

Unperfect

Susie Tate

Copyright 2021 © Susie Tate
All rights reserve

Edited By Jo Edwards
Cover Design by **Steve Molloy**

Unperfect

Verb

(*transitive*) To mar or destroy the perfection of.

Chapter I

No offence, kid

Mia

I gritted my teeth as the pain shot through my ribs like a knife. Holding my breath I waited for the pain to slowly subside, all the time trying desperately to stay awake. But the office space, even though it was open plan, was warm. Warmer than any environment I'd been in for the last week. So, despite the pain, my eyelids started to feel heavy. Digging my nails into my hands, I sat straighter in the chair – the last thing I needed was to fall asleep now. I just had to hope that the adrenaline from my interview nerves (and the double shot espresso I'd bought with my last fiver this morning) was enough to keep me going.

Eyes open, I chanted to myself. Stay awake, stay awake, stay awake. Pain is just a chemical process. You don't have to focus on it. You can choose to ignore it. Stay awake ...

But it was so warm and the chair I was in was so comfortable, even with the pain in my ribs and shoulder. *Just for a moment, I thought. I'll close my eyes just for a few seconds.*

"Ms Lantum?" I felt somebody shaking my shoulder gently, but couldn't seem to work my way up to consciousness. Who was Ms Lantum?

"Ms Lantum?" Another gentle shake. "*Mia?*"

My eyes flew open and I flinched in my chair sending fresh stabs of pain through my ribcage. Cripes. *I was Ms Lantum. That was the name I'd given these people. I had to get it together. I had to get this job. The 27p in my pocket, and the bread and peanut butter in my backpack were all I had left. Ignoring the pain from my ribs and shoulder and straightening in my chair, I forced a smile for the woman hovering over me. My heart sank when I realised that it was Verity Markham, a partner at this firm and one of the most intimidating people I'd ever met.*

When I'd popped in last week to check if my application had come through, one side of my face had still been slightly swollen and my arm was in a sling. The receptionist (a beautiful blonde who I swear was wearing a surfing rash vest with her ripped jeans) had taken in my injuries and, before I could say anything, started recommending a variety of herbal remedies and explaining how a plant-based diet combined with some sort of crystal healing could accelerate my recovery. When I thanked her but said I was there to ask about the job advertised her face fell and she apologised. Apparently they no longer needed anyone. I had been all set to leave, but that was when Verity Markham strode over to us, her sky-high heels clicking across the floor of the office. Everyone in the office broke off what they were doing to watch her: perfectly tailored shift dress, expertly styled hair and a laser-focused look in her eyes, which was directed straight at me.

"Interview next Wednesday, two o'clock sharp," she'd told me in her posh, cut-glass accent.

"Oh, that's great! V, you should—" the receptionist started.

"Set it up, Yaz," Ms Markham clipped, turning back to me and barking, "Don't be late."

It was all business and efficiency, but I hadn't missed the way she'd scanned me top to toe, or the cogs that had been whirring behind those sharp eyes. All I could do at the time was nod. And now here I was at the interview – fast asleep.

"Ms Markham, I'm so so sorry," I said, my face flushing as I stood and extended my hand I managed to ignore the wrenching pain in my shoulder as she shook it.

"It's fine, honestly and please, don't give me any of that Markham bullshit," the other woman said, her accent so outrageously posh that from anyone else it would have been

ridiculous, but from her it seemed so natural and carried such authority that it was anything but. “My parents are complete fuckers – I don’t much care for the reminder. Call me Verity.”

“Er ... okay,” I said, a bit taken aback by her rampant swearing and direct manner, but also kind of loving it. I’d never been confident enough to swear like that, and Nate would never have tolerated it anyway – it wouldn’t have fitted with his vision of perfection. I decided to take it up as soon as I could muster the ladyballs required.

Verity’s sharp gaze settled on my face for a moment. “Are you ... ?” she trailed off and her forehead puckered in a small frown of concern. “Are you feeling better?”

I forced a smile. “Yes, yes of course. Totally back to normal. Last time I attempt stairs in heels though.” My small, fake laugh sounded forced, even to my own ears. Verity gave me a polite smile but I didn’t miss how her eyes narrowed on me just a fraction. Her scrutiny made me feel edgy. I dug my nails into the palm of my free hand to keep from fidgeting.

“Okay,” she said, dropping my hand and stepping back. “If you’ll follow me, you can look at our system. Have you worked with design programmes before?”

“Yes, of course.” At least this wasn’t a lie unlike minor details like my actual name. I bit my lip as I followed Verity across the office space, trying to ignore how each step jarred my ribs and blinking against the bright light. A whole wall of the office was glass and there were skylights all over the place. Some people were working at computers while others were drawing at huge easels. One of the non-glass walls was lined with long racks from which a load of bikes were suspended, like a cycling work of art. There were large green plants dotted between the tables and hanging from the ceiling, and a large table in the centre of the office was covered with models of buildings – all made of white materials with clean lines and a unique, modern beauty. I wasn’t an artistic person, but even I could tell they were exceptional.

“Yo, V!” I heard shouted behind us, and turned to see the receptionist I remembered from last week jogging across the office. “Soz about that. Fell down on the old reception gig again. Mark needed an urgent spot of reiki.”

Most people in the office were dressed casually. Architecture was a creative industry and I wasn’t surprised by the lack of suits. But this girl was, yet again, taking casual to a new level. She no longer had the rash vest on, but was now sporting a sloppy jumper which fell off one shoulder revealing what looked to be a bikini top tied behind the back of her neck, along with jeans and flip flops. Her wavy blonde hair fell around her tanned, make-up free face. It looked as though she’d been swimming in the sea not long ago and had let her hair air dry, without making contact with a brush once.

“The ‘reception gig’ is in actual fact *your job*, Yaz,” Verity replied, not breaking her stride across the floor. “Mark did not need urgent Reiki. Nobody has *ever* needed urgent Reiki, because Reiki is a bunch of bullshit. What Mark wants is to get into your knickers. Why on earth the man would think that you rubbing his feet will naturally progress to polishing his knob I have no idea.”

We arrived in Verity’s office where Verity attempted to shut the door on Yaz, but Yaz pushed past her.

“Reiki is *not* bullshit and Mark does *not* want me to polish his knob,” Yaz said, giving Verity a grumpy look before her expression softened. “You’re terribly cross today and your balance of oestrogen to progesterone is off. I think someone needs a good shot of oxytocin ... aka a hug.” Arms open, she took a step towards Verity who retreated rapidly behind her desk with an alarmed expression on her face. Yaz sighed and rolled her eyes, then directed her attention at me.

“Well, I wanted to come and say hi,” she told me. “Sorry I left you to dragon lady. You never know when another complementary therapy emergency might crop up. I had to

give Dan a back massage in the copy room yesterday after his egg and bacon bap got taken by a seagull on his way back from Greggs.”

I blinked. There was a lot to unpack there, and I thought Verity may be right – Mark and this Dan most definitely wanted Yaz to polish their knobs. She was the most naturally beautiful girl I had ever seen in my life.

Verity cut in. “Yaz, I will remind you that I am, at the present time, your employer, and you cannot call me *dragon lady*, tell me I have a *stick up my arse*, or comment on my hormone levels.”

“Whatever, V.” Yaz turned back to me. “So, you here for the interview? Whatcha do? Bricks-and-mortar-loving-design-monkey? Money-fiddler?”

“She’s here for the tech support role,” Verity said. “Now if you can–”

“Hurrah for tech support!” Yaz shouted, punching the air. Punched the air ... for *IT*? Was she on drugs? “I’ll need your number so we add you into the WhatsApp. Monday is vegan curry night at The Raj just across the road and we can ...”

“Yaz,” Verity cut her off, her tone indicating that her patience may be waning. “I’m just *interviewing* Mia. We don’t even know if she’ll take the job yet. Slow down.”

Yaz frowned. “Why wouldn’t you take the job?” she asked, looking genuinely bewildered. Little did Verity know that I would take *any* job at this point. I’d gone beyond desperate a couple of nights ago. “Well,” she said, her smile back again, “have a pre-interview hug.”

“I–” Before I could say anything, Yaz had launched herself at me and I was engulfed in a tight hug. My arm and ribs protested and I felt the blood drain from my face but I managed to keep myself from emitting a low moan of pain.

“Yaz,” Verity clipped, having gone beyond annoyed now, that laser focus back on my pale face again. “Get. Out.”

“Okay, okay, it’s back to boss-lady-mode. Yeesh,” Yaz said as she pulled back, much to my relief. Her smile dropped when she took in my ashen face. “Hey,” she said, her tone now softer, “you okay there, love? Your aura’s gone all wonky.”

“Yaz,” Verity snapped.

“I’m fine,” I managed to get out, giving Yaz a small, probably unconvincing smile.

“Hmm,” Yaz said, tilting her head to the side as she studied me. “Do you–?”

“Now, Yaz,” Verity snapped and Yaz put her hands up in surrender, backing out of the office door.

“Don’t worry, Yaz isn’t a regular feature of the office,” Verity told me once we were alone. “She helps out when we’re short, or when she feels like the atmosphere in the office needs ‘readjusting’. You get used to her. Right, shall we start?”

After a few questions about my background (all the information was technically true, it was only the names of my old employer and, in fact, *my* name that were altered) Verity asked me to sit at her computer. The desktop was crowded with files and completely disorganised.

“What ... er ... what would you ...?”

“We need an overhaul of the system and advice on how to upgrade. The way we store all the old projects, our referencing system, our payroll, leave rota, it all needs to be ... oh!”

I had started tapping away at the keyboard as Verity was speaking and brought up the document filing system. I reorganised it, formulated a new system for accessing the files, downloaded a programme to sort the leave rota and made a start on the payroll. It took two minutes and fifteen seconds. Verity blinked at the transformed screen and then at me.

“Ah ... I–I thought that would take a bit longer if I’m honest.” She laughed. “That was supposed to be your first week of work. The desktop looks unrecognisable.”

I bit my lip and waited, aware that I may well have typed my way out of a job. Sorting this entire system *was* less than an hour's work, tops. I looked down at my hands and took a deep breath, despite what it cost me pain-wise. Verity cleared her throat.

"Right, jolly good," she said, her bright, no-nonsense tone back as she recovered from her surprise. "Let's go through to the conference room and have an actual bloody interview shall we? I'm sure we can tweak the job description a bit so that you have *some* work to do."

"V, what the fu—" the huge man who'd burst into the conference room started to say, then glanced at me and cleared his throat. "Sorry," he muttered, then turned back to Verity.

Max Hardcastle – eco architect of the moment. He'd made waves recently after appearing on *Grand Designs* with an affordable eco home and telling Kevin McCloud that designing affordable, environmentally friendly homes 'wasn't rocket science' and that most of the other projects featured on the programme were for 'reight poncy bastads who want to spend a grand on a shite tap'.

Kevin actually seemed to take to Max, as did the country as a whole – well at least the female half (maybe even some of the men if they were that way inclined). It didn't hurt that Max had the whole Sean Bean gorgeous-but-rough-around-the-edges Yorkshireman vibe going on. That clip of him talking about 'poncy bastads' and 'shite taps' had gone viral. Apparently, by unwittingly making architecture sexy Max had caused a huge increase in school leavers applying to study it at university. It was called The Max Effect.

But, despite his huge popularity, Verity had taken over most of the other interviews during the rest of the programme, telling Kevin that Max 'wasn't a people person'. I'd loved that episode of *Grand Designs* even though it always put Nate in a bad mood. He *hated* Max. Didn't have any time for "all that eco-design idiocy".

"What the chuffing hell is going on?" Max bellowed, his deep Yorkshire accented voice a stark contrast to Verity's. "I thought we discussed this in the last meeting?"

"Max," Verity said in a warning tone. "I'm in the middle of an interview. Can we talk later?"

Max threw his hands up in the air and I stifled a flinch. I wasn't good with large, aggressive men, or sudden movements. Irrational fear crawled its way up into my throat and I choked it back down with some effort.

"It's the bloody *interview* I want to talk about!" he said, scowling at Verity as he towered over the table. Up until then I had thought things were going pretty well. The name on my CV may have been false, but the CV itself was not: I could easily back up all my claims. I had my real documents with me in my backpack (along with *all* my other belongings – but nobody needed to know that). If Verity asked for them I would give them to her, but so far that hadn't been an issue. Verity had suggested that I could take on other duties as well as IT support (it had become clear that there was not enough work for just this). Although I was not keen to be facing the public in any capacity, I would do it if it meant I had an income. At this stage I wasn't ashamed to say I would do just about anything.

"We don't need owt IT support. *I* can do the IT support. It's a waste of bleeding money."

"Max," Verity said and I marvelled at her bravery. Her tone was more like that which you would use on a recalcitrant teen than a fully grown, pissed off, very adult man. "You are too busy to do that. We jolly well need you on the creative side exclusively and you know it. We—"

"Ugh!" he spat out, his head tipping back to look at the ceiling and his hands going into his thick, dark hair. I stared at him. Everything about him was so intimidating. He wasn't just tall, he had muscle bulk to him; you could see it, even under the scruffy jeans and ill-fitting jumper he was wearing.

Nate had been fit and had worked at it, but he didn't have half the physical bulk of Max. And I knew from personal experience just *how* strong Nate had been. In comparison, Max could squash me like a bug. I suppressed a shudder and shrank further back into my chair. Becoming invisible was a technique I had perfected over the years. "There's not enough work and we can't afford to hire another –"

"Lorraine's leaving at the end of the month and Yaz it barely here as it is. We can afford it."

I kept my eyes down and squeezed my hands together in my lap. I needed this job.

Max huffed and started pacing up and down the conference room. He reminded me of a caged tiger: huge, magnificent, and scary as hell.

"I don't want anyone messing with my system," he told Verity. "I've got it set up just the way I ruddy like it and–"

"There *is* no system, you stubborn arse," Verity snapped at him. "It's total chaos ... just like your mind."

I blinked and froze in my seat. For Verity to snap at a man *this* intimidating and *this* angry and call him an arse ... it blew my mind. Verity was a freaking Amazon.

Max huffed and threw himself into the nearest chair, crossing his arms over his chest. Despite his size he actually looked like a moody ten-year-old boy in that moment.

"I know where everything is," he muttered and Verity rolled her eyes.

"We need you actually being an *architect*. You know, that thing you spent ten plus years training for? I'd rather you concentrated on that." He huffed again and, much to my terror, focused his gaze on me, his blue/green eyes flashing with annoyance.

"No offence, kid," he said, and I felt my spine stiffen despite how scared of him I was. I knew I looked a lot younger than my twenty-eight years, but calling me a kid? Granted, I had become even skinnier over the last month, and the fact that my hair was dyed almost black instead of my natural sandy blonde (not to mention the dark eyeliner I'd taken to wearing) did give me look a bit of an emo, angsty edge. But I didn't look *that* young. I pulled on the sleeves of high-necked grey jumper, which I'd paired with my black skinny jeans, and tucked my scuffed ballet flats under the chair. The outfit was actually all designer. It had cost a fortune originally. But now the cashmere of the jumper was bobbled and my shoes were scuffed. Unfortunately, I had a sum total of two outfits at my disposal at the moment. And the leggings, hoodie and trainers in my backpack (also designer, but also well worn) wouldn't have looked much better.

Max narrowed his eyes at me and continued, "But are you trying to pull a fast one? You must know as well as I do that there's not enough work for a full time employee to do this bollocks."

Oh God. He wasn't going to employ me. I summoned up all my courage and took a deep breath in which became stuttered due to the pain.

"I–I can do whatever you need," I whispered, and then cleared my throat, willing my voice to be stronger. "And you can cut the hourly rate if that works better. I don't–"

"Have you guys discussed pay yet?" Max asked, his eyebrows going up and his gaze flicking from me to Verity.

"No," Verity said. Max's eyes narrowed on me again.

"If you haven't discussed pay yet then how do you know you'd take less?"

I bit my lip. If I told them I'd take *anything* then I'd look desperate and a little weird. And I was damn sure they wouldn't be employing me if they knew that the backpack at my feet contained all my worldly belongings. Or that I'd slept in a homeless shelter last night and a bus stop the night before. The address I'd put on my employment forms was fake, picked randomly from a map of the area.

“Er, I ...” I looked down at my hands again and clasped them together when I realised they were shaking. “What about your Building Information Modelling? Do you need help with that?” Building Information Modelling, or BIM, is an intelligent, 3D model-based programme that gives architecture, engineering, and construction people the tools to plan, design, construct, and manage buildings and infrastructure much more easily. It had revolutionized the industry and companies that didn’t fully embrace it were in danger of being left behind.

Verity tipped her head to the side, her eyes sparking with interest. “We outsource our BIM, but if I’m honest not everyone has taken to it.” She gave Max a strong bit of side-eye. “We could do with more support. Is that something you could help with?”

“I bloody hate BIM,” Max mumbled and my heart sank. It was rare nowadays, but there were architects out there still reluctant to modernise. The only thing left to do was put aside my pride. To be honest I was surprised there was any of it left.

“I really *need* this job,” I said quietly at my hands. “I don’t have to do just IT ... I can do anything else; I *will* do anything else. Please, *please* give me a chance.”

Chapter 2

Teen emo freak

Max

I was in a bad mood. Not that this was out of the ordinary. By all accounts I was a moody guy. *Grumpy northern arsehole* – that was Heath’s favourite way to describe me. But this situation was starting to annoy me. The image of those wide, dark, chocolate-coloured eyes accompanied by that whispered *please* had been going round and round in my head since I’d interrupted that bloody interview in the conference room.

It was the edge of desperation behind her whispered words that had got to me, and I’d relented on the job.

She was good.

I had to give her that.

She was so ruddy good that she’d sucked in not only Verity, but me as well. Some might think I was a daft bugger, but I did *not* get suckered, and I did not like to be made to look like a mug. But there was something about her that was so ... fragile. In that moment in the conference room she’d reminded me of the hedgehog I’d found as a child behind the hayloft. It had been injured and couldn’t really walk. I’d carried it home, its prickles piercing my hands until blood was running down my arms. Mam had rolled her eyes at yet another stray: the hedgehog was one of a long line of strays I’d rescued on the farm – the most recent being a fox that had been caught in a trap set by me da. Being a sensitive, animal-loving child was not ideal when you lived on a farm and your father would rather drown a litter of kittens than find them new homes. True story. But when it came to the hedgehog, Mam relented after seeing the pain I’d gone through to get the thing home. She helped me contact the RSPCA to see what to feed it and how we should keep it, and had set up a box for it in the airing cupboard. The hedgehog may have become stronger over time, but it did not appreciate my efforts as its rescuer, nor did it think I was anything but a threat. I’d kept it for two weeks and when I let it go it shot off into the undergrowth without a second look.

So, whilst it might be a tad bizarre to compare a grown woman to a hedgehog, that didn’t change the fact that Mia’s eyes, so full of fear and hopelessness, did remind me of that animal. She looked hounded. On that basis I’d shrugged and told Verity *fine* and to *just set it up*. But the more I thought about it, the more I started to feel something was off about this girl. Something I couldn’t put my finger on.

Every time her full name was mentioned she looked down and to the left. Why would she lie about her name? And that backpack she had with her ... it was tattered and dirty. Not just a bit scuffed, but covered in real dirt. Why would she bring that to an interview with her? After I’d noticed the bag I also noticed that she never lost contact with it. Even in the conference room it was tucked behind her legs, and as she left the building she had been clutching it so tightly that her knuckles were white.

Not. Normal.

And her hair colour. It was so stark. It didn’t match her skin tone at all. The whole emo look screamed teenager. But I’d read her CV and her date of birth told me a different story. She didn’t look a day over sixteen. Was she lying about her age to get the job? There was no denying that Mia was good at IT. That much she did not lie about. But she was absolutely taking us for a ride if she had convinced Verity there was enough tech support work for her to do here. It was a waste of bloody money and I hated it when we wasted money on pointless shite – that was something I did have that in common with me da. Yes I was a tight-arse, but there was no use pissing money away whilst you were trying to keep a business afloat.

Although I had to admit that despite Mia only being here for three days, the new system she'd established *did* seem to be making my life easier – not that I'd ever admit that to Verity. But now that she'd rearranged the whole system, run all the searches we needed running and analysed all the data that needed sorting, there was precious little *IT support work* for her to get on with. So, this morning I'd found her sitting behind the reception desk, looking like she was going to vomit and flinching every time the phone rang. Yaz had buggered off to the sea as soon as the wind picked up. Typical of my bloody sister.

And ... Mia hadn't made me any tea.

Yaz might be useless in general, but she made a decent brew and she always saved me the chocolate digestives. The absence of my morning tea and biscuits had put me in the mother of all bad moods – and it was all this skinny, little, lying teenager's fault. My phone rang and I made a grab for it, needing the distraction.

"What?" I grunted, holding the phone to my ear with one hand as I checked the latest design with the other.

"Nice greeting, you grumpy git," Heath said in his normal happy tone. Bastard was in a perpetual good mood, which always managed to piss me off more. "Do you want to have lunch today or not? You were going to show me the plans again. I *am* a client you know." Heath had bought a small bungalow overlooking the sea that we were converting into a massive house with an entire wall of glass looking out over the clifftop. It was costing him an insane amount, but it was safe to say he weren't short a bob or two.

I rolled my eyes. "Only if you're paying. And only if we can go to the Badger and Ferret and not some swank place that serves me hal-fucking-loumi."

Heath laughed. "Well, you're on rare form today."

I sighed. "Look I'm swamped here and t'op it off your sister's hired some fucking teen emo freak and stuck her on reception. I've already had a complaint from a client, and she's too much of a lazy article to even make me a brew. You know how I get without me tea."

Something caught my eye in my peripheral vision and I swivelled on my chair to see teen emo freak blinking at me from the doorway.

Ah shite.

"Verity wouldn't have hired someone dodgy. My sister has many flaws but she's a scarily accurate judge of character. Ever thought of making your own tea? And maybe even ... I don't know ... make one for the new member of staff who's probably nervous, you massively entitled bastard." During Heath's mini rant, Mia scuttled into the room, giving me as wide a berth as possible, and deposited a cup of tea on the very edge of my desk before turning and running out of the door. No woman had ever actually run away from me before. I knew I was rough around the edges, but I'd never scared them into a sprinting retreat.

"Arse," I muttered. Her wounded expression now lodging into my brain along with those chocolate-brown eyes and that desperate *please* for the interview.

"So articulate as always," Heath said.

"Listen, I'm up t'eyeballs today. Let's make it one o'clock tomorrow, okay? You can come here and meet me seeing as your lazy arse in't at work where it belongs," I said.

"My lazy arse has just been on seven straight night shifts you bloody pr–"

I ended the call before Heath could finish, then stared at the plan on my desk for a moment before closing my eyes and rubbing the centre of my chest, which for some reason was feeling too tight. I refused to believe it was because I might have hurt teen emo's feelings. I shook my head to try to clear it and settled down to the design.

Mia

I stared at myself in the mirror of the bathroom. A small, dark-haired, deathly pale girl with dark circles under her eyes stared back at me.

Teen emo freak.

That was what I looked like. Max Hardcastle might be a complete bastard, but at least he was an honest one. I felt my lips start to tremble as I gripped the sides of the sink, willing the moisture I could feel building behind my eyes back. I hadn't cried since That Night, and I wasn't going to start now just because some arrogant twat thought I was nothing. Something to be sneered at. A freak.

"Get it together," I whispered to myself in the mirror. "You've had worse insults chucked at you for *years*. You can handle this. Horrible men are not a new phenomenon. He can't hurt you. You're in control of your life now."

I sighed and let my head fall forward, closing my eyes. It didn't *feel* like I was in control if I was honest. I'd been lucky last night that the shelter had still been taking in people when I made it there. The three-mile walk from the office seemed to take forever. What would I do tonight if there wasn't space? Verity had asked me to stay until after everyone had left so that I could lock up. She said I'd be paid until seven, and whilst I needed the extra money, I really didn't want to stay any later than five and jeopardise a space at the shelter. But Verity had been so kind that I didn't feel like I could turn her down.

I swallowed past the lump in my throat and then threw my head back, giving my body a quick shake and telling myself to woman up. Once I was sure no more tears were threatening I pushed open the door and started along the corridor. Feeling stressed about the amount of time I'd spent hiding in the toilet, I glanced down at my watch and picked up my pace until I walked smack into what felt like a solid brick wall. Pain flared up my side. I stumbled back and, just as I thought I was going to go down on my arse, a pair of huge hands shot out and engulfed my upper arms, keeping me on my feet. I froze and looked up and *up* until my eyes met his blue/green gaze.

Max towered over me and didn't look any less annoyed than he had been earlier. A muscle was ticking in his jaw and it caused a spike of adrenaline to shoot through my body. To my absolute horror I made an involuntary small noise of fear. A sound I had made many *many* times before. One I swore I would never make again. I was furious that it had escaped my lips. It was weak and pathetic. *I* was weak. But that feeling of being trapped in someone else's grasp had invaded me again, triggering such a violent reaction that I wrenched free of his hands and took a few rapid steps back, searching wildly for a way past him in the narrow corridor which his big body was currently filling.

Max

I blinked as I watched Mia stumble away from me. The girl had torn out of my hands like I was a serial killer. For fuck's sake I'd stopped her from breaking her arse on the floorboards after she'd careened into me like a bat out of hell. Why was she looking at me like I was the devil incarnate? And that terrible noise she'd made. It'd gone right through me. What did she have to be scared of?

"Hey, you okay?" I asked. If I could have gentled my voice I would have but it was tricky to make my low, gruff tones any softer.

"Fine," she whispered. I had to strain to hear it, even in the silence of the corridor. She took another step back and I felt myself frowning. The way she was backing away from me felt ... wrong. It made my chest feel tight again. "Excuse me," she whispered again, looking more and more like a trapped animal as she tried to peer around me.

"You should look where you're going," I told her, immediately regretting my words and wishing that I could pull them back. A perceived reprimand from me was not going to

help this situation but, once again, I had let my quick temper get the better of me. I was pissed off that I was feeling like a monster when *she'd* been the one to run into *me*.

“S-s-sorry,” she stuttered and I felt like an utter bastard. Her hands were shaking at her sides, but when she noticed me glancing down at them she balled them into small fists.

I sighed but it came out as more of a huff. Mia flinched then backed up another step. Being smart enough to realise that I wasn't going to get anywhere with her in this confined space, I stepped to the side, trying to give her as much room as possible. As soon as she saw the opening Mia sprinted past me. Shoving my hands into my pockets, I scowled after her rapidly retreating back. I hadn't handled that well. I shook my head to clear it. The last thing I needed at the moment was to be worrying over some child-woman. Not when I had to concentrate on winning the biggest contract of my career. I'd wait until she had calmed down and then I'd apologise. And, in the meantime, I would try not to allow that small sound of terror she'd made ruin my concentration for the day, or make my chest feel any tighter.

Chapter 3

Do you two know each other?

Max

“Hey, big man,” Heath smiled at me as he strolled into the open plan office. “Got you your fave sickly pseudo-coffee. No whipped cream I’m afraid but I convinced them to give you extra chocolate sprinkles.” A ripple of laughter went through the office floor – only quieting when I scowled across at the cheeky buggers.

Everyone found it hilarious that big, gruff, northern Max liked mochas instead of ‘real coffee’. Apparently men like me should be main-lining black Americanos all day to maintain their alpha personas.

“You’re hilarious,” I said dryly as I snatched the mocha.

I rolled my eyes as Yaz giggled from her yoga position in the middle of the office floor.

“Good for you, bro,” she called out. Apparently two of my junior architects needed some *urgent centring*, and so were now with Yaz copying her downward dog. There were a number of things that wound me up about this situation. Firstly, there was no reason for Yaz to even *be* in the office today. Secondly, the blokes she was *centring* had no interest whatsoever in yoga – they were far more preoccupied with my sister’s arse, which was currently up in the air for all to see. Thirdly, she had laid yoga mats out in the middle of the office space, obstructing any movement in my supposedly free-flow environment. As Yaz transferred from downward dog to an upward one – my employee’s gazes went from her arse to her ample chest at lightening speed and I rolled my eyes. “It just shows how comfortable you are in your masculinity,” she continued. “Don’t fall into the trap of societal norms. Embrace your feminine side as well. Fight the patriarchy.”

I was so bleeding tired of my goddamn sister hanging out in the office.

“Yazmin,” Heath addressed her. “Hard at work as always.”

“Bugger off, Heath,” Yaz said, her smile dying as she stared up at him.

“Sorry, sorry,” Heath said, holding his hands up and backing away. “Do go back to your little floorshow. Keeping the troops happy and all that.”

Yaz’s face reddened as she scowled at Heath and I pulled him away before there could be any further bloodshed. Heath seemed to turn on the charm for everyone but my sister. They’d been at each other’s throats for years. Yaz was definitely the exception to his rule. Then again, my sister seemed to be the exception to every rule.

The walk to my office was slowed by Heath waving at and charming the rest of my staff – the great, personable show-off. Everyone loved Heath. He had the same outrageously posh but charming vibe as his sister, and the same immaculate, cutting-edge dress sense, that gave them both the air of having just stepped out of *GQ* magazine. Even I could admit that the bugger was good looking. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I did alright with the lasses (or at least I had done, before everything went to shite), but Heath’s perfectly styled (the vain article) hair, clean-shaven face and open expression was more appealing than my scruffy clothes, messy hair, stubble and perpetual scowl. Heath was pleasantly muscular where I was just plain huge, always had been – one of the consequences of all the childhood physical labour I’d endured growing up.

We were unlikely friends, but for some reason the git had taken a shine to me from the start. After Mam left Da when I was ten, and remarried a doctor, my life had changed dramatically. I’d gone from living on a bleak, northern farm with a cold, abusive father to a life of relative luxury down south with a kind gentle stepfather and then a new sister a year later. When it had then emerged that I was academically gifted, instead of dismissing me as a

smartarse (something Da would definitely have done), my stepfather had arranged for all sorts of testing and put me forward for entrance exams to a whole range of posh schools. I'd managed to get a scholarship to one of the top boarding schools in the country, however, it turned out that being a chospy northern chancer didn't go down too well in one of those posh establishments. If it hadn't been for Heath and Verity – who were twins in the same year as me and had buddied up with me for some reason from the first week – I would have had a pretty miserable time of it. See, Verity and Heath were from up north like me, but they weren't proper Yorkshire – they were the type of northerners that lived in an actual castle (yes, *castle*) and spoke the Queen's English. Heath and Verity's parents had been appalled by me. I think that was the main reason Heath liked me so much – he always did relish winding those buggers up.

So, I had been adopted into their fold as an 'honorary triplet', and, seeing as within a term they practically ruled that school, everyone else had to follow suit. For some reason they both thought my scowls and grumpiness were delightful. Heath used to joke that being my friend was like culturing bacteria – all you needed to do was provide the right medium for me to flourish. Meaning that I had to be around buggers I liked in order to have a laugh. My tolerance for dickheads was, and still is, very low.

"I'm doing this as a favour to you, so you might want to tone down the pain in the arse routine," I grumbled as I led Heath through to my office. Most of the floor was open plan, maximising the light coming in from the skylights and floor-to-ceiling windows. My office only had glass for walls. Verity had one very similar to mine, but she tended to keep her door open, encouraging anyone to walk in at any time.

My door was invariably shut.

"Oh, I'm frightfully sorry," Heath said through a chuckle. "I thought I was paying you, quite a lot actually, to build me a house."

"A carbon neutral, state-of-the-art, architect-designed, *single* house, knobhead. Something we don't do anymore, 'cept for the likes of you."

Heath's grin only grew wider. "Oh of *course*. You're too much of a big deal now to build itty bitty houses for little people like me."

"Exactly." Since the business had expanded we'd only taken on big projects: designing eco-hotels, wings of museums, eco-office buildings, carbon neutral villages. "And yes I *am* a big deal. My time is precious. So if you could ... Heath?"

We had both moved to sit in my office with me at my desk and Heath on the other side. But something had caught Heath's eye beyond the glass wall. His grin fell and he pushed up onto his feet abruptly.

"Who is that?" he asked. I followed the direction of Heath's gaze and saw Mia sitting at a monitor to our left, typing at the computer, her fingers flying over the keyboard at a furious pace and a small frown of concentration marring her forehead.

"Oh, that's the emo lass I was complaining about the other day. The one V hired."

Heath took a step towards the glass as he shoved his hands into his pockets. His mouth was set in a grim line and a muscle was ticking in his jaw. I moved from behind my desk to come and stand beside him.

"How long has she been working here?" he asked and I blinked in confusion. Heath sounded so serious. What was his problem? Since when did he care who we employed?

"This is Mia's third week I think. I –"

"Mia?" Heath looked away from her for moment and frowned at me. "Her name is *Mia*?"

"Er ... yes, why do you–?" I trailed off as Mia's brown eyes lifted to look up at us. She only spared me a second of eye contact, which was more than she'd given me over the

last week, but when she glanced at Heath her eyes widened and her lips parted. She recognised him.

“What the fuck is going on, Hea-?” My words cut off as Mia and Heath both moved at the same time. She pushed back from the workstation and sprang to her feet. He turned on his heel and strode to the door of my office. Mia glanced at me again and I saw fear in her expression. It was like looking at a cornered animal again. As Heath approached her she looked so horrified and vulnerable that I decided I’d had enough, and stalked out of the office right on Heath’s heels.

Mia was moving away from Heath now – half walking, half jogging. I suspected the only reason she wasn’t flat out running was so that she didn’t draw too much attention to herself. That much I’d definitely noticed over the last two weeks – Mia did *not* like attention. At every turn she would try to fade into the background. When she wasn’t sorting out other people’s IT issues at their desks, like just now, or being forced onto reception (which Verity had put a stop to after realising Mia was about as welcoming as me) she stuck to a monitor she’d chosen at the very back of the office space, furthest away from the windows and me. Since the ‘emo freak’ incident last week, she’d successfully avoided me to an almost unnatural degree. Despite that, every morning there was a cup of tea waiting for me with a couple of chocolate digestives next to it, which I knew were from her. It made me feel like even more of an arse than I had before.

Even though she was jogging, Heath’s legs were longer. He caught up with her easily. Yaz chose that moment to perform an expansive yoga position across the corridor, blocking my way, so I had to negotiate around the adjacent desk.

Heath touched Mia’s elbow as she was moving past the creative team, but then pulled his hand back when she yanked away from him. He instead moved around her to block her path to the exit. Both his hands were held up in front of him and he was pushing them down in a placating gesture. He asked her something, which I couldn’t make out, and she shook her head.

“What the hell is going on?” I asked as I approached, drawing the attention of a fair few of the junior architects around us. Heath flashed me an annoyed look.

“I just need to have a brief conversation with ... *Mia* for a second,” he said, the annoyance in his expression fading as he looked back at her, replaced by concern. “Just for a moment. Do you mind if we use your office, Max?”

“Do you two know each other?” I asked. Mia shook her head and crossed her arms over her chest in a defensive gesture. Heath sighed.

“Max, now is not the time to go all talkative on me, old chap. I need to speak to your employee privately in your office for a moment. It’s nothing to do with her work here so it doesn’t concern you.” Mia’s lips trembled and I felt the strangest surge of protectiveness towards her.

I stepped around to face Heath, positioning myself so I was between him and Mia, and I put my hands on my hips.

“It doesn’t look to me like she wants to talk to you, mate,” I said, my gaze flitting between them in confusion.

“Five minutes, Mia,” he said, peering around me so he could make eye contact with her. His voice was softer than I think I’d ever heard it before. “I’d much rather we discussed this *privately*.” I glanced back at Mia and saw her swallow and close her eyes briefly. Her shoulders drooped and then she gave a short nod.

“You mind, Max?” Heath asked, his determined gaze locking with mine. I looked between Heath and Mia and frowned.

“Five minutes,” I muttered, starting to move aside so that Mia could pass, but then pausing before she had rounded me.

“Are ... ?” I trailed off and cleared my throat. “Are you okay with this? Because I can –”

“It’s fine,” she said, cutting me off with her rapid, barely audible words. She was staring at my shirt collar and I had the irrational urge to put my fingers under her chin and force her to make eye contact. Which was the last bastard thing she needed. This woman was turning me into a right nutter. “Really,” she said when I didn’t move to the side. “I don’t mind.”

Heath swept out his arm and Mia scuttled off in front of him to the office. When they were both inside, Heath glanced out at me standing in the middle of the space with my hands on my hips, and shut the door behind him.

“Haven’t you lot got owt better to do?” I growled at my employees who were still watching me. They averted their gazes and restarted their conversations. With a grunt I moved over to the kitchen area to put the kettle on, all the while keeping an eye on Heath and Mia through the glass.

Mia

“How much function have you got back in that arm now?” Dr Markham asked me, and I sighed.

“Look, Dr Markham, I’m surprised you even remember me. You must treat thousands of –”

“Please, call me Heath, Mia ... or Helen, or whatever your name is.”

“Helen is my middle name.” I shifted on my feet and looked out of the glass. My gaze caught on *his*. Of course it did. Max was staring at us and scowling whilst he took a sip of what I knew would be oversweet tea.

“I will *never* forget the state you were in that night,” Heath’s earnest tone was roughened with emotion and caused me to blink, thankfully breaking eye contact with Max before I focused on the man across from me. “The whole department was frantic when we found out you’d left. You needed an inpatient stay, Mia. Your head injury and loss of consciousness alone would have warranted it, but combined with the rib fractures putting you at high risk of pneumonia, *and* your shoulder, which needed to be seen by an orthopaedic surgeon, it was a terrible idea to leave.”

“You put the joint back into place,” I said, my eyes flicking to the door of the office to make sure nobody was about to enter. “It felt fine. I–”

“Mia, the x-ray was reported as a *fracture* dislocation. If you’d have stayed in, or even given us your real contact details you would have known that, and you could have–”

“Fracture?” I whispered. Suddenly the ongoing pain in my left shoulder was making sense. I had thought it was just because all the ligaments and muscles and stuff had taken a battering when they shoved it back in its socket.

Heath closed his eyes and let out a puff of air. “Yes, *fracture*. It’s too late for you to wear a sling now, but you need proper physiotherapy – otherwise you won’t get full function back. How far can you lift up your arm forward and out to the side?”

I shrugged. The answer was not far at all. I could reach stuff that was waist-height, but anything higher and I was scuppered.

Heath stepped closer. “There are people you can talk to. I’ve got a number ...” He started digging in his wallet then produced a small card, giving it to me. “I understand you might not want to go to the police.” I flinched at the mention of police and my eyes flew from the card to Heath’s.

“No police,” I said, forcing my voice to be stronger than I felt.

“Okay, okay.” Heath held his hands up, palms forward again. “But these people aren’t police. They’re confidential and they can help you.”

I tucked the card into my jeans pocket and nodded. If I agreed with this man maybe he would leave me alone. One of my eyes had been swollen shut that night, but I remembered his face. His eyes had been so kind, his voice so gentle as he'd asked me what happened. After the brutality of that day I'd found Dr Markham's kindness overwhelming. I'd broken down in tears and I hadn't known how to stop, even though the salt stung the cut under my eye and the heaving sobs had been agony for my ribs and shoulder. I never cried, not normally, but I think that day I'd reached the end of my endurance. He'd wrapped an arm around me so, so tenderly, being so careful of my injuries. I never normally tolerated that level of physical contact from someone I didn't know, but that day it had been like I *needed* it. It had made me cry even harder. Nobody had touched me with any kind of tenderness in months before that, maybe even years.

"Thank you," I whispered, forcing myself to reach out and touch his arm to show him how much I meant the words. "You ... you were kind. It made a difference."

Heath closed his eyes and let out a long breath.

"You're not going to ring them are you?"

I looked away.

"Would you at least have physiotherapy for your shoulder? It might not be too late to get some of the function back."

I bit my lip. My shoulder *was* restricting me. I couldn't afford to not be able to use my right arm properly. That wasn't logical and, when possible, I tried to always use logic. I nodded slowly and Heath smiled. Once upon a time, a smile like that from such an attractive man would have affected me – now I just felt ... numb.

