed a soft kiss to her lips. "You're the most beautiful woman in the world."

"And you're the love of my life."

Jo's breath caught at that, because it was true. She felt it in every bone, every breath...every gentle silence between them.

AMELIA'S STOMACH grumbled as she inhaled the scent of the Thai green curry wafting around the place. They'd set the table the way they always did, lazily and together, with the dishes close enough to share and their chairs positioned so their legs tangled beneath the surface. Amelia watched as Jo ladled steaming curry over a bed of rice, her brow furrowed in concentration as though getting it right was the most important thing in the world. Like everything she did for Amelia *had* to be perfect.

God, I adore her.

“Yours looks better than mine,” Jo said, nudging Amelia’s bowl gently across the table.

“I watched you plate up both.” Amelia laughed as she pulled her chair in. “They’re *identical*.”

“Mine has more coriander. I think I’ve sabotaged myself.”

Amelia smiled, her heart full to the brim, and took her first bite. “Oh, my God. You’ve outdone yourself this time, baby.”

Jo beamed at the compliment and swallowed a mouthful. “You have your talents, and I have mine.”

Amelia watched Jo quietly. She wasn’t sure when it had started feeling like this, easy and unforced, but now it was second nature. The glances across the table, the laughter, the unspoken threads that seemed to tie everything together. Life was no longer messy. It was beautiful, and it was Amelia’s for the taking.

Halfway through her bowl, Jo set down her fork and wiped her mouth with a napkin. “Have you heard anything?”

Amelia looked up. “From Callum?”

Jo gave a small nod.

“No. You?”

“Nothing.”

Amelia shrugged. “He’ll be licking his wounds somewhere, trying to make sense of the world now that he *isn’t* the centre of it.”

Jo arched a brow. “You’re not worried?”

“I know my son.” Amelia set her fork down and reached for her sparkling water. “He processes things slowly. He pushes the world away until he can make peace with what he can’t change. And he *can’t* change this.”

Jo reached across the table and laced their fingers together. “No, he can’t.”

The quiet settled over them, allowing them a moment or two to take stock of the day. Another property complete, more images added to Jo’s website and portfolio, and now dinner with the woman she loved. “Thank you.” Amelia gave Jo’s hand a squeeze. “For being so...good to me. When everything came out, you could have washed your hands of me and walked away. You should have, really...”

“Hey.” Jo gave her a look. “Don’t you *dare* thank me for loving you.”

Amelia’s lips parted at those words.

Jo smiled. "You gave me something I didn't think I'd ever have again. Not really. Not after Callum."

Amelia searched Jo's eyes.

"I know it was over long before you and I got together, and I know I was doing so much better, but I think parts of the wreckage remained. You know?" Jo grazed her thumb over Amelia's knuckles. "I didn't realise how much of myself I'd buried just trying to feel okay again. You..." She exhaled. "You pulled me out of that. Not by fixing anything, just...by loving me like there was nothing broken."

Amelia's throat tightened. "I don't see broken when I look at you, baby."

"I know," she whispered. "And that means everything to me."

Amelia felt the weight of Jo's words settle deep inside of her. Not in a heavy way, but in the kind of way that rewrote and softened something. She let the moment stretch and settle between them, one of those quiet lulls that felt like its own kind of intimacy.

"You're my entire world, Amelia."

Jo gave her hand another small squeeze, then picked her fork back up and finished eating. Did she realise the severity of her words or her love? Did she understand just what she meant to Amelia? Jo simply smiled back at her as though she hadn't just shifted something seismic inside Amelia with a single sentence.

"I didn't think I'd ever have this either," Amelia said, picking her own cutlery back up. "Not again. Not after...everything."

Jo didn't press. She just nodded and kept eating. She already knew what Amelia meant.

"I thought I'd be on my own," Amelia continued. "Too much baggage. Too many ghosts. But you just..." She trailed off and smiled to herself. "You've never once looked at me like I'm too much."

"You could never be too much. You just needed the right person to sit with you through the hard stuff."

A surge of emotion hit Amelia full force. She reached for her napkin and dabbed at her eyes before the tears could spill out. "You're so perfect."

"Honestly..." Jo grinned. "It's *exhausting* being this perfect."

Amelia laughed as she pushed her bowl aside. "I love you."

"I love you, too." Jo stood, circled the table, and bent down to press a kiss to Amelia's hair. "Come on. I'm craving something sweet, and it's *not*

in the fridge.”

Amelia tilted her head back and looked up at her. “Oh? What are you craving then?”

Jo smirked. “You.”

“Well.” Amelia was guided to her feet. “Aren’t you in quite the mood tonight?”

“I’ve had excellent food with the woman I love...*and* compliments. There’s nothing down for you now. You’re in trouble.”

They left the dishes where they were and moved into the living room, the lights dim and the evening mellow. Amelia curled up against Jo the moment they landed on the couch, one arm looped loosely around her waist, her head on Jo’s shoulder.

“This,” Jo whispered, her chin resting on Amelia’s head, “is the best part of the day.”

“Mm.” Amelia closed her eyes and breathed it all in. The pain was gone, happiness had planted itself firmly inside of her, and Amelia couldn’t wait for whatever came next. “It is.”

Epilogue

ONE YEAR LATER...

THE RAIN HAD *FINALLY* STOPPED by the time the last wine bottle hit the recycling bin. Amelia wiped her hands on a tea towel and turned to glance at Jo, where she was curled up on the couch in the kitchen with Ada, both of them laughing at something on Ada's phone. Evie stood at the window, swirling the last of her Malbec as she peered out at the garden Jo had insisted on 'saving' from Amelia's meticulous landscaping. A wild little patch of lavender and daisies now thrived in the corner, chaotic and oddly perfect...much like Jo herself.

A year.

Somehow, it had been a year.

Amelia set the towel down and leaned against the kitchen counter, giving herself a moment to take it all in. Her life was truly something beautiful now. Friends and conversation, dinner with those who mattered most to them. One of Jo's hoodies slung over the dining chair, a half-written shopping list stuck to the fridge with the llama magnet...a Polaroid of them grinning in the garden on Jo's birthday, sitting just below.

Her home didn't just *look* different now. It felt different. Lived in, loved, every corner showing their relationship in one form or another.

And Amelia was still here, still thriving, and still...whole.

Evie stepped back from the window and turned to Amelia. "You having a moment over there?"

“Maybe.” Amelia smiled. “Is that a crime?”

Evie walked over and bumped their shoulders together. “Depends on whether this moment ends with more wine or a smug speech.”

“I’m leaning towards smug speech.”

“Oh, go on then.”

Amelia laughed softly, but before she could speak, Jo shot from the couch. “Wait! If there’s going to be a speech, I need snacks.”

Ada rolled her eyes. “You’ve just had two slices of cake.”

“And? Do you have any idea how much stamina is required to keep up with Amelia?” Jo sighed. “I’m burning calories at a *ridiculous* rate.”

Evie snorted as she dropped into a seat at the dining table. “God, I miss you at Satin. I miss our fun and the spontaneous evenings there.”

Amelia’s brows lifted. “Fun? You mean tragic.”

“I mean dependable,” Evie said softly. “I mean, you *always* showed up. Even when your world was falling apart. And now you’ve stopped doing that for all the right reasons.”

Caught off-guard by the sudden emotion behind Evie’s words, Amelia blinked back tears.

“I’m proud of you for choosing *you*. For choosing *this*.” Evie eyed Jo. “I’m proud of you for letting someone really love you without hiding who you are.”

Amelia’s heart clenched in the most beautiful way. “Thank you.”

“The same goes for you,” Ada said, grinning at Jo. “From where you were a little over a year ago, to now...I’m so happy you took the chance to be happy. You deserve the world with one another.”

“Well, I’m not sure that would have happened without the support of my best friend.” Jo squeezed Ada’s hand and smiled. “You made it all make sense when I was trying to find reasons to sabotage it all.”

“I know I turned it into a bit of a joke at the start, but I’ve never seen you like this, Jo. You’re settled. Not a boring kind of settled...just, content. In a way you *never* were with Callum...or anyone else for that matter.”

Jo reached across the couch as Amelia sat beside her and laced their fingers. “I didn’t know I was allowed to want this until her.”

Amelia lifted Jo’s hand and pressed her lips to the back of it. “I think deep down, we always knew we were allowed it. But love makes us do funny things, right? I mean...I pretended to be someone else just so I could be close to you.”

“I wish you’d never felt as though you had to do that, but thank God you did.”

“Right, I think it’s time Ada and I left.” Evie groaned dramatically. “God, this is why I go to the club. All of this is too lovey-dovey for me.”

Ada grabbed her coat. “Are you offering me an evening at Satin, Evie?”

Evie lifted a brow. “Oh, I don’t know if you could handle me.”

Amelia cleared her throat as she rose to her feet. “Whatever conversation is about to happen, I don’t need to know about it.” She kissed Evie’s cheek and drew back. “Text me when you get home...or Satin, wherever the night takes you.”

Jo and Amelia said their goodbyes to Evie and Ada, seeing them to the door before they could find a reason to stay any longer.

Evie turned and gave them both a quick squeeze. “Happy anniversary, you two.”

“Thank you.” Amelia watched the two of them disappear down the garden path and then closed the door quietly behind them.

When she turned back around, Jo was standing in the middle of the hallway, two glasses in hand. Amelia stepped forward and took one. “Hi.”

“Hi, gorgeous.”

“One year since you sent me that text, and I walked out with nothing but my car keys and a phone.”

Jo smiled. “One year since you let me in.”

Amelia leaned in, her forehead resting against Jo’s. “One year since I stopped hiding.”

She kissed Jo, holding her chin in the palm of her hand. There was no heat and no rush...just a quiet, tender press of mouths that reminded her they were still here and they were madly in love.

When they pulled apart, Jo whispered, “Do you want to know the best part?”

Amelia smiled. “I do.”

“I still get to wake up next to you tomorrow.”

Amelia’s heart swelled in her chest. “And every day after.”

AMELIA SCANNED their bedroom and smiled. The laundry sat unpacked in the corner, *another* of Jo's hoodies was draped over *another* chair, the scent of the moisturiser Amelia had just applied filling the room. Jo always teased her for it, claiming she smelled like a posh spa, but she didn't recall Jo complaining when she had her face buried in Amelia's neck throughout the night.

She sat on the edge of the bed in one of Jo's T-shirts, her towel-dried hair curling slightly at her shoulders. Her legs were bare, the duvet rumpled beside her, while Jo was in the en suite brushing her teeth. She could hear the muffled sound of her humming something off-key and cheerful, and her smile instantly widened.

This was their life now.

No secrets. No shadows. No curtain between them.

Just *this*. Toothpaste and bare legs. Shared moisturiser and midnight snacks.

Love, honest and whole.

Jo strolled back in, her pyjama bottoms low on her hips, and a loose tank clinging to her frame. Her hair was messy, but her smile was bright as she crossed the room, holding out Amelia's glass of water like she always did.

"You'll thank me at 3 a.m.," Jo said.

"I always do." Amelia took it from her and placed it on her side of the bed.

Jo slid beneath the duvet first, stretching out like a cat. "Why are my legs always colder than yours?"

"Because you never put socks on."

"Socks are suffocating."

Amelia crawled in next to Jo and tucked herself into her side. "Then stop complaining about being cold."

"Never." Jo kissed her temple. "Complaining is part of my charm, and by being cold...it means you get to warm me up."

Amelia wrapped an arm around Jo's waist and appreciated the peace and quiet for a few minutes. Today had been a busy day, and tonight hadn't been any quieter. But now, they could both relax in the safety of their bedroom...holding one another.

"You know what I loved tonight?" Jo asked as she absentmindedly traced circles over Amelia's arm.

“Your third glass of wine?”

Jo huffed. “I was trying to be heartfelt then.”

“I know. I’m just winding you up.” Amelia angled her head slightly and looked up at her. “Go on.”

“The things Evie said. The way she looked at you and spoke about you. I know we’ve always had our best friends’ support, but hearing she’s proud of you...I love those little moments.” Jo dipped her head and kissed Amelia. “And I hope you know that I’m proud of you, too.”

Amelia swallowed back the emotion lodged in her throat. “You make it easy to be myself.”

“And I hope you’ll always feel that way.”

“I will.” Amelia shifted closer and draped a leg over Jo’s. “I’ve never loved anyone like this.”

Jo smiled, kissed the tip of Amelia’s nose, and then pulled the duvet up around them both.

“I used to think the dark room was the only place I could be wanted without being seen,” Amelia whispered. “I thought it would be the only place I felt safe.”

Jo’s hand found hers under the covers. “You don’t ever have to go back there.”

“I know. I won’t.”

“Because you’re mine now,” Jo said without missing a beat. “And I see *all* of you. Every part.”

Amelia closed her eyes, forcing away the sudden rush of emotion. She leaned in and brushed her mouth against Jo’s. “I love you.” She deepened the kiss, knowing that if nothing went further...or it did, it wouldn’t matter. This was the kind of love that didn’t have to ask for permission.

Jo pulled back and yawned, already half asleep. “Wake me at seven?”

“Mm. I’ll try.”

“*Don’t* let me oversleep again. I have too much work on.”

“You know...” Amelia grinned into the dark. “Considering you’re significantly younger than me, you’re the one who fell asleep with toast in your lap last week.”

“Rude.”

She chuckled as Jo’s breathing started to slow.

Still, Amelia would stay awake for a little while longer, simply because she enjoyed watching the steady rise and fall of Jo’s chest and the faint

moonlight catching the edges of her jaw.

At one time, she used to ache in the silence. Now, she only felt peace.

Because this was who she was now.

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About Melissa Tereze



Melissa Tereze is an award-winning, Liverpool-based author of sapphic erotic romance. With thirty-two books published—twenty-three of those international number one bestsellers—she spends her time writing angsty romance about complex, real-life women who love women. Her heart lies within the age-gap trope, and you'll find a wide range of unique characters and stories to sink your teeth into.

Melissa's books deal with real issues, ranging from grief, self-discovery, and starting over. Don't let that fool you, though. With high angst comes high spice. There is a little something for everyone.

In 2023, Melissa was a triple gold medal winner in the eLit awards for **At First Glance** (LGBT Fiction), **Behind Her Eyes** (Romance), and **The Stepmother** (Erotic Fiction). In 2024, she was a finalist for a Golden Crown Literary Society Award in the Ann Bannon and Erotica categories for her first published erotic novel, **Study You**.

In the rare event she's not writing, Melissa enjoys spending time with her wife, travelling, and finding the nearest karaoke bar.

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You can contact me through my social media or my website. I'm mostly active on Twitter.



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