



*A Winter's*

**NIGHT**

WITH TEMPEST

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**MICHELLE MANKIN**

*a winter's*  
**NIGHT**  
*with tempest*



MICHELLE MANKIN

**Michelle Mankin**  
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## Blurb

Tempest. The biggest baddest rock band in the world. No one expected five misfits from Southside Seattle to climb that mountain, but they stormed it. Not only that but each of them found love along the way. But hold up. Maybe things at the top aren't as blissful as they seem. Tempest might have to defend that hard won prize from another band who thinks they're even bigger and badder.

Warren "War" Jenkins is the handsome and volatile lead singer of Tempest. The most arrogant frontman in the business won't yield without a fight. But now he has his wife Shaina, the woman he always needed, and his twin girls to consider.

And then there is Bryan Jackson's boy. The kid has an attitude and some to spare. Can War help Bryan understand his headstrong son? Can he be the father his girls need? Can his band fend off their challenger? And what will happen when War invites the whole crew to his place for the holidays? Will it be a merry Christmas or just mayhem? These answers and more can be found inside: *A Winter's Night with Tempest*.

# Table of Contents

## Tempest Band Member Cheat Sheet

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Shooting Stars Preview

# Tempest Band Member Cheat Sheet

To view the band member cheat sheet for the Tempest series, please scan the QR code below or click [HERE](#).







## *War*

“You’re late.” I stomp down the stone front steps from my house, the soles of my boots crushing the ice-melting pellets I scattered earlier. Snowflakes part for me. With over fifteen years as lead singer of the biggest band out there, the elements should be mine to command.

“I wasn’t aware I was being timed.” Bryan Jackson exits his Land Rover, plants his boots on my circular driveway, and surveys the place as if he owns the seven-million-dollar house and plot of land on Lake Washington rather than me.

“I’m serious, man,” I say, marching to him.

“Chill, Mr. Scrooge.” He rolls his gray-green eyes. “It’s Christmas at your place, not an appearance at the Grammys.”

“You were supposed to be here an hour ago.” I scowl at my best friend. Closing the distance between us, I’m careful to avoid the patches of snow that have refrozen into ice.

“It’s snowing.” His expression softening, Bryan leans in for the man-hug I give him.

“It’s slowed some.” I slap him on the back. “So, that’s not an excuse.”

“Right, it’s practically a spring thaw.” He slaps me on the back harder than necessary. “Might only get a foot of accumulation today rather than two.”

“Missed you,” I mumble as my chest warms under the thick cable of my cardigan. “Even though you’re a sarcastic asshole.”

I would never be caught dead in such an un-rock ‘n’ roll piece of clothing, except that my wife, Shaina Jenkins, bought it for me. I grumbled about putting it on, but I must admit that I am a DILF in it.

“Missed you too.” He straightens. “Even though you’re a pain in my ass.”

“Been a while,” I say.

“Since the last tour over the summer.”

“I was worried about you. The news is reporting a lot of accidents on the roads.”

I glance up as bigger white flakes begin to float down. They melt on contact with his navy beanie and jacket. It won’t be long before they add to the foot of accumulation already on the ground.

“The airport was a nightmare.” He nods, his gaze turning reflective. “The freeway wasn’t so bad, but traffic over the bridge into your neighborhood was absolute shit.”

“I’ll get Lace’s door.” I round the silver hood of their rental SUV.

“Thanks, man.” Bryan goes the opposite way. “I’ll let out my kid.”

“Hey, War.” Lace Jackson smiles up at me after I open her door.

Her wide smile and that sultry voice of hers did all sorts of insane things to me once upon a time, but not anymore. We’re practically family, so close that it still bugs me that she never pursued a musical career of her own. With her pipes, she could have been huge as a solo artist, but she chose a different path, a different guy than me.

Secondary choices in both instances, in my opinion, not that I desire her anymore. Her choosing Bryan led to me meeting and securing my wife. Shaina is my best choice, and I am hers.

“It’s a little icy out here on the driveway,” I say to warn Lace.

Tucking her gloved hand into the crook of my arm, I guide her to the first stone step. Bryan joins us. He has his son with him, who in a navy coat and worn jeans looks like a younger version of his father.

“Thanks, War.” Lace removes her hand from my arm and moves closer to Bryan. “Seems like you’re a gentleman nowadays.” Her golden eyes dance beneath her dark blond brows.

“It’s all for show.” I ignore her ribbing and hook a thumb over my shoulder where Shaina is waiting with the girls. They’re just inside the open door, keeping out of the snow like I told them to.



I shift my attention to Bryan. With it being almost Christmas, I sent all our staff home. For this holiday, it's going to be just the band and our families.

"Let me help you with the luggage."

"Thanks, man, appreciate it." Bryan nods at me and leaves his son with his mother. "Anyone else arrived yet?"

Bryan shoots me a questioning look while pointing his fob at the tailgate. It slowly opens as we approach. There are only two suitcases inside, plus an electric and an acoustic guitar case. I reach for the suitcases, knowing after countless tours not to touch Bryan's guitars. He is a total pussy about them.

"Everyone else arrived an hour ago," I tell him, my tone only slightly accusing. "We parked their cars in the garage. There's plenty of room for your vehicle too."

The garage has six bays, making it nearly as large as the house. With ten bedrooms and ten and a half baths, our home is prime real estate and a far cry from the Southside shithole I grew up in.

"This way." I stride past Bryan and stop at the logjam at my front door. "Sweetness."

I set the suitcases down and bend over to kiss my wife on the lips. Unable to stop myself, I poke my tongue between them and touch hers. It's been too fucking long since I tasted her delectable mouth. I straighten and smile at her dazed expression. Yeah, I still make my woman melt.

"I'll get Bry situated," I tell her. "Can you escort Lace and Robert to the others?"

"Sure. We're glad you got here safely." She slowly gives me her world-famous smile, and my cock swells behind the zipper of my jeans.

Shaina Bentley Jenkins is the most famous actress in Hollywood, yet she willingly follows my command.

She shifts her gaze. "Good to see you, Lace."

"You too, Shay." Lace comes inside as Shaina steps back. "Wow, this is stunning. Love all the family portraits," she says after glancing around the expansive two-story rotunda. Unlike the Southside hovel I grew up in, all the space in our home bears the evidence of our lives.

"Thanks. We like the extra square footage with the girls being older." Shaina turns and beckons. "Everyone else is already in the gathering space."

"Awesome." Lace steps closer and the women walk away side by side, my twin girls following them.

I lose my focus for a moment, watching my woman's sexy hips sway. Getting it together, I turn my attention to Bryan and his son. "Hey, Robert."

"Name's Bo." The thirteen-year-old kicks my boot with his and glares up at me.

"Sorry, little dude." I raise my palms in mock surrender. "Didn't realize you had a preference. I only met you once before, and you were only a babe back then."

Our band schedule keeps us guys close, but it hasn't been conducive to our families getting together until now.

"I'm not little." His gray-green eyes flash. "I'm in seventh grade."

"So you are." Cheeky little shit. He reminds me of myself at that age. I grin at him.

"Robert Garrett Jackson," Bryan snaps. "What have I told you about being disrespectful to your elders?"

"Yeah, okay, Dad." Bo drops his chin onto his chest. "Sorry I was rude, Mr. Jenkins," he mutters.

"It's okay, little dude," I say.

"Go with your mom," Bryan says in a severe tone that I've never heard him use. "And stay out of trouble."

"But I wanna stay with you guys." The kid lifts his head and gives his dad a pleading look.

"No." Bryan shakes his head.

"But they're all girls," Bo says and spreads his feet as if he's planning to stay a while.

"Your Uncle Diz isn't a girl. Neither are the other guys in the band." Bryan's gaze narrows. "So, do as you're told."

"Oh, all right." Bo makes a face and turns away. His shoulders in his coat rise to meet the wavy ends of his brown hair.

"Man, you're a hardass." Eyes wide, I shake my head. I've never seen this side of Bryan.

Strike that. I have seen it, but only when his back is against the wall and he's protecting someone he loves. Not sure who he's protecting here. However, I do know that this dad business is a lot more complicated than being a rock star.

"Don't want to be." He exhales heavily. "But I have to. The kid has grown a huge attitude since school started this year."

“What’s wrong with a little attitude?” I close the front door. “Worked all right for the two of us.”

“Don’t want him running wild like you and I did.” Bryan’s lips twist. Apparently, he doesn’t remember our childhood as fondly as I do.

“I get it, I guess.” I pick up his suitcases. “Studio is this way.”

I head for the hallway that branches off in the opposite direction from where our wives and kids went. Warmth hits us as we enter the hallway, leaving the foyer behind.

“There are only two other rooms off this annex. The bathroom.” I jerk my chin, pointing it out since my hands are full.

“Good to know,” he says, giving it a cursory nod.

“But more importantly, the studio is here.”

I step inside a large room that has a huge black velvet sectional with throw pillows shaped like guitars, a couple of crimson chairs that swivel, and our band accolades plastered all over the walls.

“Cool fucking setup.” Bryan follows, stops to take it all in, and whistles through his teeth. “Who painted the Tempest hurricane logo?”

“Jewel Anderson.” I park his two suitcases by the door. “I mean, Jewel McMahon.”

“Rush McMahon’s wife.” Bryan tilts his head, considering the painting some more.

“Yeah. Shaina commissioned her to. Cost a fucking whack.”

“I’ll bet.” Bryan nods. “It’s really cool, man. The whole house is, from what I’ve seen so far.”

“Wasn’t me.” I shrug off the compliment. “Shaina did all the decorating, inside the studio and the rest of the house. But come see the best part.”

I leave the lounge, pass through the sound room with its top-of-the-line equipment and enough space for about ten people to congregate, and stop inside the soundproofed recording room.

“Whoa.” Bryan lets out a long breath. “Now this is freakin’ insane.”

“Thanks.” I beam. “The studio was all my doing. The only other part I participated in was sitting for the family portraits that are hanging on the walls in the rotunda.”

“Like those. Very welcoming.”

I make a face. “Shaina forces the girls and me to sit for a family photo every Christmas.”

“Forces *you* to sit for it, you mean.” He sets down his guitars and glances

around.

“Yeah,” I say. “Not big on sitting still.”

I feel out of my element with the whole family gig. My old man never acknowledged me and my own mother was ashamed of me, or at least that’s what I always assumed until after she died. So, with family stuff, I rely on Shaina to guide me.

“The girls love getting all dressed up for it.”

“Love getting concentrated attention from their dad, you mean.”

“Harmony does.” My brows draw together as I consider my daughters and the differences between them. “The more attention Harmony gets from everyone, the better. She’s a lot like her mom. Peace? Not so much. She’s pretty shy. Her only real friend is her sister and her uncle Alex. But honestly, that kid prefers reading more than anything else.”

“Reading, huh?” Bryan arches a brow. “Where does that come from?”

“I have no earthly idea.” I shake my head, but no hair skims my shoulders anymore. It’s short now, easier to blend into the suburban landscape. “Probably from Alex. He started reading his scripts to her when she was only four.”

“Alex is a trip, but he’s good people.”

“Yeah.” I nod. “A trip is right. He’s been on a big ego one since he won another Oscar.”

“Big ego, huh.” Bryan rubs a hand over the scruff on his jaw and considers me. “Can’t say I’m familiar with anyone who has one of those.”

“What are you implying?” I narrow my gaze, playing along. I know very well that he means me.

Bryan grins and changes the subject. “Your girls sure are pretty.”

“Yeah.” I agree wholeheartedly, and this is a subject I instantly warm to. I love my girls. “They look like their mom.”

“They do for sure.” Bryan looks around again and crosses his arms over his chest. “I can’t get over it. This studio is the shit.”

“Thanks.” My shoulders go back.

“Important to you, huh?” Both his dark brows rise to an inquiring height.

“Definitely.” I give him a serious-as-shit look. “Tempest is going to record our best fucking album here.”



I take a moment. Emotion sweeps over me as I gaze around my living room, which has never been so full. The sectional, the easy chairs, the couch, and the game table that seats four, every available seat is taken.

Moving further into the space, I clock Bryan's location. Unsurprisingly, he is beside Lace with his arm around her. The large window behind them reveals that the snow has transformed our front lawn into a winter wonderland.

My girls are on the leather sectional with their beautiful mother. Shaina is deep in conversation with Miriam Acenado. My wife and my drummer's wife are likely discussing Hope House.

Miriam started the Southside-based charity years ago. Shaina is on the advisory board. All the wives of Tempest band members have roles in the nonprofit that serves underprivileged youth. We have come a long way from our Southside Seattle roots, but those roots remain.

Juaquin catches my gaze. The Tempest drummer is known as King to all of us in the band and our fans, but he is Mr. Southside to the rest of the world because of his multiple platinum albums as a solo rapper.

King is standing but hovering close by his wife. As I watch him, his tawny gaze slides to his daughter.

Hope has long glossy black hair like Miriam, but her eyes are the same tawny shade as her father's. At fifteen, Hope is older than her cousin Bo or my girls, who are twelve. Hope's focus isn't on me or any of the rest of us.

It's glued to her phone.

Just to the right of King is Sager Reed. Our wise and well-read bassist has his wife beside him. Melinda, who is Blue to her husband, was once a competitive ski-cross racer and a solo recording artist with significant success. But nowadays she spends most of her time at Black Cat Records in Vancouver.

Mary Timmons, the owner of our record label, and Melinda have grown close. The ice queen began to thaw when she took Melinda into her home after the ski accident that left Melinda blind. Mary thawed even further after reconciling with her former, now current husband Charles Morris. He owns Zenith Productions, Black Cat's biggest rival in the music business. There are rumors, though I can hardly believe them, that Mary will retire soon.

"Yo, War." Dizzy Lowell, our rhythm guitarist who is also Lace's brother, makes eye contact with me and lifts his Ranier beer. His other arm is draped around his wife, April.

Like Sager and Melinda, Dizzy and April don't have any kids, but they possess the type of insular love that makes the rest of us feel like outsiders.

"Thanks for inviting us all here." Dizzy gestures with his bottle. "Cool idea. Nice digs, man. Great view of the lake."

"Thanks." I downplay the praise with a shrug. "It's all right."

The big benefit to our home is the location and the fact that the community is gated. That provides an extra layer of protection and privacy for Shaina and my girls from our fans, who sometimes don't understand boundaries. It became a home as soon as we moved in, not because of where it is or how many square feet it has, but because of the three most precious people in the world who occupy it.

"Missed you guys," I say sincerely. Everyone here today is precious to me. Man, I'm becoming a sap.

My throat tight, I cast my gaze around and make eye contact with each of my bandmates, who are really my brothers. I don't speak about my feelings because that would make me a pussy, but I don't bother to hide what's in my eyes.

"Oh no." Bryan groans after taking a long look at me. "War is gonna make a speech."

"Got things to say, smartass." I narrow my gaze on my best friend.

"Can we get the CliffsNotes version?" Sager asks. "Please?"

"Fu—I mean, hell yeah, what Sager says." King weighs in, and he and his

best friend share a commiserative nod.

“I vote for CliffsNotes.” Diz raises his beer again.

“That’s my vote too,” Bryan says, and everyone else raises their hands, even my girls, the little traitors.

“Put your hands down.” I mock glare at everyone.

Harmony grins at me. That girl doesn’t back down from shit. But Peace lowers her hand and scoots closer to her mom.

“Just joking, Peace,” I say in a softer tone. Peace isn’t like her twin, even though they’re identical.

“Right.” Peace nods but brings the book up to cover her face. Opening it, she drops her gaze to the pages.

Shaina shakes her head at me.

Sighing, I let it go. Unlike the rest of her outgoing family, Peace doesn’t relish being the center of attention.

“So, first off,” I say loudly to regain everyone’s attention. “This band isn’t a democracy.” That quip gets some grins and a few groans. “Secondly, Merry effing Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas to you too,” Bryan says, and the others echo the sentiment.

“*Feliz Navidad.*” King lifts his chin, making eye contact with me.

“To you too, man.” I nod to acknowledge him, and everyone wishes him the same. “I want everyone to feel free to bring your presents down and place them around the tree.”

I gesture to the ten-foot spruce that’s twinkling festively in the corner.

“I know there will be a lot, since most of them are for me,” I say with a grin.

Bryan shakes his head.

“War.” Shaina smiles. My sweetness gets me.

“There’s no formal agenda for the morning.” I lay my eyes on my girls, knowing they will likely wake me before the sun rises wanting to open their presents.

Harmony’s eyes, which are mostly brown with little flecks of peridot green, twinkle brighter than the tree. Peace’s eyes are brown like mine with just a hint of gold near the rims.

But Peace isn’t looking at me. Her gaze is moving back and forth over the page. When she reads, no one else exists, because she’s been transported to another world. She is as absorbed in her story as Hope is with her phone.



“I’m making homemade cinnamon rolls for breakfast,” Shaina says to everyone.

“Thank you, sweetness.” I nod approvingly. “Love those.”

“You’re welcome.” She smiles softly, and I think about kissing those sexy pink lips of hers. Again. And again. Preferably with her naked.

“But before we have dinner,” I tell everyone, “the band is going into the studio to get some work done.”

“What?” King glowers at me.

I would be intimidated, given that he’s huge, but I’m the leader of this band of misfits, and the former ruler of all the losers in Southside. I’m not intimidated by him or anyone else.

“On Christmas Eve?” Sager shakes his head at me. “No way.”

Dizzy releases April and shoots me the double bird with both hands.

“I’m in.” Bryan throws in his support for me, which probably has less to do with our longstanding friendship and more to do with the fact that he is always in the mood to shred his guitar.

“Hear me out.” I raise my hands in mock surrender like I did with Bo earlier. The silver rings on my fingers glisten, reflecting the flames from the nearby roaring fire. “There’s something you should know.”

“What?” King’s tawny eyes narrow.

“They’re saying rock music is dead,” I say seriously.

“Who’s saying that?” Dizzy pops a skeptical brow. The shiny silver surface of the hoop in it is like a mirror for the twinkling lights from the tree.

“*Guitar Universe. Rolling Rock.*” I count on my fingers. “*Who’s Who in Music.* All those prominent but nerdy motherfucking publications with writers working for them who think they can sit behind their computer screens and know everything about music.”

“War,” Shaina says in warning, glancing at our girls.

“Sorry, sweetness.” I rake a hand through my hair. “Those idiots think the only rock bands still relevant are those that are pivoting to pop.”

“Who’s pivoting?” Sager’s dark brown brows draw together.

“Don’t remember the entire list,” I say with a shrug. “Most were second-tier bands compared to us. But there was one that bears mentioning.”

“Who?” King asks.

“Brutal Strength,” I tell him.

“*Putas,*” King spits out. “Except Red. Avery’s all right.”

“Yeah.” Bryan nods his agreement. “Keep Avery Jones out of any trash-

talking involving BS.”

Lace frowns. Although she and Bryan are solid, and Avery’s brief fling with Bryan is a distant memory, it still remains a sore spot.

“She’s Avery Anthony now.”

When Dizzy points that out, Bryan frowns.

“Marcus Anthony is an arrogant prick.” I turn the focus on who it needs to be on, and I get nods of agreement from everyone.

“Of course, you’re one too.” Bryan has a point of his own to make, the bastard.

Sager nods wisely. “But he’s our arrogant prick.”

“Right. Thanks, Sager.”

“Don’t mention it,” he deadpans.

“Our marketing firm polled our fans,” I say, making an effort to keep us on track. “Asking them who they think is the best band rock band in the business. Tempest or BS.”

“Who did they pick?” King asks as he leans forward. All the guys do.

“You’re not gonna like this.” I don’t keep them in suspense. “It wasn’t us.”

Bryan scowls. “That’s totally whacked.”

“How close was the vote?” Sager asks.

“Too close.”

Dizzy gives me a questioning look. “When did this vote take place?”

“A month ago.” I aim my serious-as-shit gaze at him, and then I pass it around.

“Why didn’t you tell us this as soon as we arrived, *ese*?” King asks, his fingers twitching as if he’s itching for his sticks.

“I’m telling you now.”

“We’re better than BS,” Sager says somberly.

“We are,” I say with a nod. “Wholeheartedly.”

Sager gives me a questioning look. “So, what are we going to do to prove it?”

I grin. He’s no longer worried about it being Christmas Eve. No one is. So, I lay out my plan.

“We’re not going to sit around on our asses. We’re not going to sell out, pivot, and write pop shit like BS has.” I sweep my hand around. “We’re going to make the best motherfucking rock album anyone has ever heard. Sorry, sweetness.”

I apologize to Shaina before she can get onto me about the curse word, then look at each of my brothers.

“And we’re going to start right now.”



“It’s nice having everyone here at the house.” Shaina comes out of our attached bathroom and into our bedroom looking like a Grecian goddess in a slinky silver nightgown with a tempting tie over each of her slender shoulders.

“Come here.” I sit on the edge of our bed. When she gets close enough, I guide her between my spread thighs.

“War.” Her fingers sifting through the longer layers of my shorter hair, she reads the sensual message in my darkened eyes. “I want what you want, but we just put the girls to bed.”

“It’s way past their usual bedtime.”

After dinner, we all stayed up talking, grownups and kids. I expected Harmony and Hope to pair off like usual, but for some strange reason, they didn’t. Instead, Peace and Bo had their heads close together.

“Everyone’s probably already fast asleep.”

“Bryan and Lace are in the guest bedroom next door.” Shaina bites down on her lip.

I see the interest in her gaze and feel it in my dick when her gaze falls to my mouth. Knowing the things I can do to her with it, she lowers her lids and her eyes darken.

“So.” I slide my hands up her shapely legs and dip them under the high leg slit on her gown. The silk is cool against my skin, but her flesh is creamy and enticingly warm. “They’re probably already fucking like we’re about to.”

“Yes, please.” She lets out a fluttery sigh as my fingertips graze her upper thighs.

“Fuck, you’re sexy.” I lift her gown. Her skin pebbles as the cooler room air rushes over it. Unable to go slow, I surge to my feet and whip the silk over her head.

“Oh, War,” she manages to say before I capture her mouth.

Grasping her by the shoulders, I bring her magnificent naked body into me. Her perfectly rounded breasts are a fantasy. Crushed to my chest, the diamond-hard points score me with need.

She moans when I thrust my wet tongue into the seam between her plush lips.

I growl into her mouth. Hungry for her, I taste her. She is sweeter than candy, and one taste is never enough.

On fire for her, I lash her tongue repeatedly with mine. Heat throbbing between her legs, she shifts them restlessly. My cock lengthens as she rocks her perfect pussy over me.

“Babe.” I rip my mouth from hers, licking a wet path to her ear. “You’re so incredible.”

I nip the sensitive lobe with my teeth. She shivers with pleasure, but I burn with it. Framing her tits in my hands, I weigh and shape them. They were amazing before the twins were born, and after, they are more so and overflow my hands.

“War.” She peers at me through her heavily hooded eyes, shuddering as I roll and pinch her rigid nipples. “That feels so good.”

“Are you wet for me?” I ask roughly.

“Yes.” She parts her lips, panting as her tits rise and fall within the frame I provide.

“You are beautiful, turned on for me.”

I don’t let up. I can’t let up. I must take her, possess her, show her that she is mine. The years we’ve been together haven’t decreased my appetite or my obsession.

“Oh, War.”

Her voice breaks as I release a breast and cup my hand over her pussy. My pussy. I feel her heat and the wetness that’s only for me.

“Shaina, fuck, I want you.” I drop hot kisses along her jaw before retaking her sweet mouth. Stroking my tongue deep, I groan as she palms me. I’m throbbing inside my boxers.

“I need you too.” She squeezes my length. “Desperately. Please, War.”

“I need inside you.”

I don't pretend that I'm anything but hers. Her desire is my desire. It's only ever been like that with her. Without warning, I lift her.

“Oh.” She gasps as I throw her into the center of our bed.

The pretty upholstered headboard that she chose for our bedroom slams into the wall, the shared wall with the guest room next door. I don't care if Bryan and Lace heard. I have only one goal right now.

Ripping off my boxer briefs, I toss them aside. I catch my wife's gaze on my cock. My shoulders back, I grin at her.

“Don't tease.” Shaina shakes her head.

She wants me as madly as I want her. That's such a fucking turn-on.

Before her, it used to be the adoration of the fans that satisfied me. But it was only a temporary fix, a bandage for the soul-deep damage my mother's neglect and my father's rejection caused.

But I don't need a fix anymore. Shaina's love healed me. Sure, I still enjoy performing. It's a fucking rush singing to a stadium filled with fans. But nothing compares to the high of being loved by Shaina.

“Babe.” I crawl onto the mattress and tap her knees. “Spread your pretty legs for me.”

She complies beautifully, her gaze on me.

“So fucking beautiful,” I say softly, trailing my gaze over her.

She was made for me to love. Her tits are swollen. Her nipples are tight dusky points. Her perfectly trimmed pussy is wet and glistening in anticipation of my cock.

“You ready for me?”

“Yes,” she whispers and reaches for me as I move between her thighs. “You know I am.”

“I'm always ready for you.”

I pump my steely cock in my grip. She plants her palms on my chest but her gaze dips. In response to her attention, precum slickens the end of my cock.

“You are mine.”

“I am yours,” she says. “Give me what I need. Put your amazing cock inside me.”

“Amazing is damn right.”

I grin darkly and slide my cock inside her. She's wet, hot, and grips me

perfectly.

Once I get inside her, I can never slow down. I have to move.

I groan as I pull out and feel her tightening around me. Gliding right back in, I bury myself to the hilt, but it's not enough. I crave more. I need more. I want her soul to kiss mine. Faster and harder, I rock into her.

"Oh, War." Her eyes flutter in pleasure as I begin to hammer my cock into her. "Yes. Just like that."

I grunt my approval, unable to speak. I'm a fire that she shapes. Burning with my love for her, I must reclaim her. Show her that what I feel for her is undeniable. Prove to her in the most elemental way possible that I am hers and she is mine.

"I love you." Those words slip easily from her mouth.

"Babe." Her words take me to the edge. But I must have her at that edge with me. Again and again, I drive my cock into her.

"War," she cries. Her tits bounce with the force of my possession. "Oh, War."

She hooks her ankles around my ass. When I feel her pussy clenching around me, my balls draw up. Electricity crackles at the base of my spine.

"Shaina." I dive my hands under her ass and thrust into her deep.

"War." She sucks in a breath, her pussy rhythmically pulsing around me. "I'm coming."

"Sweetness, fucking hell."

I dive my hands underneath her and drive deep one final time. Stiffening, I throw back my head and roar as I fill her. Pulse after pulse, she takes everything I give her.

In the fire of our passion, our bodies are one, our hearts beat in sync, and our two souls merge.





“Where are you going?” Shaina asks from her side of the bed.

Sadly, she’s not naked anymore after our shower. But the night is still young. I will make certain there are more opportunities.

“Going to make sure the alarm is on,” I say without meeting her eyes.

“Checking on the girls, you mean?”

“Yeah.” I nod, my gaze meeting hers.

Her eyes dance. She knows she’s caught me.

“But I’m also going to make sure the Christmas tree lights are off too.”

“A reasonable excuse,” she teases.

“Do you need anything from downstairs?” I ask, pausing with my hand on the doorknob.

“Don’t take too long. You know I don’t sleep well without you.” She sets her latest script on her nightstand and narrows her gaze on me. “Don’t get distracted by your new studio while you’re down there.”

“I won’t.” I shake my head, unlock the door, and exit our bedroom.

She knows me. I was going to pop into the studio, but the idea for a song that she inspired will have to wait until tomorrow.

Out in the hallway, I glance around. All the bedrooms are upstairs. The rooms are filled with our guests, but the doors are all closed.

There’s a telltale banging inside Bryan and Lace’s room. I roll my eyes. Apparently, Bryan’s woman made him wait longer than mine did.

Heading to the end of the hall, I peek into Harmony’s room first. She’s

sound asleep. Her blond hair looks like liquid gold on her pillow. On her dresser, her nightlight globe spins slowly, casting constellations around her room. Harmony is obsessed with fashion like Lace, but she has always been equally fascinated by the stars.

Beside her bed, I bend and press a soft kiss to her cheek.

“Love you,” I whisper. It’s easier to share the way I feel when she’s asleep.

Leaving the room quietly, I shut her door. A few additional steps on a carpet runner that softens the hardwood take me to Peace’s bedroom. I crack open the door.

Soft light from the full moon outside Peace’s window illuminates all the bookshelves inside. But my eyes widen when I realize that my book-loving daughter isn’t in her bed.

“Fucking hell.” I distinctly remember telling her to go to sleep and no reading, not even on her phone. Well, her lights are out, and her phone is charging on her nightstand. She obeyed me, yet not quite.

Scowling, I leave her room. It’s the last one before the staircase that leads to the family room. Hearing her voice, I head down. When I step off the last stair, I pass the kitchen and find her. Sitting on the window bench beside the Christmas tree, she has a blanket around her shoulders, and she is not under that blanket alone.

Shocked, I feel my jaw drop.

Peace doesn’t see me. She is too busy reading to Bo. He’s older than her by a year and much bigger, but he’s snuggled up beside her with his head on her shoulder like she’s the more mature one.

“Why are they living in a train?” Lifting his head, he gives her an inquiring look.

“It’s a box car,” she says, correcting him.

I smother a smirk and duck into a shadow beside a load-bearing beam and watch them.

“And they live in it,” she says, “because they were afraid to stay with their grandfather after their parents died.”

Bo’s dark brown brows pull together. “Why were they afraid of him?”

“They think he’s cruel.” Her gaze returns to the book.

“Like my dad.” He frowns.

*What the hell?* My eyes widen. Bryan isn’t cruel.

Peace glances at him sharply. Apparently, she’s shocked by his statement

too. "I think your dad is nice."

"He is if he likes you," Bo mutters, and that crease between his eyes deepens.

"You're his son." She places her hand in the book to hold her place. "He more than likes you. He loves you."

"I can't read," Bo says. "I mix up words and numbers like Aunt Miriam. The kids at my school act like shit about it. My dad thinks I'm not trying hard enough, and he gets mad at me a lot. He hates me."

Peace sucks in a breath.

"Well, he does. The word fits." Bo's chin juts out to a stubborn angle.

"My dad doesn't like me either," Peace says softly.

I stagger backward, stunned by her words. *That's not true.*

"Why not?" Bo asks.

Righting myself, I lean forward, very interested in her answer.

"I'm not like my dad or my mom." Her gaze turns unfocused. "Harmony is. She speaks her mind like my dad, and she's into acting like my mom. My parents like her better than me. But that's okay with me." Her eyes get shiny. "I like Harmony too, but mostly I just like to be alone so I can read."

"I like listening to you reading." Bo takes her hand and points with his other one at her book. "Can you read some more?"

"Sure." She reopens the book. Her gaze moves as she searches for her place.

Bo continues to stare at her. "You're really pretty."

He's right. Both my daughters are pretty like their mom.

"Harmony is the pretty one." Peace shakes her head. "Not me."

The girls are identical, so they are both pretty. It bothers me that Peace seems to think her sister outshines her. She is wrong about her mother and me; we don't love Harmony more. We love both our daughters. I just understand Harmony better.

"You *are* pretty," Bo says. "Like that princess in the fairy tale, the one with the long blond hair."

Peace blushes. "Rapunzel, you mean."

"Yeah." Bo tilts his head, studying her. "Your skin is a little lighter than your sister's."

"Because I stay inside." Peace rolls her lips together. "Harmony likes being outside. She swam in the lake a lot this past summer."

"I like you." Bo returns his head to her shoulder. "I liked you right away."

Thanks for sitting between me and my dad at dinner. And for offering to share your story with me. We're going to be friends. You don't have to go outside if you don't want to. We can stay inside, and you can read to me."

Peace smiles. Her joy lights up her entire face. "Okay," she says and starts reading again.

I slip away. I'm not going to get onto Peace for being downstairs past her bedtime. I might not understand her as well as I would like to, but I know her better than she thinks.

I see how sad she is whenever I pick her up at school. That's why I get onto her about always having her nose in a book. I don't want my daughter to be alone at school like I was until Bryan came along.

I think Peace is more like me than she thinks, and that she hides behind those books because she's afraid people won't like her.

Maybe all she needed to come out of her shell was to find the right friend.



“Daddy.” Harmony shakes me awake.

“It’s not time to get up yet,” I mutter. Cracking my eyes open, I immediately close them. “The sun’s not even up.”

“It’s Christmas,” she whines and pushes on my shoulder again.

“I need more sleep,” I say and blame Shaina. “Your mom kept me up all night.”

“War,” Shaina mumbles sleepily. “That wasn’t me.” She rolls over in the opposite direction and yanks the covers over her head.

“Climb in bed with us,” I say to Harmony. “Give your mom and me a few more minutes.”

“Okay.”

Thankfully, she climbs between us and falls asleep.



“Dad, wake up.”

Waking to another shoulder shove, I find myself staring into a pair of beautiful brown-and-gold-flecked eyes that aren’t sleepy at all.

“Everyone’s already up,” Peace tells me.

Harmony pops up. “Present time!” she yells, slapping me and her mom.

“Okay. Okay.” I throw back the covers. “Give me some room,” I tell Peace. “I gotta take a piss.”

“Dad, ewww.” Peace wrinkles her cute nose.

My girls don’t get that I’m a big rock star. I’m just Dad to them. I like that. Rocking hard is what I do. Being their dad is who I am, who I always will be with them.

I shuffle into the en suite, take care of business, wash my hands, and walk out to an empty bedroom.

*Fuck.* They didn’t wait for me.

Getting my ass in gear, I drag on a pair of jeans, rake a hand through my bed hair, and head downstairs. I hear multiple voices on my way down and can easily identify Peace, of course, and Harmony.

When I appear, Shaina moves toward me from the kitchen and hands me a steaming cup of Joe.

“Thanks, babe.” I set the mug down and bring her close. I need the caffeine desperately, but I need her more.

She’s wearing a slinky robe over her nightgown. Having intimate knowledge of all the sexiness hidden beneath all that silk, my cock punches my fly.

“Three times last night wasn’t enough,” I murmur in her ear and grin when she shivers for me.

“Merry Christmas, War.” Her voice husky, she eases back.

Looking at her, I feel like the luckiest asshole on the planet.

“Love you,” I tell her, my eyes burning, and she slowly smiles at me as if those words are the best present she ever received. “I got you something.”

She frowns. “I thought we said we weren’t giving presents except to the girls this year.”

“I couldn’t help it. I saw this while on tour this summer, and I wanted you to have it.” I release her to dig in my front pocket. “Turn around.”

When she obeys, I sweep her long blond hair aside to put the silver King Baby necklace on her. Gently turning her around, I straighten the word, so it rests on her breastbone.

“Chosen.” She glances down, fingering the script. When her chin rises, her lips tremble and her peridot-green eyes fill. “I love it. I love you. Thank you, War.”

“You’re welcome.” I nod and swallow the lump of emotion in my throat. Seeing her emotional gets me emotional. Every. Fucking. Time.

She takes my hand. I retrieve my coffee and thread my ringed fingers between hers, which are bare except for her engagement solitaire and her

platinum wedding band.

We enter the living room together. It's chaotic like backstage at a concert.

All my bandmates are perched on different pieces of furniture with their wives close by. Wrapping paper is strewn everywhere. The four kids are standing by the tree. Hope has a new phone in her hands. Bo has on a set of headphones.

My girls are holding their unwrapped presents. When they throw me expectant looks, I give them the nod of approval, and they tear into their boxes like little savages.

Harmony gets hers unwrapped first and holds up the new and ridiculously expensive designer outfit she requested. Spinning in a circle, she squeals and then prances over to us like she's modeling on a catwalk.

*Note to self: Stop taking Harmony to Lace's fashion shows.*

"Thank you, Mom." Harmony kisses Shaina's cheek. "Thank you, Dad." Her kiss for me lands on my chin.

My heart, which I once thought was black and irredeemable, pulses brightly like a star about to go supernova.

On a bridge about a thousand years ago, I was redeemed by my woman. I didn't deserve to be. But she saw something in me, and I completely fell for her. Every day since then, I've been trying to live up to that something good she sees in me.

"You're welcome, baby." I kiss Harmony's head. Straightening, I see Bo move closer to Peace.

"Whatcha got?" he asks her.

"An audio subscription, a book-reading one, and this."

She shows him the Christmas card that I put in her box last night after overhearing her conversation with Bo. She glances over at me. The gold flecks in her eyes shimmer with emotion.

"I love you, Peace." Bo reads my words on the card out loud. "Just the way you are." He looks at me. His eyes soften, and he gives me an approving nod.

Harmony wrinkles her nose at me. "I didn't get a note."

"You already know I love you." I glance at my bookworm. "I just wanted to make sure Peace does."

Hesitantly, Peace approaches me. I grab her as soon as she gets close and pull her into my arms, careful not to spill my full cup of coffee that I have yet to drink.



“Love you, baby.” I kiss the top of her head.

“Love you, Daddy.” She gives me a quick glance. “Thank you for my presents.” She smiles at Shaina. “Thanks, Mom.”

“You’re welcome.” Shaina glows with happiness.

In moments like these, I feel like maybe I can get it right. That there really is something worthwhile for her to love inside me.

“Hey, PJ,” Bo says, and I narrow my eyes as Peace jumps to attention. “Come listen to this song.”

“Okay.” Peace heads his way.

Harmony drifts over toward him too. “Why PJ?” she asks him.

“Peace Jenkins.” Bo gives her a *duh* look.

“Ah.” Light dawns for Harmony, and for me too.

“Plus,” Bo says, gesturing, “Peace was wearing those PJs last night when she read to me.”

Bryan’s head snaps up.

*Oops, that cat is out of the bag.*

“When and where,” he asks, his gaze on his son, “did this reading take place?”

Peace’s cheeks turn almost red enough to match the candy-cane stripes on her pajamas.

“There, Dad.” Bo points to the cushion in the window. “Peace reads really well.”

“That’s good, I guess.” Bryan gives me a look with a raised brow.

I shrug. I don’t see the problem, except that they were up past bedtime.

“Did you know about this?” Shaina scoots closer to me, sloshing my coffee when she bumps my shoulder.

I switch my mug to my other hand. “Yeah. I actually think it’s cool.” I throw my arm around her.

Her lush lips flatten. “But he’s a boy.”

“They’re just kids, sweetness.”

But I give it more thought, recalling how Bryan and Lace were tight around that age, and how that turned out.

“Harmony is going to get her feelings hurt.” Shaina’s brows draw together as she looks at our daughters.

I guess I can see what she means. With Peace and Bo sharing his headphones, that leaves her sister out. Harmony doesn’t appear to be too happy about that. She is accustomed to being the center of Peace’s world.

“Harmony will be all right. She has tons of friends,” I point out. “Peace just needs one person outside the family who she feels understands her.”  
After all, Bryan was all I needed back in the day.



“Can I sit here?” I ask Harmony at breakfast.

“Sure, Dad.” A pink hoodie covering her hair, she scoots over on the long but crowded bench at the table to give me room.

“Thanks.” I set down my plate that’s loaded with applewood smoked bacon and three of Shaina’s cinnamon rolls. My mouthwatering from the rich butter and cinnamon aroma, I dig in and glance around.

Shaina is sitting in the chair at the head of the big rustic farm table. It seats twelve normally, but it looks like we’ve squeezed in everyone this morning but Hope.

“Where’s your daughter,” I ask King.

“She gulped down one of her healthy concoctions for breakfast and went back to her room.”

“Ah.” I nod.

I’m not looking forward to my daughters being Hope’s age and avoiding me like she seems to be doing with her parents.

I polish off one entire cinnamon roll, then focus on Dizzy. “You hear from Justin Jones lately?”

“Wished him a Merry Christmas early this morning.” Dizzy sets his orange juice down and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Neanderthal, here.” April gives him a napkin.

“Why you asking?” Dizzy’s brows rise.

Yeah, I guess it’s an unusual question from me since Justin Jones is

Avery's twin brother. A long time ago, he took my place in the band while I worked out my shit. When I returned, I made it pretty obvious I wasn't happy about that.

"I'm wondering if Justin might want to jam with us, maybe add a bonus track." I shrug like that offer isn't a big deal, but it is huge.

The room goes quiet. I see the wide eyes around the table and feel the surprise from everyone.

"I'm not going fucking soft." I glower.

Shaina hides a smile behind her napkin that she'll pay for later.

"It's a strategic marketing move on my part. Everyone knows Justin is Avery's twin. She's in Brutal Strength. They are our direct competition for being the most relevant rock band out there. If Justin has a track on our album, it'll seem like he's with us, and not BS. Get it?"

"Ah." King nods. "*Bueno*. I like this idea."

"Good." I make eye contact with him, then move my gaze to Bryan. "You still keep in touch with Avery?"

"I speak to her occasionally." He forks a big bite of doughy cinnamon roll with lots of gooey cream cheese frosting. Chewing, he seems to be considering his words before he speaks again. "We only talk about our music."

Lace socks him a good one with her fist. "You never said anything about talking to her."

"Ow." He frowns at her and rubs his arm. "She's just a colleague. It's not a big deal, Lace."

It might not be a big deal to him, but it obviously is to Lace. Wisely, I stay out of that mess. We have band business that needs addressing.

I knock on the table to pull Bryan's attention away from his wife. "See if you can get Avery and Brutal Strength to agree to a reunion tour with us."

"What?" Sager sputters his OJ, and Melinda passes him a napkin.

"You okay, *hombre*?" King slaps his best friend on the back.

"Yeah, man." Sager shakes his head. "Except for my busted spine from your big handprint."

King laughs. "You should come into the gym with me more often, puny man."

"What's your angle?" Bryan asks me, narrowing his gray-green eyes. "Not gonna set Red up without knowing."

I note that Bryan still calls Avery by her nickname. Lace notices too, and

she frowns.

“Not a setup. Just a little friendly competition,” I say to clarify. “Shared billing on tour. We’re not opening for them this time around. We’ll take turns being last in the lineup, and when their fans hear us, we’ll win them over.”

“Fuck yeah.” Dizzy nods.

I zero in on him. “April’s brothers still running a tour service?”

“Yes.” April answers for her husband. “John and Michael have the best instrument techs in their road crew.”

“Can you secure them for our band?” I ask, wanting Tempest to have the best.

“Absolutely.” She nods, and her long blond ponytail slides forward over one shoulder.

“Brutal Strength will use Samantha Daniels-Reynolds.” Melinda leans forward. Her sightless blue eyes are startlingly accurate at locating my exact position at the table.

“I figured they would.” I let the ramifications of that sink in and decide it doesn’t matter. April’s brothers are better, in my opinion. “You going to join your husband onstage on this tour?” I ask Melinda, knowing we could use all the star power we can get.

Though I would never admit it out loud, Brutal Strength with Marcus Anthony, his brother Dwight, JR on drums, and Avery Jones on lead guitar are serious competition for Tempest.

“No,” Melinda says. “Mary has me working round the clock on new acquisitions.”

“A&R agents reporting directly to you, huh?” My brows rise when she nods. “That’s big-time.” I wonder if the rumors are true that Mary really is training Melinda to take over Black Cat Records.

“The enthusiasm for the music is pure when bands first start out.” She flashes me an infectious smile that won her many modeling gigs before Sager became her boyfriend.

“It should always be about the music,” Sager says and takes her hand.

“To the music.” I raise my juice glass, and everyone around the table does the same while echoing my words. “And to kicking Brutal Strength’s ass.”

That must be said.



“Swanky setup,” Sager says. In the studio, he’s settled into his usual position on my left and has his new favorite red Fender strapped to his shoulder.

“Agreed. Gets the creative vibes flowing.” Bryan strums an intriguing power chord from his position on my right. “I like it better here than at Black Cat.”

“*Muy bueno.*” King taps his snare behind us. “We’ve come a long way since high school when we practiced in Lace’s uncle’s garage.”

“Miss those days,” I say.

I’m feeling nostalgic, not because Lace was mine back then, but because it was all about the music and the fact that we had something important to say. What Melinda said about new artists resonates with me.

“What’s your opinion?” I lean my weight forward on the mic pole and make eye contact with Dizzy, who is on the other side of Bryan.

“I guess it’s all right.” He grins.

“Asshole,” I say without any heat, shaking my head at him. “Let’s get this shit started right.” I call out my song choice. “‘My Way or the Highway.’ Hit it, King.”

King pounds out the drum intro, and I belt out the lyrics that were a fuck-you to my piece-of-shit absentee father. The guys hit all their cues instrumentally and vocally. The walls vibrate with the force of our fervor. We are a violent storm. Our band name suits us.

“Tight.” I nod approvingly when the music fades. “That song needs to set

the tone for the new album.” I clip my mic in the pole. “Us versus all the shittiness in the world, like it was in the old days.”

“Fuck yeah.” Bryan raises his hand, fingers as devil horns proudly displayed.

“I can get behind that messaging,” Dizzy says.

Sager nods. “Let’s do it.”

“Rock it loud and proud.” King hits a beat on his snare. “Tempest style.”

“You got any new riffs running through your brain?” I ask Bryan. “Something like that one you warmed up with?”

“I got one.” Dizzy strums a cool chord on his new white SG.

“I like that.” I gesture. “Do it again.”

“You got it.”

Dizzy does the chord again, and I hum along. King starts tapping a complementary beat. Sager gives us a groovy rhythm on his bass. Bryan goes a little crazy on lead guitar. His embellishment doesn’t detract from what Dizzy is doing on rhythm, though. It enhances it.

I slowly grin. My band fucking rocks. This is the way we have come up with most of our songs. Just hanging, trying shit out until something feels exactly right. Just like this. Just like us.

“I have some words,” I say. Lyrics filling my mind, I grab a nearby steno pad and scribble down a few phrases, ones with a rebellious tone.



“What time is it?” King asks later after we have synced my words with the music. “I’m hungry.”

“You’re always hungry.” Sager shakes his head at King.

“Because I work out, unlike you, *puta*.”

Sager rolls his eyes.

“Whoa.” Bryan whistles after checking the time on his phone. “It is late.”

“Fuck!” I exclaim, glancing at my own phone and realizing he’s right. I missed a reminder text from Shaina. “Dinner was supposed to be at six. My woman is gonna kill me.” I set down my pencil and steno pad. “Let’s give these lyrics some more thought. We’ll start with them tomorrow. But the session’s over for today.”

Since I don’t have an instrument to put away other than my amazing



voice, I exit the studio before everyone else. I have my mind set on smoothing things over with Shaina. Striding through the lounge space on my way to the hall, I almost miss them.

I stop, back up, and glare at my daughter. “What the hell, Peace Addison Jinkins?”

“I’m sorry, Daddy.” Her eyes grow as large as spotlights from under the side table where she was hiding with Bo and is now cowering since I discovered her.

Bo isn’t cowering. He’s wearing a belligerent look.

“You know my studio is off-limits.” I tug her out of her hiding place and search her gaze, trying to figure out what her motivation was for disobeying me.

“I know.” She drops her chin and apologizes again. “I’m really, really sorry.”

“It was my idea.” Bo climbs out, straightens, and locks eyes with me.

“Was it?” I shift my displeasure to him.

“Yeah.” He squares his shoulders and cranks up his chin. “Stupid-ass rule, if you ask me.”

“Stupid, huh?” I fight a grin. The little shit is just a boy, but he’s fucking fearless. I’m interested to see what type of man he will become.

“We weren’t bothering anyone.” He spreads his feet like he did when he first arrived. With his dad or me, he holds his ground. “Peace had nothing to do with us coming in here.”

“You forced her to come with you, huh?” I arch a disbelieving brow. “Is that what you expect me to believe?”

“Sure.” His strong features firm, he throws his arm around her shoulders. “Whatever.”

“That true, Peace?” I refocus on her.

Obviously, Bo is lying, but he’s not going to break, not if it means getting Peace into trouble. Bo being protective of Peace reminds me of the time when the cops pulled Bryan and me over. Only this situation isn’t as serious as when we hotwired my old man’s car.

“No, Daddy.” Peace lifts her head. Her eyes are glistening and her lips tremble, but she owns up to the lie.

I’m proud of her for being honest, but I also feel like an asshole at the sight of those tears.

“Bo wanted to hear the band. I told him about your rule. It was my idea to

hide under the table.” She starts shaking so badly, she drops the spiral notebook she had hugged to her chest.

“What’s this?” I pick it up. The cover has doodles and her handwriting all over it.

“It’s nothing.” She glances away.

It’s nothing that is extremely important. That glance-away ploy doesn’t work on me. After all, I perfected the maneuver.

“Try again,” I say softly but firmly.

Bo moves in front of Peace and glares up at me. “Why are you being such an asshole?”

“Robert,” Bryan snaps as he comes to a stop beside me.

Distracted by Bo and Peace, I didn’t hear him exit the studio.

He points to a spot in front of him. “Come here right now.”

“Fuck.” Bo grabs and squeezes Peace’s hand before jauntily striding to his dad.

“Sorry about Bo.” Bryan meets my gaze, then drops a heavy hand on his son’s shoulder. “I’ll take him upstairs. Have a word with him. I promise he won’t come into the studio again unless he’s invited.”

“Don’t be too hard on them,” Dizzy says from behind us. “They’re just kids. It’s not like they’re breaking the law or doing drugs.”

I turn my head and see that Sager and King are there too. Apparently, they’ve all been watching us.

“Noted.” Bryan acknowledges Dizzy, but his expression doesn’t lighten as he steers his son toward the door.

Dizzy thumps my shoulder. “See you at dinner.”

“Right.” I give him a chin lift and watch the others file out behind him.

When everyone is gone, I pull in a deep breath and refocus on Peace. “I’m disappointed with you for disobeying me, but I don’t want you to be afraid of me, baby.”

“I’m not afraid.” She denies it, but she is shaking so badly, the tears balanced in her eyes fall.

“Not like you to act like this.” I gently swipe away the wetness from her cheeks while searching her gaze.

“You said you love me.” She takes a step back. “In my Christmas card.”

“I do love you.” My hands drop to my sides. “I should say it more often.” I know I don’t say it enough. Those three words are difficult for me, but that’s my fault, not hers. “The rules about the studio are there for a reason.”

“What reason?” she asks.

“There’s a lot of expensive equipment in here that’s easy to damage.”

“We didn’t touch anything.”

*We, not me.* This is what has changed and why she’s acting differently.  
*Bo.*

The kid is a handful. He has attitude in spades, for sure, but I can’t help it. I like him. However, I’m wondering whether I like his influence on my normally shy and obedient daughter.

“Whether you touched or didn’t touch anything isn’t the point.” I pause for effect. Sometimes the presentation part of being a dad is like being a rock star. “Don’t you agree?”

“No.” She lowers her head and mumbles, “I don’t.”

*Fucking hell.*

“You’re grounded,” I say reluctantly. I hate this part of parenting. Absolutely detest it. “Other than mealtimes, while our company is here, you’re confined to your room.”

“Okay.” She keeps her gaze on her bare feet, but I catch the ghost of a smile she’s trying to hide. She loves her room, loves all those damn books she has stashed away in there.

“And no reading for a week,” I add.

“No, Daddy.” Her head snaps up. The smile is gone.

“Sorry, Peace,” I say, gentling my tone. “It isn’t the rule so much. You could have asked to listen to the band, and I probably would have said yes. But you didn’t ask. Instead, you disobeyed me.”

“Please don’t take away my books,” she begs.

Her plea slices through me, weakening my resolve. Sometimes being a parent sucks major ass.

“A week. No reading.”

I stand firm. Though it’s the right thing to do, I feel totally wrong and completely uncool.

“And no more hanging out with Bo outside of mealtimes.”



On the overstuffed couch in the living room, I play with Shaina's hair while staring at the crackling fire.

"You're thinking about Peace." She glances over her shoulder at me. "Aren't you?"

"Yeah, sweetness," I say and urge her to return her head to my chest. "I don't like having to be the bad guy with her. But I'm okay."

I bring Shaina's hand to my mouth and press my lips to the double rings on her left hand that tell everyone that she's mine.

"What's wrong with Peace?" Lace asks. On the opposite end of the couch from us, she's leaning on Bryan the way Shaina is on me.

My best friend and I exchange a look. No words are necessary. We both realize we're the two luckiest fucks in the world with the women we have.

"She disobeyed her dad," Bryan says softly, tipping Lace's chin up so he can look at her.

It's late. Everyone else has retreated to their rooms. All seems to be blissfully quiet upstairs.

"I thought sneaking into War's studio was Bo's idea." Lace's brow furrows. "Wasn't that why you took away his new headphones?"

"That's the story according to Bo." Bryan frowns. "But it's not the truth."

"He's protecting Peace." I share my take on the situation.

"By lying." Shadows darken the lightness in Bryan's eyes. "That's why I disciplined him."

“The reason he lied is important,” I point out. “You should take that into consideration.”

Bryan shakes his head. “This isn’t like when we hotwired your father’s car, War.”

We’ve been friends so long; sometimes I swear he can read my mind.

“Isn’t it?” My brows rise. “They’re friends. Bo didn’t want Peace to get in trouble.”

Keeping Bryan from ending up in juvie was certainly my motivation for lying to the cops all those years ago.

“He took the blame.” Bryan nods his agreement. “Figuring my opinion of him couldn’t get any worse.”

“Maybe, Bry.” My lips flatten. I don’t like that things between Bryan and his son are strained. “Bo’s not a bad kid.”

“Not yet.” Bryan’s frown deepens. “Not if I can help it. I just can’t go too easy on him. Can’t have him dodging responsibilities and consequences now, or how’s he gonna end up?”

“He’s not your dad.” Lace’s expression turns troubled. “This year at school has been difficult for him.”

“How so?” Shaina asks and sits up.

“I think he feels neglected,” Lace says. “I’ve been away a lot this year. Milan, Paris, New York, my business has really taken off. Most of the major fashion houses have invited me to showcase my gowns.”

“Because you’re brilliant,” Bryan says proudly. “I’ve been around. My mom too. Bo isn’t neglected, and his behavior is not your fault.”

“Thanks for the pass, babe.” Lace gives him a smile that’s obviously forced. “I just wish Bo would feel comfortable talking things out with me the way he used to before he was diagnosed with dyslexia.”

“So, Bo has trouble processing reading and language.” Shaina quotes from the textbook she studied for her portrayal of a dyslexic character. “That’s tough.”

“Yes.” Lace nods. “The other kids don’t understand. They make fun of him. Bo is angry. He’s been getting into fights.”

“Miriam has dyslexia.” Remembering how homework was always a struggle for her, I aim my gaze at Bryan. “Has your sister talked to him?”

“Yeah,” Bryan says. “Miriam and my mom have tried to convince him to take his exams orally. But he refuses.”

“He doesn’t want to stand out any more than he feels like he already

does.”

“How’d you know that?” Bryan cocks his head. “That’s almost exactly what he told me.”

“Social outcast, remember?” I point at myself. The only place I felt like I fit in was in our band.

“I remember you saying *fuck you* a lot to people who didn’t try to understand you,” Lace says.

“Still do.” I’m somewhat domesticated, but I haven’t completely assimilated.

“I remember you being a force to be reckoned with,” Bryan adds.

“I’m still a force.” I have the people in my life that I need. Fuck anyone who doesn’t understand me.

“I know a man who from the moment I met him has always done the best he can.” Shaina glances at me again. The approval in her eyes makes me feel almost as good as I do when I’m inside her. “You’re too hard on yourself.”

“Thanks, sweetness.”

My features revealing my infatuation, I tuck a strand of her satiny hair behind her ear. It’s grown long, down to her waist again. She’ll cut it soon and donate the locks in memory of her sister. She does that every year at this time.

Bryan’s gaze becomes reflective. “Our kids don’t have the financial struggles we did. I’m glad they don’t. It’s difficult enough figuring out life and who you want to be.”

“I agree.” Took me a hell of a lot longer than most to figure my shit out. “I suggest making sure Bo knows you’re on his side.”

Back in the day, I didn’t have anyone a hundred percent in my corner except Bryan and then Shaina. Feeling like you’re all alone and not really good enough to be accepted by anyone does some serious damage.

“I do that.” Bryan wrinkles his nose.

“Maybe do it more.” I press the issue, thinking about how hard I was on Peace. With her head always in whatever story she’s reading, she has difficulty fitting in. Like Bo. Like I did.

*Damn. I need to talk to her again.*

I squeeze Shaina’s shoulder while looking at Bryan and Lace. “Really like having you guys around.”

“We should get the families together every year,” Bryan says.

“Agree.” I nod. “Let’s make it happen. But I gotta hit the sack tonight.

I'm wiped."

"Going to check on the girls, aren't you?" Shaina asks, her expression amused.

"Yeah, Miss Know-It-All." I untangle myself from behind her and stand.

"I'll help you clean the kitchen," Lace tells Shaina and stands too.

"Not much to do." Shaina starts gathering abandoned dishes. "Just a few stray popcorn bowls to load into the dishwasher."

"Happy to help," Lace says.

I watch the women walk off, really liking the way they look together. Bryan rises too.

"Heading upstairs?" I ask him, arching a brow.

"Yeah."

"Checking on Bo?" I ask, I'm a Mr. Know-It-All.

He nods.

"You're a good dad, Bry."

I call it like I see it. You don't have to be perfect to be good, or at least I hope not.

"So are you, War."

"I do all right with Shaina helping me," I say, giving parental credit where it's due. "I was lucky your mom let me come around growing up. When I don't know what to do now, I follow her example."

"I do that too."

"Give her my love." I try to remember the last time I went by the house Bryan bought his mother and realize it's been a while.

"She'd tell you to come give it to her yourself in person."

"I'll do that," I say. "I'll take the girls around before school starts up again."

"Night, man." Bryan lifts a hand in the air and heads for the staircase.

"Night," I say.

Turning, I watch Lace and Shaina for a moment more, marveling that the only two women I ever loved get along so well. Then I get my ass upstairs.

I have plans for my woman later, but first I have to check on my daughters.



I stop outside Peace's room. Harmony is inside with her.

"He loves you best." Peace hugs her favorite pillow that says *READING ROCKS*. I bought her that one.

"That's not true." Harmony drops down on the end of her sister's bed.

I can see them both clearly since Peace's door isn't fully closed. It's past their bedtime, but I don't barge inside and get onto them. Instead, I continue to eavesdrop from my spot in the hall.

"He wouldn't have yelled at you for being in his studio," Peace mutters.

"Did he yell at you?" Harmony's eyes grow large.

"Not really," Peace says with a shrug. "But he was really mad at me."

"Mr. Jackson took away Bo's headphones." Harmony winces.

Peace frowns. "He just got those for Christmas."

"Yeah." Harmony nods somberly. "Bo's pretty mad."

"How do you know?"

"Because he told me." Harmony smooths her hands down her designer jeans. "He asked me to come over and check on you."

"You were in his room?" Peace tilts her head. "Just now?"

"Yeah."

"I wondered where you were."

Harmony's gaze narrows. "Bo likes you, you know."

"I like him too." Peace sits up a little straighter.

"More than just as a friend, I think." Harmony's lips purse as if that idea is distasteful to her.

Tension tightens my gut. I get that kids grow up quicker nowadays, but getting it doesn't mean I won't do everything in my power to stop it. I want my girls to stay my girls.

Harmony huffs out a breath. "He sat really close to you at dinner. I saw him holding your hand under the table."

"Only because he knew I was upset. He's really nice." Peace's eyes warm and her cheeks turn pink. "He wants me to finish reading the *Boxcar* story to him."

"Why doesn't he just read it himself?" Harmony asks.

Peace presses her lips flat. I know she knows why, but she's keeping it from Harmony. That surprises me. I can't remember Peace ever keeping anything from her sister.

"There's a reason." Harmony's brow dips. "But you're not gonna tell me."



Peace looks guilty. “I can’t.” She reaches for her sister’s hands. “I love you, but it’s not my secret.”

“Okay,” Harmony says after a beat of consideration. “But you won’t keep any of *your* secrets from me, will you?”

“I will always share my secrets with you,” Peace says solemnly and draws an X across her heart. “You’re my best friend in the whole world.”



“War.” Shaina moans and tugs on my hair.

“You taste delicious.” I lick her sweet clit again and reach up to palm her tits. This is a most excellent way to start a brand-new day, making a feast of my woman.

“That feels so good.” Her thighs tighten around my ears.

“You are glorious.”

I strum her rigid nipples with my thumbs. Turning her on turns me on. My cock is hard enough to punch through steel.

“I’m going to come,” she murmurs as I suck on her swollen clit.

Ignoring that warning, I suck harder.

“I want to come with you inside me.” She draws my head up, pulling me away from her sopping-wet pussy.

“Thank fuck.”

I climb over her and kiss her hard on the lips. She slips her pretty pink tongue into my mouth, tasting herself. Stamping one palm to the mattress, I get my boxers down my legs and kick them off. She rips her mouth from mine, and I kiss and lick along her jawline.

“Oh, War.” She shivers with pleasure.

“That’s right.” I growl, thrusting into her hand as she grabs my cock and pumps. “Gonna fuck you so hard, beautiful.”

Balancing my weight on both arms now, I stare down at her. Her hair is a tangled mass of golden waves on her pillow. Her tits are swollen, the tips a

dusky rose. Her inner thighs glisten.

“Don’t talk.” Her lids heavily hooded, she glares at me. Her peridot eyes are on fire. “Do it.”

“Do you, you mean.” I position my cock.

“Yes.” She races her eager hands down my backside as I slide into her. “And I’ll do you right back.”

*My woman. Fucking hell.* She is perfect for me.

“You feel fantastic,” I tell her. She is totally primed. “Hot, wet, and tight.”

We don’t use a condom. We stopped using those nearly at the very beginning of us. My cock is the only one that’s ever been in her cunt. I love that. I love her and nearly come from being seated inside her.

“Damn, babe.” I start to withdraw, and she grabs my ass.

“Hard, War.” She tells me how she wants it. Her manicured nails dig desperate crescents into my skin. “Give it to me hard.”

“Right.” I pound my cock into her. She lifts her hips into each plunge, taking me deeper. My spine begins to tingle. Every nerve ending is scorched with heat.

“I’m not going to last long,” I say on a growl and fuck her faster.

“Me either. Please, War.”

She takes everything I give, and I give it to her savagely.

“Come with me, babe.” I drive into her deep. I’m at the edge. My balls draw up.

“Yes, War.” Her inner muscles clutch me tight. “Yes, oh yes.”

*Music to my fucking ears.*

“Shaina.” I stiffen and erupt, pouring all that I am inside her. “You set my soul on fire.”

“War.” She accepts me, every hot pulse.

She is the fire. The blaze. The source of all that is right about us.



After my shower, I wrap my arms around Shaina from behind. “Come with me on tour.”

“I can’t.” Her light green eyes meet my light brown ones in the bathroom mirror. “The girls being the age they are now, they need one of us here.”

I agree, especially after what Lace shared, but . . . “I don’t want to be on the road without you or the girls.”

I love the age the girls are now. I love every minute I get to spend with them. But now that they’re in school, I understand why Shaina doesn’t want to take them out on tour anymore.

“So, don’t tour,” she says.

“An album has to be toured to be successful.”

“Then maybe don’t focus on that aspect of it.” She turns in my arms, placing her soft hands on my bare chest.

My cock lengthens inside my boxers. I’m ready for another round. I’m always ready for her.

“I’m competitive. I rock hard. It’s what I do.”

It’s who I am down to the core. I’m not sure I know how to be or do anything else.

Her gaze dips, then rises. “You are rock hard, you mean.” Her lips curve. I grin. Love my woman. Quirkiness and all.

“Want to fuck you again.” I press my body into hers.

“I need to get breakfast going for everyone.”

My lips twist, considering our responsibilities. “I guess I could go get these lyrics ironed out with Bry.”

“Rain check.” She lays her hand on my rough stubbly cheek.

I peel her fingers away and kiss her palm. “Absolutely.”

My head turns as I hear a car door slam outside. Footsteps sound in the hall.

“Apparently, someone’s already up.”

“I’d better get downstairs then.” Shaina starts to slide away from me.

“Hold up.” I curl my fingers around her upper arms. The silk of her robe is soft, but her skin is softer.

“What?” she asks, glancing up at me.

“If I had a choice,” I say, needing her to know this, “I would spend every moment of my time with you and the girls.”

“I understand.”

“Do you? Truly?”

“We both have careers that take us away at times. You support me.” She searches my gaze. “And I support you. We’re a team. What’s this really about?”

“I don’t feel like I’m communicating well with Peace,” I say. “Makes me

antsy about leaving.” Frustrated, I release Shaina and rake a hand through my hair. “She thinks I don’t love her as much as Harmony.”

“She’s almost a teenager.” Shaina’s gaze turns reflective. “Figuring life out at her age isn’t easy.”

“All the more reason for me to stay home.” I exhale heavily. “So I can help her.”

“But you said you need to go.”

“Need and want are separate things.”

“So, make them the same.” Shaina’s brows draw together. “Figure it out. I have complete faith in you.”

“Know you do, sweetness.” My woman and her faith in me rock me to the core. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” Her eyes warm. “So do the girls. It’ll be okay.”

“I hope so. I want them to be proud of me. I want you all to know that I’m here when you need me.”

I’m determined to be a good husband and dad, unlike the asshole who spawned me.



“Sexy woman.” At the bottom of the stairs, I find Shaina, move beside her, and squeeze her ass.

“Sexy man.” She squeezes mine back, swaying her sassy hips as she leaves me behind and walks into the kitchen.

Grinning at her backside like the lovesick fool that I am, I watch her a moment more before striding into the living room. My grin slides right off my face when I see the two guests who weren’t invited by me.

“Hey, War.” Justin Jones gives me a chin lift from his seat in my favorite comfy chair. “How’s it hanging?”

It’s not hanging at all. I’m still sporting a hard-on inspired by my woman, but I don’t acknowledge his greeting or him. I focus my attention on the other redhead in the room.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I let out a warning growl and head toward her.

“Whoa, War.” Bryan stands and blocks me from reaching Avery Jones, the lead guitarist and co-lyricist for Brutal Strength. “Dial down the intimidating vibes.”

“Who the fuck invited Avery Jones?” I glare at Bryan, suspecting it was him.

“No one invited me.” Avery stands, leaving Dizzy alone on the couch where she had been sitting beside him.

I haven’t seen the Brutal Strength guitarist in a while, but she looks good.

She's tall for a woman. I know she still does some modeling, but she's shorter than me.

"I heard you want to tour with Brutal Strength again," she says.

"Who told you?" I turn my gaze to my number one suspect. "Bry?"

"It wasn't me." He shakes his head.

"Not me either." Justin waves his hands in front of himself, as if that will redirect my wrath.

"Mary told me," Avery says.

"Who the fuck told her?" My brow furrows in confusion.

"I did," Melinda says sweetly, and I turn. "Morning, everyone."

Sager's woman releases the handrail as she steps off the last stair. Unfurling a slender white cane, she sweeps it back and forth, avoiding furniture that almost certainly has shifted overnight.

"Why?" I demand to know as she stops in front of me.

"Trying to get her on board with the possibility of a Tempest and Brutal Strength reunion tour." Melinda wrinkles her nose "Mary isn't a fan of the idea."

"Why would the ice queen be opposed to making money?" I ask.

"In her mind," Melinda says, "the cost won't cover the potential reward."

"What costs? We're the best motherfucking rock band in the world." I tap my chest. We're the best mainly because of me and my unique voice, but these days I can give my bandmates some credit too. I point at Avery. "BS is the runner-up."

"Disagree," Avery says with a chin lift. "Respectfully."

"The best two bands in rock 'n' roll will sell out any tour in minutes." I frown. "I don't understand what Mary's issue is."

Melinda arches a brow. "Mary said the last time Tempest and Brutal Strength went on tour together, you guys didn't get along. There was drug use. She had to bring in a manager to control you. And Lace almost died."

"I guess she has a point," I say grudgingly. In fact, there were several of them. "But that was over a decade ago."

"We learned from what we went through." Lace steps closer, wearing a frown that matches mine. She's not a big fan of Avery Jones being here either. "We're different people now."

"You look beautiful, Lace," Justin says, wedging himself between Avery and Lace. If they were cats, those two women would have their claws out. "Hair's longer, lighter than when I saw you in Milan."

“Thanks, JJ.” Lace flips a long blond strand over her shoulder. “My hairstylist added some lowlights.”

“Stunning.” He raises his auburn brows. “You finished with your spring line yet?”

“Focus, people. This isn’t social happy hour.” I roll my eyes at them. Lace and Justin tend to be in their own little world whenever the subject is clothes. “So, Avery,” I say to regain her attention.

“So, War,” she says sassily. “I have a proposition for you.”

“I’m taken, Avery.” I look down my nose at her. “But even if I weren’t, I’m not interested.”

“A business proposition.” She narrows her striking green eyes that I know for certain used to trip Bryan up.

“A charitable one,” my best friend adds, and he and Avery exchange a nod.

Apparently, they’ve discussed this. I’m not entirely surprised. Though Avery is very much married to Marcus Anthony, there was something between Avery and Bryan back when Lace was out of the picture. But how far that something went, nobody really knows except Bryan and Avery.

“I’m listening.” I pop a brow, my gaze on Avery.

“BS is about to debut a new song.” She plants her hands on her hips, stretching her vintage Van Halen tour T-shirt tighter across her breasts. “I hear you might have something new going on with Tempest too.”

“We’re cutting an entire album.” I snap an accusatory glare at Bryan for sharing trade secrets before returning my attention to Avery. “Here. At my house.”

“Good for you.” Avery looks unimpressed. “Got anything yet?”

“A couple of melodies,” I say neutrally. We almost have at least one hit song.

“How fast can you turn one of those melodies into a polished piece?” she asks.

“So fast it would make your red head spin.”

“Good.” Her chin comes up. “But you do realize that whatever you come up with, BS’s song will be much better.”

“Wanna bet?” I lean toward her.

“Yes, in fact, I do.”

She and Bryan exchange another knowing look. I’ve been set up.

Avery gives me a challenging look. “I’ll bet you 500,000 dollars in the



form of a charitable donation to Feeding the Hungry that my band's song will be better than yours."

"One million," I say, upping the wager. "Split in half. Five hundred thousand to the food bank. Five hundred thousand to Hope House."

"You're on." She holds out her arm, hand extended.

"We're gonna kick your ass." I take her hand and shake it. "How do you propose for the winner to be determined?"

"We'll do a concert," Avery says. "At Hope House, like we did all those years ago when it opened. Only this time, all the ticket sales will be split between our two charities."

"That would work." I nod. "Miriam will love planning another Hope House concert."

"We'll stream it live for free so everyone who wants to can watch it." Avery's eyes twinkle and her voice rises with excitement. "We'll do online voting. The song that gets the most votes wins."

"Not just a million up for grabs. Let's make it a little more serious."

I cast my gaze around. All the Tempest guys are here but Sager and King. We'll have to bring them up to speed later.

"The winner gets bragging rights and the title of Best Rock Band, and if Mary changes her mind about a tour, the winner gets top billing for that too."

"Deal." Avery squeezes my hand hard.

She's a guitarist. She has quite a grip, but I keep my expression blank.

"You're on." I squeeze her fingers harder than she's squeezing mine. "But it's not gonna be much of a contest. Tempest is definitely going to win."



After our handshake agreement, I do my best to get rid of Avery and Justin. Avery is in Brutal Strength. I don't want her sticking around and learning something to give her and her band an edge over Tempest.

I almost have the Jones' twins out the door when Shaina announces breakfast. Of course, my sweetness invites them to join us.

Surprisingly, after everyone gets comfortable around the table, those two fit right in. Conversation flows. The Tempest guys like Justin. I acknowledge to myself that he's an okay guy, but he tried to take my place in the band. That kind of shit is unforgivable in my mind.

While Justin updates everyone about his wife, Bridget, and their son, Carter, who is older than the Tempest kids and about to get his license to drive, Avery is notably still. There is obvious tension between her and Lace. They took seats on opposite ends of our table.

I can tell Bryan is doing his best to avoid looking at her. I wonder if there is something going on with Avery and Bryan that I don't know about.

"I think it's really cool you play lead guitar," Peace says to Avery, giving her a tentative smile.

"Thank you, honey." Avery returns my daughter's smile. "Do you like music?"

"I love it." Her brows draw together. "But I'm not a singer like my dad or my sister, Harmony."

"Who's your favorite band?" Avery asks Peace.

My daughter glances at me. Finding me listening, she says, “Tempest, of course.”

“Right.” Avery shifts, putting her back between me and Peace. “But who else?”

“Bob Dylan. Elton John.” Peace’s voice rises, revealing her enthusiasm. “Pink Floyd. The Rolling Stones. U2.”

“Wow.” Avery’s emerald eyes widen. “That’s quite an eclectic list. Any current bands besides your dad’s that you like?”

I try to lean forward to see Peace, but I’m unable to see around Avery the giantess.

“I really like the last acoustic album you did with your brother.”

*Son of a bitch.*

“That’s one of my favorites.” Avery exchanges a glance with Justin. “We worked hard together on those songs. I’ll get you a signed copy of that album if you’d like one.”

“I’d love that. Thanks,” Peace says, and I can hear the smile in her voice.

“Can I have one too?” Bo asks.

*Fucking hell.*

I raise a brow at Bryan and gesture to his son. Both our kids are sellouts. He just shrugs.

“Of course you can,” Avery says, shifting toward Bo, who is on the other side of Peace.

My punishment doesn’t seem to be keeping my daughter and Bryan’s son apart.

“So, you like music too, Bo?” Avery asks him.

“Oh yeah.” He nods. I can just barely see him around Avery.

“Who are your favorite bands?” Avery tilts her head.

“Same as Peace.”

That is interesting. I’m not surprised Bo didn’t mention Tempest. Bryan’s son doesn’t attempt to placate his father. I like that about him. But I don’t want Peace to placate me. I just want her to love me and to know I love her.

I frown.

“What do you like best about your favorite bands?” Avery asks, leaning back in her chair.

“The lyrics.”

“The guitars,” Bo says.

Peace shakes her head at Bo. “That’s what you always say.”

“They’re important.” Bo crosses his arms over his chest.

“Lyrics are more important,” Peace says, defending her choice. “They tell a story.”

“A guitar solo can do that.”

“It can add to the mood, but it can’t tell the story. Not like words do.”

“Is that what you’re writing in your notebook?” Avery aims her gaze at where it rests beside Peace’s plate. “Lyrics?”

“Not really. Just some notes and poems.” Peace sounds evasive.

“Poems can be lyrics. Most are.” Avery’s voice softens. “I used to write my thoughts in a notebook that I took with me everywhere. Is that what you do?”

“Yeah,” Peace whispers. “Sometimes I don’t know what to say, and it’s easier to write down the words.”

“I agree.” Avery smiles. “I think that’s very cool.”

“Thanks.” Peace beams at Avery like she’s a unicorn shooting wish-granting farts out of her ass.

Admittedly, I’m not an Avery fan like most of America and probably half the world is. But I do like that she engaged my shy daughter and got her talking. I just wish Peace was sharing with me rather than with Avery.

Suddenly, I have an idea. A title for a song and lyrics come to me.

A plan unfolds, one that I hope will help me reach my daughter.



“I like Red,” King says. From his spot behind his kit, he bangs on his snare with his sticks. His expression beams with determination. “But we can’t lose to BS.”

“Agree.” Sager nods. “A million to charity is cool. Bragging rights. Top billing on a tour. I like those a lot too.”

“If we tour,” I grumble.

“Mary will come around,” Bryan says, his eyes glistening with confidence.

“Maybe,” I say. After all, she did come around to forgive Lace after she messed up. “I’ll call her.” My skin chills at the idea of talking to the ice queen, but I get the words out. “I’ll apologize.”

“Whoa.” Dizzy’s golden eyes widen. “I bet that’ll do it.”

“Or she’ll die from shock.” Bryan grins, then grimaces when I punch his arm hard. “What was that for?”

“We have some kickass riffs.” I hit Bryan again just for fun. His grin only widens. “It’s time to pick one and get behind it. Drums. Bass. And rhythm.”

I make eye contact with King, Sager, and Dizzy.

“You got it.” King kicks his bass drum.

“On it.” Sager gives me a snaky groove on his Fender.

“I’m already there.” Dizzy strums some powerful chords.

“Okay. Yeah.” That’s what I’m talking about. My band is with me. Encouraged, I share the idea I got at breakfast. “I wanna dedicate a song to

Peace. She has a lot to say but she struggles to be heard.”

Sager nods. “I can relate.”

“It’s a universal condition,” I say slowly, thinking it through. “We all have concerns and struggles that we find it difficult to talk about.”

“Everyone wants to be understood.” Bryan’s eyes brighten, and he points. “Give me that steno pad.”

“Sure.” I scoop it off the small table where I left it yesterday and hand it to him.

Removing the pencil from behind his ear, he scribbles something down.

When he shows it to me, I read what he wrote, and I slowly grin. “Yeah. This is it. I can sing the fuck out of that. Give us a riff that will set this tune on fire.”

“You got it.” Bryan lays one out, his fingers a blur on his fretboard.

King crashes in on his drum. Sager closes his eyes and finds the perfect spot for his groove. Dizzy bobs his head, strumming the perfect rhythm. And I sing Bryan’s introduction, adding the words that went through my head at breakfast.

It’s good, really, *really* good. My nerve endings tingling, I look at Bryan. He looks at me. Excited glances are exchanged all around. This song motherfucking rocks.

Brutal Strength is so going down.



“Just one moment, please,” the receptionist says in my ear. “I’ll see if Mrs. Timmons-Morris is in.”

“Thanks.”

In my bedroom, I tap my foot. It’s late. But my pulse is still popping from the tune we laid down in the studio.

The receptionist comes back on the line. “Sorry, Mr. Jenkins. Mrs. Timmons-Morris isn’t answering. Do you want to leave a message on her cell?”

“Since when does Mary not answer her phone?” I ask.

“She’s in San Francisco with Mr. Morris, sir.”

“Oh.” My eyes widen. “I see.”

I was at their wedding. Those two record label execs were once rivals, but

they're not anymore. Their primary focus nowadays seems to be spending the most time they can with each other. Being in love with your spouse will do that to you.

"Mr. Jenkins," the receptionist says, breaking through my musing. "Are you still there?"

"Yeah," I say gruffly. "I'll leave her a message."

"Sending you to her voice mail."

"*This is Mary Timmons-Morris.*"

I shake my head at her voice. It's still difficult to believe Charles and Mary are together.

"*Leave a message, and I will get back to you as soon as possible.*"

"Mary," I say after the beep. "It's Warren Jenkins. The tour with Brutal Strength. It needs to happen."

Shifting to face the door, I watch Shaina come into our bedroom. Rubbing the back of my neck, I hurriedly spit the rest of my message out.

"I'm sorry for my part in the last tour with those guys going wrong. That won't happen again. You have my word."

I punch END CALL, and Shaina comes close.

"If it's meant to happen, it will," she says.

"I know, sweetness." I wrap her up in my arms. "I want this, want to do it on our terms. Big cities, maybe six or seven spread out through the summer. That way, you and the girls could go with me, yeah?"

"Yeah." She slowly smiles, and my heart flips like a fucking girl's. "We'll make it happen."

"Man, I love you," I murmur and fit my lips to hers, marveling at the bliss.

"Mmm." Her eyelids flutter. It's perfection for her too.

I lift my head and memorize the view. She opens her eyes, but they still have that passion-hazy look in them that I'm addicted to.

"I love you too, Warren Jenkins."

"Ah, babe." I sweep my thumb across her soft cheek. "Never get tired of hearing you saying those words."

She smiles. "Things go okay in the studio today?"

"We recorded a song," I say proudly. "It's going to kick Brutal Strength's ass."

"Knew it." Her eyes dance. "You were in there a long time. I caught Peace and Bo lingering in the hallway outside, listening."

“Told her she could only hang with him at meals.” My brows pull together. “Not like her to disobey me like this.”

“They were eating a bag of chips.”

“Skirting my directive.” I shake my head at their audacity. “Those little fuckers.”

“Peace is different with Bo.” Shaina tilts her head, her gaze reflective. “More assertive. Do you really mind her being friends with him?”

“I guess not,” I grumble. “Since he lives far away, he can’t corrupt her too much.”

“I don’t think Bo’s bad. He just knows his own mind. Has his own code.” Her voice lowers. “But I like rebels. He reminds me of someone.”

“I like him too.”

I’m glad I’m not alone in liking Bo. I’m just not completely sold on him being friends with Peace. I’m not sure I’d approve of any guy being friends with her.

“They’re still together now.” Shaina takes my hand and brings me to our window.

I peer out. In the backyard, Bo and Peace are smushed together on the outdoor daybed.

The firepit is on. A box of graham crackers and marshmallows lie forgotten on a tray beside them. Both their faces are tipped up to the sky, which is full of stars tonight. They’re sharing a pair of earbuds, the black wire stretched between them.

Harmony is also outside. She’s sitting on one of the Adirondack chairs, but she isn’t looking up at the sky. Her gaze is locked on her sister and Bo. Whereas those two appear sublimely chill, Harmony doesn’t look chill at all.

“Harmony feels left out,” Shaina says.

“Yeah, apparently.” I shift to look at my beautiful wife. “But I have an idea to get us all together. Tomorrow.”

“I thought you were working on the album.” Her brow scrunches in confusion.

“The album can wait. I want to spend time with my family.” I want them to know by my actions what they mean to me. That they’re a priority.

“War.” Her face softens.

“Sweetness.” My lips curve. I’m so getting laid tonight. “We’ll go to that pizza place you all like.”

“Giovanni’s.”



“Yes, and afterward, I thought I’d take Peace to the library. Let her pick out some books. Let her know I see and hear her. That I listen when she speaks. That we might be different, but that I understand her.”

“That’s a wonderful idea.” Shaina swallows and her eyes brighten as if her throat is suddenly tight.

“That’s just the beginning,” I say. “I want to make the library thing a monthly trip for her and me. I thought you might do something special with Harmony too. Maybe take her to a play.”

“MJ, the musical, is in town.”

“Perfect.” I warm even more to my idea. “Harmony will love that.”

“I’ll talk to her.” Shaina starts to move away.

“I’ll talk to Peace.” I grab her arm. “But since both our daughters are busy right now, how about we get busy?”

“I like this plan.” Her eyes darkening with desire, she slides her arms around my neck.

“Hell yes.” I grab her ass, and she frames my face in her hands, bringing my mouth to hers.

And getting busy is exactly what we do.



While Shaina is showering—the second time, because getting busy with my woman involved more than just one thorough fucking—I exit our bedroom. It’s late, but it’s time to check on my girls. I head straight for Peace’s room.

“My dad said they’ll have enough material in a few more days.”

I wonder who Peace is talking to. Easing open the door, I frown.

Peace and Bo are sitting cross-legged on her bed. Bo is wearing flannel pajamas and a Martin guitar T-shirt. Peace is wearing her ruffly pink pajamas with the candy cane print.

I know they’re just kids, but as a dad, an overprotective one, I bristle. My daughter is growing up. I want her to stop. Though I realize I can ground her all I want, she’s going to get older no matter what I do.

“My dad said the same thing.” Bo doesn’t look happy.

“So, that means you’re leaving soon.” Peace brings one of her pigtails to her mouth and peers at him through her lashes. “I’ll miss you.”

“Yeah, I’ll miss you too.” Bo’s shoulders droop. “But we can talk on the phone whenever you want.” He removes his phone from the front pocket of his pajamas. “What’s your number?”

Releasing the pigtail, she gives it to him.

“We can talk every day.” He taps in her number, and her phone bleeps from where it’s charging on her nightstand. “If you want to.”

Peace bites her lip. “My dad might not like us talking.”

Bo cocks his head. “Why would he care?”

“I think maybe he’s afraid.”

My shoulders go back at that. *I’m not afraid of anything.*

“No way.” Bo shakes his head. “Your dad isn’t afraid of anything.”

*Smart kid.* My lips curl.

“You’re wrong.” Peace’s expression turns reflective, and I can practically hear the gears inside her head grinding. “He’s tough on the outside. He had to be tough to survive in Southside, but he’s kind underneath. I’ll bet yours is too.”

“Maybe.” Bo doesn’t appear convinced.

“My dad didn’t have anyone taking care of him growing up. He had to look after himself. I think he still believes he has to.”

“My grandma loves him.”

*Bryan’s mom is the best.*

“I’m not sure he realizes,” Peace says. “Like the boxcar kids, he thinks all he has is himself to rely on. And he has my mom, me, and my sister to look after too.”

*Fucking hell.* Peace is super smart. She gets that from her mother.

“Now that he has us, I think he worries about losing us. He checks on my mom every day when she’s on location, and Harmony and me every night before he can go to sleep.” She lifts her head and looks straight at me.

I wonder how long she knew I was there.

Bo obviously didn’t have a clue. Snagging his phone, he scrambles off her bed and stands, looking nervous as fuck. “Mr. Jenkins.” He jerks up his chin as I come into the room.

“Bo.” I narrow my gaze, stopping in front of him. “Do you have permission to be in my daughter’s room?”

“No, sir.” He shakes his head. “But—”

“Get out,” I bark. “Now.”

“Okay.” He doesn’t jump like I expect him to. He frowns at me, then glances at Peace. His eyes soften. “Goodnight, PJ.”

“Night, Bo,” she says.

He heads toward the door but stops halfway and aims his gaze at me. “Don’t be mad at Peace. It was my idea for us to talk here in her room, not hers.”

I don’t believe him for a single minute. But I like it a hell of a lot that he’s willing to take the blame for her.

“Go,” I say sternly and point.

“All right.”

Bo starts moving but stops in the doorway and glances at Peace. Their gazes lock. One is sweet and shy, the other bold and not sweet at all. Yet, the connection between them is obvious.

“Move it, Bo.” I nudge him out of the room and firmly close the door behind him.

“I’m sorry, Daddy.”

When I turn back around, Peace has shrunken in on herself. With Bo gone, she’s all shy again.

“Really, I am,” she says softly.

“You like Bo.” I get right to that point.

“Yes.” She unwinds a bit. “He doesn’t treat me like the other kids do.” Her chin comes up. “He thinks it’s cool that I like to read.”

“I think that’s cool too.”

“But . . .” She gives me a disbelieving look. “You’re always telling me to get my nose out of my books.”

“I’m sorry about that.” I walk to her bed and sit on the edge right beside her. “I have my reasons, but I never wanted to hurt your feelings.”

Her eyes widen.

“Yeah,” I say dryly. “I get that apologies from me are unusual.” This is the second one I’ve made today. Mary Timmons first, and now my daughter. I glance at the ceiling. “Probably better watch for lightning.”

Peace giggles.

*I love that sound.* My bookish daughter is far too serious for her age.

“Your dad’s not perfect, Peace.” My throat tightens. “But I love you. So much.”

“I know, Daddy.” Her eyes brighten.

“Are you getting too old for me to hug you?” I ask, opening my arms.

She uncrosses her legs and hurls herself at me. I wrap my arms around her and kiss the top of her head. She smells like that rosewater bath gel she’s been using since she was old enough to request it.

“I love you just the way you are,” I say roughly. “I might have trouble understanding you, but I love you with my entire heart. You get that, right?”

“Yeah.” She snuggles closer, and the way that affects me is indescribable. “I love you too.”

My arms tighten around her.

She’s right. I’m chickenshit. I have love and the family I’ve always

wanted, but I do fear losing them. If anything happened to them, I don't know what I would do. I want them close so I can protect them.

But even more than fearing losing them, I'm terrified of fucking them up.

What the hell do I know about being a dad? My dad rejected me. My mom was shitty. I'm basically an inept parent and rely on Shaina to guide me.

I want Peace and Harmony to soar, to be so confident that they'll take the chances I never took. I also want them to be strong, to spit in the eye of anyone who tells them they can't do or be whoever they want to be.

I want them to do that, even if the person who stands in their way is me.



## *War*

“So, why books?” I ask Peace the next day as we browse the aisles at the local library branch. It’s just the two of us. Our houseguests are on their own. Bryan is in charge of the band, and Lace in charge of dinner. I saw Shaina show her the drawer where we keep all the restaurant delivery menus.

“Why books what?” Peace shifts to look at me.

She’s been completely absorbed since we got here, blissed out in a literary daze. I wonder if Harmony is having a good time with her mother.

“Why do you like them so much?” I ask, not whispering.

I don’t have to whisper. This isn’t like when I got shushed every five seconds by the annoying Southside High librarian. For our excursion today, I pulled the rock-star card, made a huge donation, and got solo access for us into the building, even though it’s closed for the holidays.

“Because of the stories.” She withdraws yet another book from the shelf beside us and places it on top of the stack in my arms. “Because of the places those stories take me. Because they make me feel, sad, happy, excited, or scared.”

I nod reflectively. “I can appreciate that.”

“Really?” She tilts her head.

Her hair, golden and straight like her sister’s, flows over one slender shoulder. Peace looks exactly like Harmony, though to me they are easy to

tell apart. They dress differently too. Harmony prefers bright colors and trendy clothes. Peace usually wears jeans and a T-shirt. The slogan on the one she wears today says BOOKS ARE MY HAPPY PLACE.

“I’m not big on reading,” I say. “But I’m glad you’ve found something you’re passionate about.”

“You prefer music.”

“Definitely. At one time, songs were my only escape from a real shitty, I mean, terrible environment.”

“So, music is like books for you.”

“I guess you’re right.”

I study Peace. Her pretty brown-and-gold-flecked eyes have that serious sheen to them that they often do. That’s another big difference between her and her twin. Harmony hardly ever takes anything seriously, except if it involves having a good time.

“I heard you tell Avery your favorite bands.”

“I like Tempest.” Her cheeks turn pink.

“It’s okay to like other groups besides your dad’s. Just not other types of music,” I tease. “Only rock. No country music. Ugh.” I make a face.

“I like books *and* music,” she says. “Especially songs that make me feel a certain way.”

“Like how?” I lean closer. Talking about music, we’re getting into familiar territory.

She opens her mouth and then closes it, looking unsure.

“You know you can tell me anything,” I say gently, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear.

“When one of my favorite songs is playing, I feel like I have a place to belong.”

That’s heavy, so heavy it takes me a moment to wrap my head around the ramifications. Once I do, a follow-up question must be asked.

“Where do you feel like you don’t belong?”

“School, mostly.” She bites down on her lip.

“And where else?” I press since it’s obvious she’s holding something back.

Her shoulders come up to kiss her ears. “At home some.”

That affects me deeply. It’s how I felt all the fucking time living with my mom in Southside. I hate that Peace feels that way.

“You know a little about my past,” I ask. “Right?”

“Yes,” she says. “You were poor. Your mom worked in a twenty-four-hour convenience store. You never knew your dad.”

That’s the simplified, sanitized overview. I give her some context.

“My mom regretted ever having me.” I was a big financial burden to her and far too much trouble. “My dad refused to admit I was his. Both made it very clear to me that they wished I’d never been born.”

Her eyes grow large. “That’s awful.” She blinks away tears. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not sharing because I want you to feel bad for me.” Some of the old defensiveness darkens my tone.

“I know. It’s not that. It’s just . . .” She trails off, wetness seeping into her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I say, lightening my tone. “I didn’t mean to snap at you. I just wanted you to know that it was rough for me emotionally and physically when I was young.”

She nods somberly.

I hate talking about this shit, but that’s why we’re here, for us to share and connect. Something my parents never attempted to do.

“In the schools I went to in Southside, you got the crap beat out of you if you showed emotion or acted interested in school or things like reading.”

“I understand.” She blinks up at me, and her lip wobbles.

“I just want you to know where I came from and how it has affected me.”

“Okay.” She pins her trembling lip between her teeth.

“What I mean is, I know exactly what it’s like feeling like you don’t belong anywhere.” I give it to her raw and real. “The only place I felt right before I met your mom was fronting Tempest. I don’t want that to be the case for you. I want you to feel like you belong inside our home, not just sometimes, but all the time. I can’t fix school.”

If I could, I would pummel anyone who even looked at her wrong.

“But a word of advice—it’ll be easier at school if you try a little harder to blend in, or at least not to stand out so much.”

“I can do that.” She squares her shoulders.

“Good.” I nod approvingly. “Being different at school means you get your ass kicked.”

That is a universal truth for kids throughout the ages. In Southside, I made certain I was one of the ones doing the kicking. But I don’t want Peace to be like me. I want her to be better.

“I get that books are your friends, but maybe if you set them aside while



you're at school, you'll find a real friend that'll have your back, yeah?"

"Okay." She lifts her chin. "I'll try harder at home too."

"You shouldn't have to try at home, baby." I set down the stack of books and pull her into my arms. "You're my daughter, mine and your mom's. If you don't feel like you belong, that's our fault, not yours."

I tip up her chin and swipe the spilled emotion from her eyes.

Peace is overly sensitive and a people pleaser. I need to toughen her up or the world will do it the hard way.

But I set that aside. Tough training is for another day. Today, I just need to affirm her.

"I love you, Peace. I'm grateful for every day to have you, your sister, and your mom. You know that, right?"

"Yes, Daddy." She bobs her head. "I know."

There's not enough certainty in her eyes. But I will get her certain. It's a priority, a more important goal than beating Brutal Strength for the title of best rock band.

But it's a goal that I'm less confident about achieving.



## *Peace*

“Put that back.” I mimic my fifth-grade teacher and aim my stern gaze at the empty guitar stand.

“No,” Bo says. “You’re not the boss of me, Peace Jinkins.”

“My dad told us never to touch any instruments.” I soften my tone, for more reasons than one.

We’re in the lounge outside the studio. My dad and his are working inside it with the rest of the guys in the band. They could come out at any moment. I don’t want to get into trouble.

“Well, your dad isn’t my dad, and this is *my* dad’s Les Paul.”

Bo resumes strumming the unplugged electric guitar. His messy brown hair slides forward, shadowing his gray-green eyes.

I love his eyes. I could stare at them for hours. The color reminds me of the steely clouds that roll over Lake Washington whenever there is a storm.

“Stop acting like a teacher.” Harmony looks down her nose at me and inches closer to Bo.

Bo lifts his head and smirks. “More like a teacher’s pet.”

“She is Miss Matthews’ favorite.” Harmony exchanges a glance with Bo that makes the inside of my chest hurt. “You’re good with that.” She points at the matte-black instrument.

“Thanks.” He grins and strums the Les Paul again.

“Where’d you learn to play,” she asks him.

“Watching my dad.” His chest seems to expand from her praise.

I like Bo’s dad. He’s my dad’s best friend more than he is the famous lead guitarist for Tempest. But I don’t like how hard he is on Bo.

“Do you have permission to play your dad’s guitar?” I ask boldly, then lose my nerve.

“You use a lot of big fancy words.” Bo narrows his striking gray-green eyes.

I don’t like how he’s looking at me. It traps all the air inside my lungs.

*I won’t cry.* The before-Bo Peace would tear up like she does when the kids at school make fun of her, but not this Peace. Blinking to wash the sting from my eyes, I curl my fingers into my palms.

“You didn’t answer my question.” I crank up my chin like he often does.

“What question was that?” Bo’s gaze hardens.

I don’t like him looking at me hard. His eyes are usually soft when he looks at me.

I answer him, even though I know he knows. “Did your dad say it’s okay for you to play his guitar?”

“No.” Bo shakes his head. “But he’s not gonna know I did. Unless you blab.”

“Peace won’t tell.”

When Harmony defends me, the tightness in my chest loosens a little. I’m able to breathe.

Harmony is my other half. We know each other better than anyone. Her heart is as big as my mom’s. I know she loves me. But deep down, there’s a part of me, a part I don’t like, that is jealous of her. Unlike me, she belongs in our family. She can sing like my dad, and she’s confident onstage and off it, just like my mom.

“You can keep a secret.” Harmony bumps her shoulder against mine. “Right?”

“Yes,” I say, then jump when our dad hits a high note.

His voice blasts above the complex guitar chords Bo’s father is laying down. With the snaky groove of Sager’s bass, the steady churn of Dizzy’s acoustic, and the foot-tapping beat of King’s drumming, Tempest’s new song is really good.

“Yes or no?” Putting me on the spot, Bo shifts so he’s standing in front of me. His shadow falls over me.

My heart begins to race. I'm not afraid of him. I know he won't hurt me. Bo acts tough and like he doesn't care when his dad says hurtful things, but he does care. In fact, I think he cares too much, just like me.

"I don't want you to get into trouble." A plea in my eyes, I meld mine to his. He's so close, I can see the individual charcoal pixels in his eyes that remind me of the intricate designs on my dad's silver rings.

"So what if I do?" Bo has that angry glimmer in his gaze that appears whenever he argues with his dad. But he's never directed it at me. He's acting differently right now.

Is it because of Harmony? Is he going to change his mind and be her friend instead of mine?

"Robert Garrett Jackson," Bryan suddenly booms.

*Oh no!* I let out a nervous squeak.

My eyes widen as Bo's dad appears. Lost in my thoughts, I didn't notice that the music had stopped. But Harmony noticed. Out of the corner of my eye, I see her dash away down the hall. She won't get into trouble, but Bo will. I step in front of him, but he brushes me aside.

"Is that my guitar?" Bryan asks his son.

"Yes, sir." Bo jerks up his chin.

Bryan's eyes narrow. "I don't recall giving you permission to pick it up."

"I wasn't picking it up," Bo says sarcastically. "I was playing it."

"Robert." Bryan sighs and shakes his head. "Son, I'm so disappointed in you."

Bo's shoulders drop. My heart hurts for him. I know it's a heavy weight being on the receiving end of your father's displeasure.

"I asked him to play it." I step closer to Bo. "Actually, I insisted. I . . ."

My courage flies away like a frightened bird as my dad appears. He's the point on a wedge, and all the rest of the men fall into place around him.

I try to shrink into a ball. Unlike everyone else in my family, I don't like being the center of attention. I wish I could run away like Harmony did, but I won't. I can't leave Bo alone. He is my friend.

"I dared Bo to do it." I started with a small lie, but it grew, feeding on my panic. "He told me no. He said he would get in trouble." I weave a tale as tall as the Paul Bunyan ones we've been studying in my advanced English class. "But I took it off the stand and gave it to him. It was me. It's all my fault."

"Why, Peace?" My dad swallows my lie in one gulp. The taste obviously bitter, he scowls at me. "You know the rules."

*Don't touch your things. Don't go into the studio.*

"I don't like the rules." Another lie. I do like rules. I like knowing what's expected of me.

"That's not an excuse, Peace." His displeasure slices through me.

"I don't have an excuse." My courage leaking from me like air from a pin-pricked balloon, I hang my head in shame and murmur, "I just wanted to hear Bo play. He's really good. If you would listen to him, I'm sure you'll see how—"

"I think you both know better."

At the sharp sound of Bryan's voice, I lift my chin. Catching the look he gives Bo makes me feel bad for my friend.

"Go to your room."

"But, Dad," Bo protests. "Peace isn't—"

"No more excuses." Bryan cuts him off. "You did what you did. Accept the consequences. One being that you'll stay in your room and out of trouble until we leave in the morning."

"Yeah, okay." His expression dark like a thundercloud, Bo unclips the shoulder strap and hands his father the guitar. His arm doesn't even shake. "See you, Peace." He flashes a quick glance my way.

"Bye, Bo." Fiery darts prickling my skin, I watch him as he walks away.

Will this be the last time I see him? Bo lives in Vancouver. Will we still be friends when we're apart? I'm not sure. My stomach sinks to my toes.

"Peace," my dad says.

"Yes?" I snap my head in his direction, discovering he isn't just mad at me. He's furious.

"You'll sleep in Harmony's room after our company leaves, and the rest of the nights this month." Flames are practically shooting from his eyes. "Maybe being around your sister, you can learn to make better choices."

"Right." My cheeks burn.

One lie, well, a couple of them, and the earlier connection between my dad and me is ashes.



## ***Bo***

I don't say anything as my dad comes into my room. He shuts the door and turns around, and the look he gives me is a familiar one. It's ice and venom. It chills my blood and punctures my heart, which ceases beating.

"Hey." I pretend it doesn't matter what he thinks.

Placing my phone on the bedspread beside me, I turn the screen side down so he can't see it. The text I dictated to Peace is only half-finished. I know he wouldn't be pleased that I started complaining to her about him the moment I came upstairs.

"What am I going to do with you?" Bryan brings the chair from the desk to the bed where I'm sitting. Exhaling heavily, he shakes his head at me, then drags both hands through his brown hair. I've disappointed him again. I'm nothing to him but a pain in his ass. What he doesn't say hurts as much as what he does.

I pop off. "You can let me off the hook. For shit that isn't a big deal."

"It is a big deal, Bo." His gray-green eyes are the same shade as mine, only his are cold with disapproval.

"I know how to handle your guitar."

Playing the shit out of anything with strings is the one thing I'm good at. With a guitar in my hand, the world makes sense to me. My dad and I both play the instrument well. We have that in common. It's the last thing I know

to do to gain his approval.

“That’s not the point.”

“What is then?” I ask bitterly, knowing I’m always on the sharp end of it.

“You disobeyed me.” He shakes his head. Again. “You have no respect for me. Or for the rules. And I don’t think you even care that you got Peace into trouble.”

“I guess you missed the part where she said playing your guitar was her idea.”

“I know better.” His gaze sharpens. “She lied *for* you.”

He’s right. She did. Peace Jenkins gets me, and I get her.

“What is it going to take to get you on the right path?”

Dad poses the question, but I can tell he already has an answer. He believes I’m a lost cause. He thinks there is nothing that will keep me from going bad. Maybe he’s right.

“You mean the path that you want for me?” My sharp gaze clatters like steel against his.

“I’ll settle for one where you don’t get into trouble at school, or at least one that lets me and your mother worry less.” He leans forward. “Even your grandma is concerned.”

“You don’t know what it’s like.” I dredge up the words from deep inside me.

This is a low blow. He’s never mentioned my grandma being disappointed in me.

“It’s shit for me at school.”

“You go to one of the highest-rated schools in the province. It’s not that bad. Try surviving one day at any school in Southside, and you’ll realize quickly how good you have it.”

He doesn’t understand. He doesn’t want to.

“So, send me to Southside.” I lift my chin. I would do all right. I’m tougher than he’ll ever admit.

“Not Southside.” He lets out another loud breath like he’s a tire leaking air. “But after winter break, you will be going to a new school, one for troubled teens. You got expelled from Burrard.”

“But—”

“If you wanted to stay there, then you should have followed the rules.”

My dad drowns me out like he drowns all my explanations. He doesn’t get it, doesn’t care to get how school was okay for me until the reading and

math part started. I can't make sense of any of that shit. It's embarrassing.

"I don't care. Send me wherever the fuck you want."

But I do care. I care what the other kids think. What my mom thinks. What he thinks, most of all. But I will never admit it. The days are long past that I will admit anything to him.

"You should care." My dad drops his head into his hands. "I don't know where I failed you, but I'm afraid you're going to end up just like my father."

His dad was an abusive drunk who skipped out on his family. I curl my fingers into my fists, but there's no enemy to fight, just his opinion of me that can't go any lower.

Maybe he does actually hate me.

His brows draw together when I don't say anything. "Maybe you'll care more when you don't have it so easy and have more time to think."

I glare at him. But inside, a part of me coils into a tight ball.

"Give me your phone." He holds out his hand. "You're going without it until I see a consistent change in your behavior."

"No."

I snatch it away before he can take it. I don't want him to read the texts I sent Peace. Opening the screen, I quickly delete them.

"Not that you care or believe me." I toss the phone toward him, and he catches it. "But I only finish fights at school. I never start them."

"You escalate them." He gives me a sad look that makes my tense stomach turn sour.

I don't even know what that word means, but I sure as shit won't ask him to explain.

My dad doesn't get why I fight, and he doesn't seem to remember that you can't back down when you're being bullied. I'm done trying to reach him. I'm going to do what I want to do.

I don't need him or anyone else. I have Peace to talk to.





## *Peace*

I slink further into the pillows on my bed. My phone bleeps with a notification. Turning my head, I read the text from Bo before it fades from the home screen.

“Peace,” my dad says, regaining my attention.

“Yeah?” I lean into my headboard and look at him.

“Did you hear a word I just said?”

“Yeah,” I say. Only I tuned him out since I’ve heard it all before.

“I’m going to have to take your phone away.” He frowns at me from his position at the foot of my bed.

“But—”

“If you’re sticking to your story, that it was your idea not Bo’s.”

“It was mine.”

I drop my chin to my chest. The candy-cane pattern on my pink pajama bottoms swims in the wetness in my eyes. I don’t like disappointing my dad, especially after feeling like we connected earlier today. But Bo is my friend.

“Then turn over your phone.” He reaches out a hand, palm up.

“Okay.”

I roll over, disconnect my phone from the charger on the nightstand, sit up, and offer it to him. The look he gives me as his ringed fingers curl around the case makes my stomach churn.

“I’m sorry, Daddy.” I swallow hard.

“Apology accepted.” His brows draw together. “But I’m still going to keep your phone.”

“I understand.” But understanding him doesn’t make disappointing him hurt any less.

“Do you?” He shakes his head. “It doesn’t seem like I’m getting through to you at all since Bo got here. I thought we made progress today. I thought sharing shit . . . stuff, helped you understand me a little better. But then you go and do something like this right after, and it makes me feel like I’m wasting my time.”

“Fu—” I cover my mouth but it’s too late. The curse word is already out.

“More of Bo’s influence.” Dad sighs heavily. “Good thing he’s leaving tomorrow.”

Wisely, I keep my mouth shut about the agreement Bo and I have made to keep in touch. I just hope my dad doesn’t use the passcode to open my phone.

“How long are you keeping my phone?” With no books to read and no phone, it’s going to be only my laptop for entertainment.

“Two weeks,” he says grimly.

“Oh no.” My eyes widen. I’ve never been punished that long.

“It’s less about the actual offense,” he says. “And more that you’re not owning up to the fact that you lied to me.”

“Right.” I swallow hard.

What happened downstairs isn’t my truth to tell. I might not have another friend outside of Harmony, but I know friends have each other’s backs and keep each other’s secrets.

Dad’s light brown eyes narrow. “We can’t build the closeness I want between us if you aren’t honest with me.”

My throat gets tighter.

I want to be close to my dad, but I want to be Bo’s friend too. He understands me, and I think I understand him. But being friends with Bo and getting closer to my dad are desires that seem destined to be at odds with each other.

“Nothing more to say?” My dad’s frown deepens.

“I messed up.” I twist my hands together. “I’ll do better.”

My skin burns at the way he is looking at me. He said that he wants me to feel like I belong in our home, but I don’t, and I’m afraid I never will when the standard for me seems to be perfection.

“Okay, Peace.” He clucks his tongue in displeasure but comes to my side of the bed and kisses the top of my head. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

I want to throw my arms around him and beg for his forgiveness, but I don’t.

Tears prick my eyes as I watch him leave my room. The door clicks closed.

It seems that a chapter between me and my dad has closed. Suddenly, my room feels too small and too quiet. My heart thuds painfully inside my tight chest, and my thoughts remain unsettled. But then I remember Bo’s text. I can’t think about me. Bo needs me.

I untwist my hands and try to think of something to do to pass the time until I can meet Bo outside. Glancing at the digital clock, I see that there are hours to go. Without reading or my phone, those hours are going to feel like days.

Sighing, I get up and go to my desk. At least I can write in my notebook and listen to music on my computer.

Much later, my timer goes off. I take off my headphones and listen. The house is completely quiet.

I locate my waterproof boots. Sitting on the edge of the bed, I put them on. My insulated parka, wool cap, and gloves are next. Dressed for the weather, it’s going to be obvious where I’m going if I’m caught.

Do I want to risk being caught?

I bite down on my lip and stare at my closed door. There’s not a specific rule about not going outside the house after a certain time, but I know it’s wrong. I know my dad wouldn’t like it.

But this is my last chance to talk to Bo alone. He’s leaving tomorrow. I’m a different person when Bo’s around. I’m stronger. I don’t want to return to being the person I was before.

My decision is already made. Standing, I head to the door.



“I wasn’t sure you would come.”

Bo stands as I slip outside. With the dark firepit behind him, he walks toward me. His footsteps crunch on the snow. It melted some in the sun and has refrozen. It’s shiny and smooth, a crystalline white surface all around us

except for the pathway from the house.

“Of course I would come.” I smile. Despite everything, seeing him makes my heart feel lighter.

“It’s freezing out here.” He rubs his hands together. He’s only wearing a black hoodie and jeans. He doesn’t have on gloves like me.

“Do you want to turn on the fire pit?” I ask and glance back at the house. The windows are dark. There were no lights on when I tiptoed downstairs. We could probably get away with it.

“Too risky,” Bo says. “Can’t stay long anyway. I don’t want you to get into any more trouble on my account.”

“I’m not worried.” Yet, I bite down on my lip.

“You are,” he says softly. His breath puffs in the air. “You can fix your relationship with your dad.”

“You can too.” I step closer. “Your dad didn’t seem too mad.”

“He was beyond mad.” Bo snorts derisively. “He’s given up on me. He thinks I’m a lost cause. He’s probably right.”

“He’s wrong.” I reach for Bo’s hand. “Completely wrong.” My fingers are encased in wool, but I grasp his hand firmly.

“I’m glad you think so.” He sighs. “I’m going to miss you.”

We stare at each other. His gray-green eyes are darker like I feel, knowing he’s leaving tomorrow.

“I’ll miss you too,” I manage to say, tears filling my eyes. “But we can talk.” My nose stings, and I sniff. “Only not on my phone.”

“Why not?” He tilts his head.

“My dad took it away as punishment. No reading for one week, and I can’t have my phone back for two weeks.”

“Sorry.” He shakes his head. “You’ve gotten into a lot of trouble because of me.”

“It’s okay.”

What I mean is that he’s worth it. But he’s the first real friend I’ve had aside from Harmony. I’m afraid to share something that heavy.

“We’ll online chat,” he says. “I’ll play my guitar for you.”

“I’d love that.” My eyes brighten. “I can read more stories to you.”

“Stories and music sound nice.” He nods. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“I wish I could see you in person.” I glance away. Vancouver is too far.

He squeezes my fingers. “We’ll make it happen somehow.”

“I don’t know how.” I glance back at him. “With our dads so

disapproving.”

“This is between you and me.” He searches my eyes. “No one else gets a say. No one comes between us. Not even our dads.”

“Promise?” I whisper.

“Whoa.” His attention suddenly shifts. “Look at that.” He points with his free hand, and I turn.

“Beautiful.” I watch a shooting star blaze across the night sky.

“Yeah,” Bo whispers. “Beautiful is the perfect word.”

I turn around, but he’s not looking at the sky. He is staring at me wearing an expression I’ve never seen before.

“I promise that I will always be there for you if you need me.” His eyes are brighter than the blanket of glistening snow.

“I’m here for you too,” I say solemnly. “I promise.”

With our hands joined, our gazes locked, and a shooting star over our heads, our promises to each other seem unbreakable. But are they?

To be continued in *Shooting Star*, a Tempest Next Generation novel

## Shooting Star Preview

### *Bo*

“Why can’t I play with you?” I ask my dad.

“You know why.” He folds his arms over his chest.

“Because of school.” I frown.

“Because this is the second school that you’ve been kicked out of.” His mouth forms a displeased line. “Fighting again. When are you going to learn?”

“I didn’t start it.”

But I know he doesn’t give a shit. He already has it all planned out where to send me next. Can’t fucking wait to get rid of me.

“But you finished it.” His brows crash together. “Decisively.”

“Yeah, Dad.” My arms stiffen at my sides. “I’m not going to be the guy who constantly gets shit on.”

“If you would lay low—”

“I can’t lay low. I have dyslexia.”

In every class, every subject, that is an issue, but I don’t share my feelings with him. I gave up trying to reach him or my mom after Christmas. Instead, I talk to Peace at least once, sometimes even twice a day. She’s the only one who understands how much I hate school.

“Mr. Jackson.” A tech wearing a black shirt with the Tempest hurricane logo appears. “Mr. Jenkins is asking for you.”

“Right.” My dad nods to him, then turns to me. “I gotta go.”

“I’ll come with you.” I don’t wait for his permission. I just hurry my steps to keep up with his longer strides.

“You’re not playing with the band.” He gives me a stern glance that makes me feel small.

“I hear you.”

Yeah, I hear him loud and clear. His displeasure is a megaphone. I can barely hear my own thoughts around him. Maybe the military school in South Texas won’t be so bad.

“I just wanna watch the show.”

Today is the benefit concert and competition between Tempest and Brutal Strength. It took six months for everything to come together, but it finally has. Brutal Strength and their song “Victory” versus “Listen” by Tempest. To me, Tempest’s title and lyrics are ironic since listening is the last thing my father knows how to do.

My dad weaves around people, and I follow him.

Backstage is chaos like it always is. Techs with instruments. Roadies with sound equipment. Black Cat staff with phones to their ears. Plus, a bunch of Hope House employees wearing specially designed BRUTAL STRENGTH VERSUS TEMPEST T-shirts to commemorate the event.

This isn’t my first time backstage. I’ve been to a few Tempest concerts. There’s an energy around a show that thrums like an electrical current inside me. But even better than that surge of anticipation is the music. That is a thrill that shoots straight to my heart.

My focus is like a laser as I watch my dad take his Les Paul from a tech. My fingertips burn with the urge to pluck those strings. But I haven’t touched his guitar since the last time at the Jinkinses’ house when Peace and I got into all that trouble.

Dad clips on the strap and moves to the right of War. King is already in place, a force up on his riser. Dizzy has his Martin on War’s left. Sager is below King’s kit with his Fender.

I take in the band in a sweeping glance, but my brows inch together in disappointment when I scan the stage and don’t find Peace.

I take my phone out of the front pocket of my jeans and check my texts, our private chat channel, and my email.

*Nothing.*

My gut tightens. I haven’t heard from her for a week. That’s too long. It makes me antsy. We have that promise between us, one made on a hushed winter night with a shooting star over our heads.

I sure as shit plan to honor my side of it. I trusted that she would.

*But where is she?*

Making another sweep, I find her, only not on the stage like we agreed. She's in the audience wearing a hot pink sundress that matches her sunglasses.

My heart goes electric. She's a thrill like no other.

Peace is beautiful. Even in the crowd, she's impossible to miss. The first time I saw her, her expressive brown-and-gold eyes were what I noticed, then she showed me the rest, and I was done for.

She's smart, but she doesn't treat me like I'm dumb. She's sweet, not because she wants something, but because that's just the way she is. She makes me feel like I'm on a perfect vacation, like I did on our last family camping trip by the river before everything went downhill with my dad. I can practically feel the warmth of the sun on my skin and hear the soothing sound of the water rushing over polished stones. Peace smooths my rough edges.

Only smooth isn't what I'm feeling looking at her right now.

Peace isn't alone. There's a guy with her. While I watch, he sits in the seat beside her. My gaze narrows as he reaches for her hand.

Not only has she forgotten to meet me, but it also seems like she has replaced me. This is why I haven't heard from her.



## *Peace*

When I finish stacking the T-shirts for the Hope House booth, I search for Bo. We agreed to meet backstage.

I've been looking forward to seeing him for months. Live chats and calls aren't the same as being together in person. But though I search the entire backstage area, I can't find him anywhere.

I plant myself beside a stack of amps, deciding I'll wait for Bo as Tempest performs. One number leads to two. I know their finale will be "Listen."

Their song is better than Brutal Strength's. It's more rock 'n' roll. But I know others will have different opinions. Music is personal, like who you choose to be your best friend.

I search for Bo from the shadows. I can't let my dad catch me looking for



him. He continues to blame Bo whenever I step out of line. Even this last time, Bo got blamed, though it had nothing to do with him.

“Hey, Peace.” Harmony appears and steps into the shadows beside me.

“Where’s Mark?” I ask. She and her new boyfriend are almost always together.

“He’s getting me a beer.” She removes her pink sunglasses and places them on top of her head.

“Harm.” I frown at her. “You can’t drink alcohol. You’re underage. And you know Dad will go nuts if he sees you with Mark.”

He likes Mark even less than he likes Bo, and that’s saying something. I don’t think he’s ready for either of us to get older, and Harmony is acting like she’s sixteen, not thirteen like we are now after our birthdays.

“Dad’s not going to see.” She wrinkles her nose. “He’s too busy.”

“That’s what you said when Mark came by the house, and look what happened.”

“I appreciate you covering for me.” She throws her arms around me. Her expensive designer perfume makes my eyes water.

“You already thanked me.” Straightening, I gently put space between us so I can breathe. “Have you seen Bo?”

“Yeah.” Her eyes flicker with some emotion I can’t read. “He’s out back.” She points. “By the food tents. Smoking.”

“Okay, thanks.”

I know Bo’s been smoking. He started when he turned fourteen. We argued about it. Harmony isn’t the only one doing things she shouldn’t.

“I’ll see you later.” I start to turn, but she puts a hand on my arm, stopping me.

“Wait.”

“What is it?” I glance at her hand, then up at her.

“Never mind.” She releases me. “I was just going to ask you to hang with me and Mark, but I remembered you don’t like him.”

“He’s not a good influence on you.” That’s the main reason.

“You sound like Dad.”

“I guess I do.” I sigh. “You act different when you’re with him.” This is another reason.

“Different how?” She tilts her head.

“Different not in a good way,” I say. “When you’re with him, you act uppity and mean.”

Mark is part of the in-crowd at our school. He maintains his status by treating anyone who doesn't kiss his ass like they're an enemy.

"Mark says you think you're better than everyone else."

That hurts. "I do not." My brows pinch together.

"Just because you're smart and the teachers like you," she says like I haven't even spoken, "doesn't mean you're above us."

I start to defend myself, something I've begun doing since Bo and I became friends, but she waves a dismissive hand in the air.

"Mark is back," she says and points. "I gotta go."

I frown at him, and he frowns back. I'm in the enemy camp. I already knew that, but I didn't know that Harmony and Mark talked about me.

As I watch her walk toward him, I don't say anything. It wouldn't matter what I say. She barely listens to me anymore. My gaze narrows when I see that Mark has two plastic cups in each hand that appear to be full of beer.

I don't know where or how he got alcohol when he's a minor like us, but I'm not going to interfere. Not this time. If Mom or Dad finds out, Harmony will get in big trouble, but maybe it will be good for them to find out that she's not as perfect as they think.

I head out back. My heart beats faster in anticipation. I can't wait to see Bo.

However, my heart stumbles and my body comes to a complete stop when I find him. He's not alone, and he's obviously not waiting for me. He is with a girl.

Crystal is the daughter of one of the roadies. She's older than me, older than Bo, but as I watch them, he leans in and kisses her. My heart rises to my throat, choking me. Bo seems to know what he's doing.

I haven't kissed a boy. I've thought about it a lot, but the only boy I want to kiss is him. I know we're just friends. I know I shouldn't have wanted anything more. But I do want more and it hurts to see that desire crushed.

Bo is only a friend, my best friend, but I realize that I'm probably not his. How can I be a best anything when there's a whole other part of his life that doesn't involve me?

Tears filling my eyes, I spin around and head back the way I came. Fast. But I'm not fast enough to outrun the image of Bo kissing Crystal or the hurt that witnessing that kiss caused me.

This is a pain that I fear will last longer than promises made beneath a shooting star.



To receive a text alert (US only) when the full-length novel *Shooting Star* releases, text ROCK BOOK to 33777

For international notifications, subscribe to the author's newsletter at michellemankin dot com.

Brutal Strength's song "Victory" and Tempest's "Listen" are available [HERE](#). After reading the lyrics, be sure to visit the author's reader group (Rock All Stars) to vote for which song you think is more rock 'n' roll.