

## Prologue

*The night is painfully beautiful. Blurred lights pulse on the signs of skyscrapers. Music booms out of the speakers of the silver Porsche. The rhythmic sound mixes with Phoenix's laughter, my heart beating in time. I accelerate with confidence. People, shops and cars fly past us, blending into the towering rows of houses. The road ahead of me is empty, bright green traffic lights luring me on. I feel more alive than ever before. Phoenix touches my thigh, I grip the steering wheel tighter. My body wants more.*

*Suddenly, a black Jeep shoots towards us. Glittering blue light explodes behind my retina. Somehow, I manage to swerve and avoid it. Our Porsche slides all over the pavement. The blue light is flooding my senses, it saturates every cell. With all my strength, I slam on the brakes. I feel the loss of control, hear the loud music and my own suffocated wheezing. Only Phoenix's laughter has stopped.*

*And then suddenly, there is only darkness, followed by a deep silence.*

*When I come to, I am no longer myself, I can feel it. My world has also changed. Matte-black water lilies float on a glassy lake. It is still night, but there is more mystery in the air than before. I am standing on a curved bridge. A single gas lamp casts its sparse glow over a marbled balustrade, in the dark stone of which sparks of blue light are stirring. I feel an ominous tingling in my neck.*

*I am not safe here. And I know why.*

*The shadow of a tall man detaches itself from the darkness. Cajus Conterville. I know his name as well as I know his face. He is wearing strange clothes, fitting for this strange place. His high boots are pitch black, like the coat that flutters threateningly around his slim body. His glittering eyes are fixed ruthlessly on me. A short, dark beard covers his cheeks. His movements are resolute as he comes silently closer.*

*I reach into my pocket.*

*I am ready to fight.*

## Chapter 1

Panicked breathing. As if coming up from a deep dive, I drag myself out of sleep, breaking groggily through the surface of reality. It was just a dream. Just a dream. For two breaths, I actually believe myself. Then the memory returns. The party of the outskirts of the city. Phoenix's lips on my neck. His hands on my hips. The bass of the music, our carefree movements, the taste of cola mixed with alcohol. The journey back through brightly-lit

Seattle. His fingers on my thigh. My thumping heartbeat. The black Jeep. After that, only darkness and guilt.

The guilt has been with me for four weeks, as though it's expecting a damn prize for following me everywhere. It's there day and night. For twenty-eight days it's been mine, like the birthmark over my lip that I've never liked.

But that's the way it is. Just one moment can change your whole life. Nobody asks you for permission. Just a few seconds, that's all it takes to make a difference. Every look, every breath, even every feeling that you have is determined by that one moment. Lately, I've been asking myself how many of these moments a human life can endure. Whether there's an upper limit, or whether everything is just arbitrary, without any rules, nothing more than a game of chance.

Four weeks ago, I might not have realised my luck, but at least I was living the life of a normal nineteen-year-old – with a boring job that paid my bills and a new boyfriend, who made me happy. I had drifted, without any real plans for the future. Now my future has a plan. In a few weeks, my trial will take place at the King County Superior Court. There, it will be decided whether I'm to blame for Phoenix's condition – he has been in a coma ever since the car accident. I already know the answer to this question. It's too obvious. The guilt will follow me into the court like a faithful dog, but only I will see it, the jury will ignore it. Innocent. This will be their verdict, simply because what happened to Phoenix can't be explained. Because it's a goddamned enigma. It's not exciting or intriguing, it's just a black hole, that everyone could find their own solution to.

With a frustrated sigh, I fling my pillow across my room. It bounces off the half-lowered blind and falls unimpressively onto the chest of drawers below, which my parents bought for me when I moved into the flat. The pillows lands right on top of my plate of leftover curry, the green sauce spraying all over my latest sketches. The moonlight shining through the window lights up the strange splashes of colour, making the dark sketches underneath appear even more unreal.

Great. Annoyed, I fold back the covers and stand up.

My phone shows 5.12am.

I've slept for three hours, more than the last two nights. I grab the curry pillow, pull off the dirty cover and, with the plate, head for the washing machine. Blue light from the TV streams towards me as I open the door to the living room. Wearing only boxer shorts and a grey T-shirt, my best friend Scott is sitting on the sofa, fervently playing one of his online games, the aim of which is to slaughter as many people as possible.

"Hey..." he doesn't look at me as he presses the buttons on his controller furiously.

“Hey, shouldn’t you be asleep?” I ask.

“Yep. Shouldn’t you, Harper?”

“Can’t.” I clamber over a crumpled pair of jeans, Scott’s old baseball cap and a solitary sock on my way to the kitchen. Then I put the plate in the sink and stuff the pillowcase into the washing machine, which is once again full to the brim. Since I don’t want any trouble from the neighbours, I resist the urge to turn it on. Instead, I get myself a cold glass of water. It does me good, but it doesn’t get rid of the tightness in my chest.

“Fuck!” screams Scott. He throws the controller onto the olive-green sofa. “Those fucking idiots! What’s so difficult about staying in the trenches for five seconds instead of jumping straight into the crossfire?!”

Smiling, I make my way back into the living room – it doesn’t take long. Our flat, which we’ve shared for a couple of months now, is only sixty-one square metres. “Don’t be too hard on them. You’re probably playing with some thirteen years-olds.”

“Those thirteen-year-olds can suck it,” Scott grumbles, before he chucks his wireless headphones next to the controller. Then he runs his hands through his messy brown hair, which is almost the same shade as mine. “Be nice and distract me from this stupid tragedy. What’s got you out of bed at this time? Another nightmare?”

I raise an eyebrow. “Do we really have to talk about it?”

“Have you got anything better to talk about?”

“I have a couple of things actually.” I point to the half-empty pizza box on the floor in front of Scott. “How about, for example, the agreement we made last week?”

“That you should stop hating yourself?”

“That you should stop leaving your stuff lying around everywhere.”

He picks up the pizza box and puts it on the coffee table, between a few empty beer cans. “I’m still eating that.”

“And that sock too?” Grinning, I kick the lonely sock in his direction. Scott catches it surprisingly elegantly. Although he’s carrying a few extra pounds, his reflexes are enviable.

Scott places the sock neatly on the back of the sofa. Then he pats the space next to him.

“Come on, tell me about it.”

“About what?” I say stubbornly, but settle down next to him anyway.

“About your dream. If the cleaning dictator’s come to hang out it must have been another bad one.” His warm brown eyes fix me with that special look, that I can’t decide if I like or

not. It's nice that we're so close we can interpret each other's every emotion correctly. But it's also hell.

"Less of the X-ray vision." Reluctantly, I pull my legs into a cross-legged position. "I'm not one of your bacteria that you're looking at under a microscope."

"Right, they're more relaxed," Scott replies drily, making me laugh. "You look better like that. At least you do when you get rid of that stubborn expression. You remind me of Miss MacKenzie-Davenport from primary school when you look like that."

This is not a nice comparison. Miss MacKenzie-Davenport looked like a lemon crossed with a goat.

I tie my hair up into a bun and fix Scott with a stare. "You could use another haircut. And a shave."

He raises an eyebrow. "Next you're going to ask me to take a shower." He sniffs his T-shirt. "It's still in the yellow-green zone."

"Yellow-green is not a good zone to be in, Scott."

"Only sleeping for three hours a night isn't a good place to be in either, Harper."

With a sigh, I turn the glass of water around in my hands.

"Was it the accident again?" he asks.

I slowly take a sip of water before I nod. I feel like the steam-boat caught in the churning waves in William Turner's painting of a snowstorm at sea. Sometimes, you just don't know which way is up and which way is down.

"I dreamed about the accident and a strange, dark place."

A city keeps flashing through my mind as if it belonged there. Night after night its contours become clearer, even if the memories drift away gently every time. That's why I try to capture the black bridges and shimmering lanterns in my sketches.

"But this time I wasn't alone. The guy from the Conterville Group was there."

"What guy from the Conterville Group?" Scott turns to me. "You mean that pretty boy?"

"He's not a pretty boy, he's just rich. And an idiot. He fired my mom. At least they still have dad's teaching salary."

Scott pats my shoulder. "I realise that you don't like him, Harper. But Cajus Conterville is still a pretty boy, at least according to current social standards – which will hopefully change at some point."

I like the grin on Scott's face as much as I do his self-confidence. No matter what happens, my best friend is not easily put off his stride.

"Unfortunately, right now we have to live in this superficial world in which Cajus Conterville ends up on the cover of Vogue and not me. But even so, he didn't fire your mom from the shoe shop, he doesn't even know her name, let alone yours. But it's obviously difficult for you to keep working for that family. You don't have to be Freud to understand why the guy's showing up in your dreams."

I remember the moment my hand slipped into my pocket. It wasn't me in my dream, but I could see and feel what the person was doing. And that person was ready to fight Cajus Conterville – to the death.

"You've got a lot going on at the moment. Maybe you shouldn't go visit Phoenix in the hospital today?"

"I have time. My shift doesn't start until twelve," I reply. "I want to be with him."

"You've visited him every day since the accident, Harper." Scott takes hold of my hand. "His mother doesn't want you there. And you can't spend your whole life at his bedside."

"Why not? After all, I put him there."

Scott shakes his head. "Stop telling yourself that."

"I'm not telling myself anything. I was driving, even though I had been drinking."

I wish we'd never gone to the staff party at the architecture firm where Phoenix works, never entered the raffle, and never won the convertible for the weekend.

"You were only just over the limit. Stop playing the martyr, Harper. The guy in the Jeep was driving the wrong way down a one-way street. You didn't hurt anybody, you just hit a street sign. And even that was gentle."

"But even so, Phoenix has been in a coma since then."

"But not because of you."

My shoulders start to tremble. "Well, why then?"

I wish I hadn't drunk anything on that night. Wish I had clearer memories of what happened. But all I have is blurry images, the damn blackout and the testimony of the Jeep driver, who pulled me and Phoenix out of the convertible, thinking we were dead. But we weren't dead, just passed out. Only, I woke up and Phoenix is still unresponsive. And nobody can explain that.

“No idea. Maybe you accidentally took some strange drug at the party that can’t be detected in your blood. Maybe Phoenix has a rare genetic predisposition. Or it’s a new state of shock that modern medicine hasn’t discovered yet, no idea.” He sighs. “Whatever it is, you have to start taking care of yourself again. After all, you’ve only known Phoenix for a few weeks. You’ve got no obligation to him. Go to judo, watch a few series or whatever. But don’t self-destruct. Don’t.”

We are silent for a moment. The silence is hard to bear, because it’s waiting. Waiting for me to react, to move one way or another. For me to finally do something.

“I’ll try,” I say, eventually, just to end the conversation.

Scott doesn’t respond. He can see that I need time and that, for now, we’re stuck here. With a deep breath, I get up and go to my room. I leave my glass next to the pizza box, but I take my guilt with me.

## Chapter 2

Three hours later I’m sitting on the subway and staring at the reflections in the black windowpane of the carriage, which is racing through the lightless tunnel. The monotonous rattling of the wheels on the rails melds with my thudding heartbeat. I look at my own reflection, which stares back at me wearily from the scratched glass. To the other people in the carriage, I look like any other young woman on the way to university or work. With my tied up brown hair, blue jeans and comfortable trainers, I hardly differ from millions of other young women who are out and about this morning. I am one of them and yet, I am not. It’s probably an illusion to believe that we’re all alike anyway. Each of us is different – internally uglier or lovelier, older or younger, fully alive or just surviving.

I catch the eye of a man who looks me briefly in the eye before glancing at my mouth. I see him fix his gaze upon the birthmark above my lip because it’s conspicuous and stands out. I have never liked to be conspicuous and stand out, but Phoenix liked my beauty spot. He always claimed that it looks exactly like Cindy Crawford’s and that I look very similar to her all round. In the few weeks we were together, he said a lot of flattering nonsense. But Phoenix isn’t a romantic, quite the opposite. He’s practically allergic to sunsets and walks on the beach. Even so, he was convinced we belonged together because we’re so different. While he likes marathons, chart music and cars, I like drawing, I’m interested in art and I basically don’t like sports, apart from judo. He reads mostly biographies or Russian authors, while I love books that have a lightness and a silliness about them. He prefers sushi and usually eats healthily, but I can eat pizza for dinner with ice cream for dessert.

I liked conversations with him because he’s charming, but so different at the same time. Phoenix is determined and he always has a plan, he never loses his bearings. Even if he

hadn't said it out loud, it was clear that he didn't see himself as a technical draftsman at an architecture firm forever. He wants more and he's prepared to work hard for it. He often worked overtime and under no circumstances did he want to end up like his father, who had worked in the same position, in the same firm, in the same jacket until his death.

A tinny voice announces my station. With a few others, I push towards the exit. The route to the hospital has become so familiar to me over the past twenty-eight days that I could do it blindfolded. Familiar noises and smells pave my way, as I leave the subway behind me and walk up the wide staircase, because it's faster than taking the escalator.

Seattle is already coming to life at this time. With their heads lowered, people hurry through the streets, their eyes down or turned inwards. Very few people look you in the face, perhaps because they've never known things to be any other way.

I pass the kiosk I try to ignore every day. I've got no desire to look at the magazines, with the happy photos that are just as fake as the perfect ones that are on Instagram. Unfortunately, today my eyes land on a headline: *Cajus Conterville is single no more!* Below is a photo of the young heir kissing a half-naked brunette on some yacht. His family must own countless boats, but they still prefer to sack loyal employees to hire cheaper workers. The thought alone makes me sick.

I walk the last few metres to the hospital entrance quickly. Disturbingly, the familiar atmosphere of the hospital calms me. It's habit. First, pass the reception to reach the lift. Wait an average of forty seconds, then the elevator doors open with a bleak *ping!* There's usually one person inside, dressed in white. Smile, press the button for the third floor. *Ping!* Straight ahead, past the department counter, fourth door on the left. Enter tentatively. Like every day, Phoenix is lying on his back, motionless, eyes closed. If it weren't for all the IV drips and tubes, you'd think he was just asleep.

"Hey." My voice sounds strangely hollow. The machines around Phoenix's bed bleep quietly, mixing with his uneven breaths, his chest slowly rising and falling. His neighbour lies in a bed on the other side of the room. He doesn't move either.

Quietly, I go into the small bathroom to wash my hands before returning to Phoenix and sitting on the hard chair next to his bed. I reach for his hand. His fingers are still slightly tanned, even though he's been lying in this bed for almost a month now.

"You look good," I whisper. I stroke his dark blonde hair gently. It looks a little tousled, even without styling. "I hope you slept well."

"My night was good, too," I lie. "I dreamed about the two of us."

About the night I did this to you.

The doctors have recommended using confident and positive words when speaking to Phoenix. They say I should play him familiar music or remind him of shared experiences. And that I shouldn't give up, because there are coma patients who wake up even after years – in contrast to those who never wake, because they're brain dead.

"I read about an American writer the other day," I say, just so that he can hear my voice. "Her name was Helen Keller. When she was nineteen months old, she developed meningitis and it left her blind and deaf." Phoenix doesn't respond, but I keep squeezing his hand. "When she was seven, she finally learned to communicate with the outside world by having a therapist give her something to hold, and then drawing the letters of that thing onto her hands. Incredibly, that's how Helen learned to read and write. As an adult, she wrote about her dreams, which were colourful and varied, even though she'd never actually experienced any of them." I take a short pause to brush the hair from his forehead. "I don't know where you are, Phoenix – but I hope you're having wonderful dreams, wherever it is."

"What are you doing here again?"

The cold voice of a woman behind me makes me flinch. Startled, I turn to Mrs Hunt, who is standing in the doorway. Phoenix's mother is wearing a grey coat and has her blonde hair tied up in a bun. Her unforgiving look automatically makes me let go of Phoenix's hand. Usually, Mrs Hunt doesn't come here until midday, when her veterinary practice has a lunch break.

"I just wanted to visit him quickly before my shift," I say.

She takes a step into the room and looks at me without any recognisable emotion. "Even if you come here every day, it won't bring him back, Harper." Her reproach hangs in the air, heavy and impenetrable. "But it would help if you finally told the truth."

"I have told the truth."

"That you can't remember? My son has been in a coma for four weeks, without any explanation. And you can't remember?!"

I get up and push back the chair. We've already had this conversation too many times.

"I don't believe you," she continues. "I don't believe that you told the police everything, Harper. You're not telling the whole story, but you will." She takes a breath, as if she's gearing up for a new attack. "I wish Phoenix had never got into that damn car with you. I wish he had never met you."

Mrs Hunt is insisting on a trial, even though her lawyer advises against it, just like everyone else. There is no evidence that I had anything to do with Phoenix falling into a coma. The facts are clear: the silver convertible got away with only a few scratches. I'll have to pay for the damage, even if I don't know how yet. Phoenix and I were unhurt anyway, not a single

mark on us. But we still both lost consciousness and nobody can explain why. At least not with any tests or X-rays.

But it doesn't matter how many times I go through this story or it's confirmed that Phoenix's case has no explanation, his mother needs someone to blame – just like me. Probably, it's better to live with a bad explanation than without one at all.

"I'm so, so sorry; you know that," I say.

She doesn't respond. It's always the same routine. First the reproaches, then the silence. My words fade away in the sparse room, drowned out by the sounds of the machines, drowned out by the guilt for which I am responsible. Because I was at the wheel. And, while Phoenix lies there in the bed in front of me, I'm standing here, awake – even though I feel so damn tired.

### Chapter 3

The rhythmic rattling of the subway interfuses with the view of the houses racing past me. For a few seconds, I can see into strange living rooms, kitchens and lives. See strange people, who know nothing about me, carefree as they sit in front of the TV or lay the table. I get a tiny insight into their lives and feel how fatigue calls for me. The sleep I've missed wants its lost hours back. My eyelids become heavy, no matter how hard I fight against them.

I don't want to fall asleep, not now, not here. I don't want to have another one of those dreams that pulls me into another world. A world that tastes of deep secrets and old magic and catapults me into a body that's not my own. Maybe it's shock from the car accident, or maybe it's my soul looking for distraction and yearning for a different universe.

I glance at the clock. I still have fifteen minutes to go before my stop. I'm much too early, because I wanted to spend longer with Phoenix. But wanting is one thing. Since the accident, it's become clear to me that life isn't made for giving you what you want. Maybe it's not even made for giving you what you deserve.

My eyelids lower as though they have a mind of their own. I immediately force them open again. I don't want to sleep; I want to fight back. But exhaustion rolls over me. I drift away, jerk awake, drift away again – deeper and deeper, until all the sounds around me dissolve.

*Suddenly, I'm back on the curved bridge, with the barely perceptible blue light flashing in the marble balustrade. The world around me is immersed in night and I sink into a different body. From this new body, I catch a glimpse of the smooth, mirrored surface of the lake, with the pitch-black waterlilies glowing softly on the surface. I don't have much time to look at my surroundings, because, with just a few steps, Cajus Conterville has reached me. The sparse glare from the solitary street lamp falls over him. His clothes are strange, much too old. He is*

*wearing high boots with a dark coat, underneath which a blue necktie flashes. A shiny top hat sits on his head. Stray strands of black hair peek out from under the hat. Cajus Conterville's distinctive features are contorted with anger and his emerald eyes reveal his distaste for me.*

*He stares at me with pure hatred. My hand automatically reaches into my pocket. Relief flows through me as though it were my own feeling. The smooth, hard object carved with ancient symbols is still there. I have something to fight Conterville with.*

*"Where is it?" he hisses at me. "Where the hell is it?!" His deep voice echoes through the night.*

*I know exactly what he wants. But he can forget it.*

*At that moment, he grabs me by the collar. His face gets closer and closer to mine, until I can feel his breath on my skin. His smell of cold and black ivy fills my nose, he's making it unmistakably clear that he won't let me go until I give him what he wants.*

*Without hesitating, I pull out the magnifying glass that I bought from old Ossiander. Moving quickly, I raise it high and aim it at Conterville's hand. A bright flash of lightning shoots out of it, straight at the back of his hand. He groans loudly. Panting, he loosens his grip. This gives me enough time to land a powerful blow on his ribs, which sends him reeling towards the balustrade. He wasn't expecting that. But I don't allow myself any time to savour my satisfaction and put the magnifying glass back in my pocket. Now is not the time, but he will suffer much more. He will pay for the damage he has caused. I turn away, reluctantly. As I turn, he rushes at me a second time. The momentum of his attack makes me stumble. In a flash, Conterville hooks his foot between my legs and brings me down. I land on my back, the impact pushing the air out of my lungs. I let out a muffled gasp and then he's over me. His dark face appears in front of mine, at the same time as I feel a cold blade at my throat.*

*"Where is it?" he snarls again. Like a broken record, incapable of any other words. When I see the undisguised hatred in his eyes, the corners of my mouth rise all by themselves. I can feel that he would like to slit my throat. But he still needs me. His hesitation gives me enough time to reach into my pocket, unnoticed. The magnifying glass is still warm from its last attack. I can only hope that it still has enough magic for another flash of lightning. With my lips pressed together, I aim my weapon at Conterville. The bright flash hits his hip, burning through his dark clothes. He rolls off me with a cry of pain. I discard the now useless magnifying glass and jump into the air. Conterville still has his black knife. It shouldn't be underestimated. I kick him in the stomach, swing around and start to run. I know he's strong, I know Conterville's reputation. But I won't give him the chance to live up to it here and now. My footsteps thunder over the bridge, all that's left in the night.*

“Hey, make some room,” I hear a voice say. At first, it’s very far away, but then it comes closer. I slowly open my eyes. My blurred world takes shape again, my breath is fast. A young girl with an undercut hairstyle is standing in front of me, impatiently pointing at the seat. Apparently, I was taking up two seats while I was asleep. I haul myself upright nervily and the girl sits down.

Then I realise I’ve just missed my stop. I jump up to get off at the next opportunity. My heart is pounding as though I’ve just run a marathon, but it was just a damn dream...

Twenty minutes later, the automatic doors of the Footastic Shoe Company slide open. Every time I go into the huge store on 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue, I act as though it’s the last time. The last time I put on my stupid sales apron, paste a smile onto my face and help all sorts of people to dress their feet anew.

The light citrus scent our boss insists on wafts towards me, as does the voice of an old customer, who is complaining to Angela that her left shoe shrank after she purchased it. Angela nods and smiles bravely, one after the other. It’s a ritual that she performs regardless of her own thoughts or feelings. The customer is always right is one of the golden rules of the Footastic Shoe Company’s business policy. The rest of the rulebook is just as nonsensical. Of course, I could quit and leave it all behind, but right now, I need the money.

“Miss Mitchel wants to see you,” Molly greets me, as she sorts a box of shoelaces by colour behind the counter. Our boss isn’t bad, but she’s also not particularly good. She’s career-orientated and as meticulous as a vacuum cleaner – not a nice combination.

I slip my jacket off. “And why’s that?”

“No idea.” Molly grimaces.

The dainty blonde girl works in the shop as well as studying. Without her and the other girls here, I don’t know how I would survive it all.

Molly scratches her nose thoughtfully. “You probably didn’t follow rule number eleven.” She blinks at me.

I blink back. “Oh no, did I say goodbye to some customers without saying a prayer for the shoes? Did I just let them go out into the cold, miserable world?” I make a horrified face that makes Molly grin.

“You’ll go to shoe hell for that, Harper.”

“And I thought I was already there,” I counter. Then I bring my things into the break room and take my yellow apron off its hook. Colourful shoes dance on the fabric, like they’re completely high. They’re a painful reminder of rule number four – shoe sellers at the

Footastic Shoe Company must be instantly recognisable to customers at all times. I tie my hair into a bun and throw a piece of chewing gum into my mouth before I go back outside – where Miss Mitchel is already waiting for me.

“Hello, Harper,” the forty-year with the brunette pageboy haircut greets me. As always, she’s wearing a white blouse with dark trousers and she looks strangely stiff, as though she’s a school pupil.

“Hello, Miss Mitchel.”

She’s been the branch manager for three months, but she wants to climb even higher up the career ladder at the Conterville Group. According to the Forbes list, this global, family-run company is one of the biggest and most important in the world, owning not only countless shoe shops, but also fashion houses and exclusive restaurants. Rumour has it that Miss Mitchel wants to get into marketing.

I, on the other hand, have no such ambitions. I started working in the shoe shop when I was at high school, on the advice of my mom. After I graduated, I didn’t know what to do next, but I wanted to move into a shared flat with Scott, so I increased my hours. It was only supposed to be temporary, but it had turned into nine months already. Nine months, the time it took other people to have a child, and I still didn’t know what to do with my life, much to the chagrin of my parents.

“I just wanted to talk to you about an extra shift, but now I see there is another issue we need to address. You know how important it is that we all adhere to the Group’s guidelines, Harper. What’s rule number sixteen?”

Every employee is forced to memorise the twenty golden rules of professional shoe sales. I can’t stand the fact that this rubbish is taking up space in my head that could be used for something much more important.

“The customer should always receive our full attention.”

She folds her arms in front of her white blouse. “Exactly. But how are you going to give your full attention to the customer when your chewing muscles are occupied? Employees who chew gum also look bored, an impression we do not want to convey to our customers. I don’t like to caution you, but unfortunately, I don’t have any other choice. You really have to follow our guidelines or you can’t continue to be a member of our shoe family, Harper.”

Shoe family. A phrase that makes me sick.

“It won’t happen again,” I say, politely, even though I wanted to say something else. Under no circumstances can I lose my job.

The rest of the afternoon is relatively uneventful, despite the caution. Mentally, I'm with Phoenix and my nightmares, but I don't show any sign of that. I sell sports shoes to a woman with two small children, slippers to an elderly couple and colourful sneakers to three teenagers. But I spend most of my time in the storeroom, trying to whip it into shape. Miss Mitchel thinks she's punishing me, but she's wrong. The hours down in the basement do me good. I enjoy being alone until I finally finish work.

"Hey, I'll give you a caution right now if you if you don't start engaging in our intellectual conversation properly," says Molly.

We're sitting with Angela in an Irish pub around the corner that's seen better days. The dark furniture is worn and the lights are dim, but the prices are okay and the old bartender is nice. *I See Fire* by Ed Sheeran is blaring out of the speakers. The song mixes with the babble of people's voices.

"Sorry, I was lost in thought."

"Thinking about Phoenix again?" Angela wants to know. She's almost thirty years older than me. Her dark green jumper contrasts with her short, red hair and exudes a refreshing liveliness that matches her character. "Girl, don't be so hard on yourself!"

"I wasn't thinking about Phoenix."

Molly turns a beer mat in her hand. "Is it about the money? Are you worried about the dough for the Porsche? It was an accident, plus it was the other person's fault."

"But I was over the limit and that makes the whole thing more complicated," I admit bitterly, wishing I had left the second glass or just not sat at that stupid wheel.

"And how much will the damage cost?" Angela asks.

I really don't want to say it out loud. "Looks like a couple of thousand dollars."

Angela whistles through her teeth. "Shit."

Molly drops the beer mat on the grubby wooden table. "So how are you going to get the cash? Can your parents help you out?"

I shake my head. "They're only just staying afloat with dad's salary. I'll get it somehow. I still have some savings and then I'll just have to take out a loan." In actual fact, my parents don't know anything about the costs. They think the insurance company will take care of everything, because we won the car in a raffle. "Can we talk about something else, please? I would really like to take part in your intellectual conversation."

“Okay.” Angela raises her glass with a determined expression. “We were thinking about completely overhauling the Footastic Shoe Company rules and publishing our own guidelines.”

Molly cheers to that, nodding. “Rule number one: the customer is only king if his feet don’t smell bad.”

“Can we add bad breath?” asks Angela. “I had a customer today who stank out of every orifice.”

“Out of every hole?” Molly and I laugh.

“That’s what I said. Although I can also imagine...urgh, I don’t want to imagine that.” She sighs. “Great, thanks girls, now I have a really gross image in my head.”

“You only have the thoughts you let in,” says Molly, grinning.

Angela straightens her back. “I took a longer lunch break after that, which I think should definitely be the new rule.”

“And we should have the right to burn the yellow aprons!”

The old barman puts fresh drinks on the table and collects the empty glasses. Angela takes a sip of her gin and tonic before toasting again. “Death to the aprons!”

We cheers in agreement. “Death to the aprons!”

Molly puts down her glass and taps her index finger on the dark table top. “I have an idea. I don’t think Cajus Conterville should be allowed to attend corporate events from afar. I think it should be his duty to know all the shoe sellers personally.”

In a flash, all the memories of my dreams are back. His face, his closeness. I quickly force the images out.

“And what good will that do?” I ask.

Molly is beaming at me. “Think about the fairy tale, about Cinderella. Out of all the shoe sellers, Cajus Conterville could choose the one that makes his heart sing. And then she could enforce the new rules. As a coup for the others.”

I know what Molly’s getting at. “And that one shoe seller...that would probably be you, right?”

Molly laughs as though her wildest dreams are coming true. “Well, stranger things have happened.”

Angela raises her eyebrows. “The fairy tale is a bit different. It’s about a ball in a royal castle and a shoe that gets lost. Not a girl in a shoe shop. But I get what you mean, who wouldn’t

fall for this hot guy?" She fishes the magazine I saw at the kiosk this morning out of her handbag and slams it down in front of us. The light from the dull ceiling lamps falls over a glossy double page spread of Cajus Conterville on a yacht. With his six-pack and black swim shorts, he could be a model for Hugo Boss. Next to him is the curvy brunette, whose bikini looks like the designer was trying to save fabric.

"Apparently, he's taken now," explains Angela and starts reading the first few lines of the article. *"Cajus Conterville is single no more! According to reports from people close to him, the attractive twenty-three-year-old is now spoken for. The parents of the twenty-year-old Columbian who's snagged this womaniser are among the most influential entrepreneurs in the country. The lovely Valentina seems to have succeeded where many others have tried in vain before her – she's finally cracked go-getter Cajus. There's even talk of an engagement! Since finishing his business studies, Cajus Conterville is obviously not doing things by halves, just like his father who just purchased the start-up Shoe-t-me last week. But what about Cajus's sister Laetitia? While her ex is already enjoying himself with an ample blonde at the NEBEN release party, Laetitia has cancelled her latest modelling job in Milan. Is she strutting towards rehab, instead of down the catwalk? Rumour has it she's had a hard time coping with the breakup..."*

"This is terrible," I say.

Angela scans the next few lines, next to which there is a photo of Laetitia. Just like her brother, she is tall, dark-haired and has emerald green eyes. Both have very sharp facial features, the same angular chin. No wonder Laetitia's on her way to a career as a model.

"What? Do you feel sorry for her?" Angela still doesn't look up; her eyes are glued to Cajus Conterville's six-pack.

"No, that's not it. I just find these gossip columns so stupid. They write whatever they like."

Molly throws her blonde hair back. "I don't believe a word about either of them. Maybe she's not just some Columbian girl, maybe she's just his cousin."

It's kind of sweet and at the same time laughable that Molly is crazy about Cajus Conterville. The guy's slippery as an eel and for sure an idiot.

"His cousin?" Angela closes the magazine. She points to the cover photo, in which Cajus Conterville is shoving his tongue down the throat of the brunette. "I sincerely hope that is not his cousin."