

# ZATHYN PRIEST

*What if a pill could trap  
your lover and leave  
your mind shattered?*

# THE STATUE



**THE STATUE**

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to the beautiful young man I saw on Christmas Eve who walked into a store of grumpy shoppers and inspired this story. You were the only person smiling, laughing, and having a good time. I listened to people's underhanded comments referring to you as crazy. I couldn't see crazy any more than I could see your friend. What I saw was adoration and love.

I would also like to dedicate this book to the elderly lady I saw when I was eleven years old, whilst visiting my grandmother in a geriatric home. I don't know your name and I never will. I will never forget your face or the haunted look in your eyes. All the dignity I saw stripped from you that day, and the peace torn from your soul, I pray have been returned to you in a peaceful afterlife.

## Chapter One

In everyone's lifetime there is the chance to look either left, right, straight ahead, or behind. To decide if what the majority says is correct, or make up your own mind as to what is true, false, or beyond the realms of either. Life isn't always black and white. It isn't just good or bad. It isn't dream versus reality. Somewhere in the middle of those extremes is where answers sometimes are.

I first met Zane about eighteen months ago. I was twenty-four then, shared an apartment with my boyfriend, Eli, and pursued my goals as a freelance journalist while lamenting a stale relationship. Eli and I met in high school, we grew up together, we discovered sex together, and we discovered love. Eli went on to work alongside his father in the family auto-mechanic business. I wanted to keep somewhat fancy free, assuming I could change the world with my reporting skills. This meant Eli provided most of the household income during times I didn't make much in the way of wages. He wanted security. He wanted us to save money so we could buy a home of our own. I didn't want to be tied down to a mortgage. I wasn't even certain I wanted to be tied to Eli.

My name is Tristan Church. As I write this, approximately a year and a half after my first meeting with Zane, I haven't changed the world. My world has changed for me.

Back then it was an election year in my home city and the state would either re-elect their current Premier or opt for a new one. The time when politicians make a mountain of promises they intend on breaking. It's also a time when wide-eyed, green, wannabe reporters try and find a scoop no other journalist has found. Something to break open party promises and reveal the lies beneath. Of course, this is as likely as snapping a photograph of a unicorn. Every young journalist had the same idea. We all think we're going to be the ones to win an award for saving society or tearing it down. It didn't really matter which, as long as our names were associated with a massive coup.

One of the major stumbling blocks for the current Premier was the state of affairs in regards to the public hospital sector. Nurses were losing their jobs, hospitals were closing down wards, beds were few for patients, and waiting lists for elective surgery grew longer. There were major concerns among people for aged care and mental health care. To make matters worse, the city's major mental hospital was on the verge of a revamp. This sounded good on the outside, with the government trying to win votes by saying the Victorian building was in dire need of refurbishment. And true, it was. In fact, the hospital resembles what it must've been like back in the nineteenth century. Horror stories came out of that place. Revamping it meant even less beds for patients once renovations were finished.

This was going to be my claim to fame. Somehow I planned to infiltrate Galloway Hospital and reveal the dark side for all to see. The name itself—Galloway—brought with it the obvious nickname 'The Gallows'. Any sane person would prefer to walk to the gallows than be admitted into Galloway. Not that the insane knew whether they were living in hell or not. They spent their days stoned out of their heads on medication. What would they know about their circumstances? Family and friends of these people suffer most, right? That's what I believed.

I'd hooked up with a photographer, Mark, through a friend of a friend. We hatched a plan to request access to The Gallows on the pretence we planned writing an article on the human face of mental illness. On the inside looking out, so to speak. We thought we'd have more luck accessing different wards if hospital staff believed we were interested in how the minds

of patients worked rather than how the hospital worked. The last thing I wanted to do was interact with nutcases. A reporter had to do dirty work if they ever wanted an accolade at the end of it all.

Mark was broody, tall, dark, handsome, and perhaps the job would have its perks. All I needed to do was keep Eli in the dark about my interest in Mark while I figured out whether I wanted to save the relationship or walk away. Eli trusted me. He didn't always understand me, he didn't always provide me with an adrenaline rush, but he trusted me. I planned to use his faith against him.

I remember sitting down to dinner, staring across the table at Eli as he told me about his day at work. I zoned off. His work wasn't riveting stuff. For God sake, he fixed cars for a living. When I told Eli about my plans to expose a scandal inside The Gallows, expecting him to be as excited as me, he raised an eyebrow and smirked. That smirk I used to find sexy, now irritated me each time I saw it.

"Hasn't that place already been exposed several times?" he asked. "What exactly do you think you're gonna find out?"

"I don't know yet, do I?" I snapped. "That's why it's called an investigation."

"What you're planning to do is take advantage of mentally ill people by pretending you're interested in their welfare?"

"Oh, come on!" I shoved my plate away in a huff. "Like they'd know. Like they'd care. You're making it sound as if I'm doing them an injustice by taking a few minutes of their time for a chat. They'd probably be happy someone wants to listen to them waffle on about alien invasions or conspiracy theories."

Eli nodded, stood, and prepared to walk away. "How condescending of you. Sometimes, Tristan, I'm not sure I know who you are anymore. When did you become this selfish?"

"Probably around the same time you turned into a boring old fart."

"I'm going to bed. Feel free to sleep on the sofa again if you want. It's not like you let me near you anymore."

We hadn't had sex for weeks. I couldn't remember the last time we'd said 'I love you' to one another. Maybe we both tried to hang onto a relationship with no future. Perhaps we'd met too young, moved in with each other too quick, and figured we'd only see roses without thorns. That night I did as Eli suggested and slept on the sofa.

The following morning, I showered early and left before Eli woke. I was meeting up with Mark at The Gallows and made a special effort to make sure I looked perfect. I already knew Mark liked guys. He hadn't been secretive about it when we'd met for coffee to discuss our assignment together, making several comments filled with sexual innuendo. It would be an easy affair to initiate if I decided to follow through. Mark was older than me, in his mid-thirties, and well known around the traps as a great artistic photographer as well as journalistic.

I'd seen Galloway Mental Hospital from a distance before. The building itself is quite magnificent. In its day it had been occupied by—ironically—a politician who owned much of the surrounding land around it. The place is massive, with a huge clock tower dominating its facade, and surrounding picturesque gardens. If someone didn't know its history as a psychiatric hospital, they'd more than likely think the grand old mansion offered grand accommodation for patients.

Mark leaned against the hood of his car, camera bag slung over his shoulder, a rather stiff smile on his face as I sauntered over. I returned his smile, feeling my heart beat faster at the evident expression of interest on his face. That flutter in my chest and stomach made me feel

like a teenager again. The way I felt the first day Eli walked into my classroom after transferring from another high school. He'd stood beside the teacher as she introduced him, confident and gorgeous. Tall, blond, with a killer smile. When he delivered a smile to me, I melted.

"You're late." Mark cocked his head, eyeing me like he wanted to do me right there on the hood. "I don't like being kept waiting."

"Traffic was bad," I replied with a shrug. "You'll find out I'm worth waiting for."

Did I really say that? I wanted to kick myself for not playing at least a little hard to get.

"We'll have to see about that." He walked away from the car with me following behind like a dog in heat. "Remember they've only agreed to let me take photos of certain areas, like outside, and the recreation rooms. For anything else I'll use my mobile phone." He turned to look at me. "As far as the nutters go, you deal with them. I don't want anything to do with it."

Arrogant, bossy, a man who knew what he wanted and wasn't afraid to tell me. No wonder Mark had a reputation for being difficult to get along with. Eli was the most laid back man you could hope to meet. Not much upset him, not much ruffled his feathers, and he always believed in sharing responsibility in any partnership. Mark was Eli's exact opposite.

"I'm not looking forward to it, either." I straightened my tie, trying to look professional while imagining Mark throwing me onto a bed. "I'm good at pretending I care even if I don't. I'll bluff my way through the required amounts of empathy needed to win nurses over."

Mark laughed. "I have no doubt you're good at pretending, Tristan. I'm sure your boyfriend has no idea you screw around."

*Whoa!* I stopped in my tracks. I'd never cheated on Eli in the past. I didn't like an underhanded comment more or less calling me a lying slut. Eli and I had our share of arguments over the past couple of months. He never would have spoken to me in such a manner.

I lifted my eyebrows, challenging Mark with a steely glare. "There's a big difference between flirting and screwing around," I said. "My relationship with Eli is none of your business."

"I apologise," he replied, though I wasn't convinced he meant it. "I'll buy you lunch to make up for it."

\* \* \* \*

Walking down The Gallows halls held a creepy resemblance to being on an asylum movie set. I wasn't prepared for what I saw that day. While The Gallows itself is a place of dreary depression, the nurses run on a skeleton staff and are pushed to their limits. I felt ill the moment Mark and I stepped into Ward One. The first patient I saw was an old man, who must have been in his eighties, sitting on a plastic chair in the hall with a puddle of urine around his feet. My heart fell to the pit of my stomach. How could this happen in the twenty-first century?

Mark's breath warmed my ear as he leaned in to whisper, "Do you think she's looking for a good time?"

"What?" I whispered back at him, frowning. "Who?"

"Her," he sniggered, pointing to an open door where an elderly lady stood with her underwear around her ankles. "Maybe she's got a thing for the old piss man."

I've never wanted to slap anyone more than I wanted to slap Mark in that instant. I cast the old lady a glance, and her image has been burned into my memory forever. A harrowing

combination of nothingness and agony in her dull brown eyes met my gaze. She was tall. I could tell she would have once been an elegant beauty. Yet, this is where it all was going to end for her and her life. Here in a geriatric ward with her dignity stripped, her mind gone, and her heart broken. She'd probably been a loyal friend, a loving wife, reared babies, and watched her children grow to have families of their own. She could've been my grandmother. She was *someone's* grandmother.

Mark probably assumed I thought his joke funny because I dipped my face and covered my mouth. In reality I felt sick. I couldn't lose my professionalism this early on in the assignment. It seemed Mark had no qualms over losing his.

My first actual chat with a patient happened about half an hour after we entered the geriatric ward. Mark sat down on a chair beside a barred window. I took a seat opposite a man named Barry. To my surprise, Barry was as charming as he was nutty. With a tinfoil hat on his head—to bounce off the intrusion of satellites trying to drain his mind of top military secrets—Barry chatted and seemed to enjoy my company. He wasn't keen on revealing hospital gossip he may have overheard, though he did tell me he'd been living at The Gallows for seven years. During the course of the conversation, I spied Mark yawning and looking at his watch. What did I see in this man apart from his rugged, bad-boy looks?

After I spoke with Barry, Mark and I were taken to a recreation area where board games were set out on tables, a television showed Brady Bunch re-runs, and several patients sat around a table doing arts and crafts. My naive, sheltered view of life had been blown wide open. I heard crying coming from the halls. I also heard laughter, screaming, swearing, and voices over a PA system calling for doctors. This place was hell. It wasn't just the peeling linoleum on the floors, or stained paint on the walls, old furniture, or the dated equipment. It was the entire mismatched feel of the place. Some patients had gone insane in, what I can only explain as, a cheerful way. Others fought their demons with wailing and restraints. All of them were crazy. There was no other way to describe it. They'd lost their minds and I conceded an asylum was the place they needed to be for their own safety.

I've never known three and a half hours to pass so slowly. Even when Mark and I left to have lunch in the hospital cafeteria, I still heard wailing echoing in my ears. My appetite was non-existent, but Mark seemed determined to keep his promise and provide me with lunch. We found an empty table near a window looking out over lush gardens. The cafeteria was busy, and the line for food long. I wanted a break from Mark's company, glad when he ventured off to grab a tray and join the queue. When he left, I dropped my head in my hands and closed my eyes.

"Excuse me?"

I looked up to see a petite young blond male, with the bluest oceanic eyes, standing with a tray, and smiling down at me. "Yes?" I replied, returning his smile.

"There are no free tables. May I sit here, please?"

"Of course you can." I pointed to the chair opposite, noticing how angelic this young man looked, with golden hair framing a beautiful face. "Take a seat."

"Thank you." He placed the tray onto the table and sat down. "My name's Zane."

"Tristan. Nice to meet you."

"Tristan," he repeated. "What a lovely name. Are you here visiting someone?"

"No. I'm a writer. Working on a non-fiction piece. I'm here doing research. What about you?"

"I'm waiting for my boyfriend."

After a harrowing day it was nice to chat to someone this well-mannered, and as adorable to look at. "I hope he's not crazy enough to stand you up."

Zane blushed, giving me a shy smile. "Shh. You can't say the word 'crazy' around here. You never know who might be insulted."

I chuckled, grateful for decent company. "It's been an experience, that's for sure. Not something I'll forget it in a hurry."

"I hope you don't." Zane peeled plastic wrap off a muffin. "Too many people walk out and forget. Or, should I say, conveniently push this place out of their thoughts."

"I won't be one of those people."

"Aren't you eating anything?" Breaking the muffin, Zane offered me half. "Do you want to share this?"

I wanted to bundle him up and take him home with me. If he'd sprouted wings and a halo, I wouldn't have been at all surprised. There was something very engaging about the way Zane peered into my eyes and made a heartfelt offer to share his lunch with a stranger. As delightful as he was, my attraction to him wasn't sexual. I'd been disarmed by his engaging manner and beatific appearance.

"Thank you." I reached over and petted his arm, strange for me because I'm not the touchy feely type. "But, I'm waiting for..." I waved a dismissive hand in Mark's direction. "... him."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't realise you had company. I'll leave."

"No! No, no! Please stay."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure." I nodded. "Can't have you sitting all alone waiting for your tardy boyfriend to show up, can we?"

Zane popped a can of soda, drank a mouthful, and shrugged. "I didn't think he'd make it." He lowered his gaze, toying with the muffin. "He's trapped and can't get out. I wait every day for him. I know he's waiting for me, too. His name's Lucas."

In that instant I realised Zane was not a visitor to The Gallows, but a patient. In the same way as my heart hit my stomach when I saw the old lady, it plummeted again. Zane couldn't have been more than eighteen or nineteen years old. I wasn't repelled by the realisation. Instead, I wanted to take him in my arms. This wasn't fair. None of this was fair to any of the people here.

I tried to keep my conversation as natural as possible. The last thing I wanted to do was upset Zane by having him think I'd judged him and no longer wanted his company.

"How long have you been waiting for Lucas?"

"Two weeks and three days. I can visit the place he's trapped, but Lucas prefers me not to go there every day. He knows how sad it makes me." He cleared his throat, forcing a smile. "We love each other and nothing can keep us apart forever. Everyone wants to see him gone from my life. I don't understand why."

"Lucas is trapped in this hospital?" I wondered then if Lucas was another patient and not a figment of Zane's imagination.

"In the garden under the Wisteria Corridor. He's trapped inside the statue."

There went that theory. As condescending as this may sound, Zane didn't come across as mentally unbalanced. He was alert, eloquent, dressed and groomed well. He didn't look like any of the patients I'd seen that day.

"Would you mind if I went to see him?"

Zane's eyes lit up as he reached for my hand. "Tell him I love him. Just because he's trapped inside the statue doesn't mean he can't hear you. Please..." He gripped my hand hard.

“Tell Lucas I’m doing everything I can to bring him back to me. Tell him not to give up hope, and I love him more than anything else in the world.”

I nearly burst into tears right then and there. “I will.”

“Do you have someone special in your life?” Zane asked.

I thought of Eli. I thought of the love we once had, and how it had all come apart at the seams. Then I thought of Mark, standing in the queue with a tray, missing this entire conversation. I’d never felt more confused about my life, or more selfish. I had a man at home who loved me. Why couldn’t I recapture the passion we had? Where did it go and how on earth could I bring it back? Did I want to, or did I really want to walk away?

“Sort of,” I replied. “Things aren’t going well with him and me at the moment.”

Why did I tell Zane? He didn’t need to know my personal problems. He was a stranger to me.

Zane tilted his head, bouncing long golden bangs off his cheek. “Do you love him?”

“I don’t know anymore,” I mumbled.

“If he was taken away from you, you’d soon know,” Zane replied, standing and picking up his tray. “I have to go now. Thank you for sharing your table with me, Tristan. Please visit Lucas and tell him I love him.”

I barely spoke a word to Mark when he arrived back at the table. Rather, I had to listen as he made tasteless jokes about patients, interspersed with suggestive comments to me. There really wasn’t anything about Mark I now found attractive. He was arrogant, rude, plainly had no concern for the welfare of others, and assumed he should always be the centre of attention. Rather than focus on Mark as he spoke, my mind wandered to Eli.

## Chapter Two

Both Eli and I were to blame in the breakdown of our relationship. I admit the scale tipped toward me when it came to shutting down. Eli attempted to discuss our problems more than once. Each time I said I wasn't in the mood to talk and refused to compromise. Eli wanted to save our relationship. He wanted to do the hard yards to get things back on track. I didn't. I wanted the good without the work. He even suggested we see a relationships counsellor. A *counsellor!* I didn't need a damn therapist. What I needed was excitement in my life. My personality is a strong one. I don't fold under pressure. I don't suffer anxiety. I don't suffer bouts of depression. If shit happens, I pick myself up and continue on. No way would I ever see a therapist to work out my 'issues'.

Compared to being in love with an inanimate object, like Zane, my problems seemed trivial. I'd read about that kind of thing before. I remember seeing something on television once about a woman who married her violin after her relationship with a piano fell apart. Yes, it sounds funny, and I giggled as I watched the story. I don't think too many people would get an immediate sense of empathy when it appears too abnormal. Then I thought about it a little more, and realised Zane wasn't in love with the statue itself, he was in love with a man he believed was trapped *inside* the statue. For me, it put an entirely new spin on his situation.

*If he was taken away from you, you'd soon know.* Those words Zane spoke swam around in my mind. If Eli was suddenly gone from my life, would I truly know whether I loved him or whether the relationship had come to its end? Not that it would ever happen. Eli would never leave me. Or so I thought.

When I arrived home, earlier than anticipated, I'd decided to bite the bullet and sit down with Eli for the talk I'd avoided. I opened the front door, walked inside, and saw a suitcase by the door. For the third time that day my stomach dropped.

"What's this?" A stupid question, because I knew what a suitcase looked like.

"Thank you for making me feel like a fool," Eli replied, blue eyes burning with anger and grief. "I'm leaving, Tristan. I won't cramp your style anymore."

"What are you talking about?" I snatched at his arm as he reached for the case. "You can't leave!"

"Watch me."

"No!" I pushed him hard enough to move him away from the case and door. "We've been together ten years. You can't leave without an explanation." Panic set in, and I tried to calm my voice. "Sit down and we can talk about this, babe. Please?"

"I don't know who you are anymore." The tears in his eyes broke my heart. "If you want someone to talk to, Tristan, why don't you give Mark a call?"

I felt like throwing up. How did he know about Mark, and what exactly did he know?

Eli pulled a slip of paper from his jacket, holding it up in front of my eyes. I'm sure colour drained from my face. I swear to God, I'd never seen that note before. On it was written Mark's name, his phone number, address, and a message saying, *'I won't tell your boyfriend. Call me.'*

"It fell out of your pocket when I picked your jeans off the floor."

I darted forward, grabbing Eli by his jacket lapels. "Eli, please... I don't know how it got there! That's the first time I've seen it!"

"You didn't take this note off him and put it in your pocket?"

"I didn't know it was there!" I repeated, frantic.

“If you didn’t put this note in your back jeans pocket, Mark did. Why was his hand so close to your arse?”

There had been plenty of opportunity for Mark to slip a note in my pocket. The few times we’d met; I’d allowed him to get close to me. I’d let him put his arm around me. I’d let him touch me. Had the tables been turned, and I’d found the note in Eli’s pocket, I’d have been furious and devastated. Eli wasn’t a crier. In our ten years together, I’d only seen him cry—like *really* cry—once. When our dog had to be put to sleep, we bawled in each other’s arms the entire night.

Eli peeled me off him, trying to compose himself and failing. “I’ve had a feeling you’ve been cheating on me. Now I know you have.”

“I haven’t!” I shouted, trying to grab him again as he picked up the case. “You’re jumping to conclusions, and none of it is true.”

Okay, that wasn’t entirely honest. I’d thought about cheating on Eli. Until Mark proved himself to be a loser, I probably *would* have cheated on Eli. But, I hadn’t done it. Surely that counted for something?

“I’ll come back for the rest of my stuff on the weekend. Go to Mark’s house or something, so I don’t have to see you again.”

He slammed the door on the way out.

I’m not sure how long I stood in the kitchen staring at the door, hoping to see the handle move. My heart felt like it was going to implode. That was when anger hit. Without any proof at all, Eli deemed me a cheater and left me. *He left me!* A decade together and he’d walked out on our entire life. *The son of a bitch!* I snatched the note, and my car keys, off the bench.

It was one of those dreamlike moments where you have no idea what you’re doing while having every idea what you’re doing. When something inside you snaps, and all you want is revenge, even if the person you’re seeking revenge against has no knowledge of it. As I drove to Mark’s house, shaking with fury, I seethed at how my life had been thrown into turmoil. How my blissful romance with my high school sweetheart blew apart around me. Well... I’d show Eli what real pain is all about. He thought he could walk out on me? He thought he could end it over something I hadn’t done? *May as well do it seeing as I’d been accused of it!* It’s not like I’d have any trouble getting another man. Eli could go to hell.

I’m sure I looked terrible when I arrived at Mark’s house. I didn’t bother checking my appearance before I got out of the car and jogged to his front door. Mark lived in a suburban street in a house with a Zen garden. It must’ve been for show, he’s not the type of man I’d imagine embracing a Zen lifestyle. I heard a dog barking, I heard Mark shout for it to ‘*shut the fuck up*’, I heard the door latch open, and soon I stood on the threshold staring up into dark brown eyes.

“Hello, Tristan,” Mark leaned against the door frame, arms over his chest, eyeing me while he smirked. “What brings you here?”

Those four words erupted anger inside me again. I took a step closer, putting on my seductive voice, and hooked my finger behind Mark’s belt. “You,” I purred.

I didn’t have time to take another breath. Mark dragged me inside and kicked the door closed. His lips felt foreign on my neck, mauling me while his hands gripped my waist. I didn’t even know what room we were in. Seemed like one second I was on the doorstep, and the next I was pushed up against a wall. For a moment I became caught up in the adrenaline rush. I couldn’t remember the last time Eli and I engaged in a raw display of lust for each other. It made me feel sexy. I wanted Mark’s hands grabbing me. Have his lips finding any bare skin they could, and then return to my mouth. As soon as I regained my wits, I tugged at Mark’s

shirt. I'm pretty sure I ripped off several buttons in the process of removing it. He didn't seem to mind. It got him more worked up.

Sure, this was all very animalistic and exciting... for a few minutes. Pretty soon I became aware of the pain as Mark slammed me against the wall, with no care as to whether or not he hurt me in the process. He wasn't interested in me at all. The only thing he cared about was gaining another notch in his belt. Is that what I wanted? I didn't even like the man anymore.

I'd started this. I began going through the motions, like a hooker who wasn't going to get paid. Besides, the whole point was to punish Eli, and that's what I wanted to do. Anger can be a ridiculous emotion. It can make us do insane things we'd never consider normally. After all, I wasn't solely responsible for the break up. Eli had become just as distant, refusing to see our partnership as a duet, and preferring to assume he had solo decisions on everything. He couldn't decide this for me. This was one thing Eli had no control over.

"Any chance we can move this to the bedroom?" I gasped as my back hit the wall one more time.

"You're not gonna be one of those whining bitches, are you?"

My hands froze on his shoulders. He laughed. Even now, when I remember that laugh, it turns my blood to ice. His eyes were filled with intense hatred, as though he saw everything he despised wrapped up in me. I doubt the devil himself could have challenged Mark's evil expression of loathing.

"I don't want my back broken," I replied, trying to fool him into thinking I wasn't intimidated.

"The only bitch I fuck in the bedroom is my girlfriend," he said. "I call the shots, Tristan, not you. Understand? You shut the fuck up and take what I give you."

*Oh shit.* This was not good. This was so, so, so not good. If God chose to punish me for trying to punish Eli, then He'd gone the whole hog. I had to get out of Mark's house. I had no idea how to leave, or even if I could get my legs to stop shaking enough to move me. What if the worst did happen? I'd gone there with the sole purpose of initiating a sexual encounter. I'd given him permission. If I said no now, would anyone believe me?

"I asked you a question," he snarled. "Do you understand I call the shots or not?"

His hand gripped my chin, digging fingernails into my skin. "I want to go home." The whimper in my voice twisted his lips into a lopsided smile. "Please, let me go home."

"You're not going anywhere. You're going to bend over and get what you came here for." His hand slammed over my mouth, and the back of my head hit the wall with a sharp crack. "Filthy little faggots like you do this all the time. Beg for cock, then whine like a bitch when they're about to get it."

My life flashed before my eyes in slow motion. I stood frozen on the spot as Mark glared at me like I was dog shit. Then I started blaming myself. I'd more or less asked for this to happen. Every time I'd met Mark, I'd made my flirting clear. I must've come across as a whore, and that's exactly how he thought he could treat me. What right did I have to complain now things turned sour? I couldn't speak. My tongue went numb, my body refused to react to danger.

When Mark's hand grabbed my crotch, I slapped it away. He belted me across the face and I careered into a coffee table. Blood filled my mouth. Dazed, stricken with terror the likes I've never known before, I could barely breathe. My face was pushed into the carpet, and Mark's hand pressed down hard on my head. His other hand fumbled with my belt, his body weight held me down. I'm five feet nine inches tall with a slim build. Mark's height and strength overpowered me. The whole time he verbally abused me, ranted on about teaching

fags a lesson, and threatened to kill me if I dared scream for help. If I didn't figure out an escape plan the man was going to rape me.

He grabbed my collar and hauled me to my feet, throwing me over the sofa arm. I waited until he dropped his pants. My survival instinct kicked in. My brain shouted commands. *Pants! Down! Around his ankles! He can't chase you! Run! Get out!* I took off for the door, snatched my keys off the floor, and ran without looking back.

Once I'd made it to my car, I drove off at high speed. Far enough away from his house to pull over. My body shook to the point I convulsively shuddered. The only person I wanted was Eli. I wanted to curl up in his arms. Feel safe with the knowledge he would never hurt me. I'd lost the man I loved due to my stupid pigheadedness and childish need to consider myself free without ties. All Eli wanted to do was provide me with a home we could call our own, financial security, emotional security, and a husband to grow old with. What did I want? I'd wanted Eli to be trapped like the statue, and me to be the one who could walk away free of commitment when and where it suited.

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Three days went by. I remained inside the apartment, staring at the phone and praying for Eli to call. Both my mobile and the landline stayed silent. It seemed everyone decided not to contact me. Like they knew what had happened and took Eli's side over mine. As if they knew I was the slut who'd caused the breakup, and almost got myself raped by the bastard I'd thrown my relationship away for. Not even my parents called me over those three days. The indescribable shame I felt made me want to hide away in the apartment forever. On the fourth day, a Friday, I got into my car and drove to The Gallows. There was someone I had to visit.

Walking around Galloway Hospital's garden gave the illusion this place offered peace. It took me a little over half an hour to find the Wisteria Corridor Zane spoke of. Being the middle of spring, the corridor showed off with bunches of scented purple flowers cascading from above me. Gnarled old stems, grown fat over time, twined around wooden posts. The corridor was longer than I'd imagined, leading from near the hospital's main building toward a leafy garden of green lawns and colourful roses. I followed the corridor to its end. To where the statue perched on top of a low, ivy covered wall.

As strange as it might sound, I approached with a sense this statue had been expecting me. Since realising I'd wanted to keep Eli trapped, I'd obsessed over it. The statue was larger than I'd expected. I'm not sure why I imagined it to be smaller than life sized. Even covered in grime, weathered with age, he was beautiful. Crouched on his stone wall, he overlooked gardens with an expression of loss on his face. I moved in closer, looking for a plaque or engraving to tell me about the artist, and if the statue was a memorial.

I'd made a promise to Zane. After all the wrong choices I'd made recently, I had to do something right. I reached up and wrapped my fingers around the statue's hand.

"Zane wants me to tell you he loves you." My throat constricted around the words. "He wants you to know he'll never give up, Lucas."

Before the emotion of the week caught up with me completely, I let go of the statue's hand, turned, and walked away. In all my life, I'd never felt as lonely as I did then. I didn't know where to go or who to turn to. My feet took me along the Wisteria Corridor until I reached the end. If I turned right, I'd head to the car park. If I turned left, I'd walk into The Gallows. I turned left.

Considering I'd met Zane for the briefest time in the cafeteria, I didn't know what ward he was in, or even his surname. I approached the first nurse station I saw.

"Hi," I forced a fake smile when the nurse regarded me. "My name's Tristan Church. I'm a journalist, and I was here earlier in the week."

She blinked and lifted her eyebrows. "And?"

"I have permission to be here," I added in haste. "I'm a bit lost. I'm looking for a patient I spoke to by the name of Zane."

"Does Zane have a last name?"

"More than likely," I returned her sarcasm. "I can't remember his surname, that's why I'm asking for your help. I'm sure there can't be too many Zane's here."

"Our records are filed by surname first and Christian name last. Unless you can tell me more information, I can't help you."

"Thank you so much," I snapped. "Can you at least tell me how to get to the cafeteria from here?"

She pointed to a sign on the wall. "Follow the big arrows saying, *cafeteria this way*."

*Snarky cow.* I rolled my eyes and took off down the hall, shoulders hunched, huffing with annoyance at her attitude. It was close to lunch time. Maybe, if God decided at any point to give me a break, I'd run into Zane in the same place we'd first met.

Once again the cafeteria buzzed with people. I scanned the room for golden hair and saw no one who resembled Zane. After waiting a few minutes for a spare table to become available, I sat down and felt sorry for myself. I took my phone out of my pocket, checking for the umpteenth time for a message from Eli. I didn't see any point in rushing home to an empty apartment. Instead, I sat with my head resting in my hand, and gazed out the window for forty minutes.

"Hello, Tristan."

I leapt from the chair, startling Zane in the process. "I'm glad to see you!"

"You are?" he smiled. "That's nice. May I sit with you?"

"Yes. Please."

He sat down. On his tray he had another muffin and a can of soda. "Why do you come here and not eat anything?"

"I came here hoping to run into you. I wanted to tell you I visited Lucas."

Zane's big blue eyes lit up. "You did?" He gave me a wide smile. "He's handsome, isn't he? Did you tell him I love him?"

"I told him." I nodded, this time accepting half a muffin when Zane offered it to me. "He's very handsome."

In a move that shocked me, touched me, and astounded me, Zane reached for my hand and held tight. "There's something wrong. I can tell your heart is hurting."

I almost cried there and then. "I broke up with my boyfriend." Again, why was I telling him this? It's not like Zane didn't have enough of his own issues. "Well," I clarified, "he left me."

"Would you like to sit outside in the garden? You can tell me what happened, and no one can overhear."

I nodded. I'd have followed my sweet angel anywhere. I'm not sure why. Sometimes you meet people in life and you know in an instant they're meant to impact you in a major way. Zane was one of those people to me.

We sat on the lawn, sharing a blueberry muffin and a can of soda. I poured my hurting heart out, and Zane listened to every word I spoke without judgement. When I'd finished, he leaned forward and hugged me.

Zane whispered into my ear, "I'm grateful you got away from Mark. You must've been very, very frightened."

"I was terrified," I blubbered, accepting a tissue Zane offered me. "It was my fault. Thing is, I'm still terrified. Jumping at my own shadow. I can't sleep. I can't eat. I feel like I'm falling apart."

"It wasn't your fault, Tristan. Rape is never the victim's fault."

"Why can't I pull myself together, Zane? It's not like he *did* rape me."

He stroked my hair, holding me, kissing my cheek between words of wisdom. "He hit you. He touched you in your private places after you told him not to. He tried to keep you in his house... It was a sexual and physical assault."

"I've fucked up everything. I don't know what to do."

"You need to tell Eli you're sorry. Tell him you love him."

"He told me never to contact him again."

"You're planning on failing Eli twice?" Zane knitted his brows together. "The first time by pushing him away and thinking about cheating, the second time by making him feel like you don't care enough to get him back."

"I wish it were that easy. I wish I could go see him, say I'm sorry, and fix all of this." The half a muffin in my hand had been reduced to a mass of crumbs. "He was my first kiss, Zane. We lost our virginity to each other. Eli is the only man I've ever been with. I'm the only man he's ever been with. That was sacred to us and I've destroyed it. He'll never forgive me for taking away something we both cherished. I didn't have sex with Mark, but I kissed him. I kissed him, and now I've ruined a special bond Eli and I shared."

"That's what you want in life?" Zane looked confused, shaking his head. "Tristan, we all want the easy path. We all want a fairy tale. We don't get it, because life can be nasty that way."

I felt smaller than an ant. Here I was ear bashing Zane, and not once had I asked about him.

"How did you meet Lucas?" I searched Zane's eyes, seeing them change in an instant to reflect his pain. "How did you end up in Galloway? I know you had to have been admitted here first to see the statue."

"When I was at school, I started to get bullied. Bad things were written about me on my locker, on the chalkboard, inside my text books." Zane grew agitated. "I told the teachers and they called me a liar. Said I was a troublemaker. Said I was making it up, and nothing bad had been written about me anywhere. I told Mum and Dad there were five boys at school who bullied me, called me names, hit me, and wrote bad things."

"How old were you?"

"Fourteen."

The same age I was when I met Eli.

"How old are you now, Zane?" I asked.

"Nineteen." He lowered his gaze and stared at the lawn. "I was suspended from school for lying to the principal. But, they didn't stop bullying me. They hid in my bedroom. Would come out at night when my parents went to bed. They tried to smother me with my pillow. Would yell obscene things in my ears. I'd scream, and try to fight them off. They threatened me with knives. Then Sean... The biggest one... He had a gun, and he'd hold it to my head. He'd laugh and say one day he'd pull the trigger."

I'd figured Zane suffered schizophrenia. My understanding of the disease was limited. However, I did know some sufferers were considered high functioning while others were

obliterated by it. I didn't know what to say. I sat and listened to Zane's story like he'd listened to mine.

"They followed me everywhere. I couldn't hide from them. Then a psychiatrist put me in Galloway."

"Do you..." I tried to word the question carefully. "I mean, do you know now Sean and the others are..."

"All in my head?"

"Yes," I nodded.

"I guess. Doesn't mean they're not real, Tristan." Zane pulled out clumps of grass and sweat beaded on his forehead. "They gave me pills to make them go away. They didn't work. They didn't make them go away. All the pills do is make them sneakier. They hide for days, a week or more sometimes, and then they start again. Yelling at me. Trying to kill me. Writing bad things on the hospital walls."

I reached over and ran my hand over Zane's head. I'm sure he didn't want my pity, but I couldn't help feeling sorry for him.

"I have good days and bad days. One good day, I went for a walk in the garden. I'm allowed to walk in the gardens on my good days."

I smiled, encouraging him to continue.

"I sat down on the bench under the Wisteria Corridor. I was looking at the statue, and I thought he must've felt as alone as I did. He couldn't leave. He couldn't see anything different from one day to the next. People probably commented all the time about how handsome he was, but no one really loved him. He looked so sad. Like he was looking over the garden waiting for someone who never came."

The statue did appear sad. It was the first thing I'd noticed when I took in his expression.

"For the next few days, I went to sit with him. I thought we could wait together for someone to come and take us away from the hospital." Zane accepted my hand when I offered it. "Then, about a week later, I was in bed, and they came back. The bullies came back. Surrounding my bed with knives, and Sean had the gun. I was about to scream when a beautiful man walked in the door. He told them if they dared touch me, he'd see them dead. They were terrified of him!"

"It was Lucas?"

"Yes," Zane nodded. "I recognised him straight away. Even though he wasn't made of stone anymore, I knew it was him the second I saw him. The bullies... they ran out of my room. When Lucas is with me, they keep away. When Lucas goes away," Zane shuddered, "the bullies come back. Eventually they always come back when they know Lucas isn't around to protect me."

A knight in shining armour, or grimy stone as it were in Lucas' case, walked in and rescued Zane from his nightmares. In its own obscure way, this was a romance story which, sadly, didn't seem to be destined for a happy ending.

"Why can't you see him now?" I asked, interested in learning all I could about what Zane sees, feels, and believes when living with hallucinations. "Where does he go?"

"Everything was perfect for a while." Now it was my turn to watch on as Zane fought tears. "Lucas and I were inseparable. We never actually fell in love, Tristan. We'd always been in love. Somewhere else maybe, some other time or some other place before, but we knew each other's hearts and souls. Lucas knows all about me, and I know all about him."

If you have to suffer from hallucinations and imaginary friends, I guessed the best way to do it would be to conjure up someone who filled all those empty gaps in life. Of course Lucas

was perfect. Of course he knew everything about Zane. Zane probably dreamed him up over a few years, and then he came to life inside his mind.

"Then, everyone started to think I was losing my marbles," Zane swiped a tear from his cheek. "Telling me Lucas wasn't real, telling me no one else could see him, and he was nothing but a relapse. No one listened to me when I told them Lucas keeps me safe from the bullies. They wanted to see him gone. They didn't want me talking to him. They didn't want him in my life."

"Who are 'they'," I asked. "Your family?"

"Yeah. And my shrink."

As much as I now cared for Zane's welfare, I could also see the opposite side to the coin. To watch your son interacting with a hallucination, to have to sit and see him chatting away to someone who wasn't really there, it must've been torturous for Zane's parents.

"He is real, Tristan." Zane spoke with force, making his point. "How do I know you're real? Does that mean I shouldn't speak to you even though I like your company?"

A point I hadn't considered. "I assure you, I am real."

Zane laughed. "They all do."

I brought the subject back to Lucas. "Where does Lucas go? Why does he leave?"

"Oh." Zane refocused on the topic. "My doctor put me on another medication. I've tried to tell them it traps Lucas inside the statue and brings the bullies back." He started trembling. "All it does is tear us apart! Jails Lucas, and jails me. They're hiding at the moment, Tristan. Hiding somewhere in dark places, waiting to jump out at me. I'm scared, because I know soon they'll be back, and Lucas can't escape the statue to save me."

My God, I felt helpless. I had a vicious flashback to the old man sitting in the chair with urine pooled around his feet, and the old lady with lost eyes and underwear around her ankles. Was this what the future held for a sweet angel who shared his lunch with a stranger? A stranger he couldn't even be certain was real. What a cruel, brutal disease.

"Lucas is a beautiful man," Zane added. "He's gentle and kind. When he holds me in his arms, nothing can ever harm me. He lies with me in bed, spooning into my back, and whispers the sweetest words in my ear until I fall asleep. When we make love..." He blushed a little. "We're one person. Lucas was my first lover, too. I don't ever want to be with anyone else."

I'd wondered about whether or not it was possible for someone to engage in sex with an imaginary lover. Curiosity burned for me to ask. Manners kept me silent.

"If you really do love Eli, Tristan, you need to prove it. Otherwise, you'll both be jailed like Lucas and me."

"What's your surname?" Thinking about Eli choked me up again. I needed to switch the conversation. "Unless you show up in the cafeteria, I can't visit you."

"Aston. As in the car, Aston Martin."

I smiled and Zane smiled in response. "What ward are you in?"

"Eight."

### Chapter Three

I lay in bed that night, aware of the empty space beside me, clutching Eli's pillow to my chest. His aftershave lingered on the linen. I breathed it in with my eyes shut tight. Where was he, and what was he doing? Was he as upset as I? Was he missing me, or was he cursing me to hell? Rather than take Zane's advice and attempt a phone call, I took the coward's way out and continued to pray Eli would make the first move toward reconciliation. I couldn't bear the thought of hearing his voice only to be told, once again, to never contact him.

As I crushed the pillow in against me, I let myself get lost in memories of our teenage years. No one at school knew we were gay. Even I didn't know Eli was gay until further on into our friendship. I was never bullied at school like Zane had been bullied by hallucinations. I got good grades, I came from a loving family, I had just enough ego to provide me with confidence, and just enough self-doubt to provide me with humility. Eli and I were popular with girls, popular with other students, and well-liked by teachers. We've led a charmed life in many respects. Then, to top it all off, we were blessed with each other's friendship.

One Saturday night in the middle of winter, when we were fourteen years old, we were walking home from the movies. By then we'd known each other for four months, and I'd developed a major crush on Eli. My feelings scared me. I worried he'd somehow read my mind, and I'd lose his friendship. We walked from a bus stop toward my house, where Eli would stay the night. I remember a breeze biting through my jacket, and I shivered.

Eli put his arm around my waist and said, "I hate winter."

Just like that. *I hate winter*. With his arm around my waist. Like it was the most natural thing in the world to do. My arms floundered around my sides, wanting to reciprocate, thinking Eli would think me a fag if I did. Why did he put his arm around my waist? Why had he left it there as we continued to walk toward my house?

I tried to talk, and make it seem as if I hadn't noticed his arm holding me. "I don't mind it," I squeaked. "I like summer, too. I don't have a favourite season."

"I do," he replied. "I like summer much better."

"I don't. I like them both."

"I like hot weather."

"I like hot weather and cold weather."

What a crap conversation! It couldn't have sounded any less natural to Eli than it did to me. Not to mention the fact I walked robot style, like I had boards nailed to my legs. Eli? No, he walked along, arm around my waist, as casual as can be.

"We're nearly home," I said, knowing Eli already knew this because he'd been to my house many times. "Around the corner, and then we'll be there."

That was when Eli laughed and stopped walking, forcing me to halt beside him. Eli's always been taller, and he peered at me with a sly smirk on his face. The overhead streetlight lit a sparkle in his blue eyes.

"You ever kissed a girl?" he asked.

"Umm..." Now his other arm went around my waist and we faced each other with no room between us. "Nope. Have you?"

"No. Don't want to."

"You don't?" I think my eyes enlarged to twice their size. "Why not?"

"I like boys."

I had to give him ten out of ten for the cool, calm, collected way he made that statement. My legs turned to jelly, my heart pounded so hard I thought it would self-destruct.

“Oh,” I whispered. “Have you ever kissed a boy?”

“Not yet,” he tightened his arms around me. “Can I kiss you?”

“Okay.”

Jesus, could I have been any less romantic? It was all I could say. I figured if it were a joke, I could respond by saying it was a test to see if he really was gay before I kicked him in the balls for hitting on me. Then his lips pressed against mine, warm and soft. My unresponsive arms flew into action, circling his neck, hanging on for dear life. Neither of us took into account the possibility of neighbours peeking through curtains, watching two teenage boys making out on the footpath, underneath a streetlight.

My memories brought tears back again, and I buried my face in the pillow. I couldn't let it end like this. Now Eli had walked out of my life, now he'd taken as much as he could of my flighty ways, half of me had been ripped out of my body. Eli was the love of my life, and I took him for granted. Trying to imagine life without him... It was a place I didn't want to be. A place I *couldn't* be.

That's when I realised someone had to fight for Zane's love. Zane was never going to recover from schizophrenia. Not unless a miracle drug was invented some time soon. I had an option to find Eli, to plead with him to work this out, to be able to see him and hear him. I realised something else. The Gallows changed me. The hospital, its patients, Zane... What was reality anyway? In an instant reality can be gone. Can change into something else, leaving you alone, scared, facing your failures, and desperate to reclaim a dream life you once had. One way or another, even if it meant crawling on my belly and bowing over Eli's feet, I needed to show my best friend, my lover, I was capable of understanding the true meaning of commitment. Admit to him my faults, admit I've changed for the worst over the years, but convince him I love him more than life itself. Swear I'll never take him for granted again. Eli is *my* reality. The only reality I want.

While I fought for Eli, I had to fight for Zane and Lucas.

\* \* \* \*

On Monday, I walked into the mechanic workshop. I remembered how comforting the smell of grease and cars were to me. When Eli arrived home from work, greeting me with a firm hug and a kiss, the aroma of grease and cars perfumed his skin. I used to close my eyes, bury my face into his neck, and breathe in his scent. It was masculine, strong, and dependable. As much a part of Eli as his charming smile. One more thing I'd taken for granted. A charming smile wasn't what greeted me when Eli rolled out from beneath a battered old Ford.

“What are you doing here, Tristan?”

“Baby, can we talk? Please?” My eyes coated with tears. My voice cracked. “I miss you. I miss you so much.”

He sat up, lowering his face from view, and wiped his hands on a dirty, oily rag. “There's nothing to talk about.”

When Eli strode toward the office, I followed. “You haven't come back to pack up the rest of your stuff. That makes me think you don't want to.” He closed the office door, keeping his back to me. “Baby, please come home. Come home, and we can talk. Try to...”

“Try to *what*?” Spinning around, Eli threw the rag at the wall, yelling at me through his tears. “Work things out? I’ve tried to work things out and *every* single time you threw my efforts in my face!”

“I was wrong.” When I approached, he stepped away. “I admit I’ve been distant. I admit I’ve made a lot of mistakes. I swear to God, I *didn’t* cheat on you. I don’t know how the note ended up in my pocket. What I do know is *I* didn’t put it there.”

“Look at me!” he shouted, fists clenched at his sides, tears tumbling over his lower lashes. “I’m a fucking wreck over this, and you can stand there, while I’m in front of you breaking apart, and lie!”

“I’m not ly...”

“*Shut up!* I followed you that night. The night I left... I parked at the end of the street and waited to see if you’d go to him. You did. You went to straight to him!”

I almost vomited. “Okay. Yes, I admit I did go to...”

“Get *out!*” He jabbed a shaky finger at the door. “Get the *hell* out of here, before I throw you out.”

“I was angry and hurt, Eli.” Desperation poured through every cell of my body. “I went there, but I couldn’t go through with it. I left and went home. Went home and cried, and prayed for you to come home, too.”

“You know what kills me the most? It’s knowing I gave you all of me. My heart, my soul, my life was all given to you. I’ve loved you since I was fourteen years old, Tris, and I’ve never cheated. Never. Then I find out all of me wasn’t enough for you.”

I surged forward, snatching his arms, bawling unabashedly. “I love you. I don’t want anyone else. I want to marry you, Eli. I want to have the house, and the joint bank account, and grow old with you. Give me the chance to prove it. *Please*, give us the chance to work this out. I’ll do anything to have you come home. No one else could ever love you like I do.”

His laughter, mixed with crying, sounded maniacal. “If a lying, cheating, selfish partner is the best love I’ll ever have, I’m screwed.” Wriggling his arms free of my hold, Eli shook his head helplessly. “What happened to you? When did you start thinking the entire God damned world revolved around you? Maybe I am a boring old fart, but at least everything I’ve done was for us both and not just for me. Get out, Tristan. It’s over. Get on with your life, and I’ll try to get on with mine.”

\* \* \* \*

In spite of sunshine pouring through car windows, I’d never known a darker day. The night Eli walked out there was a part of me clinging onto threads of hope. No matter how thin those threads were, they were there. Now, I felt they’d been cut and all hope fell away. I saw people walking along pavements and wondered how everything outside my car carried on like normal when my world had blown apart. It seemed a cruel joke, like those on the outside basked in the knowledge their lives were calm enough to stroll along pavements without a worry. My heartache wasn’t their heartache, why should they care? So long as they went home and slept beside their lover, why should they give a damn if others couldn’t?

I drove on auto-pilot, heading straight for The Gallows. There were other people I could have turned to. Friends and family would have been a more logical choice than opting for solace in the company of a Gallows patient. I didn’t want anyone else. I needed the understanding and kind words of my blond angel. Friends and family were likely to judge me if they’d spoken to Eli. Zane wouldn’t judge me. And yet, even then as I turned into The

Gallows car park, I didn't see my visit as selfish. Of course, that's exactly what it was. I wasn't there to make Zane's day brighter; I was there in hope he could make my day brighter.

An elevator took me to ward eight and, when the doors slid open, I was greeted with the now familiar sound of patients wailing in misery. How did the staff do it? How could they experience this type of desolation for hours on end, day after day, year after year? Perhaps it was the reason the ward nurse had been snarky to me. They would have to have a degree of disassociation or risk losing their own minds. I'm not a religious man, but if there really was a hell then it was encapsulated within The Gallows walls. Those hell-bound walls kept prisoner other angels like Zane, who'd not fallen from grace by choice, but because they'd been pushed by the cruel hand of fate.

"He's got a gun! He's got a gun!"

For a second I froze, until my legs reacted and I ran down the stark corridor toward the sound of Zane's horrified voice. I slid to a halt, skidding past Zane's room and needing to backtrack. One male nurse and one female nurse hovered over Zane's bed. The male nurse held a syringe. Neither of them attempted to soothe Zane's fear. All they tried to do was sedate it out of him. To knock him out and silence him.

"Where is he, Zane?" The two nurses turned around, staring at me as though they couldn't understand how I got there, even though the ward isn't closed to visitors. "Where is he hiding?"

"Wait outside," the male nurse ordered.

I ignored him and approached the bed. Leather restraints were attached to the frame. I couldn't let them restrain my angel like he was a wild demon. At that point, I wasn't certain Zane recognised me. He'd curled into a foetal position, rocking back and forth, his hair knotted inside his fingers, crying and screaming. I didn't attempt to touch him. I didn't want to terrify him more.

"Leave the room," the female nurse growled, pointing toward the door.

"If you want me to leave, you'll have to sedate *me* and drag me out!" I snapped at her. "This is my cousin, and I have a right to be here."

Whether cousins did have a right to intervene in treatment, I didn't know. I knew they must've stood a better chance than random reporters. Either way, my announcement seemed to confuse them for a moment. It allowed me time to get nearer to Zane.

"Zane, it's me. Tristan. Where's Sean hiding? Tell me where he is, sweetheart, and I'll get rid of him."

Knowing the name of the hallucination brandishing a weapon gave me brownie points with the nurses. I guess they figured only family members would know those details.

"Under the bed! He's under the bed! He's got a gun! He's going to shoot me with the gun!"

"Like hell he will!" I crouched down, moving a sheet to peer under the bed, unsure of whether anything I said would truly help the situation. "Who the fuck do you think you are?" I shouted to an empty space. "I'll tell you who you are, Sean! You're a coward, who hides under beds, and threatens Zane with a gun because you can't fight like a real man. Get the fuck out of here, Sean, before I kick your arse!"

Was it working? I couldn't see Zane's face, but he'd stopped screaming. I glanced at the two nurses, who stared at me like I should also be admitted.

"And, if you think you can come back here with your spotty, loser friends to frighten Zane again, I'll kick *all* your arses. I have a black belt in Karate, and I can break every bone in your body!"

That was a lie. I don't have a black belt in Karate and, truth be told, I'd run from a fight faster than I'd partake in one.

"I promise you one thing, Sean, if you dare threaten Zane again, I'll hunt you down and kill you. I'll get a gun and blow *your* brains out. What do you think about that, huh? Yeah, bet you're not so fucking brave now, are you?"

"Tristan?" At the sound of Zane's voice, I craned my neck to meet with his baffled gaze. "He's not there anymore."

"Oh." Straightening up, I smoothed my clothes, and arched an eyebrow at two surly nurses. "Was that so difficult?"

It must have been because the male gave me a lecture on pandering to patient's hallucinations. I pointed out I wasn't pandering to anyone. Rather, my intention was to help my terrified cousin, which I did quite successfully without the need to pump him full of drugs. With a ward full of patients, and severe understaffing, the nurses refused to argue with me for long and left. I doubted they'd bother to check whether or not I was a relative.

I sat on the edge of the narrow bed, wrapping my arms around Zane, holding him tight against me. His body trembled in my embrace. An inner feeling told me Zane's hallucinations could be kept at bay, so long as he believed someone was around to fight them away.

"You feeling any better, sweetheart?" I asked, stroking his silky hair. "Can I get anything for you?"

He raised his chin, looked at me with doe-like eyes, and kissed me. A soft press of his full, bow shaped lips against mine. It's difficult to explain how you can melt in the arms of someone you're not attracted to in a sexual way. The kiss of a cherub couldn't have been more spiritual than Zane's kiss.

"I know Lucas sent you to me," he whispered, gazing at me in wonder. "He sent you to protect me until he can come back." His fingertip traced along my bottom lip. "You mustn't tell anyone Lucas sent you or they'll give me more tablets. More tablets might make you go away, too. We must both shh, and not let them know. Okay?"

"Okay. In the meantime, while I'm here, I'll scare the bullies away." Even though I wanted to break down and cry for him, I sucked it up and winked. "No tablets can make me go away. Other people can see me, too. The nurses... they saw me. They know I'm here."

\* \* \* \*

Over the next four days, I returned to The Gallows and to Zane's side. During the span of those four days, I watched him deteriorate to the point he became a hollow shell of the beautiful young man I'd met in a cafeteria. While I lay on the bed and held him, the violent hallucinations let him rest. When visiting hours were over, and staff kicked me out, the bullies came back to terrorise him. I'd go home and cry myself to sleep. My already broken heart splintered a little more after one more day watching my sweet angel in the grips of schizophrenia. Zane's parents were overseas, not due back for another three days. I feared what would happen when they did return and informed the hospital I wasn't a family member at all. No doubt they would ban me from seeing their son altogether.

On the fifth day, I lay with Zane, and listened to his whimpering calls for Lucas. In his tragic voice, I heard my own calls for Eli. I no longer tried to hide how deeply Zane's pain affected me. I cradled him in my arms, rocking him like a baby, with rivers of tears streaming down my cheeks. All Zane needed was Lucas' return and his sorrow would be banished along with the violent hallucinations. Did it really matter if Lucas was a hallucination himself? Real or not, he

kept Zane safe, and gave him someone to love, who loved him unconditionally in return. Over and over Zane called for Lucas, begged the doctors and nurses to let him come back, tried to tell them they'd imprisoned the love of his life inside a cold, stone statue. For God's sake, all they had to do was change Zane's medication to bring him peace. They wouldn't hear of it.

At the close of visiting hours that night, I kissed Zane's face and told him I'd be back the next day. He believed doctors would soon vanquish me from his world like they vanquished Lucas. Zane clung to me, as though it would be the final time we'd be together. I saw another little part of his soul die each night I had to walk away. I swear it... I *saw* another piece die. Saw what remained of the light in his angelic blue eyes flicker and go out. On that fifth night, I made Zane a promise. If I had to fight for his right to love Lucas, if it took me the rest of my life, I would do it. I wouldn't give up.

In the early evening, the scent of wisteria perfumed a light breeze. I focused on the statue ahead of me, sitting on his wall, gazing into nothingness in the same way Zane now gazed. Was it my imagination, or did the statue look sadder now than he'd looked to me before? When I reached him, I took hold of his hand. I'm not sure why. In a way he'd become real to me, too. Not in the sense that he was real to Zane, but in the sense I knew this statue embodied an end to fear and loneliness. Speaking to the statue gave me an outlet to pour forth my emotions.

"I wish you could help me," I whispered to him. "I'd give anything to bring you back to Zane. I don't know how I can. He needs you. He misses you. He loves you."

I let go of the statue's hand and took my phone from my jacket pocket. I typed out a text. *I need you. I miss you. I love you.* I sent the text to Eli.

He didn't reply.

On my way home from The Gallows that night, I detoured and drove to the neighbourhood I lived in as a teenager. My parents have since moved on from the family home I was raised in, downsizing to a smaller house when my brother and I moved out. Nothing much had changed in the suburb, other than trees being a little bigger. I parked beside the streetlight under which Eli and I shared our first kiss. I couldn't help torturing myself with memories. They were all I had.

That night, when we finally made it to my home, Eli and I waited until my parents went to sleep and then locked my bedroom door. We made out until I thought my lips would fall off. I remember how grown up I felt. It was my rite of passage, and the first of many transitions from boy to man. Both of us were still nervous enough with each other to keep our hands from wandering below the waist. Eli did, however, forego the camper bed set up in the room and slept in my bed beside me.

By the time we were sixteen, sleeping together in the same bed on a Saturday night became a ritual. We would lie in each other's arms and talk about our future, making plans for when we had enough money to rent an apartment. We knew our futures included each other. For two years we'd dated in secret, our relationship outlasting every other high school relationship. By then, we'd explored each other's dreams as well as each other's bodies. Nothing seemed more certain to us than the knowledge we would always be there for one another as friends and as a couple.

Even though the legal age of consent is sixteen in Australia, Eli and I kept our relationship secret until we left high school. At eighteen, we sat down with my parents and came out. It was one of the most nerve wracking times of my life, and I'll never forget the furtive glances my mother and father sent each other.

Dad frowned, peering from me to Eli. Then he said, "Do you really think we haven't already figured this out?"

They'd known for a couple of years, and our announcement came as no shock. Eli's parents took a little longer to come to terms with it. It wasn't the fact we were in love with each other that sent their minds reeling, it was the fact it had been going on for so long. The start of our adult life together began. No more secrets, no more hiding, and we could involve our families in future plans. Both of us were blessed with their acceptance and support.

I wished I could turn back time and kiss Eli beneath the streetlight. Start from the beginning, and have the chance to do right what I'd done wrong. Since Eli left, I'd shut out everyone, including my family. The only person I'd had contact with was Zane. I couldn't face anyone else, in spite of several worried messages Mum and Dad left on my phone. The incident with Mark played over and over in my mind. If I hadn't been the one who initiated the sexual encounter, I'd have reported the assault rather than let the bastard get away with it. How many other guys had he done it to? How many other guys weren't lucky enough to get away before Mark raped them? I couldn't report it when I felt to blame. I wanted to curl up in Eli's strong arms and be safe.

Before I folded into another round of uncontrollable sobbing, I pulled away from the curb and drove home.

## Chapter Four

I placed a bag of clean laundry onto a chair beside Zane's bed. With his parents away, the pile of dirty clothes grew in size. I took them home, washed and folded them, and brought them back. Zane no longer knew I sat with him. Nurses kept him heavily sedated. I'd requested permission to bring in my electric shaver. No one seemed to care about Zane's appearance. When I'd met Zane he'd been well groomed, clean and tidy, wearing fashionable clothes. This told me he cared what he looked like. I knew he wouldn't want to lie in a mental hospital *looking* like a nutcase.

I carefully shaved off patchy facial hair, washed Zane's face, and combed his hair. I cleaned his fingernails and filed down jagged edges. I brushed his teeth, as best one can brush the teeth of a sedated person. Once I had Zane cleaned up, I changed him out of a light blue hospital gown and dressed him in a clean pair of pyjamas.

When done, I sat down and brushed my fingers over his now smooth cheek. "There you go, sweetie. You look lovely for when your mum and dad get here."

The full force of Zane's parents returning hit me. I didn't know whether they had been in contact with hospital staff while away. I figured they hadn't. Quite probably their vacation meant taking time off from Zane, too. These crashes into the depths of schizophrenic delusions were something they'd lived with for years. I'm sure they loved their son. I'm sure they did what they felt was best for him. I'm sure they needed time away to recharge their batteries before returning to the fray. I was also sure they'd banish me once they found out a stranger had been masquerading as a cousin. That thought terrified me.

At times Zane's eyes flickered open, dull and haunted. He'd look at me for a moment before the sedative swept him into sleep once more. I prayed his dreams took him some place beautiful, away from torment and into Lucas' arms. To the same place my dreams of Eli took me, where I could make love to him and feel the warmth of his kiss fill my soul. Before I knew it, tears started up again. I didn't think it possible for one man to cry as much as I'd cried since Eli left. I licked away a droplet from my lips and reached for a tissue. Beneath the tissue box was a small sketch pad. I picked it up and flipped it open.

The images stole my breath away, and not just for their artistic beauty. Each pencil sketch had Zane's name in the bottom right hand corner. Finally, I saw what Zane saw. The man inside the statue brought to life in these amazing images. There were pictures of the two of them walking hand in hand, pictures of them sitting together talking, pictures of them kissing, and pictures of them making love. Suddenly, Lucas reached out from those pages and gripped me with his realism. *This* was what Zane saw. Not a cold stone statue, but a real man who walked beside him, kept him safe, kept him company, kept him loved, and kept him sane.

I put the sketch pad where I found it. I'd invaded Zane's privacy by looking at intimate images of him and his lover. They were sketches done, probably, to pass lonely hours. I wanted to see what Zane would be capable of if given a canvas and peaceful surroundings to create in. I'm not easily impressed when it comes to art, yet Zane's ability blew my mind.

Restless nights had drained me. I gave into the urge to close my eyes. I hadn't meant to fall asleep. Two hours later, a rough hand on my shoulder jolted me awake.

"Who the hell are you, and what are you doing with my son?"

It took me a few moments to get my bearings, startled, and scrambling to my feet. "You must be Mr Aston? My name's Tristan. Tristan Church."

“Get out of here before I have you arrested.” He shoved me out the door. “What are you? Some kind of pervert?”

A woman stood in the corridor, hands over her mouth, eyes wide in dismay.

“I’m visiting, that’s all. I swear.” Mr Aston shoved me hard, and I almost lost my balance. “I’m Zane’s friend.”

“If you go anywhere near my son again, I’ll call the police.”

“I haven’t done anything,” I pleaded my case, panicked over how Zane would react when told he wasn’t allowed to see me again. “I’m a reporter and...”

Bad move. Neither Mr nor Mrs Aston took kindly to knowing a reporter spent a week at their son’s bedside.

“If you dare write anything in the papers about Zane, I’ll see you in court.”

“I’m his *friend*,” I matched the raise in Mr Aston’s voice. “He’s needed me and I’ve been here for him. I’ve been here when *you* haven’t! No one has been here for Zane except me.”

“Under false pretences,” Mrs Aston broke her silence. “We don’t know you from a bar of soap. How do we know you haven’t taken advantage of Zane? How do we know you haven’t been doing things to him?”

“What about what you’ve been doing to him? You and everyone else in this God forsaken shithole!”

Everything bubbled over. All my grief, all my anger, all my anxiety over Zane and his welfare erupted from within me in a fire of accusations. This was it. This was my one chance to face Zane’s parents and argue his case. I’d never see them again after this moment. I owed it to Zane to say everything I could say before security arrived to drag me out.

“Can’t you see his heart’s broken without Lucas?” I pleaded with upturned hands.

Perhaps the fact I’d burst into tears stunned them both enough to not dare come any closer. I ranted like a Gallows inmate.

“Lucas isn’t real,” Mrs Aston squeaked, gripping her husband’s hand. “If that’s what Zane told you, then you don’t know the truth. Lucas isn’t *real*.”

“Do you love your husband, Mrs Aston?” I demanded.

“How dare you ask me such a question? Yes, I love my husband!”

I turned to Mr Aston. “Do you love your wife?”

“Of course I do!” he growled, peering around for security guards, who were as lax as everything else in The Gallows.

“Well, you know what?” I dared step closer, speaking in gasps. “I can’t *feel* the love you say you have for each other. I can’t *see* it. Maybe it’s real to you, but it isn’t real to me. *Your* reality isn’t *mine*. What would you do if I held all your cards? What would you do if your love depended on me and what card I dealt you? What if I could throw down one single card to rip you out of each other’s lives, and I threw down that card based on the fact *your* love isn’t *my* reality?”

“You’d better leave now before I call the police.” Mr Aston took out his phone to back up his threat.

“Call them, I really don’t give a shit! Until they arrive, you can listen.”

For the first time I was glad The Gallows had a bad reputation. None of the nurses were willing to intervene and escort me out of the ward. Security still hadn’t arrived. No one was game enough to stop my rant.

“I know you love your son, and you’re doing what you think is best for him. Can’t you see you’ve taken away his only line of defence? Zane’s mind invented Lucas to protect him from bad hallucinations. The drugs he’s on now are destroying that natural defence system. Lucas

is gone and the bullies are back.” I wasn’t sure if their silence meant they listened or they’d gone into a deep state of shock. “Without Lucas, Zane exists in misery. All you have to do to give your son happiness is to let him love the man trapped in the statue.” I could barely see through my tears. “In the end, love is always only the reality of the two people who share it. *Your* love isn’t my reality. *My* love isn’t your reality. Lucas *is* Zane’s reality.”

The elevator doors opened and security stepped out.

“Your son is a sweet, beautiful angel. With all his own problems and heartbreak, he’s been there for me through mine.” I threw my arms in the air and retreated. “Have a think about what it would be like if I forced a pill into you that could rip away your love, leaving your mind torn to shreds, your heart shattered, and one side of your bed empty forever.”

Needless to say, security escorted me out of the building, along with an order to never return.

\* \* \* \*

Three weeks went by. The only time I left the safety of my self-imposed isolation was to make a quick trip to the local store for groceries. I slept on the sofa at night, with the television on for company. I couldn’t bring myself to sleep in bed alone. A week prior, Eli sent me a text to pack up his things and leave them outside for him to pick up. I couldn’t do it. Instead, I left a pleading letter outside, begging him to forgive me and come home. I hadn’t heard from him since.

I’d tried to call The Gallows in an attempt to find out news on Zane’s progress. My calls led to a dead end, no one would tell me anything. I thought about going there, thinking perhaps their slack reputation would allow me to sneak in unnoticed. I knew the staff on ward eight knew my face. If I managed to make it that far, I certainly wouldn’t make it to Zane’s room without them intervening.

I looked terrible. I’d lost weight, couldn’t be bothered shaving, had dark circles under my eyes, and sallow skin. I didn’t care if anyone thought I should snap out of my depression and stop feeling sorry for myself. Eli had been my best friend and love for half my life. My life was now dark, empty, and frightening without him in it. I wasn’t the free spirit I wanted people to see me as. My freedom came from knowing Eli’s love supported me and my goals. At the risk of sounding cliché, Eli truly was the wind beneath my wings. Without him, I didn’t want to fly anywhere. What was the point of flying if the one I adored wasn’t there to share the view?

Something inside me had snapped in two. My fear of another sexual assault kept me from leaving the house at all after dark. While I’d sat with Zane, while my focus was on him, it took my thoughts off what happened with Mark. Now, it replayed over and over again, like a movie stuck on repeat. My anxiety ruled me. My depression ate me alive. It taught me another harsh life lesson. All of us, no matter how strong we think we are, are subject to a breaking point, and I’d reached mine. In fact, I’d crossed it. God forbid that breaking point should ever lead to somewhere like The Gallows.

The phone shrilled, screaming for me to take my attention off my sorrows and answer it. Mum called several times a day, panicking my grief could lead me into doing something crazy. I didn’t feel like talking, but she didn’t deserve to worry more if I didn’t answer.

“Hello?”

“Tristan?”

I jolted forward in the sofa. “Zane?”

“Yes. Hello!”

No brownie points for guessing I burst into tears again. "It's so good to hear your voice! How you doing, sweetheart?"

"I'm doing great. I've wanted to call you for a few days. I lost your number. I couldn't find it anywhere. Lucas found it in my sketchbook."

*Oh God, Tristan, stop crying like a four-year-old.* "Lucas is there?"

"Yes." I heard the smile in Zane's voice. "Mum and Dad told my shrink to put me on the old medication and Lucas came back. Thank you, Tristan. Thank you so much. I know you talked them into it. Lucas and I are forever indebted to you." He paused. "Would you like to come visit us? I've missed you, and Lucas wants to meet you and say thank you."

"I'd love to come see you both, sweetheart. I've been blacklisted from the hospital."

"Not anymore. You're allowed to visit. Guess what?"

I was already off the sofa and heading for a shower. I couldn't visit Zane looking like I did. "What?" I even managed a smile.

"My shrink says I might be able to go home soon. On a trial basis at first, just to see if it works out."

"I'm so, so thrilled for you, honey. I've missed you, too. Really missed you a lot. I can't believe how good you sound. I can hear the joy in your voice."

"I can hear the sadness in yours."

Last thing I wanted to do was rain on Zane's parade by making him fret for me. "I'm going to have a shower and tidy myself up. I look like a tramp. Then I'll be straight there to visit, okay?"

"Can you visit tonight?"

Night. My stomach lurched.

"Umm, yeah. Okay. Whatever is the best time for you."

"You'd still better have a shower and clean up if you look like a tramp. I'd say you have about forty minutes before Eli gets there."

My fingers strangled the phone. I swear my heart stopped beating. "What?"

"You saved my love, Tristan. I hope I've saved yours. Eli is on his way to talk to you."

"Zane..."

"I'm hanging up now."

"Zane! What do you mean..."

"Good luck. We'll see you tonight. Bye-bye!"

Was he delusional? Sure, Zane sounded great, happy and lucid, however that didn't necessarily mean what went on his head went on in the real world. I stared at the phone in my hand, heart pumping like a drum against my ribs. It was then I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. If Zane conjured up a miracle... *No, impossible.* Then again, what if it wasn't? Did I dare take a chance at opening the door to Eli looking like this?

I tore off my clothes, dived into the shower, scrubbing my body clean, and washing my hair in about three minutes. I jumped out again, rushing to the mirror to brush furry teeth and shave off three weeks of beard. From there, I dashed into the bedroom and tore clothes off hangers. I opted for a pair of jeans I knew Eli liked me wearing. I chose a green sweater, his favourite colour. I splashed on his favourite aftershave. Once dressed, I cast my gaze around the bedroom and knew there wasn't much time to make the apartment look presentable. It looked like a bomb had hit it. I snatched laundry off the floor and stuffed it into a hamper. I ran into the living room to gather up dirty dishes, piling them into the dishwasher. When I had the place somewhat tidy, I stopped to take a breath. If Eli didn't show, I didn't know if I could recover from the disappointment.

The doorbell sounded. My hand slapped to my chest. I ran to answer it. I flung the door open, and there he was. Standing in front of me, looking as tired and worn as I did. But, oh my God, to me Eli had never been more gorgeous.

"Hi," he said, caution in his voice. "Can I come in?"

I wanted to throw myself into his arms. Instead, I stepped away to allow Eli room to move forward and close the door. He swept his gaze over me, brows knitted, expression tense, and then wrapped me in a hug. I held on, noting Eli hadn't tried to kiss me, but thankful to feel the warmth of his embrace.

"We need to talk," he whispered into my ear. "I mean *really* talk, Tris."

He took my hand and led me to the sofa. Speech failed me. I waited for Eli to speak first. He took folded sheets of paper from his pocket and handed them to me. I was too scared to open it for fear of what he'd written.

"That arrived at the garage this morning, addressed to me from a guy called Zane Aston."

My jaw dropped. "Zane?"

Now I knew it wasn't a Dear John letter, I unfolded it. I remembered telling Zane where Eli worked, mentioning it once in passing when we'd sat in the hospital garden together. His memory for conversation detail surprised me almost as much as the letter did.

"At first I thought it was a joke," Eli said. "Then, I called the hospital and spoke to him. Read it."

I did as Eli asked, reading the words Zane penned in beautiful, flowing handwriting.

*Dear Eli,*

*As I write this letter to you, I pray it isn't needed and Tristan has been reunited with you in the same way I've been reunited with Lucas. If, however, this letter finds you and Tristan still estranged, I pray you will read each word and know I speak from my soul.*

Already I'd gotten choked up, reading on as Zane explained who he was and how we met. He wrote about Lucas, how he'd been trapped in the statue, and how they'd both suffered broken hearts because they'd been torn apart. I couldn't blame Eli for assuming the letter was a joke.

*I hope you won't be angry, Eli, but Tristan told me all about you. Tristan told me many things about why you broke up and what he did to make you walk away. I also hope Tristan won't be angry with me for betraying our friendship confidence, however under these circumstances, where love is most important, I feel I must.*

*I trust Tristan implicitly. He protected me when I was too weak to fight alone. He came to sit with me every day. He lay in bed with me and held me while I slept. One of the nurses told me he cleaned me up, changed my pyjamas, took my clothes home to wash, and took care of me. He is the reason Lucas escaped the statue and come back to me. Our happiness is due to Tristan's selflessness.*

*Eli, Tristan made very big mistakes. It's because I trust him that I know he told me the truth when he said he didn't know how the note got into his pocket. I know he didn't cheat on you with the other man. Yes, he did go see Mark when you left, and yes, that was stupid of him. Tristan realised it was stupid and told Mark he wanted to leave. Mark became violent, hit him in the face, and tried to rape Tristan. So you see, Eli, he learned his lesson the hard way. He feels very frightened and ashamed.*

I cringed. Bless Zane's heart for his honesty, but the disgrace of what happened with Mark was something I wanted to keep from Eli. Wanted to keep from everyone.

*If you love Tristan, Eli, then you owe it to each other to not throw away a ten-year history for the sake of a few stupid mistakes. Lucas was trapped in the statue, and neither of*

*us had the power to get back to each other. Our love was dependent on the kindness of others. Your love is dependent on the kindness of forgiveness. Please, don't trap your love and happiness in a self-made statue of anger. Tristan set Lucas free. Give Tristan the chance to set your love free again, too.*

*Sincerely, Zane Aston.*

Folding the papers, I dropped my head in my hands and sobbed. Crying had become second nature to me. It was all I seemed to be able to do. Eli held me until I calmed down enough to talk. I told him the truth about everything. About my intentions to cheat on him with Mark, about what happened when I told Mark no, and how my life had been impacted since. I took responsibility for being the main culprit in our relationship breakdown, admitting I'd taken Eli for granted, confessing my selfishness drove a wedge between us. In a matter of weeks, the dream life I'd thought I wanted turned into a nightmare.

Eli didn't pile all blame on my shoulders, taking responsibility for his part in the break up. Our relationship *had* become stale. He acknowledged this, promising to compromise in the same way I vowed to compromise. Eli and I are two different personalities, at times we clash. We made an oath to rediscover the time when our differences complimented each other rather than allow them to push us apart. We talked until we were hoarse and, at the end of it, felt as if we'd exhaled poisonous breath from our souls and inhaled healing tonic.

Eli leaned in and covered me, as comforting as a warm blanket. His kiss, familiar and soothing, drained tension away and replaced it with desire. My hands knew every curve of his body better than they knew mine. The width of his shoulders, the firmness of his muscles, the smoothness of his skin, my fingertips knew it all. Little nuances I'd taken for granted now were extra special. Like the slight difference in his top eye teeth, how the right one was ever so slightly sharper when my tongue grazed against it. The way Eli's breathing changed when his craving shifted from being satisfied with making out to needing more. I knew the smell of his hair, the taste of his mouth, the mildness in his touch, the strength of his arousal, the silent words in his expressions, the happiness in his smiles, and the sadness in his tears. I knew it all. All those things Eli had learned and cherished about me as well.

\* \* \* \*

A year and a half has passed since I first met Zane in The Gallows cafeteria. My sweet little angel, who taught me so much about life. Who taught me selflessness, and who taught me to hang on to love with both hands and never let it go. They were harsh lessons and, I now believe, were fated for me to learn.

During our time apart, the streetlamp where Eli and I shared our first kiss became another focus for my grief, fear, and lost love. When I told Eli this, I saw sadness in his expression. Sorrow that a special place, and a sweet, innocent memory, twisted into a representation of my misery. He decided to pull out all the stops in regards to bringing happy memories back, and proposed underneath that same streetlamp. Eli and I married four months ago in a beautiful ceremony within the gorgeous Botanic Gardens. Zane was my best man, standing beside me while I took my vows.

Zane no longer is a resident of The Gallows. He and Lucas live together in a flat his parents built in their backyard. When he was released from hospital, Eli bought him a mobile phone with a Bluetooth earpiece. The effect it's had on Zane's freedom to interact with Lucas in public has been nothing short of amazing. No longer do people look at him like he's crazy. Instead they assume he's having a phone conversation. Zane can chat away to Lucas to his

heart's content. It isn't a one hundred percent foolproof tactic, dependent on how animated his conversations with Lucas are, but for the most part the earpiece is a simple idea with excellent results.

Zane takes an art course at university while working as an apprentice mechanic with Eli. When he compared his surname to an Aston Martin, I should have guessed a passion for cars lurked within. Seven months ago, Zane's psychiatrist gave the all clear for him to obtain a driver's licence. Eli and I took it in turns teaching Zane to drive. Lucas causes no more distraction to him than any passenger would.

As for Zane's relationship with Lucas, they're blissfully happy. The bullies, although not vanquished completely, haven't caused a relapse. Lucas keeps them away. Zane's label from medical professionals is 'High Functioning Schizophrenic'. To me and Eli, he's our best friend. Lucas is as much a member of our social circle as our visible friends are. In many ways, Eli and I feel saddened we'll never meet Lucas face to face. He's always included in everything. He is, after all, Zane's life partner.

I never did write about the politics of Galloway Psychiatric Hospital. I chose to follow the more important story of people like my sweet little angel, Zane. It landed me a full time job writing for a well-respected newspaper. Like I mentioned previously, I haven't changed the world. My world changed for me. Zane came to me as my teacher and guide. The statue represented more than Lucas. It represented everything about Eli I'd tried to sculpt into the man my twisted perspective thought I craved. The man I really wanted, the man I truly love, was the man *inside* the statue.

In regards to the sexual assault, shame kept me from reporting it to police. Eli has been my rock, accompanying me to therapy sessions, supporting me as I battled to get a handle on the anxiety. There are times my reactions to situations are a direct result of what Mark did to me. I feel panicky when alone with a man I don't know, like in an elevator or an office at work. Night still scares me, as does being home by myself. I sometimes still have nightmares, which leave me covered in sweat, or jolt me awake and reduce me to tears. Eli holds me until I calm down and fall back to sleep in his arms. It's not just the memory of what happened, it's also the dread of knowing what *could* have happened.

I had the misfortune of running into Mark about six months after the assault. He shuffled out of an office with crutches, his left leg in plaster. When he saw me, he turned around and shuffled out of sight. Looking at him made me feel physically ill. Being an in demand freelance photographer, it was inevitable I'd one day bump into him at work.

That night, as I prepared dinner, I told Eli. "Maybe God does exist. He looked like he'd been in some kind of accident."

Eli picked up a slice of raw carrot, bit into it, and replied, "He's going to find it difficult running after reporters to take photos now."

I frowned, put the knife down, and turned. "What makes you say that, babe?"

"Chasing a story on crutches won't be easy."

"I never mentioned the injury was to his legs."

He picked a speck of orange from between his teeth. "Didn't you?"

Poking Eli in the stomach with my finger, I grinned. "No, I didn't."

"You sure?"

"I'm positive."

"Before you accuse me of breaking his leg, of course I didn't." He picked up another carrot, strolled out the kitchen, and peered over his shoulder. "Got a couple of mates to do it."

THE END

## **Trademark Acknowledgement**

The author acknowledges the trademark status and trademark owners of the following places and items mentioned in this work of fiction:

Brady Bunch: CBS Television Distribution