

Chapter 5. Suspicions.

Once Jake has vacated the bed, Serena sits up and slides Tile X out from under her leg.

‘That was a close call,’ she whispers.

‘Knew I should’ve waited to tell you. Should have waited until we were more private. I can’t afford to be unveiled. The repercussions for me would be unthinkable. The Host would never forgive me,’ said Tile X, his worried voice not matching his smirking, winking stone face.

‘It’s all me, me, me with you, isn’t it? What about me? I never asked for all this, you know. I’ll be right in the brown stuff if my part in all those deaths and injuries comes to light. Doesn’t bear thinking about.’ Serena is desolate. She’s had scant time to mull over the mind-boggling information dumped on her by two square inches of stone. ‘Why the hell didn’t you tell me all about The Host and his despicable ‘games’ before?’

‘Why do you think I kept it to myself? You weren’t old enough to comprehend what I had to say,’ whispers Tile X.

‘Not sure I’d ever be old enough to discuss such horrors. It’s not fun to hear I’ve caused the deaths of people, even my own father, just because of a silly game. Do you know how grotesque that makes me feel? Feel like a total prat for talking to you in the first place, to be honest.’

‘Charmed, I’m sure. I’ve had my uses, when you didn’t have a friend in the world. Remember how lonely you were, Serena?’

Serena turns away from him in disgust, unable to look at the smirking expression a second longer. Although she wants to discover more from Tile X and has a million questions for him to answer, she pops him back inside the purse, brushes her copper-coloured hair, splashes water on her face to freshen up, and heads downstairs to lose herself in the chaotic atmosphere of her family and Jake. *Even listening to Tristan, Lizzie and Emily squabbling and Mum screaming at them to shut up is preferable to listening to the fate Tile X and his boss have in store for me, and whoever they force me to destroy. Jake must*

be half-crazy with having to listen to them. I'll suggest only he and I slip off somewhere for some peace and quiet.

Keith's mind is swirling in a miasma of disbelief and horror, much like Serena's. *Did I hear him right? If he's to be believed, I'm dead because of some poxy GAME! Carl, too. He'll be livid ... probably make Carl hate Serena even more. Oh, sweet Jesus! Maybe I won't tell him what Tile X said ... No, no point in keeping it from him ... need to discuss this new state of affairs I find us all in. I can't do that without being honest with Carl.*

On cue, Carl suddenly materialises in the room after floating through the closed window, much to Keith's relief. 'Thank God you're back earlier than expected. You'll never guess what ... Tile X has just filled Serena in on what's behind his fascination with causing pain and misery to folk like you and me. It's a game, mate ... a fucking game!'

'Huh? Whatcha mean? Game? I'm dead before my time, so there'd better be something more substantial than a silly game behind it all.' Carl kicks himself for being missing just when the most meaningful conversation in years between Serena and Tile X has taken place.

'Reckon he's got loads more to say to her when they can arrange to be private. Luckily, they're both downstairs with the rest of them—'

'Not quite the rest of them ... I saw Jake all alone down at the beach with a face like a wet weekend.'

'Really? So I guess he did see Tile X for a split second when he came in here ... thought he had. This could get messy. Still, we've got limited time before Serena might come back up here alone, if Jake's away at the beach. She might want to take advantage of Jake being away from this place to pump Tile X for more info.'

'I'd be grateful for just any info right now as have no clue what all this talk of games is about.' *Don't like the sound of it, though.*

Keith and Carl sit on the double bed. It doesn't take long for Keith to bring his friend up to speed. 'Holy shit! Are you sure you heard right? It makes no sense that we're both dead because of something so ... err ... words fail me ... childish!

Yeh, childish will do. Just because a couple of unknown dudes I've never clapped eyes on get a bit bored, you, me and a whole pile of other people have been hurt, more often than not fatally. Dare say whoever's been paired up with a Tile X lookalike to be Serena's equivalent, somewhere in England, has polished off a similar number of people ... maybe more—'

'Yeh, probably more deaths, which is probably why Tile X is freaking out and getting on Serena's case to up her game ... there's that bloody word again ... game!' says Keith. He can tell how devastated Carl is after listening to his account of the earlier conversation between Serena and her precious tile.

Keith needn't have been worried about Serena returning to the room. Having seen that Jake is nowhere to be seen in the house, she asks Beatrice, 'Any clue where Jake is? Has he popped to the shop for something?'

'He said he's going to the beach for a bit. Probably wants to top up his tan or something,' Lizzie says, always one to butt into other people's conversations.

As Serena limps out of the front door and down the flight of stone steps leading to a short road to the beach, she hears Lizzie's voice calling after her. 'Can't you leave the poor guy alone for five minutes, Serena? Jake needs a breather away from you, and who can blame him?'

'Keep your nose out of it, face-ache,' Serena shouts over her shoulder. *If you knew about how I've just been told I've got to kill more people because of these Host and Hostess monstrosities, you'd be watching your troublemaking mouth, sister dear.*

Beatrice glares at Lizzie for provoking her pregnant elder sister, then shakes her head in despair. *So glad I bothered spending a fortune to take my darling children on holiday. It's been so worth it.*

Serena finds the sun is more bearable now it's late afternoon. The short walk to the beach distracts her briefly from her worries. She envies the carefree holidaymakers as she mingles with them as they dive in and out of pastie shops and other tourist attractions designed to separate them from their hard-earned money. The delicious smell of the pasties lures her into a bakery and she buys a large one to stave off the nausea

caused by the foetus growing inside her. *I'll be the size of a bus if this sickness doesn't stop soon. If I manage to find Jake, I'll share it with him.*

Despite her good intentions of sharing, she discovers she's eaten the entire pastie by the time she's reached the seafront, but at least she feels less sick. The walk's made her short of breath, so she sits on a bench on the promenade overlooking the beach and scans the shore for any signs of her missing boyfriend.

There's still plenty of activity on the beach, so at first it's not easy to spot him with the sinking sun dazzling her eyes, but after slipping on her sunglasses, she sees his familiar shape sitting hunched over on the sea wall over a hundred yards away. Instead of leaping up and going over to him, she observes him as he hits the buttons on his phone. *Wonder who he's texting? He's not texting me, because my phone isn't pinging. Maybe he's on some gaming app or something, but he seems to be in some sort of conversation with someone. He's smiling to himself. How odd. I'll see how far I can get to him before he notices me sneaking up on him.*

Jake is so engrossed, he fails to notice his girlfriend among the promenaders until she is standing directly behind him. She briefly sees his phone screen and can tell he is indeed texting. She even manages to spy the name of the person he is texting. *Patricia? ... Surely not Patricia Blunt? Maybe it's another Patricia ... who am I kidding? Must be Patricia sodding Blunt. She's still sniffing around him, even after all this time.*

Before Serena can see what he and Patricia, the girl she's always hated, are talking about, Jake jumps, almost dropping the phone onto the unforgiving stone wall. *Why would Jake jump like that if he has nothing to hide? Best not let on I saw who he's talking to. Must do some investigating first. It's all I need right now, with Tile X's bombshell announcement rattling around in my brain. Not only must I polish off more people to fill some crazy quota to satisfy Tile X's boss, now I have to contend with a possible rival, one who's never given up chasing Jake since we were all at school together.*

Seeing the dreaded name of Patricia on Jake's phone confirms some vague suspicions Serena has been feeling over

the past couple of months. Just as Jake has been questioning what Serena's been up to with a tile, she's also been wondering why Jake's ardour seems to have cooled where she's concerned. She's gradually lost body confidence the more her body is morphing, due to their baby growing inside her and the weight piling onto her small frame. Eating everything in sight to dull the pregnancy nausea hasn't done her appearance any favours. Her upper arms jiggle and her ankles have thickened at an alarming rate. Every part of her is inflating. *I'm no longer the girl Jake signed up for. How can I blame him if my body disgusts him when it disgusts me too? Damn Patricia Blunt for looking even more gorgeous than when she used to bully me and a load of other kids in our class.*

To Serena's annoyance, Patricia is still living in Manchester, although Serena is blissfully unaware that her arch enemy has recently started working in a nail bar not far from Jake's father's graphic design agency. It had been obvious to everyone at their school that Patricia was destined to be employed in some aspect of the beauty business. Her own beauty had always been of paramount importance to Patricia. She deemed her appearance to be far more important than gaining any decent academic qualifications that would have enabled her to attend any further educational establishment. Patricia's interest in Jake Forsythe has never waned, even after Serena and he became a permanent item, with a baby on the way. The only difference in the love triangle is that eighteen-year-old Jake is now far more interested in Patricia than he'd ever been as a callow schoolboy.

Patricia's blatant, skilful flirtations seemed to have worked a treat on him, much to her delight, and despite Jake's self-loathing. Five months previously, he'd spotted her distinctive flowing black sweep of hair through the nail bar's window as she sat painting a client's talons. *Only one girl has hair like that around here.* He hadn't walked on fast enough. She'd felt eyes gazing upon her and glanced up. Patricia had been overjoyed to see the youth who'd been the subject of most of her sexual imaginings over the years. She'd flashed him a

dazzling, perfect smile and waved her exquisitely manicured right hand at him. In the past, he'd normally have walked on, but something, namely his sex-starved penis, had dragged him inside the small shop, overruling his misgivings.

'Hi stranger! Fancy seeing you here,' said Patricia, ignoring her customer.

'Didn't know you were working in here. I'm on my way to my dad's agency to see what's going to be expected of me. I'm starting work there in a few months, now my university career's been torpedoed.' *Thanks to me getting Serena up the duff.*

'That's your own fault. How's Serena's pregnancy going, by the way? Heard on the grapevine you've been a naughty boy and got the girl pregnant.' Patricia, stood up and walked towards him, smoothing both hands down her short black dress, as though to emphasise her ultra slim waist, so different, so superior, to Serena's expanding waistline. Her high black heels clacked on the floor. *So different to the stinky trainers Serena wears, now her feet have become swollen. Patricia's stunning, and totally available if I want her. Do I want her? The way my heart's pounding and my dick's twitching right now, reckon I do.*

'I've almost finished work for the day. Only working a half day today. Danielle here's my last client. Fancy a drink at the Millgate once I've finished? It's the closest pub to here.' Patricia licked her large, red, surgically enhanced lips and batted her long, mostly fake eyelashes at Jake, implying she had more than a drink with her on offer if he cared to accept.

Everything in Jake's brain screamed no, yet he found himself eagerly agreeing to a drink in her dangerous company. He knew Serena would never find out about him having a drink with Patricia, because she was at home feeling under the weather with a rotten cold. 'I'll see you in the Millgate when you're ready. I'll text dad and tell him something's come up. I'll see him tomorrow. I could do with a beer or three. Don't get to drink much these days, because Serena can't drink because of the baby.'

'Poor you ... see you in about twenty minutes. I need to lock up the shop too after I've finished Danielle's nails.'

‘Sure. See you soon.’ Jake walked out of the shop in shock. Half of him was guilty for betraying Serena by saying yes to a drink, maybe more, with Patricia. The other half of him was enjoying filthy imaginings of what the drink might lead to.

Looks like Jake’s days of avoiding me are over, thought Patricia, as she sprayed perfume down her cleavage in the back room and titivated her already immaculate heavy makeup.

Never could stand Serena; such a weirdo. Poor Jake must’ve grown tired of the freak, because he’s never given me the time of day before, despite all my efforts ... If I play my cards right, by the end of today, Jake’ll be mine, and Serena can swivel.