



HATE

ELISE ALDEN

TO

LOVE

YOU

## *Prologue*

In my experience, telling the truth very rarely sets you free; it weighs you down with an entirely new set of problems and therefore should be avoided at all costs. But my sister Caroline's wedding reception and the booze that went with it proved a toxic combo, and here I am seven years later, still reeling from the repercussions of opening my mouth.

If you want you can watch me self-destruct on YouTube. "Trash at the Bash" continues to be very popular, or so I was told in the rejection letter from Holborn Secretarial Services.

Sometimes people ask me why I did it—why I chose Caroline and James's wedding to divulge my secrets. I never answer them because the truth is...

*I did it because it felt good.*

Actually, it felt *great*, but now I would do anything to stop my eighteen-year-old self, hold her down and sit on her because I'm not that messed-up girl anymore.

Unfortunately, I'm still paying the price for her actions.

Revenge is a dish best served cold? What a load of crap. My vengeance against Caroline had been a long

time coming but the joy of it lasted only as long as it took to finish my speech. James served his up hot, so scalding it's seared into my heart and will be for as long as I live. Of course, the whopper I told alongside the truth is probably more to blame for that than anything else, but I figure there wouldn't have been one without the other. Just saying.

Does my conscience hurt? Like a son of a bitch. But coming clean after all this time would only harm the person I love the most. Luckily, I've got a plan that will allow the truth to stay cosily buried and still get me what I want.

If it works.

# ***PART ONE***

## *Chapter One*

### Mask of Horror

*Brighton, 7 years ago*

My mother told me the family secret when I was twelve years old, curled up in pain with my very first menstrual cramps. While I lay in bed daydreaming about growing bigger boobs and getting noticed by the older boys, she thought it was the perfect time to shock me with the evils of sex.

“I was a pregnant virgin, Paisley,” she said, her face clenched as tightly as my abdomen. “I was already carrying your sister when I walked down the aisle.”

*A pregnant virgin?*

One look into her dulled eyes told me she wasn't joking. “But you said nice girls don't let boys touch them.”

“Your father lied to me—he lured me into sinful intimacy with promises of marriage.” Her lips twisted with the sour taste of her memories. “He said I couldn't get pregnant if he pressed his sword into the entrance of my forbidden passage but didn't go any further. The devil was in me that day and I let him.”

I controlled the urge to roll my eyes. My parents may have been born in the UK but their uptight upbringing

had been very much small-town Spain. They'd grown up a part of the tightly knit, ultra-conservative group of Spanish Catholics living in Trenmore Village, Sussex.

*Sword and forbidden passage* were about as graphic as my mother got, not that she'd ever spoken about such things to me before. I'd been eavesdropping on her conversations with Caroline. At nineteen and away at university, my sister got a lot of lectures on fornication.

"You can't get pregnant this way, María," my mother sneered, mimicking my father's voice. "But as usual, Juan Carlos Benítez was wrong." She spat his name out like a piece of rotten meat.

Years later I learned the mechanics of virgin pregnancy during a sex-ed class where the boys tittered and the girls tried not to blush. Basically, eager spermatozoids in a man's sack take a preliminary look before the guy unloads, travelling up in his pre-cum to test the waters. If it's warm and wet, they can go for the long haul and beat their stronger pals to the prize. Feisty little buggers.

My father had been true to his word, inserting only the tip before getting himself off. Alas, he left a little bit of himself behind. When my *papi* Honorio noticed my mother's expanding waistline he marched my parents to St. Albert's, where they were romanically and apostolically joined in misery.

Afterward they fled the gossiping tongues of Trenmore for Brighton, where my father still works as a construction labourer and my mother stacks shelves at Asda.

Caroline thought our parents' past was humiliating but I laughed every time I thought about it, mentally

sniggering when my holier-than-thou parents lectured me on morality.

But I wasn't sniggering now. The Find Out pregnancy test sat in my hand like a piece of lead. Tomorrow was supposed to be the first day of my new, responsible life. For starters there would be less alcohol. No, make that zero booze. And no more ABCs either. Okay, okay, the upper in my pocket was burning a hole, but it would be my last one. My decision had been made: no drugs, no procrastination about college and definitely no self-pity.

Shit happens and if you don't die you pick yourself off the fucking pavement before a dog claims you as his turf.

Sweat stuck my palms together as I prayed like I hadn't since I was ten years old, back when I believed there was a bearded hippie sitting on a cloud listening to my pleas for Caroline to get adopted.

Three minutes to go.

The bottle of vodka in my backpack called to me and I tried to resist its pull. Two minutes, thirty seconds until... *Fuck it.* Onto the bed went the Find Out and into my mouth the Absolut. Strong and energising, the fiery liquid slid down my throat like water. I wanted more but we were having guests for dinner and I couldn't indulge.

Michael Jackson's "Bad" rang out from my mobile and I choked on my booze. My friend Marcia was in a retro phase.

Her husky voice sounded worried. "Should I buy a mega pack of Huggies or get you some condoms for next time?"

"Shit if I know."

"You're not preppers," she soothed. "The drugs

screwed with your cycle and it'll take a while for it to normalise. You've been late before, remember? It's probably stress. Living at home with parents like yours would do anyone's head in."

The red crosses on my Christ's Apostles wall calendar mocked me. "But I'm two weeks late and that's the longest ever."

Fourteen days ago there'd been a tiny show but that was it. Every time I went to the bathroom, every time I felt a twinge in my abdomen, I checked to see if it was my period. Nothing.

My eyes cut to the test. "Shit on a stick," I croaked. "It's positive."

"A clear line?"

On a Find Out, the positive is indicated with a heart shape. It was faint but it was there, mocking me with its cutie little outline. It should have been a mask of horror. The back of my head hit the bed board and my body trembled. This could not be happening to me. My brain urged me toward denial but my stomach had other ideas. It lurched, churning the Absolut so violently I thought I'd have to make a run for the loo.

My voice rose hysterically. "What the hell am I going to do with a baby?"

"Shut up, hon. You're going to count deep breaths with me and not talk unless I tell you to."

She was only twenty-one but when she spoke in that tone—a combination of her natural assertiveness and her nurse's training—people jumped to obey. I was no exception.

"I assume you're not alone in the house, so *icksnay* on the *reakoutfray*, you *comprende*?"



I expelled a short, shaky breath. “I’m good—no more freaking out.”

“You have to calm down and think about your options. Last I heard Alex and his fiancée were in South America.”

“Fiancée? He told me he’d dumped her.”

Marcia made a disgusted noise. “Apparently not. Send him a PM on Facebook and tell him he knocked you up. He should know before he ties the knot, don’t you think?”

I cringed at the thought. As soon as I wrote down that I was pregnant it would become real. Impossible to deny.

“Yeah, I guess. No. Shit, I don’t know. I don’t want to tell him.”

I wanted to cry or hit something, throw the bottle of Absolut at the wall and scream at the unfairness of my predicament but Marcia was right. I had to seal my inner madwoman up in the attic before my parents’ dinner party.

“You could have an abortion,” Marcia said tentatively.

Her suggestion pulled me deeper into my nightmare. Regardless of my strict Catholic upbringing I’d always been pro-choice, but what I felt before peeing on that damn stick was drifting away from me now that pro-choice had become *my* choice.

How could I have been so stupid? All I’d wanted was to get drunk at Marcia’s party but when Alex Novak pulled me onto his lap I let him. He said he’d never been so hard in his life and he’d burst if he didn’t get inside me. When I looked into his eyes and read the truth of his words, I was flattered. That sounds pretty bizarre, I

know. I've not got freaky magical powers or anything. It's more like I can read single words or phrases when I look at people. See their truths whether they want me to or not.

It started when I was a child, when family and friends would pinch my cheek or sit me on their laps. My candid readings and blurted answers to their unasked questions caused my parents a lot of angry embarrassment, not to mention alarm. They went to Trenmore and consulted with Father Martin. He sat me down after church one Sunday, irritated and impatient to get home. Innocently, I asked him what a Marlboro was and why he was desperate for one.

He prescribed an altar in the sitting room and an expensive silver rosary.

Every day after school I kneeled in front of the Virgin Mary and begged God to forgive me until dinnertime. The gruelling schedule continued until I convinced Father Martin that prayer had destroyed my unholy defect.

And how did I do that? By lying through my teeth of course.

When Father Martin saw me again he filled his eyes with every ounce of ugliness he could think of, every bad word and every sadistic thought that could catch me out. But I had practiced, making sure to stare at family members, strangers and teachers as much as possible. I fooled Father Martin even though I saw that he projected some of his own truths.

These days I don't look into anyone's bright and beautifuls for too long if I can help it, especially my family's. The eyes really are the mirrors to the soul, you know. But when I read Alex's *I want a piece of that cunt*, I was, perversely, charmed by his lust.

His thoughts matched his words and that made for a refreshing change. Plus, I liked him a lot. He was hot and he didn't seem to judge me like other people. I'd kissed plenty of guys and done lots of other things too; I had a bad reputation but I'd never gone all the way.

We ended up in Marcia's bedroom, still clothed and groping like mad.

"I thought you were only kissing in there," Marcia said.

I snorted. "I didn't notice he'd unzipped until he yanked my knickers aside and aimed his dick at me, groaning like he was in pain."

"No condom?" Her shriek was so loud my eardrum pinged.

"Shit, Mar, relax. I told him no condom, no can do," I assured her. "But he wasn't happy and dug it into my thigh. I tried to push him off but he held me down and pumped all over me. Then he said 'Thanks for the pussy' and walked out as if he'd just bummed a fag off me."

I hadn't expected soppy declarations of love, but neither had I thought he'd treat me like a slag. That's the aggravating thing about skimming the surface. Some people keep their ugliness hidden deeper, harder to fathom unless you follow the trail.

"When my shift is finished I'll give you a buzz and we'll study that cheapie test of yours," Marcia said. "In the meantime look on the bright side, at least you haven't got gastroenteritis."

"I wish I did," I said miserably.

"And Paisley," Marcia said softly, "happy eighteenth."

I threw the Find Out at the foot of my bed and shut

my eyes. My world was shrinking to the size of the little parasite inside my...

*Womb.*

Most days I didn't remember I had one of those but the bloody thing took on new significance as I lay there, picturing my family's reaction to the news. My mother would dissolve into tears and head straight to the altar and my father...well, I'd better make sure I was far away from him when he found out.

Caroline would be horrified, worried about how having a single mother in the family would reflect on her reputation. Then she'd pretend concern and play the caring sister for my parents' benefit. But I knew the truth about Caroline.

She was a liar.

"The truth shall set you free," my arse. It's the lies that allow people to fly high. People like Caroline, the golden girl who'd blighted my life and turned the whole family against me. Familiar, impotent anger and hopelessness hit my sensitive stomach, threatening to overwhelm me with nausea. I shut my eyes and reached for the vodka.

My father's voice boomed from downstairs. "Paisley! Caroline's 'ere with James!"

Crap. If I wasn't quick he might come upstairs to get me. Like his father before him, my father ruled the family like a Spanish hidalgo his serfs. The only concession he'd made to being born and bred in England was to deed poll his name from Juan Carlos Benítez to John Charles Benton. Otherwise we were in feudal Spain and I had to toe the line if I expected to live under his roof again. That meant church every Sunday, no boyfriends or—God send me to hell where the sluts belong—sex.

And absolutely no booze or drugs.

I'd run away and lived rough a few years earlier and it hadn't been pretty, so I sprang off the bed and dashed across the room, one eye on the door. I yanked hard at a corner of frayed carpet, exposing a section of missing floorboard. Into the hide-hole went the Find Out and my Absolut. It was time to go downstairs and meet Caroline's fiancé, Mr Arrogant Toff aka James Xavier Scott-Thomas.

My sister came home at weekends, but with the big day only three months away she'd finally been forced to introduce James to her working-class parents and good-for-nothing sister. He was staying the night on the sofa after dinner with Father Martin to discuss the wedding service.

Unable to resist a peek at the idiot who'd fallen for Caroline, I had checked James out on Facebook. There was no picture, but his comments about people he called "the underclass" were exactly the sort you'd expect from a snobbish, supercilious lawyer.

I frowned at my tatty clothing. The red crop top was too tight and without a bra, my nipples were clearly outlined. Well-worn jeans courtesy of the charity shop hugged my thighs and my shoes were boring flats. Shrugging, I turned my back on the mirror. Mr Posh would have to take me as I was.

I paused at the dingy wall stain halfway down the stairs to listen to Caroline and my parents in the kitchen.

My father sounded impressed. "That's a car and a half parked out front, Caroline. Do you think James would take us for a spin after tea? They'll never believe I was in a Lamborghini down at the yard."

*Ugh.* Was James so keen to show off his wealth he'd

bring a car like that to a neighbourhood like ours? I walked into the front room, my mind made up to meet, greet and beat it.

James had his back to me when I entered, perusing our family photos. Dark and tall with a muscular build. He threw me a smile over his shoulder but didn't look straight at me. It was just as well. When the full impact of that one casual smile hit me I got a mental rush akin to gulping down a triple shot of Cuervo. I didn't even have time to recover before he turned around.

I gaped at James like an idiot, my lips parted and my eyes fixed on his. They were jade green with little flecks of gold, bright with intelligence and humour—and something else I felt stab through my stuporlike wild fire. I was mesmerised, lost in the expanding black of his pupils, reading him effortlessly while my heart pounded in my ears. The air between us charged as the frenzied atoms zapped his thought straight into me, possessive and indisputable.

<<Mine.>>

James broke the spell by looking at me as if I'd stolen his sports car and gone on a joy ride. What the hell was his problem? My mind was annoyed but my body didn't care. It tightened in awareness, especially my super-sensitive nipples. They hardened under my thin cotton top.

*Oh... Crap.*

I've got to tell you about those little suckers. I am cursed with the longest nipples in the world. Even Marcia says so and she's seen them in all shapes and sizes at the hospital. Mine are ginormously freakish. They sit on a large circle of dark pink and just wait for me to brush against something or get cold or...

I looked at James.

Aroused.

He stood casually, his hands fisted in the pockets of his dark trousers, exuding self-confidence. I told myself I couldn't possibly be turned on. It was crazy, yet there was no mistaking my reaction to him. A physical response to a gorgeous man, yes, but so much more than that. My mind felt more alive than it ever had; my body so eager for his touch I could feel his hands against my skin.

"I see you've met Paisley," Caroline said, dragging me back into the faded grey sitting room. She brushed past me and stood next to James, eyeing my skimpy top and exposed midriff with distaste.

"Not quite," James said.

His voice was hoarse. Constricted. He tapped his chest a few times and cleared his throat. Pleased that I'd almost provoked a coronary in the man who'd just wiped my canvas clean, I wanted to say something witty or unforgettable.

"O'right mate?" I squeaked.

Caroline made the formal introductions and I felt James taking my measure. I didn't know why but I wanted to pass his assessment more than anything I'd wanted in a long time. Knowing Caroline, I was sure she'd painted a bad picture of me. Hell, what other kind would she? And everything James saw seemed to confirm her words. Even so, his thoughts were a slap in the face.

<<*The slutty little sister.*>>

I narrowed my sapphire blues. <<*The arrogant prick.*>>

James frowned, then schooled his features into a neu-

tral mask and walked toward me, hand extended. My palms were sweaty and my entire body trembled with the need to touch him.

*What the fuck?* Men usually got hot and heavy over me, never the other way around. Our hands touched and we yanked them back. If I looked down I knew I'd see my nipples poking out like little beacons, all because I'd been zapped by six foot one or two of *kiss me right now*.

His eyebrows lifted and I clamped a hand over my mouth.

Oh my God, had I said that out loud?

"Paisley's not very articulate in the evening," Caroline said, slanting me a venomous look behind James's back.

She led him to the sofa and then my parents came in, eager smiles on their faces. They talked about James's work trip to Australia the next morning and the upcoming wedding, while I stood there, shifting on my feet like the embarrassing relative nobody wants to claim. When I made a move toward the door, Caroline turned her artificially cultured voice in my direction.

"Have you found a job yet, Paisley or are you going back to college?"

*Spiteful cow.* I dragged a smile onto my face and turned around. "I'm between miseries at the moment, and rehab was a bitch with a whip."

From the expression on Caroline's face she'd told James I was a tramp but hadn't filled him in on my drug addiction. Good. If he wanted to think badly of me he might as well base his opinion on reality, not on Caroline's fabrications.

My mother barely managed to contain her glare. "Paisley's going back to school next term. She's got



an interview tomorrow morning at Brighton Technical College. Secretarial studies.”

I squeezed onto the sofa next to James while my parents outlined my lack of academic ambition and my utter disinterest in joining salaried drudgery. The spicy smell of James’s expensive aftershave stuck in my nostrils, doing nothing to dispel my underlying awareness of him.

He shifted around to look at me. “You were planning to live on social benefits?”

Underneath his politeness lurked a censorious tone that set my teeth on edge. “It’s the underclass way, isn’t it?”

Caroline sighed to show how much she cared. “Paisley struggled in school but we’re hoping she’ll find a course to match her abilities.”

Great, now I was stupid as well as lazy.

I sat up and pitched my voice to infomercial perfect. “Secretaries are employed in an extensive spectrum of industry and commerce, from international business to the creative arts, using a broad variety of eclectic skills.”

The corners of James’s mouth curled up and I shrugged. I’d read the college brochure with my friend Tarzan. Well, he wasn’t really a friend, more like a guy I’d met at rehab who I hung out with to heckle bad porn and moan about life. His parents had told him to get a job, study something or get out, just as mine had.

We’d gone for the easy option. Closing his eyes, he’d grabbed a Brighton College brochure and picked a course for me at random and then I returned the favour. I nearly shit myself laughing when my finger landed on Religious Studies. He said he’d give it a whirl.

Caroline gave me a condescending look. “I suppose

everybody needs a secretary, especially lawyers. What would we do without someone to answer the phone and bring in the lunch orders?"

I rolled my eyes. "Duh, not have any work and go hungry."

James laughed and an elegant tinkle came out of Caroline's mouth. Sitting next to James was making me feel feverish so I got up to lean against the front window. My mother shifted uncomfortably and nudged my father.

"Caroline says you're a Catholic, James," he said gruffly.

If James was startled at my father's abruptness it didn't show. "My mother's from Italy and brought me up a Catholic, yes."

"And your father?"

His smile was charm itself. "He died when I was two but I understand he was a sinful atheist. That's where I got my devilish traits, if my mother is to be believed. I was a difficult child."

He shook his head in mock self-admonishment and grinned, making my pulse jump. I could totally see him as a young boy getting into lots of trouble, bright green eyes professing innocence while he hid the evidence behind his back.

I wagged a finger at him. "But you made up for it by being the Sunday school star, right? So you could get away with pure evil the rest of the week."

James laughed and nodded. "You too?"

My cheeks warmed at his look, the zing of it reaching all the way to my toes. "No, I was pure evil, Sunday to Sunday. The highest I ever rose was stacking the Bibles after mass."

“Altar boy. Once. My mother refers to it as The Black Moment.”

I laughed at his mischievous expression and we shared a look, an instant communion that made me want to launch myself across the room and into his arms. What the hell was going on? I gulped and dragged my eyes away from his.

Caroline smiled serenely. “James is ready to make a full Catholic commitment, right darling?”

“Darling” looked a bit stoned, to tell the truth, and I wondered if I looked the same.

“I appreciate that Father Martin is coming to meet me tonight,” James said, recovering.

My mother beamed proudly. “It’s a favour to Caroline. She holds a special place in his heart.”

I turned my back and made a face. Father Martin probably wanted to make sure James really was a Catholic and didn’t need to fork out for the special pre-wedding course. I surveyed the darkening street on the lookout for his old Ford Fiesta. The Lamborghini was parked behind my father’s battered van, and when Father Martin arrived the sports car would be boxed in by ugliness and corrosion.

My breath joined the film of condensation covering the window and I smiled faintly, swirling my initials onto the glass with my finger. Art had been my favourite subject in high school and my creative use of calligraphy techniques had earned me an A. I embellished my *P* with a small star but when my *B* grew a distended belly I wiped out the letters.

Crap. Our exalted family priest would sit his arse down at our table, smile at Caroline and James and fill his gut with rioja. He would extol on Caroline’s vir-

tues and sermonise at my expense. It was bad enough listening to his prattle at St. Albert's every Sunday. At home I couldn't bait Father Martin with comments about Mary Magdalene getting it on with Jesus or taunt him about that closet full of disciples. Neither could I escape his thoughts.

*Liar.*

*Marriage wrecker.*

*Slut.*

And my personal favourite, *lost soul*.

When the church secretary phoned to say he had to attend an old widower for last rites, I couldn't contain my grin. Caroline was aghast, her eyes big as she reproached me.

"Somebody is *dying*, Paisley. How can you be happy?"

I hid my embarrassment with a shrug. "He's going to paradise. What's not to be happy about?"

Shit, I sounded callous even to my own ears. I offered up my silent remorse to the dead guy and asked him to forgive me. When my parents disappeared into the kitchen I got my revenge.

"So Caro, I saw the picture of your wedding dress. It looks like something out of *The Great Gatsby*. I never thought you'd want to go slapper style for your wedding."

James stiffened. "I think you mean 'flapper' not 'slapper.'"

The brief connection we'd shared had disappeared and the look in his eyes was hard enough to slice through steel. My layer of I-don't-give-a-shit was harder.

Caroline managed to look injured and spiteful at the

same time. “Paisley’s vocabulary is limited. She failed her GCSE English so what can we expect?”

I did *not* fail. I just... Well, I deferred the successful completion of my course. I didn’t get a chance to explain that to James though. My mother fluttered into the sitting room with a tray of sparkly stuff and four tumblers.

“Nothing but the best for Caroline and James,” she said brightly.

The cork hit the ceiling and James caught it in his hands. I smirked at Caroline’s face as she watched our mother pour out Aldi’s finest cava. Only champagne in crystal flutes would have been good enough for my sister. How our working-class parents would fit into her life after her marriage was no mystery—they wouldn’t.

My ruddy-faced, beefy father made the toast. His perpetual frown had been replaced by an expression that was open and eager to please.

“María and I are chuffed to have you as a son-in-law, mate. May you and Caroline always be happy.”

Caroline flashed the huge rock on her finger, telling us yet again of how James had taken her to Hatton Gardens and she’d had it made to her specifications. I looked at the ring dispassionately. Diamonds may be a girl’s best friend but I’d engage the enemy if it meant I could have rubies or sapphires. Gems that were colourful and warm, that expressed passion and desire.

Diamonds were as boring and insipid as Caroline herself, as was the story of James’s proposal. Hearing it I felt disappointed somehow. It was so clichéd I laughed.

“Let me guess, all the other diners at the restaurant burst into applause. Very original, James,” I mocked.

“James knows I wouldn’t want it any other way,” Caroline simpered. “We both believe strongly in tra-

dition, family values and morality. It gives our love a special flavour.”

“Like vanilla?”

My mother gave me an irritated look. “Vanilla indeed. What are you talking about?”

James shrugged and I got another whiff of his spicy aftershave. “The adolescent mind works in mysterious ways.”

I didn’t trust myself to speak out loud. <<*I’m eighteen today, actually.*>>

He raised an eyebrow. <<*Could’ve fooled me.*>>

I blinked. He had *not* shot a mental comment at me, had he? Nobody I’d met could do that, see what I was thinking and answer back. James turned away, leaving me to bite my lip in confusion.

I gave myself a mental shake down. Meeting James was screwing with my head and it was time to screw with his.

I flirted discreetly when my parents were in the room and more blatantly when they weren’t, much to Caroline’s tight-lipped irritation. James ignored me so I contrived to touch him in some way. A graze of my fingers on his knee, a bit of thigh against his leg. Not getting anywhere I brushed my breast against his arm. *Yes!* He stiffened so I did it again and he fixed me with a steady stare.

<<*You’re wasting your time.*>>

That was it. I had to know whether he was reading me or if the vodka I’d had was laced with acid. I made my eyes wide and innocent.

<<*Why, whatever do you mean?*>>

<<*You know exactly what I mean.*>>

*Bloody hell!* My mouth dropped open. Feeling reck-

less I leaned in again, this time harder. A bad idea since my nipple hardened against James's arm.

*<<I told you to stop.>>*

*<<No, you said I was wasting my time.>>*

*<<I know all about your games, Paisley.>>*

I had no idea what he was talking about but I went with it. *<<Want to play?>>*

Caroline looked between us and frowned, and James gathered her closer. Although shaken by our rapid exchange and disgusted my sister's blue blood could read me, our silent conversation had been worth it. Anything that made Caroline squirm was satisfaction guaranteed. I gave up trying to bait James though, to study him, more than a little freaked by his ability.

Every once in a while our eyes would meet and I'd get a sense that I was missing something. Something big. It was like that feeling when you've forgotten a word and spend hours trying to remember it, only this was more frustrating, more intrinsic to my peace of mind somehow. I couldn't put my finger on what I was feeling but I seemed to want something, to need something from James.

Annoyed with myself, I chalked the sensation up to finding out I was pregnant. My mind was playing tricks on me because of the shock. The more I thought about what else pregnancy would do to me, the more panicked I became. The upper from my pocket felt soothingly warm and smooth. A little bit of sunshine to get me through the night. Desperate for a high even if it were only a small one, I twiddled it between my fingers.

Caroline wanted us to pretend we ate family meals in our cramped kitchen, giving me the perfect excuse to escape. I volunteered to lay the table and pop the

chicken in the oven so I could pop a little something else too. I think the only person who noticed me leave was James, but when I looked his back was turned.



## *Chapter Two*

### Ketchup on Your Face

I watched Jeremy Kyle browbeat his guests, feeling pretty damn smug my life wasn't as screwed up as the ex-convict sleeping with his sister's boyfriend. Then Caroline walked in, frowned, and immediately put a damper on my happy buzz. She switched off the TV and turned on Classic FM.

While some poor cow screeched in Italian, Caroline looked around the kitchen like one of those know-it-all designers—the ones who leech people's homes of personality and call it tasteful. I backed off and watched her. The nineteen eighties Formica countertops and splintered, mismatched chairs contrasted sharply with Caroline's carefully curated understated elegance. It was going to be a tight fit for dinner tonight. Our kitchen was big enough to cram in a table and chairs but not large enough to fit Caroline's distaste.

She stared at my midriff. "Don't you have anything else to wear? You look cheap."

"This is my reality-TV look," I said, eyeing her chic dress and glitzy shoes. Man, I loved shoes and Caroline had loads. "You could let me at your wardrobe if

it really bothers you, and then we could ask James to pick out the real Caroline.”

Her frown turned into a scowl. We’re hardly clones but we’re very similar and she hates that. Caroline’s my height, slender and perfectly proportioned, unlike me. We share the same shade of honey-blond hair and we both wear it long, except that hers is always salon perfect. She’s most often described as classically beautiful though, and doesn’t get the crude attention I get. I’ve been cursed with the kind of padding that inspires panting, not poetry.

When we were little my mother used to say that Caroline was her strawberries and cream, all pink and white, and I was her peach crumble—until she forgot she was supposed to like peaches just as much as strawberries.

Our eye colour is different also. Mine are a changing shade of blue whereas Caroline’s are a constant shade of bitch. Looking at her, they seemed harder than usual. I checked on the chicken and studied her as she made a salad. Her movements were stiffly precise.

Trouble in paradise maybe? I certainly hoped so.

“Is James too posh to help with the nosh?”

I laughed at my rhyme, watching Caroline grate a carrot and bobbing my head to the rhythm. Shit, I was high as a kite. If I weren’t careful she’d notice and tell the olds. I modulated my voice and tried to sound like I usually did.

“Where’s the toff?”

“If you mean James, he’s discussing the order of service with mother.”

Brilliant, my chance to get crude with cantanker-

ous Caroline had come. That's alliteration by the way. I passed my English retake with an A.

I glanced toward the sitting room. "It's a pity James will be Down Under until the wedding. That's three months for him to jerk off at his hotel all alone. Why don't you give him some pussy tonight? Show the poor sod you care."

Caroline stopped grating. "That would only show that I'm a slut, like you."

"Never underestimate the power of the pussy."

I popped a cherry tomato into my mouth, moaning in pleasure as I chewed. Her face turned a blotchy red and she grabbed a cucumber, slicing it viciously. Jesus, was she uptight or what? I bent down to get the plates from my mother's hand-painted wooden cupboard. The red poppies on the doors grew and rippled in front of me and I swatted one away.

"What's wrong, Caro? Are you afraid you won't measure up in the sack? Surely James has copped a feel and told you what he likes? Don't tell me you haven't done the same to him."

Her eyes narrowed. "Copping a feel is for women like you. I'm saving myself for marriage, especially after what happened to mother. I'll be a *real* virgin on my wedding night and never know the touch of another man."

Oh for fuck's sake! Caroline belonged in the Middle Ages. Only sleeping with one man your entire life? No fun and games before you committed yourself to life-long misery? No thanks.

"Sounds bloody boring to me," I said. "And all that pain on your wedding night when you're supposed to be enjoying yourself. Take it from me, Caro, virgin sex

hurts like hell. A man's penis is like a crowbar, stretching you open and tearing you up even if he takes it slow. The head looks like a red Nazi helmet and it's like, really wide...and that's the bit you're going to have to deal with first, all swollen and pokey. Once it's jammed inside you'll have to pee so bad you think you'll burst, but all you can do is struggle not to leak while he pumps into you."

Caroline stopped slicing, the colour draining from her face.

I resisted the urge to laugh. "If you're lucky, your hymen will break before James rips your vagina apart. You'll still be begging him to stop 'cause it hurts so bad, and then you'll bleed like you've got your period. But don't worry—he won't care about the mess. He'll be ramming his penis inside, over and over, rutting away for all he's worth, grating your tender skin like you just did that carrot. And when it's all over it'll feel like you've got thrush."

Caroline's face was ashen. "You're deliberately trying to scare me."

"Just telling it like it is. Don't go easy on the booze at your reception. James will want to screw all night since he's been such a good boy. He'll be like that geyser you saw in Iceland, ready to blow every hour on the hour."

Caroline frowned. "That's where you're wrong. My fiancé is not the sort of man *you're* used to."

I widened my eyes. "You mean he'll be happy with blow jobs?" She looked nauseous at the suggestion. "Men love getting head, Caroline. If I were you I'd take that cucumber and start practicing. Nothing disappoints a guy more than a woman who won't go down, or worse—one who won't swallow."

“You’d know all about that,” she said maliciously.

The smile drained from my face and I stared at her, lost in my agonising past. “Thanks to you.”

Caroline tut-tutted. “Delusional as usual—the drugs did a once-over on your sanity.”

Her denial wasn’t surprising but it filled me with frustration all the same. Sometimes people convince themselves the lies they tell are the truth, as I suspected Caroline had. Sure, I’ve told my fair share of porkers, from little white gaps in reality to whopping black holes. But I don’t confuse my lies with the truth and I never lie to myself. The weird quirk that allows me to see the truth in others makes it impossible not to see it in myself.

That sucks, believe me.

Looking at Caroline I wondered again why she’d always hated me. For a crazy moment I wished we were like normal sisters, ones who loved each other, shared clothes and confided things. I would be happy for Caroline’s marriage and she would help me with my pregnancy dilemma. We would hold hands and find a park to make daisy chains in, laughing and rolling around on the grass.

Shit, the upper was making me delusional. I needed a distraction and Caroline’s sour expression said she was dissatisfied with more than our shabby house and my smutty conversation.

“What’s got you into a huff?” I asked.

In her annoyance Caroline was eager to off-load. “James is thinking of leaving Wimpress & Wimpress before he makes partner. He wants to buy a hotel in Spain of all places. Can you imagine?”

Not really, but it sounded a hell of a lot better than

working a nine-to-five in dreary England. I grinned at the thought of Caroline giving up her corporate dreams to go bohemian on the Costa del Whatever.

“Don’t knock it, Caro. You’d look great in an apron and flip flops, handing out plates of baked beans on toast. And think of all the stag party drunks you’d meet.”

Caroline looked even more alarmed than when I’d taunted her about virgin sex. I puckered up to an imaginary lover, wiggling my bottom and moulding my hands to my breasts, lowering them to my crotch and undulating like a belly dancer.

“I told you already. Give the man some pussy and he’ll forget about Spain.”

I laughed at her expression, pivoted on my heels and smacked straight into James. The sudden contact with his hard chest made my nipples tingle and my breath hitch. His hands came out to steady me and he looked down. Instead of moving away, I wrapped my arms around his neck and tilted my face up.

“You should give him some tonight. I can tell he needs it,” I said, caught by a force I couldn’t put words to, something urging me to get closer. My eyes dared him to kiss me, blatantly showing him my desire. Hell, I was dizzy. Dizzy from the contact with his tall, muscular body and dizzy from my little spin with the upper.

James looked at my lips and I felt him shiver before he set me firmly away.

His voice was flat and condescending. “Only a woman lacking in intelligence gives a man pussy to get what she wants and only men who think with their cocks take it.” He looked at me disparagingly. “Caroline

is certainly not the former and I'm not the latter. Unfortunately, the same can't be said of everyone."

Anger at his insult left me grasping for the comeback that was hovering right at the tip of my tongue. Damn it, I knew I'd think of something when it was too late. Not that James would stick around to hear it. He'd cleared the space between him and Caroline and was bending down to give her a gentle, apologetic kiss for his language.

I thought I might puke.

\* \* \*

Dry chicken breast, chips and salad.

I stared at the unappetising food on my plate and let the inane conversation waft over me. Would it have hurt my parents to wish me a happy birthday? I was desperate to go upstairs and take a few slurps of liquid celebration but I couldn't, not with our guest of honour forcing me to pretend I was part of our family.

I watched Caroline's French-manicured fingers lift her glass to pale pink lips. No wine for rehab girl, no siree. I got juice or H2O at home. Self-pity threatened to topple my polite social mask so I straightened my back and jammed a piece of chicken into my mouth.

My mother was eager for stories to tell after church. "Do you have any celebrity clients, James?"

He headed her off with a smile. "My firm is draconian in its confidentiality policy."

She didn't know what *draconian* meant but she got the message and sat back, disappointed.

My father took a long swig of Heineken. "What kind of lawyerin' do you do again?"

Caroline sighed. “Corporate law and taxation, Daddy. Remember?”

I had looked it up. “James helps companies and really rich people avoid paying their taxes,” I clarified.

James gave me a steady look. “We minimise the tax liability for our clients, yes, but we do not facilitate tax evasion.”

I rolled my eyes at his mumbo jumbo. “You help your clients screw the government out of money while people like us pay everything we owe because we’re poor. That must be so fulfilling.”

“It’s fulfilling to give good advice,” he said levelly.

“It’s a lucrative branch of the law,” Caroline interjected, her face full of pride—and the desire to work in taxation once she’d paid her dues at Legal Aid. “James excels at it and should make partner before long. It’s perfectly legal—that’s the beauty of it.”

I turned on her. “So whatever is legal is right? I thought you trained to be a lawyer to help people defend themselves or fight injustice, not help the rich get richer.”

“Nothing wrong with being rich,” my mother said, smiling at James.

My father nodded and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Damn right, there in’t. Caroline will be set for life when she marries you, mate. Posh like she’s always dreamed. You said you’d only marry a high-class bloke, remember darlin’?”

James shifted uncomfortably and Caroline turned a darker red than her wine. I hoped she’d choke on it but she didn’t oblige.

I focused on James. “Do carry on making yourself



and your clients richer while everybody else pays what they owe.”

He gave me another one of those measuring looks I was learning to hate. “It’s hypocritical of you to judge me for doing my job when you don’t contribute the taxes you’re so concerned about. When you’ve tired of being ‘between miseries’ and join the workforce, I’ll consider your opinion.”

He had a point but I wasn’t willing to let him get away with it. The whole practice seemed unfair to me. “Firms like yours help dictators and the mafia to launder their money,” I accused.

Caroline huffed irritably. “Paisley, tax law is over your head. Stick to secretarial studies and leave complicated affairs to those qualified to understand them.”

“It’s hardly rocket science. I read all about it in five minutes.” I pointed my finger at James. “You’re as guilty of money laundering as your clients are. Worse, even, because you help them to do it. That’s disgusting.”

My father gave me a menacing look. “That’s enough out of you.”

“Not to worry, Mr Benton,” James said coolly. “Self-righteousness is often a shield forged in hypocrisy.”

Once again I felt his measured appraisal, only this time I didn’t care what he thought of me.

<<*Bring it on.*>>

He obliged. “You seem perfectly capable of studying or getting a job regardless of your...troubles. Yet you want to live off the work of taxpayers like your parents, people who work hard so you can laze around and—”

“You know nothing about me,” I interrupted, livid at his judgement.

“Likewise, but out of respect for your parents I’ll elu-

cidate.” He turned his head to address my father. “For the record, I do not represent criminals or dictators and I would never condone or facilitate their activities. My clients are hard-working professionals looking for tax effective ways to manage their money. I help them.”

“Yeah, to help themselves,” I mocked.

“Why should that bother you?” James asked, sounding truly perplexed. “Many of my clients are like Caroline, people who are successful because they have drive and intelligence. They don’t sit around and expect others to work for them. You languish at home, perfectly capable of doing the same but choosing not to. You should aspire to be more like Caroline—an honest, professional woman of outstanding integrity.”

I was speechless. If love was blind then James needed a guide dog to steer him clear of the bitch sitting next to him. Then again, it probably wouldn’t work. Caroline had years of practice hiding her true self.

I couldn’t look at her. She’d be preening and blushing with pleasure and the sight would make me sick. I stared into James’s eyes instead, suddenly struck by the image of a summer blade of grass dipped in gold.

“Gold dust doesn’t stick,” I said, much to everybody’s bemusement. They could make of my words whatever they wanted, because I didn’t even know what I meant by that.

“Never mind Paisley, darling, we’re used to her tirades,” Caroline said.

The conversation turned to the wedding and I slumped back in my chair, my food cold and forgotten. James looked serene, the sanctimonious prat, whereas I felt anything but. I was seething, aroused by our ex-

change and wanting to fly across the table and take my convoluted emotions out on him.

What the hell was wrong with me?

James observed me so discreetly I doubted anybody else noticed. Every time our eyes met it was like swallowing hard liquor, a burning jolt that travelled straight to the pit of my stomach. When I saw his next glance I was ready.

<<*Hungry?*>>

His fist clenched around his glass. I concentrated on squeezing ketchup over my cold chips, just to do something to keep my eyes off him. When I looked up he was watching me again.

<<*Can't stop staring, can you?*>>

His gaze went to my cheek. <<*You've got ketchup on your face.*>>

I wiped it off with a scowl and the corners of his lips lifted. When the meal was finished I got the cake I'd picked up and set it on the table. My top gaped open in front of James as I fumbled with the matches, taking my time to light my candle. Unmistakable desire flashed in his eyes before he caught himself and looked away.

Caroline's voice floated around the kitchen, her vowels longer than the Queen's. "Trisha and Sandy are travelling down next weekend for bridesmaid's fittings with Veronica and Harriet. Afterwards we'll be dining at La Piemontesa."

I rolled my eyes. There was no such thing as plain old eating and drinking for Caroline. These days she "dined," "took tea" or "enjoyed refreshments." The more she talked about her plans, the more my serotonin levels dropped. I knew all about those from rehab. They rise sharply when you're high and when they drop

they take you with them. For some people that means a lot of whinging or crying; for me it means bad-tempered rudeness.

My madwoman might be stuck away in the attic but my inner bitch was free to roam.

“You mean I’m not a bridesmaid?” I interrupted, laying on a little false accent of my own. “I’m gut’ed.”

“You can help the best man,” Caroline said.

“I’d rather get off with him, thanks.”

My father banged his fist on the table. “Elizabeth Paisley Benton!”

Oh, crap, he was going to make me pay for that little remark. My mother reached a fluttering hand out, smiling nervously at James. Watching her attempt to control my father’s rage, it occurred to me that he couldn’t do anything in front of our posh guest.

“I’m sorry,” I said, hand on heart. “I’d rather fuck the best man’s brains out than have anything to do with the wedding. How’s *that* for honesty, James?”

I toasted my sister with the last of my juice, leaving my family to make excuses to the stuck-up lawyer who was going to marry her. *Him* I was glad to leave behind most of all.

\* \* \*

I tried to drown my troubles in bathwater but my mind flitted between my unwanted pregnancy and my unwanted attraction to James. Pregnancy...James...baby...

*Babe.*

Oh God, I couldn’t do anything about being pregnant but I sure as hell wasn’t going to waste another second thinking about my sister’s snooty fiancé. I wished I

could have got him back for his insults though, especially the one about my lack of intelligence. That had to be the only reason he was still occupying my thoughts.

I pulled my bathrobe over my damp skin and walked out of the bathroom, coming to an abrupt halt when I saw James leaning against the opposite wall. His eyes swept over me, pausing briefly on my breasts before he averted his gaze. I swallowed nervously, my fingers clumsy as I finished tying my robe.

We stared at each other, swirling currents rippling in the air between us. With one stride he was in front of me.

“Excuse me,” he said stiffly, intending to brush past and go into the bathroom.

I didn’t budge. “Where is everybody?”

“Caroline took the Lamborghini to drop off your parents at the Radomskys’ for card games while I shower and change. We’re meeting up with her bridesmaids in town.”

He looked just fine to me. The work tie had come off and a few of his shirt buttons were undone. His sleeves were rolled up and his face was slightly flushed from sitting in our stuffy kitchen. And his lips—

*Stop slobbering!* my mind shouted.

“I’m sorry James,” I said hurriedly, bowing my head and mustering all the sincerity I could. “I was acting like an idiot before dinner but I was just teasing. Honest. I didn’t mean what I said about your job either. You showed me I’m being irresponsible and lazy and I didn’t like it.”

My eyes were level with his chest, counting the open buttons with a mind of their own. “I wish I had a brother like you, somebody to give me good advice.”

James's expression changed from guarded to friendly and he relaxed. His eyes warmed and out came that devastating smile. My breath caught at his loveliness. An odd description for a man, I know, and I couldn't even blame the upper.

I held out my hand and smiled tentatively. "Friends?"

When I felt his warm clasp, the same little contact buzz ricocheted between us but we didn't let go. I don't think James noticed he was still holding my hand until I tugged it free. I'd almost forgotten about getting him back for his insults. Almost.

My bottom lip trembled. "My rudeness forced me upstairs without even a kiss from Mum and Dad but never mind," I said, sighing for good measure. "We're rarely on good terms anyway and nobody even cares that it's my birthday."

I heaved a longer, heavier sigh and turned away, shoulders hunched and face averted. I didn't have to pretend the sadness but had I laid it on too thick? Something in my voice must have got to James because he pulled me back like I hoped he would.

"Happy Birthday, Paisley."

He bent his head and aimed a brotherly kiss at my cheek but I saw it coming and turned my lips to his at the last minute. My intention was to give him a quick peck to put him on the spot and embarrass him, but kissing James was like nothing I'd ever felt before. His mouth was warm and masculine, yes, but electric, sparking a jet of instant pleasure that spread from my lips to the rest of my body like one of those forest fires you hear about in California.

James gasped and pulled away. Without thinking I followed his upward move, clinging to his mouth. He

froze and I took advantage, twining my tongue with his and stroking into him. He tasted of the expensive brandy he'd gifted my father. Heady and forbidden.

A long shudder went through him and then his tongue stroked me back and he pulled me roughly into his chest. My hands locked around the back of his neck and we tangled together, probing and pulling in a rising surge of desire, tasting each other like we couldn't get enough.

He didn't nibble at me or beat around the bush. He devoured my mouth as if he were starving. When he reached down to push me away, I held on to his neck like a leech. Hot hands landed on my bottom, rested and then cupped and squeezed me into his crotch. He was hard and getting harder. The sound in his throat was tortured. Full of lust. He tightened his grip to pull me into his erection and I emitted the same sort of sound.

My nipples were on fire, throbbing under my bathrobe as I tried to get closer. I wanted to fit my body to his until the sliver of space between us disappeared and all I could feel was James, all I could hear was the pounding of his heart. He covered my breast with his palm, digging in tightly to feel its heaviness through the threadbare cotton. It wasn't enough for either of us. He yanked my robe open and clamped his hand over my naked breast, grinding into me with his hips.

I gasped at his thrust and my heart jumped as five kinds of alive touched my bare skin. His fingers were scorching, circling my aching nipple, confident and sure. I'd never felt anything like it. Exhilarating. Excruciating. I bit his bottom lip and he returned the favour.

It was as if James was consumed by the force of his attraction to me, as if he wanted to absorb me com-

pletely, delete the effect I had on him and wipe me out of his system. And I wanted to do the same, sink myself through his every layer and tear out whatever it was that triggered my overwhelming response to him.

Lost in a current of conflicting emotions, we took it out on each other. I raked my nails across the corded muscles of his neck and drew blood. James's revenge—the instant, demanding prod of his granite hard-on—heated me to boiling. Everywhere his hands touched my body responded, wanting more. He obliged, his tongue delving deeper, punishing me with his exploration. Tasting every particle of my desire and owning me completely.

He was no longer fighting his attraction to me; he was branding me his, singeing my skin with his possession.

<<Mine.>>

My eyes were shut but his thought rippled through me as if he'd spoken out loud. We were connected, mentally and physically wired together. He pulled me upward and hoisted me around his hips, spreading my thighs and fitting my legs around his waist. When my back slammed into the wall I had a moment of clarity, remembering that my parents and Caroline could be home any minute. The thought was fleeting, gone with the next shove of his hips. We were melded together in a desperate, carnal rhythm and I completely forgot they existed.

All I could think of was James's rampant sword.

Hold on a minute, where in the *fuck* had that come from? All I could think of was his *cock* pressing into me, damn it. He moaned when I unzipped his trousers and found him, hot and thick and heavy. I whispered



my approval against his mouth. I'm not one of these shrinking virgin types like Caroline. I liked his package and I told him so.

A huge reality check, as it turned out.

"Shit!" James grabbed my hand and pulled it off him. The supportive hold on my bottom dropped and my knees buckled. I slumped against the wall, dazed, and he jumped back with another hoarse curse. The sudden absence of his body left me feeling bereft. Incomplete. As if I'd given up my favourite drug cold turkey. I wanted to launch myself at him and feel his arms around me once more.

Oddly, I also wanted to cry.

Recovering enough to readjust my robe, I glanced at James's face and read his desire for me. Self-loathing was fast overtaking it though, and I suspected the loathing would be directed at me next. Yes, there it was. I dropped my eyes. What the fuck had I just done? My petty revenge for his irritating judgements had turned into the most intensely passionate experience of my life. That it had been with James was the worst thing that could've happened to me. Hell, I didn't even *like* the man. In fact, I hated people like him, snooty and patronising. Not only that, he was Caroline's soon-to-be husband, forever and ever, amen.

How could I have thrown myself at him?

I wanted to escape to my bedroom but the disgust on James's face kept me prisoner. It also triggered my pride, spurring me to taunt him before he saw how much he had affected me.

"It looks like the little head does the thinking after all," I mocked.

He looked away, infuriated at his participation in

our mano a mano. “You’re a nasty piece of work, Paisley Benton.”

He was right, but I wanted to slap him all the same. “I think you like it nasty,” I sneered, staring pointedly at his crotch. “I think you’re tired of boring and tasteless. You’re starving for flavour and thirsty for my personal favourite—a long, hard screw up against the wall.”

James’s pitying look made me want to graduate my slap to a jaw-breaking punch.

“Throwing yourself at unavailable men only says you’re desperate and have no class.”

I looked away. Kissing him had proved that I was indeed the slutty little sister. I didn’t want his opinion of me to hurt but it did. Then the hurt turned into anger. Who did James think he was to judge me? He had participated just as much I had, hadn’t he? Kissed me like he couldn’t get enough and rubbed against me like he meant business. So what did that make him?

I jutted my chin. “I wouldn’t say it’s classy to feel up your fiancée’s sister.”

He cursed, advanced a step then drew back. “What you—what *we* did was despicable.”

I imitated his expression and shot it back at him. Not for the first time I thanked my bizarre gift. Oh, he meant what he said, all righty—most of it. Paisley Benton repulsed him.

But he wanted her anyway.

“And that really bothers you, doesn’t it?” I said derisively. “That somebody like me can make you hot around your expensive Italian collar. Who’s the hypocrite now? Look me in the eyes and tell me you don’t want me.”

“Don’t push me.”

“Or you’ll push *into* me right? Want to put it to the test?”

I grabbed my robe and considered flashing him to prove my point. Quick as a panther, he lunged. I yelped in surprised pain as his fingers dug into my arms. My body leapt in response and I wanted...I wanted... Well, I didn’t know what I wanted but I knew I wanted him to give it to me.

He lowered his mouth to my ear, his lips parting to shape themselves around calm, controlled words. “Maybe one day you’ll find a man who doesn’t mind settling for what you offer, but even if I didn’t love Caroline you wouldn’t meet my standards, regardless of how long it’s been since I’ve had a screw up against the wall.”

I recoiled, struck by the truth in his eyes. He released me, setting me aside and shutting the bathroom door in my face with a dismissive click. I don’t know how long I stood there, staring at the chipped paint before I ran to my bedroom and flung myself on the bed, trembling with a mixture of fury, shame and unfulfilled desire.