



# ONLY EVER ONE CHOICE



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# CHAPTER 1

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Ashleigh von Bronckhorst, hello 🖐️ How are you? How have you been?

I suspect this is out of the blue, given the way our lives have progressed over the past few years. As you already know, I'm an over-thinker and a planner, but I was feeling brave, so I've sent this message. I hope you've been keeping well and safe and healthy, and living your best life.

So, there's actually something rather delicate I wanted to talk to you about. It's kind of an apology wrapped in an explanation, though I'm sure the last thing you want is to rehash any of our high school/university drama.

But, if you're willing, I have a lot more clarity about my own self, and talking to you is part of my whole dealing-with-it process, bravery be damned. If you have time, of course. If you're not interested, that's also all right. Just know that I am sorry for being such a little shit back then. There was a lot going on that I didn't fully grasp or realise, and I have regrets, obviously. You were a very important friendship for me, which I am grateful for, and I sometimes hate the way things were left.

They can stay left, of course, but I think you might get a kick out of what I've learned about myself. Until then, I wish you all the good things.

Take care,  
Mikaila

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IT TAKES A FULL TWENTY-FOUR hours to receive a reply.

In that time, Mikaila Mohamed obsesses about every scenario possible, ugly to perfect, and she's certain her heart can't handle the stress of the unknown. She knew it was a bad idea. She really should have just left well enough alone, but she couldn't resist the temptation when Ashleigh's the one who opened the proverbial window by following Mikaila on Instagram completely out of the blue just three weeks ago.

Just when Mikaila's accepted there won't ever be a response, Ashleigh replies in a burst of three messages, and she has to force herself not to react in any noticeable way as she reads the previews.

It's fine.

She's fine.

Mikaila doesn't reply right away. Instead, she pockets her phone and goes to make sure her sister's children haven't created a mess of the bathroom during their mission to get clean. It's already been half an hour since she sent them both to bath, so she's hopeful they've actually used soap. She's not in the mood for either of them failing a sniff-test, though it'll probably help keep her distracted from the discourse currently waiting for her in her inbox.

She's done this twice before: sent a similar message to a particular girl, and what she's learned is that it never gets easier. This time is different, though, because Ashleigh has always been a bit of an outlier and, as an engineer by degree, Mikaila hates that Ashleigh doesn't quite fit into the empirical and semi-scientific evidence she's managed to collect for herself.

This time around is also different because Ashleigh doesn't do the expected and react the same way as the other two girls on Mikaila's short, mental list. At this point, she shouldn't even be surprised. She should have known because, instead of just agreeing to talk over the phone, Ashleigh rather asks where Mikaila is currently in the world.

As if she wants to meet up and have this all-important talk in person.

*That* is severely unexpected.

The first time Mikaila had the type of conversation she intends to have with Ashleigh, it was through a series of extremely long texts. The second was over a two-hour phone call that she remembers somewhat fondly. Talking to Ashleigh in person would be uncharted waters, but Mikaila is trying to be brave. She *needs* this, so she already knows she's going to agree.

To both her immense relief and mild disappointment, Ashleigh has already revealed she's nowhere near where she is at this moment, because why would she be? Last Mikaila heard, Ashleigh was somewhere in Europe completing her own master's degree.

But they'll be in the same city in two weeks' time, and that creates an entire host of possibilities—and complications—for Mikaila. She'll be travelling back to university then, and Ashleigh will also be in Cape Town doing goodness knows what.

They can actually meet up.

They can finally talk. In person.

But first, Mikaila has to make sure Sufjan and Samir haven't actually killed each other in their mission to get clean. Trust her sister to birth such adorable heathens. At just eight and six years old respectively, these hyperactive boys have kept their family held together in ways she hopes they never quite comprehend.

As the only adult currently home, she's in charge of preparing dinner by default. Any kind of pasta dish is always Sufjan's favourite, so Mikaila already spent an hour earlier in the afternoon preparing a chicken and broccoli pasta bake.

As she moves through the house, she can hear the boys yelling at each other from the second living room. Truthfully, this isn't how she expected to be spending her end-of-year holidays, essentially being a

supplemental parent to her nephews, but here she is: coming up with ways to keep them occupied, running bath time, and ensuring they don't pick up on any of her bad habits.

Well, somebody had to step up now that their father has decided to fuck off for good.

Mikaila isn't entirely bitter about it because the man was kind of useless from the get-go. Barely a father and barely a husband. Barely a *man*, if she's honest. She selfishly wants to tell her sister, *I told you so*, but she knows she won't. She always had her reservations about Ahmed, who worked with her father for three years before he managed to get Zora to fall for him.

Well, really, he mostly hung around her with no intention of marriage until it became inappropriate for them to be spending so much time together. In the end, Mikaila knows Zora was basically pressured into the marriage, even if she could have vetoed the entire thing.

Mikaila will hand it to Ahmed, though, because he saw an opportunity to get into this family, and he took it.

Money is such a powerful motivator.

In Mikaila's memories, they didn't always have a lot of it. Of course, her parents made sure she didn't *feel* it, because she went to some of the best schools and wanted for nothing, but she's learned many dark truths about her own childhood as she's grown older.

There's no escaping that she was raised as a rather sheltered child, which was by her parents' mutual design, but now she's living this somewhat adult life. She's less insulated, her eyes finally open to the world, and now she *knows* things she really wishes she didn't.

Now, it's a well-known detail that this little faction of the Mohamed/Parker family is well-off, only because her parents have spent years establishing themselves and creating something of an empire that's meant to be passed on to Mikaila and Zora.

Mikaila is still trying to figure out to tell her mother she doesn't *want* it.

When Mikaila finds her nephews, they're both lying on the carpet of the second living room and watching *Henry Danger*, arguing about whatever hijinks are occurring on screen. She can see the appeal of the

show. She, herself, was brought up on *The Suite Life* and *Wizards of Waverley Place*, which were both such staples of her childhood.

It all reminds her of how old she is. She can practically feel the years creeping into her bones. Surely, twenty-five is too young to feel this weary and out-of-sorts. She's deeply aware that she has her whole life ahead of her—near-death experiences do tend to alter your view on life—but it's always just felt so difficult. Harder, still, because now there's this added complexity to how she's going to be navigating the rest of said whole life, and she just wants everything to stop.

Maybe just slow down. If only for a little while. Give her a bit of a breather.

It's definitely not the first time she's wished for a *pause* button—don't even get her started on her final year of high school—but life hasn't yet been kind enough to award her one.

Sufjan must be hungry, because he bounces to his feet as soon as he sees Mikaila step into the doorway, eyes hopeful for some food. It's pretty damn cute, really, and she can't even be bitter this is now a part of her obligation to her family.

"All clean?" she asks, and receives several nods from them both. "Let's smell."

Sufjan skips towards her, already lifting his shirt. Mikaila bends to sniff, making sure to exaggerate the sound until she actually snorts, which makes them both giggle. Satisfied, she moves on to Samir, who can't even keep still long enough for her to do it again. She ends up tickling his side, which makes him recoil with a little shriek.

"Okay," she says as she straightens again. "It seems you *don't* smell terrible."

With that, she sends them to wash their hands while she gets their food dished up, warmed, and placed at the kitchen table. She'll wait to eat with her mother and sister when they get home from work—whenever that is.

In the meantime, Mikaila sits with the boys while they eat, engaging with them enough that they don't quite notice all the vegetables she's managed to sneak onto their plates. They're actually rather good about their greens, and Mikaila reasons it's because they imitate quite

well. As long as the adults are eating their vegetables, then so too will the little people.

It's really quite simple, but also quite terrifying. What if they end up imitating whatever is considered the wrong thing? That's one of the reasons some parents claim to be so against people like her, isn't it?

After they've eaten, she oversees as they clear their own plates, then sends them to watch television until it's time for bed or their mother gets home—whichever comes first. Mikaila opts to watch *The Food Network* in the main living room, mostly because she doesn't want to watch the *Disney Channel*, but also because she needs the privacy to send a suitable response to Ashleigh.

Mikaila wouldn't even be able to explain how she managed to get to this point in her life. She hasn't spoken to Ashleigh von Bronckhorst in such a long time, and now here she is messaging her—on Instagram, of all places—and potentially about to make plans to meet up as if they don't have a complicated history.

It doesn't feel real, if Mikaila's being honest. They met when they were only twelve years old on their very first day of boarding school, both a year young, which is probably why the memory is still so vivid to her. She remembers Ashleigh's smile was also tinged with nerves, something shared between them, and Mikaila cites *that* feeling as what would lead to her eventual demise. The two of them, in the trenches together, both knowing they weren't going through it all alone.

That's been a theme of her life since she matriculated from high school: flocking to people who are significant to the way she lives her life and holding onto them as tightly as possible. She knows how it feels to lose people who are important to her, and she's not willing to go through it again. And again.

She also recalls that Ashleigh cried their first night—and every night for the rest of the week—and Mikaila had no idea what to do. They barely knew each other, and then Ashleigh was crying, sitting on her own bed across from Mikaila, and she realised belatedly that she was supposed to do something. Anything other than just staring at her.

So, bridging that first gap between them, she went to sit beside the strange girl. She didn't touch her, just sat close enough for her

presence to register as something like comfort. The difference between them, sometimes Mikaila likes to think, is that Mikaila is a younger sister and Ashleigh is an older one.

Mikaila said, "It's going to be okay," with all the belief she felt in the moment, which wasn't all that much, but she's always been good at portraying exactly what other people need from her. "You'll see."

In that moment, Ashleigh probably set both their fates in motion when she tearfully asked, "Promise?"

Mikaila remembers nodding, willing to say anything and everything to clear her crystal blue eyes of her tears. It's constantly amazing that she's never been able to get that singular image out of her head: lines of water on freckled cheeks, strawberry blonde hair framing a perfect, round face.

"I promise," Mikaila said, finally taking her hand and giving it a squeeze.

Which is really how and why it's so baffling to her that she's managed to reach this point in her life where Ashleigh feels like a stranger. If she knew then what she knows now, she never would have left her side of the room.

No.

That's not true. She knows it's not.

The truth is she actually hasn't talked to Ashleigh in four and a half years. Not since before Mikaila turned twenty-one and Ashleigh explicitly told her they were essentially done being in each other's lives.

Perhaps that's something they could talk about.

In person.

While Mikaila didn't expect to *see* Ashleigh, she's not going to say no to the opportunity to get all she needs off her chest. She really is taking a leap into the unknown when she mentions she'll be back in Cape Town the first week of January, if that works for Ashleigh.

It feels less terrifying to send this second message, but Ashleigh replies just as quickly, already sending Mikaila's heart into overdrive. They haven't even met yet and it's already going to be the death of her.



They work it out, though, both of them agreeing to make more concrete plans once they're both in the same city, all within seven exchanged messages.

It suddenly feels as if she's run a marathon.

Now, with the prospective meeting a real possibility, Mikaila almost doesn't want to leave her hometown of Kimberley anymore. Which is silly, because she's wanted to be back in Cape Town for the last few days. Weeks. Possibly since the moment she first arrived at her family's home just over four weeks ago, finally able to travel freely after months of lockdown.

Don't get her wrong, she loves her family very much, but they're very stressful. Particularly her mother's side, who can be rather overbearing now that her mother is a widow. They're under the impression they're now entitled to claim her back from her late husband's family, but Janet Mohamed has always belonged to only herself. Never to her husband, never to his side of the family, and never to her own family.

If anything, she belongs to her children.

Either way, Mikaila is looking forward to having her own space back once she leaves. She misses her bed and her things. She misses what she considers her home, though she wouldn't dare call it that in front of her mother.

Interactions have been rather tense about the fact she's still living in Cape Town, particularly in the last year, and Mikaila is not willing to poke the bear until she absolutely has to.

It does help that she can tell her mother, "I work better in Cape Town," and know that her mother will let her go, albeit reluctantly. It's not that it's not true, because it is. It's just that there isn't that much more work left to do on her master's dissertation, but that isn't something she's willing to divulge to anyone just yet. She's not ready for the inevitable follow-up questions.

What's next? What is she going to do once she's submitted her master's?

As far as her family's aware, she made a gentlewoman's agreement with her supervisor, Jules Harris, that she would continue on with her PhD in the same department, but Mikaila has been having second thoughts ever since...

She *could* say since around the time her father passed away and still be correct in her timeline. Only, the true reason for her reluctance to commit her academic future to the University of Cape Town has little to do with her father's death and a lot more to do with the reason she's messaged Ashleigh.

There are revelations Mikaila has had about herself in the past year, and talking to Ashleigh is something she needs to do to move forward in this authentic life she intends to live. She's seeking something like closure, and Ashleigh appears willing to give it.

Mikaila, perhaps naïvely, hopes this conversation with Ashleigh will help her find some clarity on what comes next for her.

Ashleigh von Bronckhorst is actually the last person on Mikaila's three-person list. Mikaila wasn't even sure she would ever get around to her, which she likes to think she could and would have accepted, but circumstances have changed, and now they're going to have a very difficult, but necessary, conversation.

Until then, though, Mikaila has another two weeks at home to get through, acting as a part-time parent and filling in at the family business whenever her mother calls her in. It isn't often, because Mikaila has managed to stay out of the daily operations by being so involved in her university work. Too young, too busy—she's actually been rather strategic about it by pursuing a career entirely separate to what her family has become known for in the city of Kimberley: towels.

It's almost funny. Mikaila is now part of a towel dynasty, her parents building the towel factory from the ground up, funding the project with her mother's fast-food restaurant and her father's construction company. Both businesses that were once part of Mikaila's biggest childhood memories are sold now and, these days, they're known as the Mohamed family of the Banyan Tree Towel Company.

The name was her father's choice, before any of the building and business plans were even submitted, mostly because his favourite fruit was always the fig. The company's logo even pays homage to the tree's characteristic spreading branches and aerial roots, designed by Mikaila's older sister nearly a decade ago.

The factory, itself, has shut down manufacturing operations for the holiday period, but sales on existing stock are still underway.

Christmas doesn't really mean much to a Muslim family, so Mikaila does help out whenever she can despite her distance from the company and its ongoings. Her disconnect is mostly because she attended boarding school in Johannesburg just a few hours away, but also because she's made a point to ignore all the strange hype around her family's rise to a different monetary status within the Muslim community of Kimberley.

*They're* known now, but *Mikaila* isn't, which does give her the freedom to fill her next two weeks writing, painting, cooking, and obsessing over what she's going to say to Ashleigh.

By the time she's ready to depart in the new year, she's actually finalised her master's dissertation document, painted two canvases depicting the greenery of their backyard, attempted to make a chocolate soufflé and failed, *and* managed to envision a handful of reactions from Ashleigh, ranging from brilliant to plain awful.

She sometimes believes that, if she can think up a situation, then it must not be capable of happening. As if her imagination holds no bearing compared to the Great Big Plan of the Universe, which does bring her some comfort when facing her worst-case-scenarios.

But, then again, the worst thing she imagined could happen to her actually *did* happen, and she's still trying to process it.

On the Thursday she's meant to leave, Mikaila drives herself and her mother to the airport, Sufjan and Samir begging to come along. Her mother allows it because the boys are fans of the airport, both of them enjoying watching the planes through the floor-to-ceiling glass windows. In a city as grey and industrial as Kimberley, any kind of excitement is always welcomed.

It's expected of a mining town, maybe, but it's still quite sad that Kimberley's only real attraction is just a random hole in the ground. When she and Zora were much younger, they used to make up stories about it, pretending aliens accompanied the famous meteorite, and they were the only two who could save the world.

Now, years later, Mikaila can't quite recall how it feels to *talk* her sister, let alone joke with her. It's maybe why she takes these annual farewells very seriously. She knows there might be a day when—well.

When it could be the last.

So, she hugs her mother tightly once she's checked in, then takes the time to study her closely. The two of them get told they look alike quite often, both tall and soft-spoken, with dark hair and dark, intense eyes. Mikaila might have inherited her mother's appearance but she definitely got her father's intellect, eyesight, and abundance of hair.

Next, she squeezes her nephews until they squirm to get out of her hold. She kisses their cheeks, knowing it'll be at least a few months before she sees them again, and she's sure they'll be a whole head taller by then. They're growing so fast, and this is the one part she hates about living so far away from her family: all these moments and milestones she ends up missing.

On top of that, it's definitely nice not to have to cook for herself all the time, or have to do her own laundry. Grocery shopping, too. Even just having someone to talk to at all hours of the day. *That*, in particular, is why it's always a bit of an adjustment once Mikaila returns to Cape Town, taking a few days to get used to the quiet of living alone again despite the endless hustle of the city beyond her apartment's walls.

So, she says goodbye to her slow-moving, sometimes-stagnant Kimberley life and boards a ninety-minute flight that takes her right into the heart of the Mother City.

She *loves* this city for several reasons. The independence, yes, and the distance from her immediate family. It's given her numerous academic and networking opportunities. Table Mountain. The many beaches. Penguins.

But mostly her friends.

Particularly one Cassandra Evans, whom she finds leaning against a pillar when Mikaila emerges from Domestic Arrivals with her many suitcases. She's definitely a sight for sore eyes, all long limbs and a decidedly calm expression, secrets hidden in her green eyes.

Mikaila hasn't seen her since the end of November when she returned to Kimberley and Cassie went in the direction of the Eastern Cape for a much-needed break with her mother. Mikaila can't even explain how much she's missed her friend.

They're not really the best at staying in contact but Cassie insisted on fetching Mikaila, and Mikaila wasn't going to argue with her. It's

just really good to be back with people from whom she doesn't have to hide parts of herself.

To be back in her own home and her own bed and her own kitchen and her own car. Just, her own things. Her own space and her own people.

Her own life.

After the obligatory hug they share less commonly than any of their other friends, the first thing Cassie says to her as they're rolling through the airport towards the car is, "Can I ask about you-know-what?"

Which is expected.

At least she's giving Mikaila the option.

"As long as I can ask in return," Mikaila warns her.

Cassie huffs a breath, then very carefully says, "Tell me you're done." There's just the slightest hesitance to her tone as she broaches the topic, because getting to this point has been blood, sweat, and tears, and not necessarily in that order.

Mikaila grins at her, hopping a little as she rests her weight on the luggage trolley she's pushing. "I'm done," she declares.

Cassie definitely doesn't react the way Mikaila expects. Instead of any kind of positive remark at the decidedly monumental news that Mikaila has in fact completed her master's dissertation, Cassie actually groans, tilting her head back and looking to the skies like Mikaila's insulted her in some way. "I owe Mbali fifty bucks, now."

Understanding dawns and Mikaila's mouth drops open. "I can't believe you bet on whether I'd finish in time. Honestly, wow."

"To be fair, we did both have you finishing *before* registration deadline," Cassie says, steering Mikaila towards Parkade 2. "I just thought you'd finish while you were here, and not at home."

"I'm hurt, Cass," she says, though she's really not.

Cassie rolls her eyes. "You're done," she says, and maybe Mikaila needs to hear someone else say it out loud for it to be real.

"I mean, my final draft is currently with Jules, so I might have some last-minute changes to make, but, yeah, I'm basically done." She glances at Cassie. "Now, it's your turn to answer."

Cassie doesn't even take a breath before saying, "I'm not done."

Mikaila eyes her closely, noting the sudden tension in her features, as if she expects Mikaila to be disappointed in her. “You upgraded to a PhD only last year, so I don’t expect you to be done. Nobody who knows anything about academia does.”

“Well, you should have stopped me from doing something so silly,” Cassie counters. “I could have been done, too.”

“You’ll get there,” Mikaila tells her, “We’ll figure it out; you’ll see.”

One would think Mikaila would stop saying such lofty words to the people in her life, but she believes in Cassie enough for the both of them, and that has to mean something.

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Mikaila spends her first few days back in Cape Town cleaning her apartment, going grocery shopping, and taking her car for a nice, long drive along the coast to re-familiarise herself with her city, as well as to charge the battery after six weeks of disuse. She opts for heading south, taking the M5 towards Muizenberg and Hout Bay, the sun warm on her arms and the mountain behind her.

After a lunch of hake and chips at the famous Kalky’s overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, she decides on a whim to continue on to Simon’s Town, hoping to see some penguins, before returning home with a few snapped pictures to show her nephews. It’s been so long since they’ve visited that she’s sure they must think Cape Town is some mythical place.

Well, they wouldn’t be entirely wrong.

It’s only once she’s fully settled that she messages Ashleigh, and the two of them decide to meet on Thursday, early. Ashleigh suggests The Gardener’s Cottage in Newlands at eight-thirty in the morning and, after a taking a moment to balk at the suggested time, Mikaila agrees.

She gets little sleep the night before and is awake before the sun even rises. It was silly to hope for anything different.

Despite her early start, Ashleigh still beats her to the outdoor café. Mikaila’s heart does a little jump in her chest when she arrives, her eyes immediately landing on Ashleigh, who is already seated at an outside table, glasses on her face and a novel in her hands. She looks soft

and unassuming as she sits there, a little other-worldly and seeming so very far away.

Untouchable.

For a moment, Mikaila just stands and watches her, caught in some memory that's just out of her grasp. The last time they met like this was vastly different, the two of them going out to dinner in an attempt to capture something like the old times. That was nearly six years ago. Mikaila could tell things were changing already, desperate to bask in Ashleigh's attention and hold onto how good it felt to have her so close.

Sometimes, Mikaila doesn't let herself think past that last walk up to Ashleigh's shared house's gate, the moment feeling like something out of a South African romantic comedy. One that turned into some kind of a tragedy, with the way it all played out in the end.

She's startled out of her thoughts when a waiter appears in front of her, and Mikaila stumbles through an explanation that she's meeting someone who's already here.

When Ashleigh spots her approach, she automatically smiles, unwittingly stealing Mikaila's breath, and abandons her book. She doesn't get to her feet, which is maybe for the best, because Mikaila is already going to be awkward enough without throwing in that terrifying '*are they going to hug or not?*' moment.

Their last hug, as far as she remembers, happened that same night in her memories, right after Ashleigh asked her a very specific question and Mikaila didn't say yes. That hug, looking back now, had been a goodbye, which she couldn't have known at the time.

After a quick look around, Mikaila can't quite bring herself to take a seat. The table Ashleigh's chosen is so close to another pair of women, and Mikaila knows she won't be able to say what she needs to with strangers in proximity.

It's only a beat of hesitation, but Ashleigh must read it for what it is, because she's already gathering her book and car keys as Mikaila asks their waiter for a different table, the two of them ending up in a quieter, emptier spot.

Once they're settled, their waiter introduces himself and takes their order. Mikaila chooses a caffè latte, and Ashleigh orders a tea.

“And a scone,” she adds almost as an afterthought.

Mikaila is too nervous to eat, but Ashleigh seems at ease.

“Thank you for meeting me,” Mikaila begins, not quite ready to dive into talking about why they’re here. “How have you been?”

Ashleigh smiles, willing to indulge her in small talk. “Busy studying, and travelling,” she answers. “I finished my master’s in Brussels a couple of months ago, thank God, so I’ve kind of been wandering around Europe for a while.”

Mikaila uses the opportunity to study her, silently, wondering about this new Ashleigh who doesn’t look all that different from Mikaila’s memories. Maybe a little thinner. Leaner, rather. Her glasses are different, blue frames instead of the purple ones she wore their first few years of university. She’s still freckled, tiny dots prominent on her pale cheeks and bridge of her nose. Her long hair hangs loose around her shoulders, looking a darker blonde than Mikaila remembers in the shade of the trees.

“I spent some time in Amsterdam, as one does,” Ashleigh continues, slightly uneasy in the face of Mikaila’s silence. “And then skipped from town to town in the south of France before heading to Paris.”

Mikaila manages to find her voice when their waiter brings their order, her fingers automatically wrapping around the cup he sets in front of her. “Are you back in Cape Town now?”

“Yeah,” Ashleigh says. “I’m actually starting a new job in March.”

Mikaila can’t even imagine it. If she had her way, she’d never work a nine-to-five job. She just doesn’t think she’s built for it. “That’s soon,” she comments. “Doing what?”

“Consulting. It’s a business management firm.” She rolls her eyes a little. “I’m finally turning into an adult. Officially have to move out of my mum’s house now.”

“Your *mum’s* house?”

Ashleigh smiles like everything is a secret. “Oh, yeah, my parents are divorced,” she says. “My mum lives with her boyfriend now.”

Mikaila opens her mouth, then closes it. Opens it once more, but nothing comes out.

“My brothers live with her, and I guess I do, too, here in Newlands,” Ashleigh adds. “And my dad lives in Hermanus, now.”



Mikaila frowns. Her memories of Ashleigh's parents wouldn't have led her to such a conclusion, mainly because she was sure Killian and Claire were something akin to *couple goals*.

Ashleigh's smile slips. "It was—it hasn't been easy," she admits. "They struggled a lot when I was in high school, but I—I didn't really tell anyone."

Mikaila audibly swallows. "You mean me."

"We always just had so much going on," Ashleigh offers, which is an understatement.

Mikaila has so many questions. "When was that?"

"My third year," she answers, not quite looking at Mikaila. They both know that was a pivotal time for what eventually became of their friendship, marking the year everything truly fell apart between the two of them.

Some of it is starting to make more sense.

Ashleigh carefully spreads some butter on a broken piece of her scone, maybe giving Mikaila time to digest this new information. She's going to need a lot longer than a few moments.

Ashleigh eventually clears her throat, straightening in her seat. "I suppose I should get this out now, but I chose to make myself and my family a priority, and I just—I don't think that's something I should apologise for."

Mikaila frowns. Is that why Ashleigh thinks they're here? Mikaila's already told her that *Ashleigh's* the one owed an apology.

"I was also drinking a lot and getting high more than I should have to cope with everything, but that's neither here nor there," Ashleigh adds, and Mikaila can't even look at her. She says it offhandedly, as if it holds no significance, but Mikaila gets the feeling *that* is one of the truer reasons Ashleigh let them drift so far apart.

There is an extended silence that hovers between them, and Mikaila drinks nearly all her coffee before she can speak. She needs to switch topics, because she's learned more than she intended before even telling Ashleigh why she messaged her in the first place.

"You were worried about me," Mikaila says. "In high school."

Ashleigh nods slowly. "Of course I was. I could tell things weren't easy for you."

There are reasons for that. She's protected herself behind her religion and schoolwork for such a long time. They gave her an excuse to remain hidden, but life has a funny way of exposing everything.

Mikaila fiddles with the handle of her empty cup, licking her lips and preparing herself for her next words. "Something happened. Not this past year, but the previous one," she says, suddenly feeling as if she's about to give away such a huge part of herself. "I was in a car accident. I almost died. And I just—I didn't want the people I didn't speak to anymore to receive notice of my actual death that way, you know? It felt—I didn't want the last things we said to each other to be what they were, but I also didn't know how to start a new conversation with you after the way our last one ended."

Really, she wasn't ever sure she would have at all until Ashleigh decided to follow her on Instagram just a few weeks ago. It's still a surprise, because Ashleigh made it very clear that Mikaila was no longer a person she wanted in her life.

Mikaila has thought about their last text conversation several times over the years, holding onto the bitter feelings to keep herself from ever reaching out like the idiot she can be when it comes to Ashleigh von Bronckhorst. Reading in Ashleigh's own words on her phone's screen just how they descended into becoming essential strangers, so far removed from each other's lives, was formative in ways she's not sure she's ever been able to shake off.

"Something happened," Mikaila says again. "Something I figured out while I was in the hospital. Something I think you already know. In fact, I'm sure you've always known." She pauses. "Since Chelsea, and possibly even before."

Ashleigh's expression shifts with realisation, and her eyes widen just slightly. "Is that why we're here?" she asks, voice a little low, tinged with wonder and a bit of disbelief. "Are you about to do what I think you're about to?"

Mikaila nods. "I'm trying," she says, actually meeting Ashleigh's blue gaze. "There was someone in the hospital. My physiotherapist, actually, and I didn't quite realise what was happening until I just did, and it was—God, it was terrifying."

Ashleigh keeps her eyes on her, not looking away even once.

"I didn't—I was still recovering from surgery and I was figuring out this huge thing about myself, and I spent so much time looking back on how my life and relationships have gone, and I—" she stops, biting down on her bottom lip.

She hasn't even said it.

She hasn't even admitted the thing they both know.

Finally, Mikaila tells her, "My physiotherapist, her name was Miriam, and I realised only after I was discharged that I actually developed a huge crush on her while I was in there."

Ashleigh blinks. "Oh, my God," she says. "You're totally coming out right now."

Mikaila drops her gaze, blushing. "I'm not sure *what* I am, exactly, but I'm aware enough that I don't classify as straight," she admits, comfortable with at least that much. "I've spent the last year or so trying to make sense of that, figuring out how to accept what that means for me, in terms of my past, present and future."

Losing her father was traumatic, recovering from her own injuries was also traumatic, and figuring out the person she was becoming wasn't even whom she was meant to be, was its own trauma. It's been a lot to work through.

"I figured out there were three girls in my past whom I managed to develop feelings for and just didn't realise it until I stopped and really *thought* about it." She swallows. "And you are one of those girls."

If anything, Ashleigh is *the* girl.

Mikaila clears her throat. "But I think you already know that, don't you?" She doesn't even give her the time to reply. "You've always known."

"*Mikaila.*"

It stops her cold, the sound of her name, whispered in that tone.

"Is this what we're doing here?" Ashleigh asks. "Rehashing the past?"

"No." But she's not quite sure anymore. Isn't it all wrapped up together, past, present and future? Mikaila didn't even know the role she played in the end of their relationship until just a few months ago. She didn't anticipate just how much it would change to be *aware*. To replay those last moments together, standing on the street in front

of Ashleigh's shared house, her heart racing, too scared to share in Ashleigh's 'what if.'

How different would their lives be if Mikaila had answered yes when Ashleigh asked?

Mikaila abruptly turns her head and raises her hand to get their waiter's attention, and orders another coffee when he comes by to buy herself time.

Ashleigh sits silently, watching her with those eyes that Mikaila has actually painted more times than she would be willing to admit. She's tried to get the colour right, but never quite succeeded. They're almost luminescent, the perfect blend of sea and sky, always so captivating.

"I've wanted to talk to you for a while," Mikaila tells her, finding her voice again. "You're on my list, you see, and I know we left things badly when we last talked. It's taken a while, but I've figured out why it hurt so much when we—when we just stopped being friends, I guess. I didn't even realise I'd gone through it before. With Chelsea, sure, and this other girl in my undergrad, Nicola, who ended up switching to Psychology and I just didn't see her anymore." She stops, heart beating double-time. "I've managed to have a similar conversation with them both, and I... Well, the truth is I didn't know if I would be able to sit here and do the same with you."

"Why am I different?" Ashleigh asks, crease in her brow.

"I'm the most confused about you," Mikaila says. "Like, I am certain of harboured feelings for Chelsea, and for Nicola, but you—"

"Me?"

Mikaila feels heat on her cheeks. "Well, Ashleigh, if you must know, you don't quite fit the profile of what my friends and I have established is my 'type.'"

Ashleigh's grin is sudden and even more embarrassing for Mikaila. "You have a type?"

Mikaila ignores her amusement. "Apparently," she concedes, meeting her gaze. "I also can't tell if I was so heartbroken about losing someone I had feelings for or about losing someone who promised to be by my side through everything the world threw at us."

Ashleigh's amusement immediately evaporates. "Mikaila..." she breathes, soft in a way that reminds Mikaila of warm Wednesday af-

ternoons spread out on the carpet of their shared boarding room, The Script playing on repeat while reading *Twilight*.

"Because I recognise it now," Mikaila says before Ashleigh can say anything more. "Heartbreak. It is—it's not fun at all, and I've gone through it three times without even realising I was going through it."

"Mikaila."

"And I just needed you to know that I'm sorry if the way I reacted to our, um, end was so intense, because it turns out I was—I was actually losing someone whom I thought would be part of my forever, and then you just weren't, and I definitely didn't handle it well."

"Mikaila." Ashleigh's voice is firmer, a bit sharper, and Mikaila finally stops. Ashleigh looks conflicted, as if there are things she wants to say but isn't sure she should.

Mikaila is equally, if not more, unsure she actually wants to hear anything she has to say at this point. It's already been a taxing day, and she feels raw and exposed, vulnerable in all the worst ways.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to say," Ashleigh finally admits.

"You're not *supposed* to say any specific thing. I just—I want closure on my past." It's the reason she convinced herself she needed to talk to Ashleigh at all, not sure she can get on with her life without working through the list. "I'm still figuring out my present, obviously, and I have no idea what's going to happen in my future, but I just wanted to apologise for the role my inability to make sense of my feelings played in the end of our friendship."

Ashleigh leans back against her chair, frowning in thought. "That sounds like a lot," she says, which is yet another understatement. "Does your family know?"

"I haven't told any of them, no," Mikaila answers with a shake of her head. "I don't think I could. They wouldn't understand. I just—it doesn't feel necessary to tell them, when there's no need to. There's nobody in my life I would be willing to risk my family for, so I just—I'm waiting to see what happens."

"What? There aren't girls just flocking to you?"

"Oh, my God, no," she says, laughing through the sudden panic she feels at such a thing. "I am very much still firmly in the closet."

"But—"

"I mean, my friends know, of course, but I'm—I can't do that kind of thing in Cape Town."

It's a discomfoting truth. Because she has so much extended family in this city, even the idea of being just a little outgoing in this new normal she's discovered fills her with dread despite how much she longs for it.

"Have you kissed a girl?" Ashleigh asks.

Mikaila feels her cheeks warm again, more surprised that Ashleigh would ask the question, but she makes sure to maintain eye contact when she smiles and says, "No."

"*Mik*," Ashleigh says, voice soft. "You've got to kiss some girls."

Mikaila shakes her head, finally dropping her gaze. "I'll get right on that," she says, only half-serious about it. "I'm still—I'm not sure how comfortable I am with the whole, uh, process."

"The process?"

"Of finding someone," she explains. "Of putting myself out there enough that people who *would* be interested in me would know I *could* be interested in them. I don't even know what I would do, to be honest."

"It's unlikely some girl is just going to pop out of the woodwork and throw herself at you, you know?" Ashleigh points out, clearly amused as she sips her tea. "You should try a dating app," she suggests. "But an actual dating one, not *Tinder* or one of those hook-up ones. You might meet people, if only just to talk."

"I meet people," Mikaila tells her, because she *has* met people in the few online spaces she's joined while trying to make sense of the changes in her life. "Just, you know, they don't know I'm me, and they kind of live on other continents."

"Mikaila," Ashleigh says around a laugh.

"What?"

"You've got international lovers," she accuses lightly.

Mikaila's instinct is to deny, the words on the tip of her tongue, but she can't bring herself to. The accusation isn't entirely inaccurate. She just wouldn't use *that* word to describe them. Friends, perhaps. Acquaintances.

"I can't help it," Mikaila says, which is really the truth. She's spoken to people with their own anonymous social media handles, wherever they are in the world, and it's allowed her to be herself without actually being *herself*. She's discovered a lot about the person she is because of it, and one of those things is, "It turns out I can be a bit of a flirt."

"Oh, I know."

Her eyes snap up. "What?"

"You totally used to flirt with me."

"No, I didn't," she counters, voice a little high. "What? No, I didn't, Ashleigh, that's—I definitely didn't."

"You definitely did," Ashleigh assures her. "You probably just didn't realise it."

"Well, obviously not," she grumbles, frowning. "Wait, seriously?"

Ashleigh nods, looking amused. "Casual touches, as well."

"No, now I definitely don't believe you," she says, because Mikaila keeps her hands to herself. Right? Well, *now* she does, constantly overthinking everything she never used to pay any attention to.

"It was—Yeah, you could be intense, sometimes," Ashleigh says, smile fading a little. "It was... a lot."

"Oh."

Mikaila fiddles with the handle of her fresh cup once again, feeling particularly deflated. She really had no idea. It's no wonder Ashleigh felt uncomfortable around her.

"I'm sorry," she says.

"No, don't," Ashleigh immediately counters. "It's—I should apologise, too."

"What on earth would you be apologising for?" she asks, because Ashleigh explicitly said she *wouldn't* be doing that.

"I don't think I handled things with us well," Ashleigh says, eyes slightly distant, and Mikaila can't figure which part she's remembering, because they've got their signals crossed more than once before. "I just didn't handle it well, so I'm sorry about that, but not for—"

The other part.

For putting her family first.

For removing herself from Mikaila's life in a way that hurt them both.

Mikaila tells herself the acknowledgement is enough. Whatever conclusion they've reached in this moment can be enough. The difficult part can be over. It feels as good a place as any to close the chapter on their mutual past.

"Thank you," Mikaila murmurs, which Ashleigh acknowledges with a nod of her own.

Then, with a little grin, she asks, "So, besides these life-changing realisations, how have *you* been?"

The switch back to casual conversation is slightly jarring, but Mikaila just about manages it. "I think it says a lot that I'm just trying to survive," she reveals. "Everything is changing for me right now. It's almost as terrifying as when we were in Matric."

"Those really were some wild times," Ashleigh agrees. "Are you still in contact with anyone else from high school?"

"One or two," she reveals. "Maintaining adult friendships isn't easy. Are you?"

"Not at all, no, but you hear things, right?" Ashleigh says. "I mean, did you know Chelsea's working in London now and living with her Irish boyfriend?"

"I—Yeah, I did, actually." Not because Mikaila is overly interested in her once-best-friend's life, but because Chelsea is the second person on Mikaila's very short list and the two of them have already had this kind of conversation over the phone.

Thankfully, Ashleigh doesn't press further, her attention switching when she receives a text from her mother that makes her audibly groan. "I have to get going," she says, and she actually sounds reluctant, which is a foreign thing to Mikaila.

Half the time they hung out during their undergrad, Ashleigh seemed ready to leave as soon as she arrived.

"My mother, who is a *grown woman*, needs me to drive her to the dentist." She rolls her eyes. "Honestly, doctors are actually the biggest babies."

She types a message out on her phone while Mikaila gets the waiter's attention once more and asks for the bill.

"You should keep me updated on how things are going," Ashleigh tells her, and Mikaila is already certain she's going to do no such thing.



She still takes Ashleigh's new number when she offers it, saving it as an entirely new contact, and wonders how strong she'll have to be to be able to resist the chance to establish full contact once more.

If only this could be a chapter she could actually close and keep closed. She's said her part. They can both move on with their lives. That's why Mikaila wanted to talk in the first place, isn't it?

When they leave, they walk side-by-side. It's the closest they've been to each other in more than four years, and Mikaila is torn between treating it as something normal or taking the time to memorise everything about this moment.

Mikaila can see her own car as they walk out to the parking lot, and Ashleigh accompanies her right to it, steps assured on the uneven terrain. She looks thoughtful, as if there's something she wants to say but can't decide if she should. Mikaila almost laughs, because that's never stopped her before.

Mikaila comes to a stop before Ashleigh does, turning her body to face her. It's time to say goodbye. It's likely they won't willingly meet up again, and Mikaila is trying to be okay with that. It just feels safer this way, because Mikaila's memories are potent, and Ashleigh is so very beautiful.

"Okay," Mikaila says, trying to escape this moment intact. "It was—Thank you for meeting me. And for listening."

"I hope it helped."

"It definitely did," she assures, though she can't say how or why. It just did. Mikaila steps back, already turning away. This is it. This is all she really wanted. They can both finally move on. She won't have any more excuses not to keep truly living her life.

But then Ashleigh asks, "Do you want to kiss me?" and Mikaila freezes. The question is asked softly, almost teasingly, and Mikaila would find it a cruel, sick joke if she wasn't convinced Ashleigh is actually being serious.

It sends her right back to that all-important night, something like déjà vu, a younger Mikaila Mohamed standing in front of a younger Ashleigh von Bronckhorst in front of a quiet house, those same words rattling between the space between them. Mikaila remembers the shock, horror, fear and desire, all descending on her in an instant,

forcing her back a step. It was *that*, maybe, and not the words that came tumbling out of her mouth, that sealed it for them.

Mikaila said no, then, and now Ashleigh is asking again.

Mikaila blinks. "Um..."

"Would you like to?" Ashleigh presses, and her eyes sparkle with intent. A test to see how far Mikaila has come.

Mikaila's heart beats rapidly in her chest, disbelief clashing with anticipation. It isn't shock or horror anymore, maybe some fear, and *a lot* of desire.

Ashleigh takes a step closer, right into Mikaila's personal space. She has to resist the urge to step back, because Ashleigh smells exactly as she remembers: warm and floral, sweet and spicy all at the same time. It's a little overwhelming how many memories a simple scent can evoke.

"Ashleigh," Mikaila whispers, tempted to look around to see if anyone is watching them. It's unlikely, of course, because it's still early morning on a Thursday, and the parking lot isn't easily visible from the actual café or the road. The only risk is the car guard's seeing, so she hopes he isn't paying them any attention.

"You can," Ashleigh tells her. "If you want to."

Everything about this moment feels surreal, and Mikaila knows she probably shouldn't, but she's also tired of doing what she's supposed to.

*If Mikaila wants to.*

As if she wouldn't.

Mikaila suddenly feels as if she's been waiting to be able to rewrite the end of that night from the moment it spun so devastatingly out of control, her eyes slipping closed as she closes the gap between them.

When Mikaila kisses Ashleigh now, she thinks of nothing, and it is perfect. Eyes closed, lips pressed together for a long moment, this kiss confirms many things and leaves her *wanting*.

Before she can lose herself in the feeling, she forces herself to pull back, blinking against the morning light, and Ashleigh is looking at her with eyes that are just slightly wide as she absently licks her lips.

"I didn't think you would," Ashleigh whispers, and there's an odd lilt of wonder—almost longing—in her voice.

Mikaila feels a little giddy, even a little reckless. She's proud of herself, though, because she also knows she was nowhere near ready for this the first time around.

"Yeah, well, I think there are a lot of things you don't know about me," Mikaila says, tone coy than she intends.

"I guess there are," Ashleigh agrees, her eyes darting over Mikaila's face as if she's taking in whatever new things she might find just in her appearance.

Mikaila just smiles, putting some space between them. She needs to breathe air that doesn't smell like Ashleigh. "Thank you," she says after a moment.

"For what?"

"Everything," Mikaila tells her, and she means it.

Ashleigh keeps her eyes on her, as if she's seeing someone she's never met before. It's only a little unnerving, but Mikaila isn't going to let it affect the way she feels right now.

"I should—I need to get going," Ashleigh says.

Mikaila nods. "Your mother is waiting, yeah."

Ashleigh rolls her eyes. "Like she doesn't have other children to drive her around for moral support, seriously."

"I don't know if it's appropriate, but please do pass on my regards," Mikaila says.

At the sound of the words, Ashleigh reaches for her, gently pulling her into the type of hug that almost feels more intimate than their kiss. Mikaila allows herself to relax into it for just a moment, committing the feeling to memory. Allows herself to enjoy it for a sliver of time. Because then it's over and Ashleigh is letting go, and Mikaila thinks she would be okay if this is the last time they talk. She'll have to be.

"See you, Mikaila," Ashleigh says.

Mikaila playfully salutes, like a complete dork. "AVB," she returns, and Ashleigh beams—actually *beams*—at her.

"You're still the only one who calls me that," she says, and she looks particularly delighted by that fact. "I like that it's stayed that way."

And, well, Mikaila does, too.

## CHAPTER 2

MIKAILA WOULDN'T ADMIT TO FEELING that monumental entity called 'closure,' but she does feel settled in the idea all the people she lost owing to her inability to make sense of her own feelings all now know some of the reason it all fell apart. Her list is complete. She can't hide behind it anymore.

It's all still a little terrifying, having to live a version of a truth she's still trying to get comfortable with. It's something to be proud of, as her friends keep telling her, which is why she finds it odd that she hasn't been able to tell any of them about the kiss.

She doesn't want to know other people's thoughts on it, because she's choosing to view it as a good thing. An experience she was always meant to have.

The problem is that not talking about it just makes her keep thinking about it and, in the two weeks since it happened, Mikaila has thought of little else.

It's the reason she's convinced she's still caught in some fever dream when she's shopping at Cavendish Square with Cassie and comes face-to-face with Ashleigh von Bronckhorst just as they walk out of a bookshop.

It's definitely Ashleigh, though, right in front of her, eyebrows a little raised and slight smirk on her face as she approaches them. Mikaila almost convinced herself the safest way forward for all of them was avoiding her completely, but it is also just *so good* to see her again.

Her heart beats double-time as Ashleigh comes to a slow stop at the same time she does. Cassie takes a few extra steps before she notices Mikaila isn't still beside her, and it is awkward immediately.

Mikaila clears her throat. "Ashleigh, hey," she manages to say, keeping her voice steady.

"Mikaila," Ashleigh replies, and Mikaila wonders if she just enjoys saying her name. "Fancy seeing you here."

Mikaila laughs a little nervously. "Yeah, we're, um, looking for a present," she says. "This is Cassie. We were in the same master's program. Cass, this is Ashleigh, my roommate from high school."

She knows there are other, more detailed ways to describe both women to each other, but it feels unnecessary now.

Ashleigh tilts her head to the left, thoughtful, but then she smiles at Cassie, open and warm, and Mikaila is reminded of how and why she could fall for this girl and just never realise it. "Nice to meet you, Cassie," she says. Then, unexpectedly, she adds, "You're keeping an eye on her, right? She tends to overwork herself."

At this, Cassie glances at Mikaila, looking only slightly confused. "I—Yeah, I guess we keep each other on normal schedules. Kind of."

"Two all-nighters this week is *not* a normal schedule, Cass," Mikaila reminds her, and Cassie rolls her eyes, because it's really the norm for postgraduate engineers. If they're not constantly on the cusp of a nervous breakdown, are they even working hard enough?

Ashleigh just darts her eyes between them, and Mikaila realises too late that Ashleigh must think there's *something* going on between them.

Which there definitely isn't. Cassie is just her closest friend in Cape Town, and Mikaila isn't going to do anything ridiculous like develop an actual crush on her and potentially ruin a very important friendship.

She's learned her lessons the hard way.

Mikaila looks at Ashleigh. "We're trying to find a present for Cassie's boyfriend, but *someone* can't decide on anything," she explains, and Cassie just shoots her a look. "Apparently, he just likes too many things."

"I once bought my boyfriend clothes for his birthday," Ashleigh says, her eyes on Cassie.

Mikaila feels a little numb at the mention of a boyfriend. Of course, Ashleigh has a boyfriend. She's Ashleigh von Bronckhorst, for goodness' sake.

"The guy can't dress to save his life, so I had to pick out things I wanted to see him wear."

"It's why we're headed to Woolies," Cassie says, pointing a thumb over her shoulder. "It was nice to meet you, Ashleigh."

When Cassie starts to walk away, Mikaila does not move, saying, "Cool, I'm right behind you."

Ashleigh immediately makes her regret her decision to stay when she comments, "You'd make a cute couple."

Mikaila frowns.

"Are you actually looking for a present for her boyfriend, or did you just say that to throw me off?"

"Throw you off of what?"

Ashleigh steps closer, and she really has no boundaries when she asks, "You're not interested in her, are you?"

Mikaila finds herself shaking her head, but she can't figure why she should even answer. Why does Ashleigh care about whom she may or may not be interested in?

"We're just friends," she still confirms.

"Like *we're* just friends?" Ashleigh asks.

"We're not friends," Mikaila reminds her, because they're not. They haven't been for too many years to start kidding themselves now.

"No, I don't suppose we are," Ashleigh agrees. "You don't go around kissing your friends, do you?"

Mikaila has no idea how to respond to that, but she doesn't have to because Ashleigh continues speaking.

"We should hang out again," she says, which is so unexpected. "Maybe actually *do* something other than talk about our feelings."

"You actually *want* to do that?" Mikaila asks, perplexed, though she can't be certain why. Ashleigh doesn't have to do this.

Ashleigh nods, smiling in that way that tells Mikaila she thinks Mikaila's being silly. "It was really nice to spend time with you again. Almost felt like the old days."

Mikaila wonders which 'old days' she's referring to.

Ashleigh winks. "Besides the whole kissing thing, of course," she says, easily bringing up the kiss again as if she didn't *just* say she has a boyfriend. "You should text me. Let me know when you're free and we'll organize something."

"Oh, you're serious?"

Ashleigh nods, right hand reaching out to squeeze Mikaila's upper arm. She's always been a tactile person, but this action feels purposeful. As if she's saying something without words.

"Can't wait," Ashleigh says, and she sounds genuine. "You better get back to Cassie before she ends up buying her boyfriend something orange. Or, worse, purple."

Cassie *wouldn't*, but Mikaila appreciates the opportunity to escape. It's all a little overwhelming at the moment. If Mikaila is reading her correctly, and she strongly suspects she is, then Ashleigh's intentions are—

Well, there *is* intent.

Ashleigh squeezes once more before releasing her, and then glides past her in that way that makes Mikaila remember she was once a dancer. Perhaps she still is.

It takes her another moment to gather herself to go and find Cassie. She's in the men's section, sifting through a selection of pastel shirts, and she raises her eyebrows when Mikaila approaches.

"Was that some jilted ex-lover?" is the first thing she asks.

Mikaila laughs out loud. "You know as well as I do I haven't even *had* a lover," she reminds her, answering her unnecessary question. "And, no, she wasn't. She really was just my roommate."

"She was definitely more than that, Mikaila."

Mikaila moves to a separate clothing rack, looking through the different colours. She finds a lovely pastel blue cotton shirt that she's sure Lincoln would like, retrieving the hanger. She can't bear to look at Cassie as she quietly confesses, "I'm pretty sure she's the first girl I ever loved."

“Does she know?”

“She’s always known,” Mikaila explains. “She knew from the start, probably even before I was a mess over Chelsea, and when I—”

“When you what?”

Mikaila swallows hard. “I wasn’t in a good way in the latter years of high school,” she reveals. “Dealing with things I didn’t even know I was going through. I guess I worried Ashleigh enough that she made me see one of the counsellors at our school.”

“Worried, how?”

“That I would hurt myself,” Mikaila confesses. “That I would hurt myself *more*.”

Cassie goes still, and Mikaila finally turns, handing over the shirt she’s picked. “We’ve never really talked about it, have we?” Cassie says as she takes the shirt and feels the fabric with her free hand.

“Talked about what?”

Cassie isn’t looking at her, either, which is maybe for the best, because it is an unexpected thing when she says, “I have to remind you to eat, sometimes.”

Mikaila blinks. “What?”

“You are kind of balls at taking care of yourself,” Cassie says, turning to face her, right there among men’s clothing in the middle of Woolworths. “Do you think I don’t notice all the parts of yourself you try so hard to hide?”

Mikaila feels a potent flash of annoyance at the sound of those words, and she turns away to find something else for Lincoln. His favourite colours to wear are blue and more blue, so she drifts to the left. Maybe she’s not used to being *known*.

“Hey,” Cassie says, and she’s suddenly at Mikaila’s right side. “Leave those. Link can wait. Look at me, Mik.”

Mikaila waits a stubborn four seconds before she lifts her gaze.

“We don’t talk about these things,” Cassie says, again. “We’re not those kinds of friends who hug and exchange hearts and all of that, but you know how important you are to me, right?”

“Cassie.”

“Who is she, really?”

“Who?”



“Ashleigh.”

Mikaila audibly swallows. “When we were twelve years old, we promised each other we would go through everything together, face the world side-by-side, but then we didn’t.”

“And now she’s back?”

“Now she’s back,” she echoes, but she can’t know for how long that’s going to be. Ashleigh could leave again. More likely, Mikaila could leave.

“What does she want?”

Mikaila fiddles with the collar of one of the shirts on a hanger. “I have no idea. I’m pretty sure we said all we needed to say to each other the last time we saw each other.”

“When was that?”

“Um, like two weeks ago,” Mikaila says, and Cassie’s eyebrows rise. “I know I didn’t mention it to you. I just—we’ve never really talked about our relationships the way other people do.”

“But you told Mbali?”

“Not all of it.” It makes sense that Mikaila *would* tell Mbali, given she’s the closest person to Mikaila who does identify as queer, but Cassie is still the person she finds it easiest to talk to. Mbali also has way less free time than they do, now that she’s joined the adult world and got herself a real job and a girlfriend. It’s a far cry from their days in their master’s when they would see each other nearly every day.

“Mikaila,” Cassie says, sighing heavily, almost as if it pains her. “Come on, let’s get some coffee, and you can tell me what you’ve done.”

It’s widely known among their master’s group that Mikaila is the Mum-Friend. She’s always the designated driver, loves bringing food and baked goods for all of them, and makes sure to text people to remind them to keep hydrated.

But, if Mikaila were to have a Mum-Friend of her own, it would be Cassie.

Cassie, who leads them to Mugg & Bean and finds them a table. Cassie, who orders a tea for herself and a caffè latte for Mikaila. Cassie, who doesn’t push Mikaila to speak, just sits quietly waiting for her to grow antsy enough to start talking all on her own.

“We stopped talking around my twenty-first birthday,” Mikaila reveals. “I was having this small dinner thing, and I invited her, but she—I mean, I guess I knew by then that things between us had deteriorated badly.” They never could quite recover from the fact Mikaila couldn’t answer yes the first time Ashleigh asked if she wanted to kiss her. “I thought, maybe naïvely, that we could use the dinner to try to fix things, but I rather just gave her an opportunity to call it once and for all.

“It was pretty dramatic, our very formal friend breakup. Over text. She was *very* clear about who I had become in her life, and there was just no coming back from it. We were just done, and all the years we knew each other were just what they were, and we’d both go on to become the people we were always meant to be. Without each other.”

Cassie looks immeasurably sad at the sound of those words, but even she must know that Mikaila is leaving something out. The end of a friendship is meant to hurt, but this one almost broke her. By not answering yes the first time, Mikaila essentially drove Ashleigh away, and she didn’t even realise she was doing it.

Mikaila can’t handle the expression on her face, so she keeps talking. “I think it was always going to happen, anyway.”

Aside from her own beliefs about fate and faith, a part of her always knew their break was inevitable. Outside of their boarding school room, they were just too different in the end, and trying to fit them together in the new environment of university was near impossible. Mikaila was too introverted; too much of a homebody and entangled in her academic commitments, and Ashleigh’s starting university after a gap year put them in very different worlds.

On some of Mikaila’s most cynical days, she blames her choice to study engineering for it all.

“It was just what it was,” Mikaila continues. “It was weird, though. After. Like, here was this person I grew up with and became myself beside, and she was just—it was like none of it ever mattered to her.” She drops her gaze to the table. She’s never talked about this with anyone, let alone with Cassie. It sounds worse when said out loud.

“It’s why everything is just that much harder,” Mikaila says. “I don’t—I can’t tell if people care about me as much as I do about them.

Or if they miss me as much or at all. If they even think about me half as much as I think of them. I've been in so many friendships where I end up giving so much, and it—it's always too much or not enough." Here, she pauses and looks at Cassie again. "Am I as important to you as you are to me?"

Cassie frowns. "I wouldn't be able to quantify that," she says.

"You're basically a scientist."

"I'm also human."

Mikaila bites the inside of her cheek. "Anyway, we didn't talk in all that time," she says. "We'd see each other in passing on campus, but that was it, and I was just about okay with it. Graduating, moving onto master's, all of it. Then I had my near-death experience, lost my father, and figured out I actually like girls, and I was learning how to function in my new normal." She rolls her eyes at herself. "Then Ashleigh von Bronckhorst decided to follow me on Instagram, and I damn near self-destructed."

Cassie blinks. "Dude. Did you get Instagram like yesterday? How is it possible your old roommate wasn't already following you?"

Mikaila breathes out a laugh, quietly thanking the waiter when he brings over their drinks. "I don't even know why we didn't follow each other before, because we're totally listed as sisters on Facebook."

"Seriously? This is incest, Mikaila," Cassie points out with a little laugh.

Mikaila pours half a sachet of brown sugar into her coffee and slowly stirs it in, using the simple action to help soothe her. Ashleigh shouldn't still be able to do this to her.

"I followed her back, anyway, because I didn't feel as if it was a big deal," Mikaila goes on. "But then I started to think that it *had* to be. I wanted to know why, or what prompted it. If she even thought it would mean something to me. And then I figured she probably didn't think it would mean anything at all, because I've always been the one to overthink everything between the two of us."

"How did you get from that to actually talking to her?"

"I messaged her."

"What?"

Mikaila shrugs. “I don’t know. I was feeling brave this one night and just decided to go for it.” Even just thinking about it is slightly incredible. She can barely believe her own words as she fills Cassie in on the details of their initial meeting. Though, she still doesn’t know why she can’t bring herself to talk about the kiss. It just feels like something between only her and Ashleigh.

“Okay, so, now she wants to hang out?” Cassie questions, giving her a searching look. She’s always been a bit too good at reading Mikaila. “There’s something you’re not telling me.”

“There’s *so much* I’m not telling you.”

“I’ll just ask Mbali,” Cassie threatens.

“She doesn’t know, either.”

“Mikaila.”

“Cassandra.”

She scowls in response, because she’s really not a fan of her full name. “I can’t help if I don’t know what’s going on.”

Mikaila sighs. “There’s nothing going on. We just—we talked, and I’m trying to move on with my life now.”

Cassie narrows her eyes, but she mercifully lets it go. “Does that mean you’re going to let Mbali sign you up for one of those dating apps?” she asks with a grin. “You realise she’s got a success rate of *three*, right? She should be a spokesperson for them.”

“She’s probably the only person who actually gets into relationships with the women she meets.” Mikaila sips her coffee. “But maybe, yeah,” she says eventually. “It’ll be something of a step, right? I’ve kind of just been letting my life pass me by, waiting for things to happen, but I guess I should start *making* them happen.”

“Please don’t start talking about your master’s.”

Mikaila shakes her head, laughing softly. “If I had my way, I’d never speak of it again.”

“But you are done, right? You said you were done.”

Mikaila nods slowly. “Jules is still reading it over, and then I’ll submit after I fix whatever final notes she has. It won’t be a lot, I don’t think. Not long left to go.”

“You don’t look very happy about that,” Cassie points out.

“Once I click that button, I have to figure out what to do with the rest of my life,” she says. “And it’s kind of expected I go on to do my PhD.”

“Is that not what you want?”

“Is it actually what *you* want?”

“We’re not talking about me.”

Mikaila looks away, her gaze drifting to a young boy and his mother sitting at a table a few over from them. He’s still in his school uniform, feet swinging beneath the table and enjoying what looks like a delicious bubblegum milkshake.

Sometimes, she wishes she were still that young, unburdened by the expectations of life and love and career.

And family.

“Can we go back to talking about my non-existent love life?” Mikaila deflects.

Cassie allows it. “I’m just surprised you’re going against your usual type,” she teases. “Ashleigh’s taller than you usually go for, and her hair is a lot lighter than the whole petite, pretty brunette thing you’re all about.”

Mikaila rolls her eyes, and then sighs. “Isn’t it just the biggest lesbian cliché to fall for your über straight roommate,” Mikaila grumbles, tilting her head back and groaning. She’s not entirely sure how much she believes her own words in assuming Ashleigh’s sexuality, given that Ashleigh instigated their kiss, but Mikaila is trying to keep herself safe here. She barely survived losing Ashleigh the first time. It would devastate her to regain her, and then go through that all over again.

Cassie knocks her knee against Mikaila’s. “That may be so,” she allows, “But imagine the story it’s going to be.”

\* \* \*

While Mikaila can’t yet see herself sharing more about her situation with Ashleigh with either Cassie or Mbali, her two friends definitely talk about her in return. This is made immediately clear when Mbali arrives at Mikaila’s apartment for dinner the next night and snatches Mikaila’s phone right out of her hands.

It's officially time to set her up with a dating service, apparently, and Mikaila doesn't quite have it in her to fight her. Mbali Mogorosi is scrappy, hailing from the Free State, and grew up with two older brothers who taught her to aim for the knees. Mikaila is all about self-preservation these days.

Today, Mbali's dressed casually when she steps through the door, her corporate office outfits swapped for white jeans and a purple *Los Angeles Lakers*' jersey Mikaila bought for her last birthday.

Despite her initial degree in metallurgical studies, Mbali is now making a name for herself as a bank consultant, jumping ship into Finance with her future in mind. Mikaila knows she made the decision primarily for herself, but the two of them also share the unfortunate reality that they need to figure out how to exist completely independent of their families if they intend to live authentically.

It is just unfortunate that she and Mbali view what that means very differently.

Which is why Mikaila can only stand and watch from her position at the stove as Mbali downloads an application named HER and starts filling in a profile for her.

She rues the day she ever shared her password with her.

Mikaila doesn't even bother to grab the phone back, rather giving in to her fate and bending to check on the food she's had cooking in the oven for nearly half an hour. It's a lemon, chicken, and rice casserole dish that she knows Mbali likes, making it specifically because she's really missed her friend while she's been in Kimberley.

"Where's that picture from that time Jenna forced us to go kayaking?" Mbali asks, barely looking up from where she's hunched over the phone, seated at a bar stool at Mikaila's kitchen counter. She's thrown off her jacket and removed her shoes, already so comfortable in Mikaila's space. She looks relaxed, braids hanging loose around her shoulders, her dark skin almost glowing under the kitchen light.

"You say that as if you weren't game for it," Mikaila accuses, moving to stand at Mbali's left side, and peering over her shoulder. "Why would you need that picture, anyway?"

"You look hot in it."

Mikaila rolls her eyes. "Don't let your girlfriend hear you say that."

“Lerato and I already agree on your hotness,” she says, eyes still on the screen. “We should also use the picture from your twenty-fifth birthday. I’m certain you’ll have ladies swiping right in no time.”

Mikaila groans. “I still don’t know about all of this,” she says, leaning her elbows on the counter and resting her chin in her hands. “What if someone I know sees me?”

“Then you get to decide if you’re going to be brave and swipe a certain way.”

“What if someone who knows *my family* sees me?”

Mbali pauses, her gaze lifting to meet Mikaila’s. “What I think, Mik, is that you would be putting up more of a fight about this if you didn’t actually want it,” she points out.

Well.

That’s probably true.

Mikaila flicks her finger against Mbali’s arm, always surprised by the size of her biceps. There always has to be at least one gym rat in every friend group. “Fine,” she relents. “Maybe you should pick one of the pictures from our last trip to Gordon’s Bay. My hair looked good that day.”

“Oh, and the sunglasses,” Mbali agrees, “The ocean in the background, that irritated pout you do when Jenna acts like an idiot. Yes, and yes. You always look doubly good when you’re wearing the black *Ray-Bans*.”

Mikaila drifts away, allowing Mbali to go wild. She just hopes she doesn’t say anything about ‘long walks on the beach’ or other dating app nonsense.

“You’re probably the only person in Cape Town who hates hiking,” Mbali complains, “And dogs.”

“I do not *hate* either of those things,” Mikaila argues, taking out a plate and a bowl from one of the kitchen cupboards. “I just wouldn’t plan a hike of my own. But I’ll go if someone else organizes it. And you know how I feel about dogs.”

“Not on your person, yeah.”

“It’s a Muslim thing.”

Mbali gives her a look.

“Don’t even start,” Mikaila warns, not willing to get into the tricky topic of religion and sexuality. It’s something she constantly struggles with, and she’s wondered more often than not if liking girls is just another way in which she’s a bad Muslim.

If it’s just the by-product of her Western education.

If it’s her father’s fault for not being stricter in their household.

If it’s the fact she went to an all-girls’ high school.

If it’s all the media she’s been exposed to.

They are all part of the many conversations she’s imagined having with her family about it. Every version of it ends terribly for her. Every version ends with tears and heartbreak, and Mikaila isn’t ready to lose her family over something that’s meant to make her feel free but has, instead, caged her further.

Mikaila checks the food once more, making sure all the liquid has been absorbed into the rice before pulling the casserole dish out of the oven. She sets it on a wire rack just as Mbali says, “Your hobbies are reading, painting and feeding people, right?”

“I can’t even tell if you’re messing with me or not,” Mikaila says, opening a drawer and finding a serving spoon.

Mbali rolls her eyes, carefully navigating through the profile. “How do you identify?”

“What?”

“Sexuality-wise.”

It is a scary, terrifying thing to put words to that. She’s spent quite some time thinking about this very thing, and she’s come to accept that she *can* find both men and women attractive, though Mbali claims she has significant gay energy.

She knows she exists on some kind of spectrum, that’s for sure, so she very carefully says, “Queer.”

She likes the word, as if it’s some kind of blanket term for someone who isn’t completely straight. She’s sure of that much, and she’s a little too scared to consider much else at this point. As far as she’s aware, she’s never quite fit into a specific box, and she’s not about to start now.

Though, if pressed, she thinks she knows. Deep down. She’s known for longer than she’s *known* she’s known.



When it comes down to it, there will only ever be one choice.

Mbali finishes with her profile as Mikaila dishes food for them and pours some iced tea into two glasses. “And... you are now active,” Mbali declares, handing the phone to Mikaila. “Look at you, all grown up.”

“I don’t know what you expect to happen,” she says, skeptical. “It is super doubtful I’m going to find the love of my life this way.”

“Hey,” she says, “It’s how I found Lerato.”

Mikaila’s eyebrows rise. “*Is* she the love of your life?”

If Mbali could blush, she probably would. A definite perk of darker skin. “I mean, yeah. Is that so wild?”

Mikaila shakes her head. “You *are* wild,” she says as she slides over Mbali’s plate. “Maybe I just—I can’t really talk about love, right? I’ve never quite experienced it.”

“You say that, but you *know* love.”

“I just didn’t know it at the time?”

Mbali shrugs. “The worst you can do is make some friends,” she says. “This thing—we need a community, Mikaila. People who understand what it’s like. Especially in South Africa.”

Mikaila glances at her. “What if we weren’t in South Africa?”

“Where would we even go?” Mbali asks immediately. It’s offhanded, almost rhetorical, so Mikaila doesn’t bother answering or even elaborating.

The thing is that she has all these dreams of escaping. She has dreams of being somewhere far away from where she is, and it’s nothing new. She didn’t have to figure out she likes women to know she wants *out*.

It’s not something she’s ever really been able to speak to Mbali about.

Speak to *anyone* about.

She told her mother she wanted to go to therapy after losing her father, but that was a conversation that never really went anywhere. It’s just not a thing they do in their family, and Mikaila hasn’t brought it up again. After the accident, she actually made a few appointments with the faculty’s psychologist at university, but she always, constantly,

felt as if she was doing something wrong. Endlessly worrying that someone she knew would see her and—

It's not a fear that's ever gone away.

Mbali reaches for her fork, but stops halfway. "You know nothing is expected of you, right?" she says.

Mikaila almost laughs, because it really feels like the opposite.

"I just think you need to hear that," Mbali adds.

Mikaila isn't even going to kid herself into believing such a thing.

\* \* \*

**3 Feb 2021**

You didn't give me your number.

You're not texting me, so I thought I would text you, but I didn't get your number from you when I gave you mine.

But I have one of your old ones saved in my contacts. I don't suppose you've changed yours, have you?

I'm going to try it.

Mikaila reads the messages on her Instagram three times, convinced she's seeing something she wants to. She figured Ashleigh didn't actually mean her words—too many people don't—but the evidence to the contrary is right in front of her.

So is a WhatsApp message from Ashleigh's new number sent just a few minutes after.

Mikaila Mohamed. This better be you.

It's all just a little weird to Mikaila, really, that Ashleigh is this interested in spending time with her. Mikaila hasn't forgotten their history, though it's not enough to stop her from texting her back.

Ashleigh von Bronckhorst. Why are you spamming me?

From what Mikaila remembers, Ashleigh is rather good at replying. They've had many an online conversation since they first met at twelve years old, first over Mxit and then over Blackberry Messenger, and now they're about to start all over again on WhatsApp.

Because Mikaila hasn't even put down her phone, in the middle of replying to her sister's update on Samir's birthday party plans, when Ashleigh responds and, dear God, Mikaila's heart does a *thing*, because of course it does.

Oh.

Oh no.

Mikaila Mohamed. It's literally one message. But I'll spam you if you want.

Here we go.

I read *The Help* for the fifth time last month and boy have I got a lot to say about it. I could write an entire essay about it, you know? The book is always better, of course, but the film is actually really good.

Do you remember when we watched it at Dineo's house? You totally cried.

Mikaila just shakes her head, because all of this isn't making the entire situation any less bizarre. What is Ashleigh's endgame is here? As much as Mikaila's missed her, she reminds herself to be cautious, even as she types her response.

I mean, I'm not against letting you wax poetic about *The Help*, but I get the feeling you're actually texting for a specific reason.

You always did know me too well.

ONLY EVER ONE CHOICE

I was there for the ear infection of 2008, Ash.  
I know many things about you.

Don't even remind me. I still can't decide if  
it was even worth it to get these stupid ears  
pierced, because that shit was painful.

You did seem pretty miserable.

My ear was GREEN, Mikaila. It was probably  
going to fall off.

Okay, Drama. Tell me what you want.

Ice-cream. Come with me to get some.

Mikaila's fingers still. That's unexpected.

Right now?

Put on your shoes and send me your  
address. I'll come get you.

From what Mikaila remembers, Ashleigh has never – *never ever* –  
done anything like this before. Granted, back then, Ashleigh didn't  
have a car to get around, and they were staying in shared spaces. *Uber*  
wasn't even a thing yet.

Again, I ask: right now?

I have a craving.

Why do you need me to come with you?

I have a craving, Mikaila.

You already said that.

Ashleigh takes a moment to reply.

Will you please come and get ice-cream with me?

Ashleigh's last text is followed by several smiley face emojis that Mikaila's trying not to read into too much. Mainly because it's embarrassing just how quickly she caves. Truly. The power Ashleigh von Bronckhorst has over her is astounding.

Just tell me where to go, and I'll meet you there.

Experience has taught her she's safest when in charge of her own transport, and she's not entirely sure she wants to be left in Ashleigh's hands—not when things are still so disjointed between them.

The Creamery. Newlands. Twenty minutes.  
See you there.

Now, in another life, Mikaila thinks she would be more panicked about what's about to happen. Well, maybe not, because *nothing* is about to happen.

Still, she makes sure to change into jeans and a baby blue blouse, squirts on some perfume, and walks out of her apartment. The drive to the ice-cream parlour is short, and she finds parking easily, spotting Ashleigh already waiting for her out front.

She truly is very beautiful, her strawberry blonde hair blowing in the slight breeze. Mikaila has had the thought many times in her life. Stared at her when she's not looking and been paralysed by the intense blue of her eyes. She knows now why she's had all these thoughts in the past.

*Still* has them, really, because Ashleigh spots her, smiles and waves, and Mikaila knows that, as much as she could fight it, there's always going to be a part of her that's a little bit in love with this flighty girl.

She's mostly okay with it.

"You made it," Ashleigh says, pulling her into a brief hug. "Which direction did you even come from?"

"Claremont," she says, mouth entirely too close to Ashleigh's ear. She pulls back far enough that she can see Ashleigh's face, and it's all so weird. "So, not too far from here."

"I would have picked you up on the way."

Mikaila shrugs. "It's okay," she says. "I just—you surprised me."

"What were you even doing?"

"It's a Wednesday, Ash," she says, "What do you think I was doing?"

"Probably reading," she says, "Maybe painting."

Mikaila won't admit how accurate her guesses are. "I thought you said you had a craving for ice-cream?"

"I said I have a craving," Ashleigh returns, and her gaze feels heavy, all of a sudden. "I assume you've been here before."

"Have I not been a university student in Cape Town for the past five hundred years?"

"You have been here a while, haven't you?"

"Ouch."

“No, I just mean, not like that, you know what I’m trying to—stop laughing at me.” Her eyes crinkle, amused and abashed simultaneously, and it feels new and dangerous.

“Come on, let’s go inside,” Mikaila says, stepping around Ashleigh and heading to the automatic doors.

Ashleigh follows her, and they turn to enter the small ice-cream shop side-by-side.

It is a Wednesday afternoon, so the place is blissfully empty, which is a relief because it takes Ashleigh nearly seven minutes to decide on which two half-and-half scoop flavours she wants.

Tiramisu and Sea Salt Caramel, apparently.

Mikaila picks Sweet Cream and Sea Salt Caramel, which is the combination she always gets. She’s too nervous to ask for anything else, and the lady behind the display already looks just a little annoyed with how often Ashleigh asks to try another flavour.

Ashleigh pays before Mikaila can offer, and Mikaila tries not to feel too weird about it. She’s pretty sure this isn’t a date—*because it’s not, Mikaila, it’s definitely not*. But she’s still a little surprised when Ashleigh asks, “So, would you bring a date here?” once they’ve found a table and taken seats opposite each other.

Mikaila doesn’t look at her, because *good God*. “Um. Maybe.” She clears her throat, trying to centre herself in this unexpected situation. “If she liked ice-cream, at least.”

“So, not your first choice?”

Mikaila shakes her head, finally meeting Ashleigh’s gaze. “No, probably not.”

“Where would you take her?”

Mikaila knows this is precarious territory. The two of them shouldn’t be talking about these things. Not this way. Not like this.

This isn’t high school anymore.

“Wherever she wanted,” Mikaila responds. “Maybe a café,” she offers, and definitely ignores that she’s describing the first place the two of them went together just three weeks ago. “Something low-key. Something that wouldn’t put too much pressure on either one of us. Especially if we met on an app.”

Ashleigh’s eyes light up. “You joined one?”

Mikaila scoffs, just a little too aggressive as she eats some ice-cream. "My friend kind of forced me."

"And?"

"It's been like a day," Mikaila says. "It's weird."

"You must be a hit."

Mikaila fights off the heat in her cheeks, because it's not entirely inaccurate. "I mean, I don't know how you'd even quantify a 'hit,' but it's—I just don't think I translate well through text when I'm thinking about it too hard."

"Then don't think at all."

"That sounds dangerous."

"Give me your phone."

Mikaila's eyes widen in alarm, and she actually backs up. "Absolutely not."

"I wanna see."

"No, that's definitely not going to happen," she says, firm.

Ashleigh pouts, her bottom lip sticking out, and Mikaila is transported back to the moment she had that lip caught between both of her own.

Nope.

She's not thinking about that right now.

"You have a boyfriend," Mikaila blurts, and Ashleigh goes still for a moment. Mikaila almost regrets it, but this is probably something they should talk about. It'll also help maintain some modicum of distance between them. She needs all the help she can get to stop her brain from latching onto how it feels to have Ashleigh's attention on only her.

"Not really," Ashleigh says, fiddling with her little paddle spoon. "We've been 'on a break' since I left to do my master's, but he says he wants to try again now that I'm back."

"Back for your new job, you said?" she asks.

"I officially start next month, yeah," Ashleigh says. "I've been looking for a place to stay closer to the city centre."

Mikaila blinks. "So, you're really going to be in Cape Town full-time?"

"For the foreseeable future, yep."



“Oh.”

“Can’t quite get rid of me, Mikaila,” she says, sounding only half-serious, because that’s alluding to something else they should really talk about. Her mouth opens to add something more but her eyes flick to the right just as a pair of women enters the shop, and something rather particular happens to her expression.

Mikaila doesn’t turn her head, but she still knows Ashleigh well enough to recognise that there’s some unpleasantness coming in her future.

Ashleigh looks back at her. “Do you remember that night in my first year when I was supposed to meet you for dinner at Cavendish, and I couldn’t?”

Mikaila doesn’t actually have to think that hard to recall the memory. The two of them were meant to meet to have sushi together at a restaurant in Claremont, and Mikaila sat at a table and waited for nearly an hour before Ashleigh finally called on a number that wasn’t even her own.

Mikaila had asked what was so important that she was stood up, and Ashleigh hadn’t been able to give her a real answer.

They didn’t speak for fifteen days after that.

“I remember,” Mikaila says, a little tense.

“I never told you why.”

“No, you didn’t.”

Ashleigh drops her gaze. “Do you know you’re actually a little judgmental?” she says, out of nowhere and with absolutely no tact.

Mikaila would argue the point, if it weren’t true. In a sense. She’s not judgmental to the point she’ll disapprove, but she can’t quite understand why people make such stupid decisions in their own lives.

“You did something you thought I would judge you for,” Mikaila guesses.

Ashleigh nods once. “There’s a girl over there,” she says. “Lana. I may have hooked up with her boyfriend that night.”

Mikaila blinks, choosing to focus on only one part of that confession, because she never wants to think of Ashleigh ‘hooking up’ with anyone. “Did you know that at the time?”

“I honestly don’t remember,” she admits. “I was pretty drunk.”

Second-year-Mikaila probably would have felt many things about this revelation at the time, but this Mikaila has experienced some life in the years since. People make mistakes; they just have to own them.

“Okay,” Mikaila says. “So, Lana found out and she hates your guts?”

“Pretty much.”

Mikaila shakes her head, a little amused. “Did you apologise?”

“What?”

“Did you ever apologise to her?” Mikaila asks. “Even if you didn’t know, it was a shitty thing to do. And, I mean, you’re allowed to make those kinds of mistakes, of course, but you’re not allowed to pretend they don’t have lasting consequences.”

Ashleigh stares at her, because Mikaila may as well be talking about something else completely. “I don’t even know how I’ve managed to get through life without your moral compass.”

Mikaila just shakes her head, then turns to face Lana and her friend as they continue picking their own flavours. She waits until one of them glances their way to ask, “Are you Lana?”

The woman looks a little surprised, but she shakes her head and taps the shoulder of the shorter woman beside her, getting her attention. “*She’s* Lana,” she says, and the eye contact lasts just a little too long.

Mikaila will think about that later. “Lana,” she addresses the other woman. “Hi there, I’m Mikaila,” she greets. “Ashleigh here has something she’d like to tell you.”

Lana’s eyes drift to where Ashleigh is sitting, looking smaller than Mikaila has seen her. “Ashleigh,” she says, sighing as if this is the absolute last situation in which she wants to be.

“Lana, hi,” Ashleigh forces herself to say, audibly swallowing. “Um. Long-time, no see.”

It is as awkward as Mikaila anticipated, the silence that follows stretching for an uncomfortably long time. On any other day, she might even find it amusing, but it’s rather painful from where she’s sitting.

“Would you two like to join us?” Mikaila eventually offers. “Hopefully, Ash’ll find the words to say what she needs to by the time our ice-cream is gone.”

Which is really how Mikaila ends up seated beside a woman named Savannah, with Lana and Ashleigh opposite them. Ashleigh keeps watching them, and Mikaila keeps watching her and Lana.

Mikaila eventually has to kick Ashleigh under the table when they’ve exhausted themselves with small talk and Mikaila now knows their unexpected guests work as junior associates at a law firm in Claremont and they managed to sneak out early for a mid-week treat.

Ashleigh shoots her a look in response, and then takes a deep breath. “Lana,” she says, “I—well, you see, I realised that I never quite apologised for everything that happened with Kai. So, you know, I’m sorry.”

Mikaila almost rolls her eyes, because that’s a terrible apology if ever she’s heard one. No wonder she avoids having to do it.

Lana looks a little stumped. “Kai?” she says, looking bewildered. “Wow. That was years ago, wasn’t it?”

“You don’t seem as if you’re still mad about it,” Ashleigh points out.

“I’m not.”

“Then why do you always give me *that* look whenever you see me?”

“What look?”

“Like you’ve tasted something sour.”

Lana frowns for a moment, then shakes her head. “I didn’t—oh my God, it has nothing to do with Kai. The boy was kind of an idiot.”

Ashleigh nods in agreement. “He really was.” She catches herself and shakes her head, clearly unable to figure it out. “But then why?”

Lana lets out a small laugh. “It’s so silly now.”

Mikaila exchanges a look with Savannah, who looks just a little too amused. There’s also something else in her gaze Mikaila can’t quite figure out, and she’s not entirely sure she even wants to. One confusing situation is more than enough to handle at any one time, thank you very much.

“Do you remember David Elliot?” Lana eventually asks.

“Who?”

Lana laughs again, looking embarrassed. "You had a group project with him, once."

"Um."

"He's my twin brother, and you were kind of an asshole to him."

Ashleigh's mouth drops open.

Mikaila snorts, almost right into her cup of ice-cream. "Sounds like her, for sure."

"Hey," Ashleigh says, feigning hurt. "I can be nice."

"Not in a group setting," Mikaila reminds her. "Remember that science project in Matric when you—"

It's Ashleigh's turn to kick her shin. "You promised we would never discuss that again."

"I'm just pointing out you can be a bit of a heathen," Mikaila says, entirely too innocently. She's enjoying this too much, getting to spend time with Ashleigh without overthinking every little thing. They hold eye contact for just a bit too long, soft smiles on their faces, and Mikaila feels her head and heart drifting to places they really shouldn't.

Mikaila's not used to having to police herself around Ashleigh. Usually, nobody would notice, anyway, which is why it's a surprise when Savannah looks between them and asks, "You two have been together that long?"

Mikaila almost chokes on air. "Oh, no, no, we're not together," she immediately says, because they're not. Despite the little flame of hope burning in Mikaila's chest, it's likely never going to happen. "No. Definitely not." She forces herself to ignore the sharp look Ashleigh shoots her, clearing her own throat. "No, we just went to high school together."

"But you—" Savannah starts and stops. "Sorry. I shouldn't have assumed. Especially with the whole Kai thing." She shakes her head at herself, looking slightly flustered. "You just—you just seem very close."

"It was boarding school," Mikaila says, as if it explains everything. "She's also been an asshole to me in the past, but you kind of just get used to it and realise it's a part of her charm."

Ashleigh huffs. “I *am* sitting right here. Why’s everyone being so mean to me?”

Mikaila smiles at her, softer than she intends. “We’re making friends, Ash,” she says. “Behave.”

Ashleigh, once again, looks at her as if she barely recognises her, and it is a complicated thing. Because Ashleigh likes puzzles. She likes figuring things and people out, and the last thing Mikaila needs right now is Ashleigh looking at her too closely.

Savannah’s eyes dart between them again. “So, not together?”

Mikaila shakes her head, not even allowing herself to entertain such an idea. “I am very single, and Ashleigh is—well, you’re kind of taken, right?”

Ashleigh’s eyes are on Mikaila’s face when she says, “Something like that.”

Just from the tone of her voice, it feels as if she’s answering a different question entirely, but Mikaila won’t dwell on it.

“You were with Nick Calvert, right?” Lana asks. It’s the first time Mikaila hears the name out loud, and wishes he remained some kind of phantom, unnamed, despite his face appearing on Ashleigh’s social media.

Ashleigh looks slightly uncomfortable when she nods. She offers no verbal response, and Mikaila makes a note to ask her about it later.

*Later.*

After they’ve finished their ice-cream, Ashleigh casually mentions that she and Mikaila actually have somewhere they need to be—which they don’t—and initiates their departure.

Lana takes Mikaila’s number, joking about how she’s going to make sure Mikaila knows when Ashleigh’s being an asshole.

“We’ll definitely text you,” Savannah adds on, eyes on Mikaila, and then Ashleigh is hooking their arms together and dragging Mikaila out of the shop and onto the sidewalk.

“Dude,” Ashleigh says as soon as they’re in the hot sun. “You have really got to rein in your accidental flirting.”

Mikaila’s eyes widen. “What? No. I was *not* flirting with you.”

“With Savannah, actually,” Ashleigh corrects. “Did you not notice the way she was looking at you? It was positively indecent, but, you know, you could be into that kind of thing.”

“I didn’t even notice.”

“You *are* kind of oblivious, Mikaila,” Ashleigh tells her, keeping their arms linked as she starts walking to where Mikaila’s parked one street over. “But she has your number, so maybe she’ll message you.”

“Savannah?”

“What? Don’t you think she’s pretty?”

It feels too dangerous to answer that question, so she doesn’t and rather switches topics. “See? You and Lana managed to sort out your issues, and all it took was a little communication.”

“Only because you were playing mediator,” Ashleigh counters. “Your talents are wasted on—” she stops, frowning. “I don’t even know what you’re studying.”

“I’m *not* studying anything,” Mikaila tells her, tapping the side of her nose with her forefinger. “As far as I’m concerned, I’m no longer a postgraduate student.”

“You’re done?”

Mikaila shrugs. “My supervisor’s looking at my final document so, barring catastrophe, I’m days away from submitting it to the powers-that-be to decide the outcome of the rest of my life.”

“That serious, huh?”

“Basically.”

“And then what?”

“Isn’t *that* the question?” Mikaila muses. “I have no idea.”

“What do you *want* to do?”

“Sleep, mostly,” she jokes with a soft laugh. “No, seriously, I just—I want to take a break, you know, and figure things out.”

“Why don’t you, then?”

“Because then my mother will probably make me go home,” Mikaila tells her, and those are words that could open up a topic of conversation she’s not sure she should be having with Ashleigh. “But, um, I’m sort of considering staying on with my supervisor and continuing with a PhD. I’ve already put together a research outline.”

“You don’t sound too interested in doing that,” Ashleigh points out.

“What *else* could I do?”

“Find a Sugar Mama.”

Mikaila laughs, unexpectedly and a little sharply. “Wow, that would be—I mean, that would be amazing, wouldn’t it? Just have some older woman pay for everything while I laze about and live my best life. Sounds like a dream.”

Obviously, she’s being deeply sarcastic, but there’s some truth to her words. It sounds like a simpler life than the one she’s currently trying to live. She could really go for simple right now.

Ashleigh just watches her, standing entirely too close, and Mikaila looks away, so they can cross the street together. She takes road safety very seriously these days. She fishes for her keys in the back pocket of her jeans, forcing Ashleigh to release her arm and let her step towards the car.

For a moment, it feels as if time slows, the sounds of the world fading to nothing. It all focuses in on this single moment, where she’s looking away, and Ashleigh is looking at her, and Mikaila will cite this moment as the one that starts a series of events over which she has zero control.

“Hey,” Ashleigh says, slowing to a stop at the driver’s side door. “Thank you for coming.”

Mikaila eyes her, a little bit coy. “You didn’t really give me a choice.”

“It was free ice-cream.”

“Mhmm, that’s *definitely* the reason I came out to meet you.”

Ashleigh’s eyes suddenly seem bluer, sparkling behind her glasses. “Why *did* you come meet me?”

It is maybe the simplest thing Mikaila has ever said to Ashleigh when she turns her head and murmurs, “You know as well as I do that I wouldn’t have been able to say no to you.” And it’s true. “I’m not going to make that mistake again.”

Mikaila lets the words hang between them as she steps towards her door, carefully unlocking and opening it. Something feels heavy

between them all of a sudden. Despite what's happened in the last few years, they *do* know the truth of her words.

They also both now know why, and it's a fact that's both discomfiting and liberating.

Mikaila clears her throat, and then says, "I'll see you around."

Ashleigh hums. "When?"

"What?"

"When are you going to see me around?" Ashleigh asks, and she sounds far too casual for Mikaila's liking. "Because I know you like plans."

"Ashleigh."

"What?"

"What do you mean *what*?" she says, a little irritated. "What are you doing?"

"What do you mean what am I doing?"

Mikaila sighs. "You *told* me you felt uncomfortable around me," she says, and the words are an accusation, explanation and complaint all at once. "You told me I didn't fit into your life, and that it would be better if we both just stopped trying. You told me not to be dramatic about it, so forgive me if I'm just a little bit confused about what's happening here."

"Mikaila."

"No," she snaps, and Ashleigh looks so surprised that she actually takes a step back. "I have been right here the entire time, okay? You don't get to decide you just want back in my life because I've started making sense of things."

"*You're* the one who messaged me," Ashleigh reminds her.

"For *closure*," she says, voice a little too high. "We talked. Nothing has changed."

"Everything has changed," Ashleigh tells her, "I've changed, and you've changed, and it could be—"

"It could be what?"

"Did you *see* yourself in there?"

"What?"



"In the Creamery, the way you handled yourself with Lana and Savannah," Ashleigh clarifies. "You never would have been able to do that before. You were—"

"I was *not* ready," Mikaila finishes, irritation growing into genuine anger and hurt. "And you decided you didn't want me *then*, so why would I be okay with it now? Hmm? You don't just get to pick it all up where you left me. It doesn't work like that. We talked. I said my piece."

"Well, I haven't said mine."

"You had your chance."

"Mikaila."

She shakes her head. "You told me I was your past," she says, and her voice has faded to a whisper, the anger with it. "Do you remember that, hmm? You told me that I wasn't someone you wanted in your future."

"Mikaila."

"It shouldn't matter that I've changed, or you've changed," Mikaila adds, "It shouldn't."

"Mikaila."

"Stop saying my name like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you care about me."

"Of course, I care about you. I've always cared about you."

"Then how could you just leave me?" Mikaila snaps.

"I didn't," Ashleigh automatically defends, and maybe they're remembering it differently. "I didn't just *leave*, Mikaila. Whatever I said at the end, it was—you know it was necessary. We were barely talking already, after what happened."

*After what happened.*

The *first* time Ashleigh asked her if she wanted to kiss her.

"I just put a name to it, so we could both move on," Ashleigh adds. Now, she's the one who sounds irritated. Maybe this is *her* piece, because they didn't *really* talk about it. Not then, and not now, which was likely part of their problem in the first place.

They *should* talk about it properly. They've grown and matured. They can have this conversation.

But then Ashleigh says, “I didn’t want to leave you in the dark the same way Chelsea did,” and all of Mikaila’s good will dissolves.

She glares at her, and it feels momentous, somehow. “Do you think you were doing me a favour?” she asks, voice coming out colder than she intends. “That it somehow made it hurt any less?”

“Would you rather I have said nothing?” Ashleigh asks, equally tense. “Would that have been better?”

And, for the most part, Mikaila believes it would have. Maybe, in the moment, she would have struggled to make sense of it, but she also knows she’s been irreparably altered by reading the words that she made Ashleigh feel *uncomfortable*.

Mikaila steps back, aching in ways she was convinced she left behind. It was years ago, her texted invitation to her birthday dinner met with an actual friend breakup. Ashleigh can allude to how much it was expected as much as she likes, but it *was* shocking and it *did* hurt.

Mikaila’s had time to digest it all. She’s spent years moving past it, acting as if it never quite affected her when it’s actually altered the way she looks at nearly all her relationships. Ashleigh has scarred her in ways she didn’t even realise until this second.

“You know what?” she says. “It doesn’t even matter.” And it is suddenly so very clear to her. “You weren’t even thinking about me, right? You were just prioritising yourself, weren’t you?”

Ashleigh blinks, then nods.

“Well, now, I’m doing the same thing.”

## CHAPTER 3

MIKAILA DRIVES STRAIGHT TO CASSIE'S place.

She's not usually one for spontaneously showing up at her friends' homes—mainly because she would hate for them to do the same to her—but she's experiencing something she's never experienced before, and she's going to need Cassie's help to make sense of it.

Cassie is, predictably, surprised to see her, but she opens when Mikaila calls, makes her a cup of tea, and decidedly doesn't ask why she looks irritated and miserable.

Mikaila just spreads out on Cassie's lovely blue-grey couch and closes her eyes. She half-expects Ashleigh to call her but her phone is blissfully silent, which is probably for the best. She needs to unpack what's happened herself.

Cassie just sifts through Netflix for something for them to watch, and she's just put on an episode of *Schitt's Creek* when Mikaila quietly confesses, "I kissed her."

Cassie keeps her own gaze averted. "Today?"

"When we met the first time," Mikaila explains. "A few weeks ago. After I came out to her and we were saying goodbye. She asked if I wanted to kiss her, so I did."

She doesn't need to see Cassie's expression to know it probably wasn't the smartest idea. But it happened, and Mikaila has thought about little else since.

"And, you know what, it was fine. I was fine with the way we left things, but now—" Mikaila stops, sighs, and turns her head to look at Cassie. "Do you know what she told me, when it all fell apart?"

Cassie doesn't respond, just turns her head to look back at Mikaila.

"She told me we were too different, and that it wasn't her responsibility to make me feel comfortable around her anymore," Mikaila explains. "I didn't—it didn't make any sense to me at the time, but I—it's a lot worse now, isn't it? Because now I'm finally as comfortable and ready as I can get at this stage of my life, and *now* she decides she wants to be around me. That's not how this works. It's not."

Cassie hums softly, as if she's just figured it all out just from what little Mikaila has told her. She always seems to *know* things. She's actually a few months younger than Mikaila, but she's always seemed older. Already experienced enough life to be able to see things others don't.

But then Cassie says, "She wants you."

Now Mikaila isn't so sure. "What?"

"She *wants* you."

"Please don't say that," Mikaila says. The last thing she needs is someone actually saying the words out loud. Putting them in her head and dangling the hope for such a thing to be true right in front of her. After everything they've been through, her little, battered heart can't handle it. It's already trying so hard to protect itself. "You asked me what happened."

"I did."

Mikaila presses her lips together, conflicted. "If I tell you, do you promise you won't judge me?"

"When have I *ever* judged you?"

"Just promise."

"I promise."

Mikaila drops her gaze to her hands, feeling slightly overwhelmed.

"Mik?" Cassie prompts, sensing Mikaila's severity. "Stop worrying so much. She still replied, right? She still met you. She wouldn't have done that otherwise."

Mikaila takes a breath, steadying herself. "It's not the first time she's asked me if I wanted to kiss her," she reveals. "She'd just started at UCT after her gap year. We'd seen each other a little, but it just—I was so happy to have her back, you know? But she was different. I was, too, I think. My first year was difficult in ways I wasn't prepared for."

"Anyway, she was living at this shared house in Mowbry and we went out to dinner this one night, just the two of us. I think we were trying to recapture the past. We didn't say it out loud, but it kind of felt like a date, and I think I would have been fine with that if she just—if she hadn't asked." She shakes her head at the memory of the end of that night, a coldness settling over her even now. How could everything go so completely off script?

That question, asked in that voice, brought into the light Mikaila's every unspoken and unacknowledged thought and feeling so casually and abruptly. Mikaila knows she didn't respond the way either of them expected. She knows their entire relationship changed in an instant. She knows she's responsible.

Because, when Ashleigh asked, Mikaila said no.

"I panicked," Mikaila admits now. "She had to be joking. I *needed* her to be joking. I just—I didn't react well, and I remember I just couldn't stop talking. It wasn't me. It couldn't be me. I couldn't be gay. It was wrong. It was against my religion." She swallows, voice dropping. "So I laughed it off, Cass. I *couldn't* take her seriously. I wasn't ready, and I just... Sometimes, I keep seeing the look on her face after that, like I drew a line in the sand I didn't even know existed.

"We weren't the same after that. We just never talked about it again, some moment in time that existed between us and would never again be addressed. Some *maybe*, some *what if*. We could never quite get any of that ease back. We didn't hang out the same way. She didn't randomly call. I think I broke something between us, and she fell away, but I just—I wasn't ready. I didn't even know what I was meant to be ready for."

Cassie shifts her feet to the floor and leans forward, elbows on her thighs. "Mik, you know I wouldn't have ever judged you for that," she says. "If you weren't ready, you weren't ready. Sometimes, you have to figure it out for yourself. It's why you can't really be angry with any of us for not telling you what we could see. We love you too much for that."

"And Ashleigh didn't?"

“Ashleigh’s a special case. You know that. She was invested in your figuring it out for reasons the rest of us aren’t.” She meets Mikaila’s gaze. “So, I suppose, the question to ask is: are you ready now?”

“What?”

“You *have* changed,” Cassie tells her. “Just from when I met you. It doesn’t have to be a bad thing. She must see it and realise what it means, so of course she wants *you*.”

Mikaila sighs. “Cassie.”

“Mikaila.”

“She wasn’t supposed to want me,” she whispers. “Not again.”

“Why not?” Cassie asks, and she looks as if she’s gearing up to shoot down every single one of Mikaila’s insecurities.

But all Mikaila says is, “It wasn’t supposed to happen now.” She shakes her head. “It wasn’t supposed to be her.”

Cassie pats Mikaila’s knee, placating. “Maybe it *was* always meant to be her,” she offers, which isn’t at all helpful. “Maybe there’s no such thing as ‘ready’ anyway. Isn’t life always just about timing?”

Mikaila has no appropriate rebuttal.

Cassie gives it more thought. “I do think there are still things you’re not telling me about why you’re still so hesitant, but I will say that maybe this entire thing is something you need to see through. I don’t think you’ll get your full closure with her, otherwise.”

“What does that even mean?”

“It means that you’re going to respond when she texts you next, and then you’re going to meet up and talk to her about all of this like the adult you’re trying to be.”

“She’s not going to text me,” Mikaila immediately counters.

“She’s going to text you.”

“She’s really not.”

Cassie settles back against the couch, lifting her cup of tea and taking a deep sip before looking back at her. “Mikaila, she *wants* you,” she says. “She’s *definitely* going to text you.”

Mikaila just sighs, saying nothing.

Because she knows, if Cassie is right about this, then Mikaila is actually going to have to face it, whether she’s ready for it or not.

When Mikaila's mother calls later that night, there's a part of her that desperately wants to reveal everything. Her mother would know how to deal with this, because she usually knows how to deal with nearly everything. Here's a woman who has raised two young women, became an actual grandmother, started a successful company, lost her husband, *and* she's still killing it.

Somehow, Mikaila just knows adding *girl* trouble to that list isn't going to work in her favour.

When she answers the call, Mikaila doesn't mention Ashleigh. She hasn't mentioned her in so long, in fact, that her mother has actually stopped asking. It's for the best, because Mikaila wouldn't know what to say, anyway. She's hoping it's never a conversation they end up having, though it might be inevitable.

*Ashleigh* is going to make it unavoidable.

Instead, her mother tells her about the crush Sufjan appears to have on one of his classmates. Apparently, he's written her a love letter, asking her to be his Valentine when the holiday rolls around the following weekend.

It's cute, obviously, but also a little worrying. He's only eight years old. What do kids that age even know about the opposite sex?

Well.

Mikaila probably knows even less and she's twenty-five.

She's never had an official boyfriend. Only been on one date with a boy, and that was set up by both of their mothers some years ago. The first boy she kissed was at a party she was dragged to in Matric, and it's not a pleasant memory. All she really knows about dating the opposite sex—and the same one, really—is what she's learned from various forms of media: television, books and social networks.

It almost makes sense that Sufjan would have it figured out before her.

When she gets off the phone with her mother, Mikaila feels distinctly guilty. Her mother has always been in her corner, a cheerleader and an instructor. They're close—a very different relationship than her mother has with Zora—and Mikaila thinks that's a lot to do with the

fact Mikaila is actually more like her father and Zora is more like their mother.

The guilt is because Mikaila is actively lying to her, and she's really never been all that good at it. It eats away at her, even now. She's stuck in this spot where she wants to stay as hidden as possible, but she also really wants to live as authentically as she's able to, and the duality of that is simply and continually jarring.

Mikaila's phone is still in her hand when it dings with a WhatsApp message, and her heart skips a beat at the thought it could be Ashleigh.

It's not.

It's actually an unsaved number, and Mikaila opens the message to find it's Savannah who's messaged her.

Mikaila, hi, it's Savannah. From The Creamery, in case you need the reminder. I don't know if you'd consider this too forward, but I thought we seemed to get along today, and you said you're single. And so am I. So, I was thinking... Would you like to get a drink with me some time? X

Mikaila reads the message twice, silently lamenting how she managed to go from having zero real-life prospects to having *two* women expressing some kind of interest in her in the space of just a few weeks.

Apparently, they *will* just pop out of the woodwork.

She reads the text a third time, agonising over how she's meant to respond. Saying yes to her proposition would be safer and smarter—someone completely new to her—because she's not Ashleigh.

But it's exactly *that* thought that stops her.

She's *not* Ashleigh.

And if there's a chance Mikaila can have Ashleigh, then—

With a sigh, she closes the message, tilting her head back and groaning. Probably best not to reply at all.

\* \* \*



When Mikaila says she has a lot of family in Cape Town, it isn't an exaggeration. Her father's extended family is spread around the entire country, sure, but there is an abundant amount settled in the Mother City.

Before Mikaila was aware of her sexuality, she didn't care all that much. She's generally a homebody, sticks to herself and her school-work. She doesn't quite interact with the members of the Mohamed family, except for a very specific handful, and only on special occasions: birthdays, weddings, funerals, and Eid celebrations.

Before, whenever her father would visit her in Cape Town, the two of them would do the rounds together, visiting all the uncles and aunties in their respective homes. Now that her father is gone, every house Mikaila visits is a constant reminder that she's the late Imran Mohamed's younger daughter who was with him when he passed.

Still, Mikaila can't quite avoid visiting all the time. Especially not when the younger generation becomes aware of her return to Cape Town and her phone gets spammed with invitations to lunch after Jumma prayers on Friday afternoon.

Mikaila's own prayer routine is sporadic, at best. Five times a day is nothing she's ever managed to accomplish in her life, though even she knows she would be more inclined to do so if she grew up with an adult to imitate.

Her household did no such thing, and it's one of the things she knows her father continuously worried about. She's sure he was plagued with the question of whether religion would remain strong within her when she had her own children. Would she be able to teach Islam to them if she didn't practice the correct way?

Well.

She knows he wished that she would end up marrying someone with a stronger religious background; someone who would guide her better than he was able to. Mikaila thinks it's unlikely she'll fulfil that wish, but all she truly wants is to be happy, and she likes to think her father would understand that.

Maybe.

She won't ever know if he would, and that's perhaps a mercy at this point in her life. What she does know is that he would want her at least to remain connected to some of his family in his absence.

So, after she's prayed in her own home, Mikaila goes to one of her father's aunt's houses for lunch and encounters nearly thirteen people in the process. Which is good. If she can see as many people as possible in a single visit, merely proof that she's alive and well, then she can probably go another few months without seeing any of them again. It's a win-win.

The problem is they always talk about her father.

To the uncles, aunties, cousins, and everyone in between, Mikaila can't quite exist separate from his memory. They loved him and so love her by association. They're interested in her *because* of him, wanting to see her succeed, and Mikaila gets immense satisfaction informing them that she's basically done with her master's. It's been a long time coming, and she hopes her father would be proud of at least that much.

The admission, though, leads to the inevitable follow-up question of *what next?* because of course it does. The expectations come from everyone, and Mikaila strategically deflects them by mentioning her intention to pursue doctoral research.

It's perhaps the one thing that hasn't actually changed about her future, when so much else has. She is very good at doing, saying, and being exactly who everyone expects her to be. It's been ingrained in her from a young age, the weight of being the second daughter from a mixed marriage that was frowned upon *then* and has been begrudgingly tolerated over the years.

Mikaila knows they've written off her sister, in the sense that she's already accomplished what's expected of all women in their culture: marriage and children. It doesn't matter that she's in the middle of what could end up being a messy divorce, because she's already reached that pinnacle. Mikaila knows that her considerable accolades as an academic will amount to nothing if she doesn't end up with a family of her own.

Which she will. *That's* her intention.

Just, it probably isn't going to look anything like they expect it to, and it might actually be the first thing she does that nobody expects.

\* \* \*

Ashleigh doesn't text until Saturday. When Mikaila sees her name show up on her screen, she's proud that she doesn't immediately throw her phone right across the restaurant. It just vibrates in her lap, catching her attention, and her breath hitches only a little.

Opposite her, Mbali raises her eyebrows, and Mikaila definitely doesn't need the reminder that Mbali and Cassie talk about her to each other.

Mikaila tucks her phone between her thighs, ignoring it, and keeps her focus on Lerato. She's in the middle of a story from work, and Mikaila is determined to listen. Lerato deserves her attention way more than Ashleigh does, and Mikaila is able to give it to her and then some as she, Lerato and Mbali finish up their lunch, casually discussing the kitten Lerato is considering fostering and the apartment Mbali may or may not be considering moving into.

After, Lerato has to go back to work, complaining about having to be around her colleagues even on the weekend, and Mbali is meant to be meeting her cousin for an afternoon hike. Mikaila, of course, has her own company to contend with, and she decides a trip to the beach will do her well once she leaves her friends' company.

She's not usually one to get into the ocean unprompted, and she's definitely not prepared for it, either. But she always has a beach towel in the boot of her car, ready and waiting for a moment just like this.

Sunglasses, book, bottle of water, and towel in hand, Mikaila chooses one of the quieter beaches she knows, Llandudno, picks a comfortable spot, and settles herself under the afternoon sun. This is notoriously Cape Town's hottest time of the year, so there are small groups of people scattered around the strip of sandy beach, the breeze just cool enough not to be uncomfortable.

To her right, a young couple are doing yoga on brightly coloured towels, and her left side is occupied by a group of older women that Mikaila assumes is a book club from the matching novels they seem to be discussing.

But it's the ocean in front of her, a blue that's entirely too similar to the colour of Ashleigh's eyes, that captures her attention. Of course she would find something to make her think about Ashleigh—as if she needed any more incentive. The waves are too gentle to be heard

from this distance, but just the sight of them is enough to soothe the torrents in her chest.

She wants to be ready to *live* her life, but she's not sure she truly is.

She makes a valiant effort to take in the water and read quietly, trying to relax her mind, but it's as if her phone is burning a hole in her pocket, Ashleigh's message waiting to be read. She doesn't even know why she's fighting what she's too scared to hope for. Without even realising it, she's been waiting for Ashleigh for *years*.

And now, Ashleigh is waiting for her in return. After all she's been through, Mikaila knows better than to waste any more time. Ashleigh is not the kind of person easily ignored, and it takes zero more convincing finally—finally—to open Ashleigh's text.

Mikaila,

The first night we spent as roommates, we promised each other we would face the world together, and I haven't really allowed myself to think about what it meant that I broke my half of said promise. I didn't let myself think about this moment right here, when we can look at each other and not recognise the person across from us.

We were so young. We knew nothing, and I'm convinced I still know nothing. I thought we were maturing at different rates, which was true, in a sense. We just matured in different ways, at different times, and I've spent the last few days realising I might have learned a lot about myself in the past few years, but not enough about you.

Truth be told, I'm not sure what's actually happening with me. Especially when it comes to you. It feels as if I'm at my own set of crossroads, and you were always someone I could turn to. I took that for granted, I suppose, and I've done this all wrong.

It is your decision, of course, but could we start again? With these people we are now. I had this dream the other day that I would grow old and just never see you again, and I don't like the way that feels.

You already know I wasn't really thinking clearly back then, and I didn't realise what it would mean for us to send that last text. I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought it would hurt less than having our friendship fade to nothing if I just called it.

Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I wasn't.

I didn't think this far in the future. That's always been your thing. I didn't think it would mean forever.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry we've got to this point, but I don't want us to be. Not anymore. I don't want to be back in Cape Town and not be part of your life. So I'm asking, Mik, could we start again? If that's an unfair thing to ask of you, you can just tell me to fuck off, but I know I've always been my most selfish when it comes to you.

Tell me, will you let me take you to my favourite spot in this whole city? I think you'll love it.

AVB 

Mikaila reads it a second and third time, screenshots it and sends it to Cassie – who responds with an extremely unhelpful shrugging emoji. Mikaila expects Ashleigh to bombard her with more messages, so it's really a surprise when she sends nothing more in the nineteen long hours it takes Mikaila to come up with a suitable response. She's given what she wants to say a lot of thought, allowing herself to sleep on it, before she types something she might regret.

Still, in the end, what she ends up sending is simple, a single question that says very little but gives away everything.

Where are we going?

Predictably, Ashleigh responds within a minute, and Mikaila couldn't stop her smile if she tried. Her heart continually does *that thing*, and she would worry she has some kind of tremor if she wasn't aware of just who was responsible.

Put on your shoes. I'm coming to get you.

Mikaila glances at the time, her eyes widening.

You take spontaneity to a whole new level.  
It's almost eight o'clock on a Sunday night. I  
am NOT going anywhere.

Mikaila Mohamed. Spoilsport.

Mikaila shifts in her position on her couch, the television playing some show she's definitely not paying any attention to.

Ashleigh von Bronckhorst. I am very comfortable in my pyjamas right now. Even you aren't enough incentive to change that.

Ouch, babe.

Mikaila rolls her eyes.

What if I just want to see you?

Mikaila's heart stutters, because this is—Is this it? Is she ready for what this could mean, for right now and for her future?

Regardless, Mikaila sends a location pin and a very important instruction.

Only a mini-tub of Häagen-Dazs will grant you entry.

The response she gets is a snapped selfie of Ashleigh holding up what must be her car keys as she grins into the camera.

Mikaila just smiles at the picture before she registers exactly what Ashleigh's sent, and panics at the prospect of Ashleigh coming to her apartment. Mikaila is really in her pyjamas, basically bumming on her couch. *Shit*. She scrambles to her feet and looks around.

Okay.

Her place isn't the untidiest it's ever been, but she still spends a few minutes straightening the cushions on her couches and carrying her dirty plate and coffee cup to the kitchen sink. She makes quick work of the few dishes already in there, and then she goes to the bathroom to make sure it's presentable if Ashleigh ends up needing it.

Next, she checks herself over, pulling her hair into a messy bun atop her head. She considers changing but decides against it. This isn't *that*.

This is just—

Mikaila's really not sure what it is, if she's being honest. Just that Ashleigh is coming over for the first time.

Fifteen minutes later, she receives a second selfie of Ashleigh, this one darker and obviously in her car that is captioned with: *Ice cream en route* 🍦

The entire thing is ridiculous, truly. Mikaila knows she'll spook herself if she allows herself to think too much about it. She just sends Ashleigh her apartment number in response. And then she waits, heart rate slowly rising with the anticipation of seeing Ashleigh again. She's spent some time accepting they won't ever get back what they've lost in their missing years, but maybe that isn't the worst thing in the world.

They could become something better.

Ashleigh texts once more, complaining that the ice-cream is melting in this heat as she waits for security to sign her into the building,

and then there's a knock at Mikaila's door. She's as calm as she can possibly be when she answers it, opening it to reveal an Ashleigh von Bronckhorst who is positively devastating, eyes shining and blue, her grin just a little sly.

"Delivery for Miss Mohamed," Ashleigh croons, and Mikaila just smiles like an idiot as she steps back to allow Ashleigh to enter.

Ashleigh, who very purposefully doesn't use all the space Mikaila has left for her, and rather brushes her arm against the front of Mikaila's body as she passes, which doesn't help at all with Mikaila's accelerating heart rate.

"Whoa, this place is awesome," Ashleigh says from behind her as Mikaila turns to close and lock the door. "Do you live alone? How long have you been in here? I'm totally stealing that cushion, by the way. It literally has popcorn on it."

Mikaila turns around to find Ashleigh already standing near the shelves in her living space. She's got trinkets and some books and several picture frames, and having Ashleigh in her home makes her feel exposed. She hasn't spent much time thinking about what her apartment looks like to someone new, mainly because she's maintained the same circle of friends for a solid three years now.

Nothing much has changed in all that time, the apartment's open plan leaving every little nook and cranny in clear view. The same beige couches, the same green and brown drop curtains, the same mounted television, vinyl record player in the corner, and even her small chest freezer—a must-have in every self-respecting Muslim home.

And it is, isn't it?

This is Mikaila's *home*.

"*Ash*."

She turns, smile steady but very obviously tinged with nerves. "I didn't know if you'd eaten dinner yet, so I also bought some sushi while I was in Spar," she says. "With extra ginger, of course."

"I've eaten," Mikaila tells her. "That's why I asked for dessert, but thank you."

"I wanted entry," Ashleigh deflects.

"And you've entered," Mikaila says. "Welcome to my humble abode." She moves forward, stopping at the kitchen counter and fid-



dling with the ice-cream box. Ashleigh's bought one of those multi-packs with four little tubs, each a different flavour. "I've lived here since we bought it my third year of undergrad," she explains. "My parents thought it would be a good investment, which I suppose it has been, because we would have wasted a lot of money on rent."

"Smart."

Mikaila hums.

Ashleigh slowly approaches her. "You wear glasses now," she says, voice low.

"What?" Mikaila touches her face, surprised to find her glasses sitting on her nose. She forgot about them. "I—Yeah, I guess I do," she says, laughing nervously. "Sometimes. Mostly for the screen. All that staring at a laptop takes a toll on your eyesight. The perks of choosing engineering. I thought we'd be matching."

"Contacts."

"I thought you hated those."

"I do," she groans, the Drama that is Ashleigh von Bronckhorst. "They're honestly the worst and best thing at the same time. I hate that I sometimes need them. I mean, I can't exactly dance while wearing actual glasses, you know?"

"You still dance?"

"Not the way I used to," she answers. "There's a studio in Claremont I used to go to. I guess I miss it, but not enough to do something about it. I'd rather just bust a move in my kitchen and call it a day."

"Please tell me you did not just say 'bust a move' and actually were serious about it."

"I'm *fetch*, Mikaila."

She laughs. "Oh my god, shut up."

Ashleigh smiles, looking thoroughly pleased with herself. She also looks a bit more relaxed, which helps. A nervous Ashleigh is a whole other beast, and Mikaila is already nervous enough herself.

"Your ice-cream is melting," Ashleigh eventually points out.

Mikaila takes out one of the small tubs—Strawberry Cheesecake flavour—from the box and sets it on the marbled counter closer to

where Ashleigh is standing. “Did you want something else?” she asks. “Something to drink. Do *you* want some sushi?”

Ashleigh steps around the counter, getting far too close to Mikaila. “I’ve eaten,” she says. “My mum made pasta.”

“You love pasta.”

“It is my guilty pleasure.”

Mikaila audibly swallows when Ashleigh is close enough to feel the heat off her body. “Don’t lie,” she manages to say. “There is no guilt involved.”

Ashleigh stares at her, and Mikaila stares right back. The air is charged, just waiting to ignite, and Mikaila isn’t sure she’s ready for what happens when they’re set on fire.

Mikaila looks away first, sucking in a breath. Ashleigh’s eyes have always been so intensely blue, sparkling in a way that reminds Mikaila of the ocean. They’re one of the features Mikaila has always loved the most about her, even before she was aware of why and how.

“I was about to watch the eight o’clock movie,” Mikaila says, absently picking a different flavour of ice-cream for herself before turning to pack the other two tubs in her freezer, the sushi going into the fridge. “I think it’s something with Zac Efron.”

Ashleigh nods slowly, looking slightly dazed. “He’s kind of hot,” she says, and then winces. “Is that—I mean, can I still say that to you?”

Mikaila laughs. “I still have eyes, you know?”

“I know that, but it just—I mean, you never actually said how you identified.”

“Zac Efron *is* hot,” Mikaila confirms, because she doesn’t have to be straight to acknowledge at least that much. The man is a fine specimen, regardless of Mikaila’s preferences. “But my ultimate celebrity crush has to be Chris Hemsworth. And Jesse Williams, wow. I think I’m just a sucker for *eyes*.”

It’s never been truer than when it comes to this woman, it seems, whose eyes are so outrageous that Mikaila has caught herself staring at them more often than not. If Ashleigh weren’t right in front of her, Mikaila wouldn’t believe they were real.

"I am, too," Ashleigh reveals, and she makes a point of meeting Mikaila's gaze. Mikaila's own eyes are a deep brown, though there are flecks of gold visible when she's in the sun. "I read somewhere that they're the one thing that never changes about a person, from birth until death. It's where you'll always find the most truth."

"What truth are you seeing right now?" Mikaila asks, and this conversation is suddenly too heavy. They've jumped too far. They definitely need to take a few steps back and unpack what they need to.

"That we have far too much to talk about before I answer that," Ashleigh says, as if she's read Mikaila's mind.

Mikaila nods slowly. Ashleigh's right. It's the smart thing to do. "We should sit," she says. "The movie's about to start."

Now.

When Mikaila has only one person over, she usually sits on her own couch, and the other person chooses the other couch or one of the armchairs.

But not Ashleigh.

She rather plonks herself right beside Mikaila, taking the left seat cushion while Mikaila claims the right. It's too close for comfort, and Mikaila can't bring herself to relax. Even with the ice-cream, she's acutely aware of Ashleigh's presence and her scent and her heat and just everything about her.

Mikaila clears her throat. "Where did you want to take me, by the way?"

"Hmm?"

"Tonight. You said you wanted to take me somewhere. Where?"

"I'm still going to take you," Ashleigh says, and then turns her body completely, carefully lifting her legs and draping them over Mikaila's lap. "Which is why I can't tell you."

In Mikaila's memories, this position isn't anything new. Ashleigh has never really known personal boundaries and she's extremely tactile. Not in an overwhelming way, but in a way that signifies she's comfortable.

Among all of Mikaila's friends in Cape Town, it's really only Mbali who insists on hugs from Mikaila whenever they see each other. Cassie saves those for special occasions, having realised how uncomfortable

Mikaila can get with too much physical affection, and Jenna goes through moods.

Ashleigh has no such qualms, and Mikaila now has to deal with the sight of her bare legs right in front of her face.

It's okay.

She's okay.

She just thanks the powers that be that Ashleigh can't hear her heart beating. She'd definitely know something was up. Mikaila doesn't even know where to rest her arms, awkwardly holding them suspended in the air until she just bites the bullet and rests them on Ashleigh's shins, skin smooth and warm against hers.

See? She's totally okay.

As it goes, though, Ashleigh just rests her back against the far armrest, eats her ice-cream, and easily tells her a story about her brother's new girlfriend. Of Ashleigh's younger brothers, Harry is the slightly older twin, with the darker hair and paler blue eyes.

"His girlfriend is older than me, Mik," Ashleigh explains. "I mean, okay, fine, whatever, but it's a little weird, right? I'm allowed to be a little weirded out, right?"

Mikaila laughs. "Okay, but like how much older is she than him?"

"Seven years."

"Your twenty-year-old brother is dating a twenty-seven-year-old?"

"Yip," she says, nodding. "Tell me that isn't just a little weird to you, right? She's like this actual adult, and my mum still does his laundry. *Come on.*"

Mikaila shakes her head. "I mean, I think I'd be the first person to advocate that love is love and has no bounds. But, yeah, it's a little strange. How long have they been together?"

"Four months," Ashleigh says. "He swears he's in love. He was even talking about marriage and babies the other day. Something about her biological clock."

"Oh, my god."

"What even, *right?*"

Mikaila couldn't stop her smile if she tried. "What do your parents think?"

“Oh, my dad doesn’t know. I think Harry would rather it stayed that way for as long as possible,” she says. “On the other end, my mum is thrilled.”

“Why?”

“Her boyfriend is also seven years younger than her.”

Wincing slightly, Mikaila eats some ice-cream, carefully licking the front and back of her spoon. “I suppose an age-gap is more forgiving the older you get.”

Ashleigh doesn’t respond, and Mikaila looks up to see her watching her very intently. Her eyes are still impossibly blue, if only a little dark and stormy, more cobalt than their usual cerulean. The freckles on her nose are a little more pronounced without her glasses, skin just slightly pink.

“Everything okay?” Mikaila asks.

Ashleigh nods slowly, eyes tracking Mikaila’s hand as she returns her spoon to her ice-cream cup. “Just thinking.”

“About?”

“You have paint on your hand.”

Mikaila looks down. “Oh. Yeah, I do.”

“Were you painting today?”

“Earlier, yeah,” she confirms. “When nobody’s visiting, the second bedroom acts as my makeshift studio. I couldn’t let go of it completely.”

“It’s your passion.”

Mikaila shrugs. “It’s just a hobby.” If anything, painting is therapy.

Ashleigh looks as if she wants to counter again, but the sound of a phone ringing stops her. She frowns slightly, and then shifts a little to retrieve the offending device from the back pocket of her denim shorts.

“Sorry,” Ashleigh says, ignoring the call and switching her phone to silent. “Caitlin has already started packing for the move, and she keeps texting and calling about all the things she’s picking to bring with her.”

“Caitlin Shaw?”

“That’s the one,” Ashleigh says. “She’s starting a new job end of March, and heard I was looking for a place too, so it just made sense to share the rent on a decent place closer to our respective jobs.”

Mikaila nods. “Where are you going to be staying?”

“Sea Point.”

“Nice,” Mikaila comments, because Sea Point really is prime real estate, overlooking the promenade and within walking distance of the ocean. She doesn’t even want to think about the rent they’re going to be paying.

“The commute to work won’t be too bad, at least,” Ashleigh says. “Traffic in Cape Town can seriously suck.”

“It’s worse than Jo’burg, but also *not* at the same time,” she comments, and knows Ashleigh will somehow understand. Despite how long they’ve both been in Cape Town now, Johannesburg is the city they shared first.

Ashleigh shifts again, getting comfortable once more. Her legs stretch out, and then relax, and Mikaila has the sudden urge to touch her skin; to feel it under her fingertips. It would be so easy. Ashleigh’s legs are right there, and Mikaila’s hand is also right there.

She doesn’t.

Instead, she rests her arms on Ashleigh’s shins once more and holds them still. “Caitlin did Chemical Engineering, right?”

“She did,” Ashleigh confirms. “At TUKS. We hadn’t talked in a while, so we caught up on quite a bit. She’s starting a job in, um, manufacturing, I think. She’s spent the last few weeks studying for these exams she has to write on project management. We’re both going to be super exciting people to be around, I’m calling it now.”

“You’re already a party, Ash.”

“Damn right I am.”

Mikaila relaxes further into the couch, silence enveloping them as the movie they’re supposed to be watching plays on.

“So, who are the people in your pictures?” Ashleigh asks after a while. “I recognise your mum and sister, and I assume those are your sister’s children all grown up.”

“Sufjan and Samir, yes,” Mikaila tells her, nodding. “They’re kind of stupid cute, aren’t they?”

“Eyes full of mischief.”

Mikaila looks at the selection of pictures she has on display. “Um, the picture on the far left is of my friends from undergrad. Sean, Rubi, Priya—we actually went to high school with her, remember?—and Lorenzo.”

“Are they still in Cape Town?”

“No,” she answers with a sad sigh. “Sean and Priya live together in Jo’burg, Rubi’s back home in Namibia, and Lorenzo is in Canada now.”

“They’re all scattered.”

Mikaila shrugs. “I had to make more friends.”

“Cassie?”

Mikaila’s eyes move to the picture on the far right of the same shelf, displaying what they nicknamed the ‘Donut Club.’ It consists of all the women in their master’s program, the five of them thrust together in what remains a male-dominated field.

“We met at the start of master’s, though we were doing parallel degrees during undergrad,” Mikaila explains. “It’s kind of trippy that we obviously saw each other and just never registered it. I’ve always been of the belief things are meant to happen when they’re meant to, and I believe that happened with Cassie. I met her when I was meant to. She’s exactly the kind of friend I need.”

“What kind of friend is that?”

Mikaila realises in this moment that Cassie is exactly the kind of friend Ashleigh couldn’t be all those years ago. Even when they first met, Cassie never asked her to change or rushed her in any way. She’s been patient in ways Ashleigh has never been.

“The kind that understands me,” Mikaila finally says. “She understands me, without my ever having to tell her.”

It’s not some kind of slight at Ashleigh—it’s honestly not—but Ashleigh still looks away, her expression falling at yet another reminder of how far apart they’ve managed to drift.

“There’s also Mbali, and then Jenna, who is positively insane. And finally Leanne, who is back in Bloemfontein now.”

Ashleigh nods slowly, digesting the information. “I’m in one of those pictures,” she says.

"The one from French class, yeah," she says, eyes landing on the picture in question. It was taken with Mikaila's laptop during what was their final lesson of high school French, all fifteen of them just so relieved to be able to say goodbye to their certifiably crazy French teacher. "It's one of my favourite pictures, actually. Claudia looks like an idiot squeezed into the corner like that. I love it."

"Do you still speak to her?"

"Sometimes, yeah," she says. "If ever I'm in Jo'burg and she's free, we try to make plans. She's killing it making an actual career out of arguing with people."

Ashleigh laughs. "Of course she's a lawyer," she says, rolling her eyes. "She really was very good at getting her point across, wasn't she?"

"May as well get paid for it, right?" Mikaila finishes with her ice-cream in the next mouthful, and then carefully balances her empty cup on Ashleigh's left knee. There are small goosebumps on her skin, the condensation from the cup pooling in a clear ring that Mikaila stares at for a moment.

"Don't move," Mikaila instructs.

"I'm not moving."

Mikaila meets Ashleigh's gaze for a moment. "Do you want to talk about it now?" she asks. "Tonight, at all?"

Ashleigh makes a point of finishing her ice-cream, removes her legs from Mikaila's lap, and sits up. She sets their cups on the carpet and gives Mikaila her full attention.

"I'm sorry I've been an asshole," she starts. "Going through my shit wasn't an excuse, and I shouldn't have pulled away the way I did just because things didn't work out the way I wanted them to. I was hurt, or confused, or just impatient. That's on me, but I can't—you keep bringing up all this stuff I said at the end, but I have to admit that I don't remember much of what I sent to you." She looks embarrassed, edges of her mouth downturned. "I tried looking in my messages, but I guess it must have got lost with all the number changes."

Well, Mikaila definitely isn't going to *tell* her. She won't ever repeat those words out loud, if she can help it—and definitely not *to* Ashleigh.

"Would you like to read it?"



“What?”

“I have the conversation archived,” Mikaila explains. “I would read through it whenever I felt nostalgic for what we once had, just to remind myself why I wasn’t going to be the one to reach out first.”

Ashleigh looks positively distraught for a moment, but then she steels herself and nods. Mikaila gets to her feet to retrieve her phone from the kitchen counter. She unlocks it and navigates to her WhatsApp.

It’s saved under Ashleigh’s old number, and she opens the conversation, scrolls up until she reaches the point where she invited Ashleigh to her birthday dinner. For a moment, she’s tempted to bypass the entire thing herself, but maybe she needs the reminder, as well.

Mikaila, I don’t know how to say this the right way, but why would you even bother to invite me? We’re barely even friends anymore. When we see each other on campus, it’s so forced, and you act like you don’t want to be talking to me. You get weird and awkward and that just makes me feel uncomfortable and want to avoid you. Don’t you get it? It’s painful for me to be in your company.

Be realistic here. We probably won’t know one another well again. I guess we’re not the same people anymore. That’s just the truth. You don’t have to make this some dramatic goodbye. We’re not teenagers anymore. Our friendship has been dead for years. It’s better this way, we both know that. There’s no point trying to convince yourself otherwise.

All these years later, and it hurts just the same.

With a sigh, Mikaila hands the phone to Ashleigh, who immediately starts reading.

Mikaila doesn’t want to watch her, so she bends to pick up the empty ice-cream cups and carries them to the kitchen. She dumps

them in the bin, then pours two glasses of water for them. The ice-cream really was sweet, and she can still feel it on her tongue and back of her teeth.

She remains in the kitchen, sipping her water and packing away the few dishes she washed before Ashleigh arrived. She's still busy when Ashleigh is very suddenly at her side, startling her. Mikaila barely has time to ask what's wrong before Ashleigh is wrapping her arms around her midsection and hugging her so tightly that Mikaila actually lets out an involuntary squeak as the air leaves her body.

Mikaila awkwardly pats her shoulders, trying to make sense of what's happening, but Ashleigh just holds her tighter. Eventually, Mikaila just gives in to whatever is happening, wrapping her own arms around Ashleigh.

This hug feels like an apology, an explanation, and a request for absolution all in one. It lasts forever. The longest hug Mikaila has ever had, probably, stretching for nearly eight minutes, and there is something inexplicably healing about it. As if the press of their bodies is stitching together what was torn apart all those years ago.

Ashleigh eventually loosens her grip enough to pull back to be able to look at Mikaila's face. Her eyes are red but dry, and her brow is creased heavily.

"I was *such* an asshole," she says, quiet in her admission. "I don't—I didn't even remember saying half those things. I hurt you. I'm sorry." For someone who claims not to hand out apologies very often, she's given Mikaila quite a few already. Ashleigh's hold loosens that bit more and she straightens her spine. "Do you think we're going to be okay?" she asks, the question genuine.

"You and me," Mikaila says. "We're going to be just fine."

It doesn't necessarily feel like a lie, but there's obviously a part of her that knows it's not going to be an easy road to get to that elusive 'just fine.' Whatever that even looks like. Mikaila certainly doesn't know.

If Ashleigh doesn't believe her, she doesn't mention it. Instead, she smirks and says, "By the way, while I was using your phone, you got a Like from someone named Abu."

Mikaila groans.

"You're a popular gal, Mikaila Mohamed."

Mikaila rolls her eyes, leaning against the counter behind her and forcing Ashleigh to release her. She misses the feel of her arms immediately.

"People keep liking me," she says, and it comes out sounding like a complaint.

Ashleigh laughs, throaty and gorgeous. "Have you even swiped right on anyone?"

"Um."

"You have, haven't you?"

"One or two."

"And?"

"And nothing," Mikaila admits. "One woman messaged me, I messaged back, and then nothing. Another one, I messaged first, and nothing." She shrugs, because it doesn't quite bother her that nothing has worked out. Why would it when she has Ashleigh von Bronckhorst standing right in front of her? "Mbali says I'm being too picky, because I've had like two matches."

"Oh, Mikaila."

"Don't laugh at me."

"I'm not laughing," Ashleigh says, but she's definitely laughing. "You're so cute."

"I don't even know if I want to be dating this way, anyway. It doesn't feel real. I mean, can't I just go out somewhere and meet someone? Can't I just do that?"

"I mean, you could try, but I don't know how successful you think you'll be," Ashleigh points out.

"Stop being the voice of reason."

"When have I *ever* been the voice of reason?"

"Right now."

"One time, Mikaila," she deadpans. "Though, surely Mbali's taken you to some, um, gay bars. Gay places. They have those, right? Do you go to bars?"

"I go to bars."

Ashleigh looks so satisfyingly caught off guard by that news that Mikaila can't help her laugh.

"*You* go to bars?" Ashleigh questions, borderline incredulous. "You, Mikaila Mohamed, go to *bars*? As in, plural?"

"Only with my friends," she clarifies. "On a late Friday afternoon, after the week has burned us out and they need to decompress, we head down to Lower Main and bar hop."

"Oh, my god, who *are* you?"

Mikaila smiles as innocently as she can manage. "It's not that big of a deal, I don't think," she says. "My dad used to do it when he was at university. It's not like I'm drinking or anything. I just like to spend time with my people, laugh at them when they get drunk, and then make sure they get home safely."

"Gosh, you really are fucking cute."

Mikaila does not think about how close to her Ashleigh is standing. Not a thought about it, nope. "I *am* cute," she agrees. "Like, I'm super adorable. Everyone should be my friend."

"Can *I* be your friend?" Ashleigh asks, leaning forward just slightly. At Mikaila's silence, she adds, "Oh, that's right, you don't kiss your friends."

It would be the perfect moment for a kiss, if *Mikaila's* phone didn't start to ring at that exact moment. They both startle, and Ashleigh steps back, blinking against the kitchen light as if she's just realised where they are and what they were about to do.

What is happening? Honestly, just, *what is happening?*

"That's probably my mother," Mikaila says, deciding she's actually relieved for the interruption. She's not ready to deal with whatever it means to have Ashleigh von Bronckhorst look at her as if nothing else exists.

Mikaila's not strong enough for that.

"I should get going," Ashleigh says, running a hand through her hair. "It's getting late."

Mikaila nods slowly, agreeing.

Neither of them makes a move, Mikaila's phone ringing to silence.

"When are you free this week?" Ashleigh asks.

"I'm always free," Mikaila says. "At least until I figure out what to do with the rest of my life."

"It doesn't have to be such a monumental decision," Ashleigh says. "It isn't forever, you know?"

Mikaila sighs, because that's where Ashleigh is wrong. That's where *everyone* is wrong. Whatever she decides now is setting her up for

the rest of her life, and she can't realistically see herself spending that 'rest of her life' in this city. It's one of the reasons she's so hesitant to give into whatever this thing could become with Ashleigh. Mikaila has dreams for somewhere—anywhere—else, and Ashleigh is just now coming home. They will only hurt each other in the long run and Mikaila doesn't want to do that again.

Ashleigh's hand reaches for one of Mikaila's and gently squeezes. "I should go," she says. "And you should probably call back whoever that was."

"Yeah."

"What about Tuesday?" Ashleigh asks. "Spend the day with me? Please?"

"The entire day?"

Ashleigh nods. "Yeah. The entire day. Just you and me."

It is everything Mikaila has ever wanted, truly. Ashleigh von Bronckhorst all to herself. All her attention solely on her. Those eyes focused on her, blinding smile directed at only her.

For the first time in her life, Mikaila is going to be selfish. "Okay."

Ashleigh awards her with a beaming smile, wide and bright, and Mikaila isn't even a little worried about what she's just agreed to.

\* \* \*

Cassie calls way too early on Monday morning and opens with, "Was I right or was I right?"

Mikaila is still in bed, rolling over onto her back and stretching her limbs. "About what?" she asks, squeezing her eyes shut for a moment.

"Your jilted ex-lover."

Mikaila immediately smiles at the mere mention of Ashleigh, even if Cassie's joke is well off base. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"So would you."

Mikaila yawns. "Did you call for a reason? Or are you just missing me?"

"Both."

"Cute."

"I actually wanted to ask you what you're doing on Friday night," she says. "Link's friend, Marcus, is hosting one of those games' nights that I know you geek about and I don't want to go by myself."

"Won't Link be there?"

"Not the point."

Mikaila chuckles, stifling another yawn. "Okay, yeah, I'm game," she says. "Am I driving?"

"You always offer."

"I always mean it," Mikaila tells her. "You know I don't mind."

"Can you?"

"Of course."

"Pick me up at six."

Mikaila hums in agreement. "Are you already at campus?"

"I'm trying to have a productive day," she says. "I've already had my tea and replied to *four* emails, so we're off to a good start."

"I'm sending you good vibes," Mikaila tells her. "From my bed."

Cassie chuckles. "Hmm, *someone* should get sleep. But, really, what are *you* doing today?"

"Laundry, probably," Mikaila says. "I might cook, or I might not. Maybe I'll bake. Ashleigh likes scones."

As soon as the words are out of her mouth, she regrets them.

"*Ashleigh*," Cassie says, and her voice holds far too much amusement. "You're baking for *Ashleigh*."

"I'm baking scones," she confirms. "If Ashleigh happens to eat my scones, that's something else entirely."

"There is an innuendo in there, but it's too early in the morning," Cassie says. "Seriously, though? You're going to see her?"

"Tomorrow," Mikaila tells her. "I don't know what we're doing, but she seems determined to spend time with me."

"To impress you, you mean."

"Cassie."

"Come on, Mik, you know she *must* want you, by now," she says. "You essentially told her you're hot for girls, and now she's in your orbit. I'm right. Why not just enjoy it?"

There are a plethora of reasons she could mention, but she decides on, "I'm not convinced we won't hurt each other again," and suppresses something that feels like guilt.

Cassie huffs, seemingly already done with Mikaila this early in the morning. “Even if you knew for sure that’ll happen, would you still put an end to whatever is happening between the two of you?” she asks, sounding irritatingly smug.

Mikaila can’t quite reply to the question, which is an answer all in itself.

“What’s the part you’re struggling with?” Cassie asks. “The fact someone could actually want you, or the fact that someone is Ashleigh?”

“God, *both*,” she says, groaning. “I’ve spent so long hiding behind my religion and my schoolwork, so I wouldn’t have to go through any of this. Not here. Not like this. The mere idea of dating at all is stressful enough, but dating *Ashleigh*—in this city, that’s something else entirely.”

“Mikaila, it’s happening,” Cassie says, firm and no nonsense. “Whether you’re ready or not, it’s happening. This is what you wanted, isn’t it? It’s why you’ve been on the apps; why you’re trying to put yourself out there. This thing with Ashleigh—whatever it is—can be a potentially life-changing experience you get to have. *With Ashleigh*. How many times do I need to repeat it? So what if it’s stressful and confusing, because isn’t it also some kind of magical?”

“Not all magic is good,” Mikaila points out, but she knows Cassie is right. Mikaila set off a particular series of events the moment she sent Ashleigh that Instagram message, and these are just the consequences of her actions: Ashleigh von Bronckhorst, actually wanting her in return.

“Magic is magic,” Cassie counters, indulging her. “It’s what the user does with it that determines whether it’s good or bad.”

“I always forget you’re an undercover nerd.”

Cassie ignores her. “I’m right.”

“It is way too early for this.”

Cassie laughs, and then sighs, as if realising that Mikaila has reached her threshold. “Okay, okay, I’ll stop,” she relents. “Just promise me something first.”

“What?”

“Promise me you won’t run from it when it presents itself to you.”

“Run from what?”

“Everything you’ve been waiting for.”

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# ONLY EVER ONE CHOICE

BY ILHAM ASRA

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