



He's her best
friend's brother, her
rival, and, now, *her*
fake boyfriend.

KISS AND

fake
~~MAKE~~ UP

A STEELE FAMILY NOVEL

CRYSTAL
KASWELL

KISS AND FAKE UP

Steele Family

CRYSTAL KASWELL

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Inked Love

The Best Friend Bargain - Forest

The First Taste - Holden - coming 2020

Dirty Rich

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Chapter One



Cassie

“**T**here isn’t an easy way to say this, so I’ll just say it.”

Frederick looks me in the eyes, all sweetness and sincerity. He folds his hands on the table and speaks with a calm, even voice. “I found another lyricist for the project.”

The words land with a thud.

Not only am I replaceable.

I’ve already been replaced.

That’s why he asked me to meet at our old favorite restaurant. Not because we need to sign the final paperwork for our last song. Not because I loved the autographed photos on the clean white walls and the cozy square tables. Not even because it’s near his place, our old place.

No, we’re here because my ex-boyfriend knows I won’t make a scene at an industry hot spot. Because, now, he can dump me as a creative partner without having to hear me scream or cry or even whisper *how could you?*

His dark eyes stay soft and compassionate. His face stays beautiful. It’s not fair he’s so handsome. A young John Legend. With the same medium brown skin, the same emotive eyes, the same kind expression.

He looks like a sweet, sensitive guy.

Whereas, with my sharp nose and my winged eyeliner, I look like an angry instigator.

Anyone who glances in our direction will see the same thing: the nice dude and the difficult dame who can’t take a

hint.

“It’s not you, Cass.” My former collaborator smiles with sincerity. “You’re great.”

Yes. I’m great. That’s why he slept with someone else. That’s why he’s dumping me as a colleague. Because he so appreciates me, as a partner, a person, a songwriter.

Because I’m so fucking great.

I stare at my kale salad. The one I always order here. With orange slices and walnuts and avocado, and every other California health food cliché. We used to make fun of that together. He used to tease with love. I used to laugh as I savored the dish.

Now, it tastes like betrayal. It tastes like someone I used to be.

Okay, it still tastes like kale and citrus and rich balsamic vinegar, but the flavors mingle in too familiar a way.

I stab another leaf with my fork and shove it in my mouth so I don’t have to respond. So I don’t say *fuck you, asshole, at least be honest*.

I wouldn’t like it if he said *I don’t enjoy working with you any longer; I don’t enjoy you as a person any longer*. But I would respect it.

Frederick takes a long sip of his iced tea. The one he always orders here, with the same thin lemon wedge and dark-brown hue. “It’s not personal.” He says it with even less conviction this time. “I just want to go in a different direction. You understand, don’t you?”

It’s not you, Cass. I just needed to fuck someone else. I just need to work with someone else. But not because I think any

less of you.

Right.

I take a deep breath and let out a slow exhale. The restaurant is packed with the usual mix of indifferent locals and industry regulars. Two executives trade deal memos at a table in the back. An agent woos an artist on the patio. The same sunglasses-wearing, leather-jacket-obsessed artist who declined to work with me a year ago.

Back when Frederick and I were lovers and partners.

No. He was already fucking her. He was already done with me. I just didn't know yet.

Still, when Mr. Sunglasses said our style didn't fit, I didn't take it personally. Not everyone works well together. Frederick and I no longer work well together. That's accurate.

I need to act as if Frederick is any other musician, as if this is no big deal.

Even in the highly volatile music industry, behind-the-scenes talent conduct themselves with grace. I can't blow a gasket. I can't tell Frederick to fuck off. I certainly can't stand up on the table and play *You Oughta Know* on my phone, even though it would give everyone the correct impression of what happened.

Just look at Alanis Morissette. She writes one multi-platinum album with a few angry songs, and thirty years later, we still see her as the queen of the angry breakup song.

Once a woman is angry, that's all she is. None of her other thoughts or feelings matter.

And, yes, *Jagged Little Pill* is an amazing work of art, but the only thing anyone remembers is her rage. Well, her rage

and her inaccurate use of irony. Because women who make mistakes don't get second chances. They're wrong for all eternity.

I take a deep breath and focus on my surroundings. The blue booths against the wall. The locals sipping iced tea and eating club sandwiches. The happy couple next to us, in matching distressed jeans and black t-shirts, whispering to each other.

Oh. They're whispering about us. Everyone can tell my ex-boyfriend is dumping me. Again. And these two lovebirds are sure they won't end up here.

The same way I was, once upon a time.

I force my lips into a smile. "What's the direction for the album?" It's not the most graceful reaction, but it's better than *don't tell me you're writing with her too*. I know he's working with the other woman. Why force him to say it?

"You know I love your voice," Frederick says. "But I need something different for this project. Something softer."

There it is. I'm too hard, too guarded, too difficult, too strong.

As a person, sure, whatever. If he wants to paint me as a bitch, I don't care.

But as a songwriter?

No fucking way. I can nail any voice, from Amy Winehouse's sultry self-destruction to Gwen Stefani's *I want to take over the world but also get married and have kids* pop perfection. I can write bubblegum confections for former Disney stars, love songs for sad boys, and breakup anthems for independent women.

Sure, I'm better with wit than naked emotion, but I can do naked emotion. I've done it before.

"Let's face it." Frederick studies my expression. He frowns, unhappy with my displeasure, but he barrels forward anyway. "We should have ended this a long time ago."

"You mean before or after you fucked someone else?"
Shit. So much for playing it cool. I bite my tongue.

"Exactly." He nods, proud of himself for taking the high road. I guess the high road involves getting horizontal. "I hurt you, and I'm sorry. I understand why you can't forgive me."

I eat another bite of salad, so I won't say something else. This isn't the time or the place. And he isn't the person. Not anymore. He lost the access to my heart the minute he touched someone else.

"It's hard for me too." He drops his voice, as if, somehow, we are equally culpable in our professional breakup, as if he's the one who walked in on me balls deep in someone else, then ceded every part of our former life together *except* for our creative partnership. "We should have split after we finished our last project."

Probably, but I'm not giving up this gig. "I can do softer." I try to make my voice softer too. My posture. My language. I need this job. I need to get out of my parents' house (my crash pad since the breakup). I need the opportunity. "Whatever the album needs."

"Cass." His voice drops to an old tone. The boyfriend who loves me. But boyfriends who love you don't spend six months sleeping with someone else.

Love isn't the sugary confection it is in pop songs. It's a bunch of chemicals our brain releases to override our logical

impulses. Say, letting go of a rent-controlled apartment to move in with a boyfriend.

Okay. Maybe the asshole has a point about my inability to access pleasant romantic feelings. But I don't need *authentic* romantic feelings. I can fake it.

"It's not just your voice," Frederick says. "Don't you remember the agreement? All the meetings with Bryce? The weekend at the producer's house?" The up-and-coming musician did insist on working together closely so we'd hit just the right note for his image. "Do you really want to spend three days locked in a room with me?"

No. Of course not. I don't ever want to see his traitorous face again. But I'm willing to stare at him for weeks if it means fifty percent of this deal.

As a songwriting team, we were on our way to bigger, better things. As a solo lyricist, I'm a nobody.

This is a major label project for a solo artist on track to be the next Harry Styles. That's a rare opportunity where a massive payday and a ton of exposure overlap with my writing style.

If I nail this album, I'll be the go-to lyricist collaborator for every up-and-coming artist who wants to project wit and intelligence, which means future jobs. Success. Proof I can do this on my own. Proof I can do this, period.

Frederick doesn't mention any of that. He doesn't even apologize for trying to steal the opportunity. "We signed a contract. You remember the terms." We can cancel the contract, without penalty, if we dissolve our partnership. "We can give the job to someone else. Or you can let me take it and keep ten percent of my share."

Ten percent of a lot is still a lot. And I need the money, I do. But I want the fifty percent I was promised and the reputation that comes with it. “If I don’t agree with your terms, you’ll get nothing.”

For the first time in our meeting, Frederick frowns. I have the power to deny him, the same way he has the power to deny me. As far as he knows, I’m petty enough to do it.

After all, if I’m going down, I might as well take him with me.

It’s tempting. It really is.

But I have a better idea. “What if we talk to the artist?” I ask. “And let him decide if he’d rather work with me or you?”

Frederick’s brow furrows in frustration. “How would he work with you? You’re half a team.”

Right. He’s already replaced me. The woman he was fucking is his new girlfriend and his new songwriting partner too.

I’m a lyricist. I need a musician. There is someone available. Someone who knows my style well. We even worked together well, a long time ago. “I have a new partner.”

Incredulity streaks his expression. “Who?”

The couple in matching t-shirts shifts, so they’re no longer staring at the scarlet *L* on my forehead. They see the change in power. They see the fight in my eyes.

“A friend,” I say, though it’s not the right word. We’re closer to rivals. Enemies even.

“And you two are...” For the first time in our entire conversation, regret fills Frederick’s eyes. He tries to force a

pleasant expression, but he doesn't manage to hide his jealousy. "You're together?"

Right. We're a couple. The artist wanted a couple—because who believes in love as much as someone who's currently in love?—and he's getting a couple. "We are."

"Really? When did you start seeing him?" He doesn't add *your social media is empty and no one mentioned a new boyfriend.*

It's all true. There are no signs I'm with someone.

But he only knows that if he's looking for signs, if he's still reading my Instagram posts, and asking his friends for updates on my love life.

I don't stop and think about the logic behind my actions. I don't pause on *this is a bad idea*. I need to win. I need the deal. I need to make Frederick jealous. "A few months ago, but we've known each other a long time. So it's going fast."

"You don't know any available musicians. Except for—" Frederick's dark eyes fill with epiphany. Then surprise. "Damon Webb?"

"Yep." I smile my best *I'm madly in love* smile.

"You hate him."

"We have a passionate relationship."

Frederick's expression stays incredulous. He sits there, turning over the information, nodding as he finds understanding. "Huh. Damon Webb. I guess it makes sense. You never could stop talking about him."

As if my hate of Damon is the same as him fucking someone else.

He continues, “So it’s you and Damon against me and Tinsel. The artist decides. Winner take all.” He holds out his hand, sure he’ll go home with an album of songwriting credits worth six-figures.

He’s sure he has the skills and the charm to beat me.

I don’t know about charm, but I do know one thing, I’m the better lyricist.

I shake.

Now, I just need to convince my nemesis to help me.

THE SECOND I SHUT MY CAR DOOR, I SEE IT—THE IMAGE that’s plagued me for six months straight.

Frederick and Tinsel pressed together on the blue leather couch he brought from his dad’s place. Her red hair cascading down her back. His hands around her narrow waist.

The words on his lips. *I’m sorry, Cassie. I love her.*

I was smart enough to leave, right that minute, but I wasn’t willing to give up my contracts. I wasn’t willing to pay for his indiscretions.

A great stance in theory. Feminism. Girl power. Stubbornness. All of the above.

I kept waiting for him to do the right thing, but he never did. He won’t. There’s no sense in waiting for him to change his mind this time.

I need to actually do it, to actually convince Damon to work with me.

Only when I pull out my cell and I scroll to Damon's number, I struggle to breathe. He's still there, with the same label, *Damon aka the devil*, with the same picture from Daphne's twenty-first birthday party. He's in jeans and a t-shirt, his tattooed arm around his sister, a wide smile on his face. Because he loves her as much as I do. More even.

What can I say to convince him? He's a selfish person. I need to appeal to that.

There's money in this deal. Opportunity.

Is that enough to overpower our mutual animosity?

I don't know. I need my best friend's help. She knows how to persuade her brother.

I text Daphne.

Cassie: Do you know if Damon is looking for work?

Daphne: What sort of work?

Cassie: Songwriting credits.

Daphne: Probably. Isn't that how the gig goes? You're always looking for work.

It is, yeah. There's always a new project on the horizon.

Daphne: Wait a second. Are you thinking about working with him? Did you finally drop that dead weight?

She doesn't know a lot about the music industry, but she knows enough to not continue to work with her ex.

Cassie: I did.

He dropped me, sure, but close enough.

Daphne: OMG finally! Let's celebrate tonight. We can watch The Matrix and eat chocolate until we're sick.

That sounds amazing, but I have to do this first.

Cassie: Soon. I need to find a partner for a deal ASAP.

Daphne: You can call Damon yourself, you know.

Cassie: Do I have to though?

Daphne: You could just show up, if you want to do the dramatic thing. He's at the summer place. You have a key, don't you?

Cassie: I do.

Daphne: Go. Surprise him.

Cassie: Catch another man in the middle of fucking another woman?

Daphne: That's my brother, gross.

Cassie: Is it likely?

Daphne: No. He won't bring someone back there.

I want to ask why, but I don't want to open the door to mental images of Damon Webb naked.

It's bad enough he's the most annoying person on the planet. He could at least have the decency to be unattractive.

It's really not fair someone so horrible on the inside is so beautiful on the outside. But that might make it easier to pretend I find him bearable.

In theory.

Chapter Two



Damon

After four months, I should be used to the whole sobriety thing. I'm not. All day, my head goes to the same place: I need a distraction.

I tell myself any distraction is as good as the warm numb of whiskey, but I never believe it. Nothing is strong enough to dull the voice in my head screaming *Damon Webb, fuckup*.

It doesn't matter whether it says *hey, you might as well numb the pain of being a fuckup. It's not like there's anything better out there*. Or whether it says *hey, you piece of shit, don't fuck up again. Your parents might forgive you but your sister won't*.

At the end of the day, it's all the same.

Routine keeps me busy, but it's not enough. The days blur together. The bright light of morning, the drive to the gym, breakfast, books, lunch, the view of the ocean from the backyard, the deep blue water competing with the eight billion thoughts in my head.

The first few weeks of sitting out here, my ass on the concrete, my feet in the pool, I wanted to drown myself in the shallow water. That would have been better than sitting with my thoughts for another second.

Now, I can survive a few minutes. Half an hour even.

And I'm here. At my limit. Enough of the quiet afternoon. Enough of the beautiful sky and the bright sun and the awe-inspiring view of nature.

I head inside. I fix a cup of coffee. I turn on the TV and try to fill the big, empty house with something besides a desire to drink.

This place isn't home, exactly. It's my parents' second house. The one Dad inherited from his uncle a billion years ago. The uncle who gave me his name. The guy who taught Dad how to live and love and laugh and all that kitchen poster bullshit. As if Dad is some sort of bastion of sobriety and not a fuckup, the way I am.

I can't complain. Not about the house. It's more than most people have. A lot more.

A five-bedroom mansion in Malibu, perched on the top of a windy hill, with a view of the ocean, a massive pool, a grand piano, and too much space for any one person to fill with warmth.

This place is only thirty minutes from where I grew up, in Malibu Hills, but it still feels like it's a secret spot. Only for lazy summers, with my sister and her best friend, and Dad, watching us as he worked on a song, looking at us with pride and joy.

Back then, I wasn't Damon Webb, fuckup. Back then, I had potential.

Now—

Not going there.

I sit on the bench and play a scale. Then another. My fingers slip into the rhythm instantly. They know they belong here.

For a few minutes, I fall into the flow of the music. I play a warmup song.

Then I try to play the piece I'm working on and I freeze. There are too many things whirling inside me. Things I can't stand feeling. Things I can't stand hearing.

How the fuck does anyone do this? How does anyone live and breathe without numbing everything all the time? It's too much. Way too fucking much.

I play a few more practice songs, but I don't try anything of mine. Not now. I heat a TV dinner, I clean up, and I move on to my favorite distraction.

Sex.

Yeah, I'm a sober cliché. Sex and coffee. But I'm not doing it the exciting way. No other people involved. That's too fucking weird. I haven't had sex sober in a long-ass time.

No. I do the impossible uncool thing. I head to my room, I make myself comfortable, and I look for a video aide.

None of it moves me. It's all bullshit. Fake. Like so many people in this city. Like so many things. All this glitz and glamor and promise, but it's a facade. Worse, people buy into it. I used to buy into it.

Seriously. Who watches an actor jack-rabbiting an actress who's groaning like she's having the best orgasm of her life and believes it?

Sure, she's hot in all the conventional ways, but that, too, is fake. Hair extensions, false eyelashes, fire-engine lipstick, saline breasts. I don't judge her for pretending.

It's worse.

I see myself in her manufactured groan.

She's full of shit the same way I am.

I turn off the video. I switch to music. An old R&B playlist. Not the most original choice, sure, but some things are classic for a reason.

A ding interrupts the sultry riff.

A text from my sister.

Daphne: Cassie asked about you today. If she gets in touch, please play nice. She's having a hard time.

Cassie.

My sister's best friend. The woman who used to look at me like I had potential. Who now looks at me like I'm a massive piece of shit.

No argument here, Cass.

My cock whines at the sound of her nickname. Cass. The last time I saw her was at Daphne's birthday party. It was early enough I was buzzed, not wasted. My sister doesn't leave the house after eight thirty p.m.

We were at a restaurant in Malibu Hills. One near our parents' place. So Daphne could crash at home if she wanted to get drunk. Not that she ever gets drunk.

Cassie was there, in this gorgeous black dress, one with a low back and smooth fabric that clung to every one of her curves.

She glared at me like I was the scum of the Earth, but she promised to play nice, for my sister's sake. That is, if I took my eyes off her ass.

And I said something stupid about how I'd stop staring when she stopped staring. Which made her even angrier.

And she blushed, and fuck—

It was every bit as sexy as it was when we were teenagers. Sexier, even, 'cause back then, she liked me. Now, she despises me.

There's something about her open hatred. It's just... hot.

For the first time all day, I feel something besides an emptiness or a desire to numb my thoughts. For the first time all day, I feel awake and alive.

This is probably the *most* dangerous thought I can have—'cause Daphne will kill me if I fuck her best friend, and Daphne's trust is the only thing I want—but that, too, makes it hotter.

Off-limits.

Forbidden.

Totally taboo.

Fuck me.

My entire body roars to attention. I don't just want. I need. The sort of need I usually associate with a bottle. Only I don't crave a drink.

I crave the intensity in her green eyes. The smirk on her lips. That shade of raspberry she wore at the party.

What would it look like on my neck, my chest, my cock?

What would those pretty lips feel like around me?

Fuck. I'm so fucked, and I don't even care.

I close my eyes. I let my thoughts go straight to places they shouldn't. The sound of Cassie's groan—the one she usually makes over music, or coffee, or dark chocolate.

That black fabric, cutting a long line down her bare back, clinging to her round ass.

Those long, curvy legs.

What would they feel like wrapped around my waist or my hips? Pressed against my cheeks?

What does she sound like when she comes?

She's got passion everywhere. She must have it there too.

I work myself with steady strokes. It's almost too intense, too pure, too real.

Almost, but it's not.

And then something in the air shifts, and I hear a shriek.

"Fuck." A woman's voice. No. Not any woman. Cassie.

What the fuck?

Did I watch too many of those cheesy pornos? Have I lost touch with reality?

Maybe that's it. I'm not just an alcoholic. I'm plain crazy. The sorta insane where I believe my sexual fantasies become real.

"Shit." That's her voice again. "Do you... could you... fuck."

I turn to the sound. And there's Cassie, standing in the hallway, in jeans and a snug tank top, her light-brown hair falling to her cheeks, her lips that perfect shade of raspberry.

The door is halfway open.

She has a perfect view of the action.

My cock doesn't calm down. Somehow, I get harder, closer. I try to find some sort of sense—what does a reasonable person do in this situation—but I don't. I'm too glued to her green eyes.

They're wide with interest.

Like she wants to watch as I finish.

No. She does want to watch.

And I want her to watch.

She's a voyeur, and I'm an exhibitionist.

Or maybe that's the porno fantasy insanity talking.

"Could you." Her cheeks flame red. Her eyes stay on my dick. "I figured Daphne would tell you I'm coming."

Not exactly.

"Sorry. I didn't see anything." Cassie finally realizes she's staring; she brings a hand over her eyes. "I, uh, I'll use the bathroom. And you can meet me downstairs when you're... ready."

She leaves.

I find enough sense to close the door.

I try to tell my cock to calm down, really.

It doesn't.

So I wait until I hear her footsteps move down the stairs, then I replay the scenario in my head, and I end it the fun way, with the two of us naked in this bed, her body pressed against mine, her groans in my ears, the two of us watching ourselves in the mirror.

A more intimate experience than any one I've ever had.

Maybe it's progress that I want that.

Or maybe it's another sign I'm fucked up beyond help.

Or both.

After I finish, I clean up, I dress, and I try to find a little sense. But there isn't any.

What the hell is Cassie doing here?

Chapter Three



Damon

I move down the stairs with steady steps. Find Cassie sitting on the couch, eyes closed, body swaying in time with the music. One of those singer-songwriters she adores, a wounded woman who pours her heart into her words.

The image is familiar. She spent most summers here with Daphne and me. We used to stay up late and talk about music.

Then I started drinking. I made one big mistake, and Cassie started looking at me like I was an asshole.

Instead of apologizing, I doubled down. I poked her every chance I got.

She bit back. Gently at first. Then hard enough to draw blood.

We knew each other well enough to cut deep. We acted like it was banter, and it was.

But it was brutal too.

I haven't seen her since I got sober.

She looks the same—the same messy hair, the same green eyes, the same long legs, and curvy hips, even the same dark jeans—but the air feels different. It's charged with the knowledge I started this shit. I hurt her first. I didn't give her a choice except to run away or fight back.

I should let go, forgive, take ownership, I know.

But she *is* pretentious and annoying.

And it's fun fucking with her.

Or do I have that wrong too?

She looks right on the cream couch, dissolving into the singer's voice, finding some footing in the words, some way to understand her pain.

She's not faking anything. She's truly lost in the words.

She's hurt and in desperate need of a little understanding.

The same as me.

I swallow hard and push the sympathetic thought aside. This is no time for empathy. This is war.

And, sure, Cassie looks like a nice girl—

Actually, scratch that. With the ever-present winged eyeliner, berry lips, trendy outfit, and massive headphones, Cassie looks like the type of person who'd rather scribble in her journal than launch an attack.

No doubt, she'd rather sit and listen to music all night than deal with my bullshit.

But if there's anything between Cassie and her music—

She'll kill for that shit. Without hesitation.

Cassie blinks her eyes open as the song fades into the next. When she catches me staring, she blushes and reaches for her cell. She still has the same case-free iPhone. The same as mine.

It doesn't fit her. She needs some decoration. She needs to use it to announce her obsession with music too.

But Cassie's desire to let the entire world know she is, in fact, a musician isn't my concern.

My sister is.

“Is Daphne here?” I ask.

“Why would she be here?” Cassie asks.

Why the fuck is Cassie here? That’s a better question. “Is she okay?” Maybe that’s it. Mom and Dad were in an accident. Or something happened to my sister. But then Daphne texted me this warning slash instruction.

“She’s stressed about work, but yeah, she’s okay.” There it is. The annoying thing about Cassie. The tone of her voice that says *I know your sister better than you do. I care more than you do.*

It’s not that she’s wrong, exactly. In the last few years, she’s been there for Daphne a lot more than I have.

But she’s not family.

I am.

Fuck her for pointing it out.

I swallow my irritation. Cassie is Daphne’s best friend. That’s the situation. If I want to improve my relationship with my sister, I need to stay civil.

“I’m here to talk to you,” she says.

Why? “You have a key?” Seriously, who bursts into someone else’s house and walks all the way up the stairs to their room?

“Yeah.” She brushes a stray lock behind her ear. “Since I was a kid.”

Right. Her parents dropped her off here all the time.

As soon as she could drive herself, Dad insisted she have access to the place.

Dad loves Cassie. She's the songwriter I'm supposed to be. Smart, articulate, dedicated, and, most importantly, not an alcoholic.

Not that I resent her for it. Too much.

Cassie doesn't call me on the key thing. It is a family house. Family decided she has access. She has as much right to be here as I do. Which is also annoying.

As is the look of interest in her eyes. No. That's full-on frustrating.

She's staring at me like she knows I'm an asshole, and she wants to replay what happened upstairs anyway.

Why is her hatred so fucking hot?

It's wrong.

"Do you usually leave the door open?" Cassie presses her palms into her thighs. She speaks without flirtation or animosity. She's actually friendly. Well, by her standards. "I mean, you are alone, so why not, right?"

"Do you usually stop and watch?" It comes out harsher than I mean it, but that's for the best. I don't want her to think I want her watching. Even though I do. Even though the interest in her eyes was sexy as sin.

Fuck, even now, ten minutes after takeoff, the image of Cassie in the hallway, eyes glued to my cock is sending blood rushing south.

She looks way too good on my couch. Especially in her giant headphones.

A woman who truly loves music. Who feels it in her bones. Is there anything sexier than that?

“Right. Sorry.” Her cheeks flush. “I was surprised. And that it was just you, too. My ex-boyfriend was always using porn.”

Do not take the bait. Do not tease her. No sass. No bullshit. Absolutely nothing remotely flirtatious. “Is that relevant somehow?”

“Kind of. Not the porn part. Or the masturbation part. But he is relevant.”

Did you watch too? Do you like to watch? Nope. Not asking her about sex. That’s out of the question. I’m friendly. I’m civil. I’m getting her out of the house as efficiently as possible. “Frederick?”

She nods.

Frederick. So he’s her ex now. I guess I missed that life event. Whiskey does that.

When I first met Frederick, when Cassie brought him as her date to one of my dad’s parties, I found him obnoxious as fuck. Which made him a perfect match for Cassie. They’re both sure they’re musical geniuses.

But Cassie at least knows her strengths and weaknesses. Frederick writes derivative riffs and mind-numbing melodies, but he still acts like he’s god’s gift to music.

Plus, he acted more like Cassie was his groupie than his girlfriend. Like she was with him because he was so brilliant, and she couldn’t help but fall to her knees and beg for his cock.

Okay.

Maybe I added some of that in my head. Maybe the porno-insanity is affecting my current thoughts.

The guy has some redeeming qualities. They were a successful songwriting team. People love derivative, mediocre shit. And he's tall and good-looking, with those dorky short-sleeved button-up shirts and hipster glasses Cassie loves.

I'm sure I teased her about that, but I barely remember any of it.

"Damon?" Cassie asks. "Do you need a minute?" She asks the question in a matter-of-fact way, but I hear something deeper.

A joke at my expense. Or maybe genuine concern. I can't tell the difference anymore.

I do need a minute. Twenty, actually. I need to replay all this information without my clothes, take the edge off. In a perfect world, I'd have that. Well, in a perfect world, Daphne would be best friends with someone who is less endlessly frustrating. As it is—"What are you doing here, Cass?"

"Right." She blinks at the sound of her nickname, but I can't tell if it's a *how can you call me that* blink or a *how nice that we're pretending we're friends* blink. "I guess I'll skip the pleasantries."

As if either of us can be pleasant to the other for more than two minutes.

She stands and smooths her jeans. "I need your help."

That seems implausible. "With what?"

"A project."

I motion *go on*.

"You know how Frederick and I were a team?" she asks.

"Even after you broke up?"

“We had contracts to finish.”

That sounds ill-fated. I guess it was. Not that I can talk when it comes to bad decisions.

“Well, not anymore. He found a new lyricist.”

Sure, that makes sense. The guy wouldn't want to work with an ex forever. Not unless he thought he could win her back. Is that what happened? Did she leave him?

I need more information, but I can't ask Cassie—she'll get the wrong idea.

And I can't ask Daphne. She'll get an even more wrong idea. So I say something reasonable. Ish. “Where do I fit into that?”

“We had one more contract,” she says. “An up-and-coming artist who's going to get a ton of press. The label wants to make him happen. To position him as the male Taylor Swift.”

“Do people want a male Taylor Swift?”

“Of course.” Her voice brightens. Her eyes too. She shifts into that other Cassie, the one who comes alive when she talks about music. “Where's your history? That was the vibe of all the pop-rock on the radio in the aughts.”

It was, and that's her favorite genre, too. She'll do anything to nab an opportunity to emulate one of her muses. (Not that she'd ever admit she loves the lyrics written by toxic dudes who can't get over the fact their exes are having sex with someone else).

Does that make her an obnoxious hypocrite or an adorable contradiction?

An hour ago, I was certain she was the former. Now, I'm not sure.

“And you know I can write that in my sleep,” she says.

Absolutely. She’s talented, especially when it comes to that tongue-in-cheek stuff. Only an idiot would deny that.

“But I need someone to write the music.”

Oh. She doesn’t need me as an ex-friend or as a friend’s brother. She needs my skill. That makes sense. That’s easier than any of the other options. “You’re here because I’m the best songwriter you know?” I don’t mean to tease her, honestly. It’s a force of habit.

She replies instantly. It’s a habit for her too. “The best songwriter I know, who can’t keep a partner.”

Fair. But true for her too. “Remind me. How are you in this position?”

She bites her lip. For a second, it’s playful, like she likes teasing back. Then she shakes it off. “My ex—it doesn’t matter. I want this deal, Damon. That’s why I’m here. Not because I like you. Because I need the opportunity.” She looks me square in the eyes, all fire and passion. “Do you want me to stroke your ego?” she asks. “I will. I’ll get on my knees and beg.”

That sounds way too sexy on her lips. “Don’t get on your knees. I’ll get ideas.” I already have ideas. The image in my head is far too appealing—Cassie, pushing me onto the cream couch, dropping to her knees between my legs, wrapping her fingers around my thighs.

The flag is flying in five, four—

Shit. I try to find an unsexy thought. Say, Daphne’s expression if she found out I fucked her best friend. It’s enough to keep the denim in place.

Cassie's blush spreads to her chest, but she doesn't mention the sexual nature of my comment. "What about money? We'll probably make six-figures in royalties. Daphne says your parents are looking to sell this place."

And I won't have a place to live without money. It's not the most tactful point, but it's honest. I have to give her that. "That's it? You need me to write a few songs?" Something doesn't add up. One, she must be desperate if she's asking me instead of some other available songwriter. Two, why is she doing it in my living room? "You could ask over email."

"Well... there is one other thing." Hesitation drips into her voice, but she continues. "Frederick didn't relinquish the rights. We agreed. We'll both talk to the artist. Pitch our ideas. Pitch our team."

That's a little unusual, but it's not a huge deal. "So you need me to show up and look pretty?" I ask.

"Yes, but I don't need you to impress the artist. I need you to make goo-goo eyes at me."

What?

"The artist liked that Frederick and I were a couple."

Sure, it sounds cute, love songs by two people in love.

"And he still wants to work with a couple. So I..."

Oh. She's not here to work with me as a musician. She's here because she thinks I'll play this game with her. "You told your ex-boyfriend we're together?"

"A little."

"I'm your go-to fake-boyfriend?"

“You know me. I always love to make a deal with the devil.”

That’s almost clever. She can do better. But then she is desperate. Really desperate.

Would she actually get on her knees?

No. Cassie would never use sex as a trading card.

The porno-insanity fantasy is fucking with my head. Not that I’d accept. Even if Cass wasn’t Daphne’s friend or my long-time rival, that shit is fucked up.

There’s nothing hot about transactional sex, about women who only want to fuck you because you show up with the good stuff. It’s empty and sad and fake as fuck.

Like this idea. “You really think we can pretend we’re in love?”

“It’s only a few pitch meetings,” she says. “And then, if we do win the contract, we’ll have a songwriting weekend. At his place. Three days of back-to-back music and lyrics.”

That’s not a yes.

She doesn’t believe it either.

“All you have to do is pretend you want to kiss me for a few days,” she says.

Not a few days. A few weeks. Months, probably. These things always take longer than the management team expects.

And I don’t have to pretend. That’s the problem. I want to kiss Cassie.

The fact that she wants to slap me makes me want to kiss her more.

For the first time in forever, I feel something besides that empty sense of numb.

I feel possibility.

I feel the most dangerous thing in the world—

Hope.

I need that, but I need to be smart too. To make sure Daphne and I are on the same page about this. To make sure this is going to fuck up anything worse. “Let me sleep on it.”

“Is that a yes?”

“It’s late,” I say. “If you want to crash here, we can pick this up in the morning.”

“Sure, but do me one favor,” she says.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“Close the door next time.”

Chapter Four



Cassie

After I take a shower in the bathroom in the hall, I set up in the spare room, the one I used to call mine.

From the time I was eight to the time I was eighteen, I spent the summer at Daphne and Damon's house. The Webb family is friends with my family. Our parents worked together a long time ago. They stayed close. They're still close. Our parents still vacation together every year, just after Christmas.

Damon's dad is a songwriter. So he has the flexibility to babysit kids all summer. He was always here, all day, all night.

I still remember the three of us sitting on the couch in the living room, watching a cheesy sci-fi movie or listening to a new band. I remember sneaking to their dad's room to listen to him compose. Damon catching me, teasing me, asking me if I wanted to write a song with him.

Even though it's been years, I fall into the familiarity of the space right away. The nights in this bed, alone. The slumber parties in Daphne's room. The days by the pool or the beach.

And all that time with Damon.

We were both night owls, and Daphne was an early bird.

And once we started collaborating, we spent every spare minute together. We shared headphones, played each other our favorite songs, scribbled lyrics on scrap paper.

We just *worked* together. We fit together. We were almost as close as Daphne and I were.

He was never sweet, exactly, but he had a tender side. And with two years and six inches on me, he seemed impossibly mature and grown-up.

Then, something changed. I'm not sure what happened, exactly. It's not like there was one day when Damon woke up as an asshole. It was a little, every day. A hazy look in his eyes. A biting tone in his voice. A lack of interest in our work together.

Then I turned sixteen, and he kissed me—really, really kissed me—and told me he wanted something real with me, something big and important, and I thought I had him back. The Damon who wanted to work with me, who cared about protecting his sister, who knew what mattered.

I fell asleep in a dream. Finally, my best friend's gorgeous older brother wanted me back. Only, the next day, he didn't remember. Or maybe he changed his mind and pretended.

And that was it. The death knell. He never looked at me the same way after that. He never saw me as a friend again. Only an enemy.

He was different, too. He showed up at all of Daphne's celebrations with a buzz and a bad attitude. He didn't just tease me. He tried to hurt me.

I hurt him back. I won't lie.

I hated him for forgetting our kiss, for abandoning our friendship, for leaving my best friend alone. She needed him. She needed her older brother. I tried to show up for her, but it wasn't the same.

She doesn't share what goes on in her family with me. She's private that way. We talk about dates and work and life aspirations. Never about family.

Even though I try to avoid Damon, I see him all the time. He's just around. Until the last year or two, Daphne made an effort to invite him to dinner parties and picnics. Or maybe she kept inviting him and he stopped showing.

When did I last see him before this? All his tipsy barbs run together. The snarl on his beautiful face. The delight in his eyes, like he enjoys my pain, like he doesn't even notice how much his sister needs him.

But, hey, I'm not here to ask myself how Damon and I went from friends to enemies. I'm here to convince him to play my fake boyfriend. And that means appealing to his self-interest.

That's all he cares about now, what's best for him.

I unpack my clothes, arrange them in the sticker-covered dresser, then sit at the well-loved desk, and I try to find the thread of my thoughts. There's too much swirling inside me.

Not just my ex-boyfriend's betrayal. Or this opportunity to prove myself. Everything that led up to it.

We weren't having sex.

For months, we weren't having sex. At first, I thought I'd done something, hurt him somehow, turned him off. Then, I thought maybe it was normal. After all, no one keeps the spark alive forever.

He said it was stress.

Maybe it was.

But it was her too.

Not just the novelty of another person. The passion he felt for her. After all, he didn't say *I'm sorry, Cassie, I still love you.*

He said *I'm sorry, Cassie, I love her.*

The guy who knew me better than anyone. The guy who promised to love me forever. I shared so much with him, and still, he decided I wasn't soft enough, vulnerable enough, loving enough.

I take a deep breath and push an exhale through my lungs. Only the air isn't enough to soothe me. I need my true source of oxygen—music.

I sync my headphones, and I pick the perfect artist. A singer who does acoustic covers of Hole songs. There's something about her raw, wounded voice and the way she turns these aggressive riot grrrl songs into confessions of pain. She takes all that anger and lets it dissolve to show the pain beneath it.

She's brave. The sort of brave I want to be.

The thought of working with someone like her, who could take my words and add all this extra depth and emotion—

It's everything.

Writing is the only thing that keeps me sane, whether it's a journal entry or a work for hire song. I need all the opportunities I can find. I *really* need this one.

Right now, in the room where I spent a million summers, with the possibility of kissing Damon Webb hanging in the air —

My thoughts are a mess.

I scribble until my brain is empty, then I get up, get ready for bed, fall asleep in the white sheets.

And, sure, I dream about walking in on Damon naked. And, yes, in my dream, I join him in his bedroom, and he

orders me out of my clothes, and I wake up flushed and panting.

But I can get over that.

Even if I have to kiss him.

AFTER I MOVE THROUGH MY MORNING ROUTINE, I HEAD downstairs and check my texts. Daphne promises to stop by after lunch. She is not taking sides in whatever it is we're doing here, and she expects both of us to play nice. Or at least not murder each other.

Which gives me a few hours to convince Damon to go along with this plan. But what the hell does Damon actually want? There's money, here. There's success.

And there's music.

He cared about that once. There must be some part of him that still wants to fall into a melody. I just need to remind him.

Now, where the hell is he? There's no music upstairs. The TV is off. The piano is empty. And beautiful. Really, is there anything more beautiful?

The wind blows through the massive room, sending the smell of salt into my nostrils. And something else too. Chlorine.

Sure enough, I turn toward the backyard, and I see him lounging in the aqua water, all tall and tattooed and tempting. It should be illegal for someone so annoying to be so handsome. And broad.

When did he get so muscular? He has abs now. And that v-line at his hips is begging for my fingertips.

Shit.

I'm rhyming my attraction.

This is not an *I Want You* song. This is a game, and I'm winning.

I need to get my feelings in order. To put my hate and desire aside and focus on what matters, convincing him to play my fake boyfriend.

I take a deep breath and let out a steady exhale. I do the conscientious thing and fix coffee for both of us. He takes his black. I think. He can always add cream later. He can't take it away.

I pour the java into ceramic mugs and bring them outside.

Damon turns as I approach the pool. He looks me up and down, studying my boxer shorts and my oversized band shirt, and he smiles. "A friend of yours?"

Yes. I'm supporting a friend from college. She's got a great indie rock band. They're not taking over the airwaves, but they have a small, loyal fanbase. Why does he have to say it like I'm obnoxious for supporting a classmate? Is he that unaware of the concept of friendship? "Are you jealous?"

"Let me guess. She plays piano, and she sings about her broken heart?" He uses the same tone. The *you're a parody of yourself, Cassie Steele* tone.

A long time ago, I would have read affection in it. My best friend's older brother teasing me.

Now, I hear the judgment.

I try to push past it. I try to stay friendly. After all, I'm not here to tell him to fuck off. I'm here because I need his help.

It's horrible, but it's true.

I shrug as if I don't notice the sharpness in his voice. I sit in the lounge chair on the right, set our coffees on the ground, push his toward the pool.

He moves toward me. "She plays guitar and sings about her broken heart?"

Ugh. Why does he say it like she's just so pathetic for pouring her feelings into her songs? And it matters she's a woman. Of course. I talk without thinking. "As opposed to all those guys who never play guitar or sing about their broken hearts?"

Damon stops at the wall. He reaches for the coffee. "It's not an accusation."

"Tell that to your face." Ugh. Why is he so difficult!

"You don't like my face now?" He shoots me a wicked smile.

How about I sit on your face? Would that shut you up? Shit. No. I will not think sexy thoughts about Damon Webb. I will not. "You look like your dad. I like him."

He nods *sure, that's it*, confident, collected, cool as a cucumber. There are no signs of strain on his face the way there was last night. He's not the old friend who understands my pain. He's the asshole who lives to torment me.

"Have you been having dirty thoughts about my father?" He raises a brow, teasing. "What would Daphne say?"

"No, he's a billion years old," I say.

“A silver fox,” he says.

“Are *you* having dirty thoughts about your father?”

“Well, you know me. Just staring into the mirror every time I touch myself,” he says. “I look at him, and I see that sexy guy, only older.”

“Oh my god.” A laugh spills from my lips. “You did not just say that.”

“I didn’t mean it,” he says.

“Please.” I let my eyes meet his. They really are blue. A brilliant, gorgeous shade of blue. As dark and deep as the ocean. “We both know you only think of one person that way.”

“Myself?” he asks.

I nod.

“Well, yeah, of course.” He shoots me another wicked smile. “But I don’t watch myself in the mirror.”

“No?”

“No. Only on video.”

This time, I let out a full-on belly laugh. “You do not.”

“Is that a request for proof?” he asks. “I have copies.”

Somehow, I manage to contain my laughter. “Yes, that’s something I’d love to explain to my best friend. Oh, sure, I was watching your brother masturbate, but it was just because —”

“Because he’s the sexiest guy I ever met,” he finishes. “You can admit it.”

No comment. “Do women actually want these videos?”

“They’re for myself. Get with the bit, Cassie,” he says.

Right. He's joking. Everything is a joke to him. "But that part is true?"

"Is that a request?"

Nope. This is not a road I will go down. But it's not different for him. "Daphne would kill you."

"I didn't say I'd honor your request."

"Right. This is a bit?" I ask.

He nods.

"You're never serious. Everything is a bit or it's beyond your concern." It's frustrating. And it's hard to work with this attitude. If he doesn't care about anything, I don't have any cards to play.

"You could try it." He reaches for his coffee. "It's fun."

Sure, it's fun to pretend nothing matters. But it's empty too. Maybe that's all he is now. A bunch of ink and muscle without a heart underneath.

I watch as Damon brings the mug to his lips.

He inhales and lets out a moan that can only mean *yes, this is bliss*. Then he tilts the mug back, sips, sighs. "That's good. Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"Is that it? You made me coffee."

"It's a gesture." I am trying. He could try one percent.

He doesn't. He keeps the nothing is serious tone. "A bribe?"

"If that's what works," I say.

"I don't hate the idea."

My stomach flutters. My veins surge. Yes. A chance to win this opportunity. Whatever it takes. “What do you want? I’ll do anything.”

His eyes pass over me. It’s a quick thing, a habit maybe, but it’s undeniable. He heard *I’ll fuck you for it*. Or at least thought it.

I wouldn’t.

But the mental images are far too appealing.

Ahem. “How about this?” I need to persuade him with things he wants. Things he doesn’t already have. Deep down, the guy who wrote songs with me is still there, somewhere. “I’ll play you for it.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll pick a song. We see who plays it better. If I win, you agree to the deal.”

“If I win, you agree to my answer,” he says. “No second chances. No asking Daphne to mediate.”

That’s better than any offer I’m going to get. Still, I need a yes. “Is your answer no?” I ask.

“I haven’t decided yet,” he says.

Okay. That works. This is going to persuade him. “Piano or guitar?”

“Piano.”

Shit. He’s a better pianist. But then he’s a better guitarist too. I practice more. I practice harder. But I don’t have the natural talent he does. “How do you want to judge?”

“We’ll record the performances,” he says. “Do a blind score.”

“If we don’t agree?”

“I wouldn’t lie about music,” he says. “Would you?”

Chapter Five



Cassie

After I pick a song, Damon and I take turns practicing. Fifteen minutes each. I take the first fifteen. Lose myself in the music while he goes to the backyard and listens to the song on his headphones.

Back to Black is an Amy Winehouse song about hitting bottom after a breakup. After things ended with Frederick, I listened to it a million times.

I thought that meant I could ace this. But my hands are shaky. My breath is strained. I can't hear the notes, much less play them, without a knot in my throat.

Finally, I get through the song with minimal mistakes. I stand, shrug off my worry, move to the backyard.

Thankfully, Damon is now fully dressed. Tragically, he looks just as good in jeans and a t-shirt. Especially when he stands and stretches his arms over his head, pulling the cotton fabric up his torso, showing off all those inches of taut abs.

The devil is handsome. Everyone knows that.

I force an easy smile. "Your turn."

He meets me at the glass door, slides his headphones off his neck, and slips them onto mine. "Your turn." His fingers brush my neck as he pulls his hand away.

My stomach flutters. My body buzzes. There's tenderness in his touch. But that's a lie. A trick to knock me off my axis.

Even so, as I take a seat on the lounge chair and watch the sunlight bounce off the pool, I think about Damon. We spent

so many summer days here, at this very pool, with this very view. Back then, he was a human with a soul, a person who cared. We were both competitive swimmers. We both lived in the water.

He used to challenge me there, race me.

He always won, of course. He was taller, older, bigger. But he never acted like he was better because of it. Only that he knew I'd catch up one day.

When I look to the living room and watch him play, I see it. I see the guy who teased me about my dog-eared paperbacks. I see the guy who held my hand when I was too scared to run into the ocean. I see the guy who asked what I thought of the lyrics he was writing.

Then he finishes, and he stands, and he waves me over with a cocky grin, and he's back to the asshole who doesn't care about anything.

He's been this person for a long time. He's been MIA in Daphne's life for a long time. Everything else, I could forgive. But not that.

I stand, and I move into the house with steady steps. "Do you want to go first or second?" I pull out my cell and open the recording app.

"Ladies first." He stands and motions to the bench.

I slide onto the seat. I check the sheet music. I hit record. And I start.

After the first few notes, I fall into the melody. I forget I'm in the Webb's mansion in Malibu. I forget Damon is five feet away. I forget I'm playing to win.

This is my favorite place to be, in this beautiful space where it's only me and the music.

When I finish the song, I shift into my surroundings. The blue sky outside. The massive ceilings. And Damon Webb, standing in front of the cream couch, staring at me like I'm the only thing he wants.

There's no hint of teasing or torture in his eyes. Only the sort of pure, deep need that goes to his soul. The desire to connect, understand, lose yourself in a song that swallows you whole.

For a split second, his deep blue eyes fill with a mix of hurt and longing. Then he blinks, and he's back to the devil-may-care guy I know.

I stop the recording, shift off the bench, motion for him to sit. "Your turn."

He doesn't say anything as he takes a seat. He just looks to me, waits for me to hit the record button, begins.

The second his fingers hit the keys, he shifts to that other Damon. The one who hurts. Who shares poetry and asks if I hurt too.

He plays the song like it belongs to him. Like he knows every single note.

He doesn't know about romantic heartbreak, but I guess he knows plenty about drinking too much.

When he finishes, I pause the recording, and I find my footing. I let my sneakers sink into the hardwood floor. I let the warm ocean air fill my lungs.

I need him to agree. And he played well. Better than I expected. He's talented without trying. He's everything

without trying.

He's endlessly frustrating.

"How was that?" He shoots me a cocky smile.

My veins surge. My stomach flutters. There are too many signs of the guy I used to trust. I don't know what to do with it. "You want to judge first?"

He nods *sure*.

I rename the files *Star* and *Sun* and write a code in my notes app. I play his first.

He stands in place, listening carefully, letting every note flow through his ears. When he's assessed, he nods. "Play the next."

I do.

This time, his expression shifts. His eyes close. His brow softens. He's that other Damon again, the one who feels things, the one capable of compassion.

Maybe I can tap into that.

Maybe if I ask nicely, admit a little vulnerability, he'll actually agree.

I'm sure you have your reasons, but I need this. Please. I'm not dealing with this breakup. Everyone told me I was stupid to work with my boyfriend. How can I admit they're right? How can I admit my career is fucked without this opportunity? I want to succeed at something, for once.

By the time I form a coherent thought, the song is over, and Damon is still lost in the music.

"The second," he says.

Mine.

Thank god.

“Okay.” I take a deep breath and let out a steady exhale. Now, I need to prove I play the best to myself too. “My turn.”

His fingers brush mine as he takes the phone.

Again, my body buzzes. My fingers yearn to connect with his fingers. To touch other parts of his body. But that’s not about Damon. That’s about everything else.

I need to feel that connection again. Even if it’s with him.

I nod *let’s go*, close my eyes, and listen to the two performances.

The first is technically capable, but it lacks a certain flow.

The second misses a note or two, but it just *feels* right. It’s personal and honest the way the first isn’t.

“The second,” I say.

He smiles. “So you like my performance?”

Did I really hit all those notes? And fail to bring the emotion? “You picked mine.”

“That’s a draw,” he says. “So I’ll agree, but you have to honor my conditions.”

Conditions. So he’s going to say yes. “Anything.” I admit it. I’m desperate.

“Really? What if I say we have to fuck like a couple?”

“You wouldn’t.” It doesn’t sound that bad at the moment, to be honest. It sounds really hot, actually. There’s something about seeing him lost in the music that releases all my defenses and sends blood racing south.

“No. I wouldn’t.” His voice gets serious. “I want to clear it with Daphne.”

“Sure. Of course.”

“She needs to know this is fake,” he says. “I don’t want her thinking I took advantage of her best friend.”

“I don’t want her thinking I fucked her brother.”

“Perfect. Then we have a deal.” He offers his hand.

I shake. “Can we start now?”

“I’m ready when you are.”

“We need to kiss.” If we’re fake dating, we need to kiss. “We need to practice that. To make sure we’re convincing.”

“Sure, Cass. But it’s not a real kiss. It’s all fake. We both need to remember that.”

“I can. Can you?”

Chapter Six



Cassie

I 'm going to kiss Damon Webb.

Again.

Only it's different this time. This time, I know he isn't a soulful poet. This time, I know there's no heart of gold under his wounded facade.

This time, I know better.

Our kiss doesn't mean anything to him.

I repeat the words to myself again and again, but they sound less true every time. My body hums with nervous energy. My stomach flutters. My heart races.

How the hell am I supposed to survive kissing Damon Webb?

I shift my weight between my feet. Then, I force myself to stand firm. I need to project confidence. After all, I'm the one selling him on the idea. I'm the one determined to make this work.

He can walk.

I can't.

I need this job. Possible heartbreak, be damned.

With an easy smile and all the courage I have, I look into Damon's beautiful blue eyes. "How do you want to do this?"

He doesn't need to fake any courage. He's not moved. He shrugs, as if he can't believe I'm asking such a silly question,

and he takes another step toward me. “It’s a kiss, not a ballad. It’s not complicated.”

No. He has that backward. A ballad is easy. A basic chord progression, a clear emotional aim, a simple recording. I can write a ballad in my sleep. But a kiss?

A kiss involves another person. Putting trust in another person.

That’s a million times harder than writing a slow love song. “You’re a master kisser?”

He looks at me funny, like he doesn’t understand the question. “I’ve seen you with plenty of people, Cass. You’ve done a lot of kissing. More than I have.”

Probably. A lot of casual hookups lack in the lip-to-lip action. Or so I hear. Casual isn’t my thing. I tried after my first big breakup and I hated it. I fall for everyone I touch.

Which is another reason this is a bad idea. But, hey, I already decided not to worry about the possible heartbreak. I’m doing this. I’m kissing Damon Webb. Apparently, I’m teaching him lessons on how to kiss. Since he doesn’t understand this kind of intimacy.

I’m the expert in making out. “What kind of kiss is this supposed to be?” I ask.

His brow knits in confusion. His gaze fixes on the window. He doesn’t understand the question. “What kinds are there?” His voice is all curiosity.

Does he really not know? There are a million kinds of kisses, from a quick hello between friends to a passionate *I need to consume you* lip-locked, tongue swirling make-out session.

There's soft, slow, hard, fast, loving, hating, sexy, sexless.

Anything.

Everything.

I open my mouth to tease him, but for some reason, I can't find a joke. Damon is annoying, yes, and his inability to connect via mouth-to-mouth action is completely in character, but it's not funny. It's sad.

Does he even remember the last woman he fucked? Did he feel anything?

"Cass?" he asks. "Is it a complicated question?"

"Yes." I nod. "There are all sorts of kisses. They can mean anything, from I love you, to I hate you, to I'm going to take you right now, in front of everyone."

"There's no one here." He says it without any defense, but I hear the hesitation anyway.

He is afraid of this. Of real intimacy. Even if it is real fake intimacy.

"We could start with a peck," I say. "Something fast, without heat."

Damon's eyes flit to my mouth. He speaks with calm, even words, but his posture stays stiff. "Is that where we are, as a couple?"

"I don't know. Where are we?"

"You're the expert," he says.

"Let's start with this." Couples kiss. Even the couples who can't keep their hands off each other kiss in a loving way sometimes.

He nods *sure* and takes another step toward me. His next step is shaky.

He's nervous.

When did I last see Damon Webb nervous? When did I last see him sincere?

It's disarming.

"I can lead," I offer. After all, I'm the one who's been in relationships, the one who's been in love. I kissed Frederick a million times. The first time, it felt like a big deal. The second too. For a while, I felt the heat and affection and need in our kisses.

Then, it was just affection, but that grew and blossomed into something deep and pure. Love.

But how could something pure turn so ugly?

"Cass?" Damon takes another step toward me. "Are you okay?"

No. I'm supposed to set him at ease. I'm supposed to lead. I try to find something comforting to say. Nothing. So I go with a joke. "Thinking about other guys." It's true, and it's exactly what he needs to hear. This is fake. I don't really want him closer. He doesn't have to actually come closer.

"Not Freddy boy?" His nose scrunches in distaste.

My chest tenses. I don't want to think about him. I don't. But how can Damon judge me for it? "What's wrong with that?"

"Besides him fucking someone else?" he asks.

How does he know that? I didn't tell him. I told Daphne, yes, but she swore to secrecy. She wouldn't betray that.

He looks at me with pity, as if I'm pathetic for finding myself in the situation, as if I'm a loser for standing here, in the living room, begging him to play my fake boyfriend.

And, yes, I do want to make my ex jealous. I want him to seethe. I want him to go home and cry a million tears over me.

But this is about the job.

I need this fucking job.

I try to think of something to say to put us back on course, but Damon continues.

"He was all over the new girl's social media for months," he says. "They went official about two days after you two officially broke up."

"How do you know when we officially broke up?"

"You posted angry break-up lyrics on your Instagram for three weeks straight," he says.

"You check my Instagram every day?" Is he that interested in me? It's hard to imagine Damon sitting there, refreshing my profile. It's hard to envision him caring about anything I do.

"I looked last night," he says it casually, as if it means nothing that he scrolled through at least six months of my social media posts. And checked my ex-boyfriend's new account.

He's curious about me. Maybe it's so he can torture me more easily. Or maybe he still cares, deep down.

"And the pictures you've been posting." He shifts into his usual shit-stirring mode. Once again, he's the Damon Webb who never hurts. Once again, he's above caring. "A bunch on the edge of the shore. Or the one on top of a mountain. You might as well have written the lyrics to *Survivor* on those too."

“It’s an iconic song.” My chest warms. My fingers curl. I’m not sure if I’m angry or aroused. Both, maybe. I still like the way his attention feels. I hate that I like it, but I do. “And, yeah, I was hurt. Am I supposed to deny it?”

“You could have been more straight about it.”

“Damon Webb is giving me advice on emotional honesty?” I ask.

“An outside perspective. It looks like you’re trying to hide it.”

“And what would you do differently?”

“It works, partially,” he says. “That’s your brand, as a writer. The tongue-in-cheek thing. You would hide from the pain. But you should be more clever about it.”

He’s... right, actually. Fuck. Why is he so smart about music?

He smiles. “Did I nail it?”

“You’re good at this.”

“I know.”

“I’m glad we’re working together.”

His eyes meet mine. “You are trading up, sure.”

“Why do you dislike Frederick so much?”

“Huh?” he asks.

“What do you care if I’m with some guy who’s beneath me?”

“He’s not good enough for you, as a musician.”

A laugh spills from my lips. “Oh.” My laugh gets louder, bigger. Of course, Damon isn’t worried about me as a friend, a

fake girlfriend, or even a human being. Only as his competition. “For a second, I thought you cared.”

“You know I’m not capable of that.” He returns the teasing tone, but he doesn’t shake the nerves in his eyes. Even though we fit well in front of the piano, he’s scared to connect with me. Or maybe because we work together well.

He’s pushing me away on purpose.

But that doesn’t matter. We’re fake boyfriend and girlfriend. We don’t have to actually like each other. I don’t need to trust him. Not for this part.

“Stop stalling,” I say. “Unless you can’t handle a kiss.”

“I’m ready when you are.” He finds the confidence in his posture.

I don’t totally believe it, but I accept it at face value. I move toward Damon until I’m only a foot away, but it’s not quite right. It’s the wrong angle. “Let’s sit down.” I motion to the couch.

He moves around the cream leather and sits on the middle cushion.

I take the spot to the left of him. “We can pretend we’re talking to someone. Or watching something.” I motion to the blank TV screen.

“We could actually watch something,” he offers.

“We’ll spend so much time debating what we watch, we’ll forget to practice.”

“I’ll let you put on *The Matrix*.” The teasing tone returns to his voice, but it’s different this time. It’s an I like you kind of teasing. The way he teased me when we were kids. When

he had a heart of gold under the playboy facade. When he cared.

Maybe that guy is still there, deep down. Or at least he can fake it for long enough to secure this deal for us.

That's why I'm here; the six-figure contract. The stepping stone. The contract.

I remind myself again and again, but my body still doesn't get the message. The butterflies in my stomach go haywire. They're not nervous about convincing anyone we're in love.

They want to kiss Damon. Period. The end.

I need to find some sense. Somewhere. "We can't watch *The Matrix* without Daphne." See. There's the reason why we can't kiss for real. Because he's my best friend's older brother. Because it would make things weird between us, and she's the only person who's always been there for me.

He smiles, that old version of Damon, the one who charmed to delight rather than dick-around. "Right. You wouldn't want to watch it twice in a row."

"You're just jealous we don't always invite you."

He sinks into the familiar banter. "Yeah, I'd hate to miss hearing Morpheus lecture Neo about reality for the eight-millionth time." He smiles, pure Webb charm.

Fake or real, I don't know. Maybe he's already sinking into his role as my arm candy slash songwriting partner.

Maybe we're trading frenemy barbs.

Maybe he wants to have his way with me on the couch while we watch *The Matrix* trilogy.

It doesn't matter, really, as long as I know where we stand. Fake lovers, real creative partners.

I try on my role as his fictional girlfriend. I don't have to act any differently than I used to. I can tease him. I can hate him *and* want him. "Sure, you might not hate missing that, but we both know you taped Agent Smith's monologue about humans to your wall in high school."

He laughs. "I wrote it on the wall in sharpie."

My heart thuds against my chest. He has such a nice laugh. I want to hear it again. I want to hear it forever. I want to sit here and make him smile all day.

It's annoying, but it's useful, I guess.

"Oh, yes, that's so different," I say.

"Huge difference," he agrees.

My lips curl into a smile. The memory of Damon complaining about our movie marathons is fun. The thought of him reciting Agent Smith's monologue is even better. Of course, he'd latch on to the misanthropic rant about humanity's ills. It's such a high school thing to do. It's such a Damon Webb thing to do. "Is it still there?"

"Behind the bookshelf." He nods.

A million memories fill my mind. The Damon I used to know. The one who filled my days with promise. That's the guy I need to see him as now. A guy who fills my days with all sorts of beautiful things. "I want to see it after this."

"You just want an excuse to get in my bedroom."

"Really? I need an excuse?" My voice drops to something past flirty, something seductive. It's completely involuntary.

As is the desire racing through my body. I want him. I really do. But I can work with that. I should want my fake boyfriend.

“No.” He stares into my eyes with all that Damon Webb charm. “You have an open invitation.” His voice is seductive too.

I tell myself it’s part of our act, but my blush spreads to my chest anyway. My body surges with electricity. Then he turns so his leg brushes mine, and I’m on fire.

I want to touch him, kiss him, taste him. But this is pretend. It’s our *first* pretend kiss.

I need to get a fucking grip.

I look into his deep blue eyes. I bring my hand to his cheek. I lean closer.

And then I dissolve into the feeling of my lips against his.

A soft kiss. The sort of kiss people use to say *I love you*. It’s too much, too intimate, too close.

My desire to connect with him is overwhelming. I want to kiss him all night. I want to mount him. And I want to whisper secrets in his ear.

Casual has never worked for me. How the hell am I supposed to kiss him *and* stare into his eyes like I love him without falling for him for real?

It’s not enough he’s annoying and difficult.

Deep down, the guy who cares is there, somewhere, and my body is determined to find him.

I pull back before I fall over the edge. My eyes blink open. My gaze stays hazy. My words fall off my lips easily, like we’re in the middle of an actual seduction. “How was that?”

Satisfaction spreads over his face. His shoulders soften. His chest too. He looks at me like he loves me.

The kiss did something to him. Or he's that good at pretending. I'm not sure.

"How do we know if it looks real?" Damon asks.

I try to find my footing. A joke. I need to make a joke. "You could break out your camera. Record this." Only it doesn't come out as a barb. It sounds more like *I want to mount you on film, so we can watch it together later.*

Thankfully, he responds with his usual teasing tone. "I might not be able to control myself in front of a camera."

Fake. We're fake. And he's an asshole. All good things to remember. And the camera is a good idea. I pull out my cell phone and open Instagram. "We could make it a Story."

"So Frederick sees?"

Yes, of course. If Frederick doesn't believe this, he'll undermine me with it. If that makes him jealous—

Okay, so I want to make him jealous. Is that a crime? Anyone would be jealous of a kiss like that.

A fake kiss, I remind myself, but again, the logic fails to penetrate.

"So everyone sees." I stare at the screen to center myself. This is a mission with one goal—career success. Everything else is secondary. "If you're ready to make it official."

Damon swallows hard. "How about we get through a real kiss first?"

He's nervous. It does something to me. It makes it hard to concentrate on the task at hand. "That wasn't real?" I ask.

“A passionate kiss,” he says. “One that will convince everyone who sees we’re fucking like rabbits.”

Yes. Rabbits hopping all over each other. The two of us grinding on the couch, his hands on my chest, my lips on his neck, our bodies joining—

“That is what we’re selling, isn’t it?” he asks.

“We’re supposed to be in love.”

“Isn’t that your love language?” he asks. “Physical touch?”

How does he know that? “Maybe. What’s yours?”

“Let’s say it’s that.”

“Is it?” I ask.

“I’ve never been in love.” He doesn’t really answer the question.

But he’s right. It doesn’t matter how he really feels. Only what other people believe. And Frederick knows everything about how I love, how I write, how I fuck even.

We don’t have room for error.

“You and Frederick broke up six months ago.” His eyes fill with sincerity.

I don’t know what to do with it, so I nod. “Five months.” Five, but who’s counting? I nod.

“This isn’t a rebound. It’s the real thing.” Damon looks me in the eyes. “You took some time to heal, a few months on your own. Then you came to me, as a friend, for help with a project. And one thing led to another and...”

“We started kissing.” That’s the truth. I took time to heal, on my own, and I came to my frenemy Damon and begged him to play my boyfriend. That is a project. Only the way he

says it suggests an actual relationship. He's brilliant sometimes. "So we've only been dating for a few months."

"Two months." He nods. "Even though we've known each other forever, we still can't keep our hands off each other."

Yes. That's perfect. That's exactly what will make Frederick jealous enough to buy it. And it's what will sell the musician too. According to his reputation, he's a pretty typical twenty-something music industry guy.

He gets around.

He wants a reputation as a romantic, but deep down, he understands sex better than love.

Of course, we're still passionate. Of course, we still want to fuck every minute of every day. We're just too busy writing songs and whispering sweet nothings to fill every moment with sex. We need time for love too.

I meet Damon's gaze. "Show me."

Something in his posture shifts. He still loves to tease me. Only it's a whole other sort of teasing.

He places one hand on my thigh, just above my knee. He runs his thumb over the fabric of my jeans, tracing the seam of the denim, up and down, again and again.

He wraps his other hand around my neck. "You look hot as fuck in your jeans. Have I mentioned that recently?" There's no irony in his voice. None of his usual need to make my life difficult. Only pure, raw desire.

I fight my blush. "Not enough." I try to meet his confidence with my own, but I'm too overwhelmed. I'm melting.

Damon brings his lips to my ear and stage whispers, “I daydream about rolling them to your knees and flipping you over on the couch.”

“Are you going to say that in front of people?”

“Yeah,” he says. “Just like this. So it’s for us...” But other people can hear too.

Why is that so fucking hot? My blush deepens. My veins surge. I need to mount him. Now.

“Let’s give everyone a show they’ll enjoy, huh?” Damon runs his thumb over my temple. “Unless you aren’t game.”

“I’m game.” I’m way too game. I’m a puddle of pure, raw need. This is way too fucking sexy.

“Do you have a limit?” He drags his hand up my thigh a few inches.

I shake my head. “Use your best judgment.”

He nods and pulls my body into his. His lips brush mine. A soft kiss to start. The taste of mint ChapStick. And something under that, something I recognize as Damon.

His lips part.

Mine follow.

His tongue slips into my mouth and swirls around mine.

Damon groans against my lips as he slips his hand up my thigh. The gesture is firm and confident and sexy as hell.

But there’s something else too.

It’s fake.

Of course, it’s fake. This is all fake. But it’s fake in a deeper way. He’s giving his best seduction and it’s all

pretense.

Even so, when he pulls back, I need a moment to catch my breath. My head swims. My heart bounds. My body throbs. It doesn't feel any falseness. Only a desire to throw him on the bed and ride him like a pony.

So when he says, "Should we do that for the camera," I know I should say no.

But I don't.

I get my phone out; I angle the picture so the camera only sees the back of his head—more classy and subtle that way—and I kiss him again.

This time, he moves slower, softer. Like he loves me as much as he wants me. Like he needs to inhale every moment of my kiss.

His lips wrap around mine. Then, the gentle scrape of his teeth. A good move. But it doesn't feel like a move this time.

It feels honest. Real. Like he's really here with me.

This time, when he pulls back, I hide my blush behind my phone. I edit the clip so it's just right. Five seconds of our kiss, from my eyes on his to his lips around mine.

A tiny sliver of his face. Enough to catch his skin tone and hair, and even the tattoo on his bicep, but not enough for anyone to recognize him.

I add a caption.

What's better than mixing love and work and love?

"Are you sure?" I ask.

"Are you?" he asks.

I'm not, but I hit publish anyway.

And then it's officially unofficial.

Cassie and Damon, songwriting duo and power couple. A fake relationship with my worst enemy.

My entire career riding on a fake relationship with my worst enemy.

No problem.

Chapter Seven



Damon

For a few minutes, Cassie stares at her Instagram, waiting for someone to interact with her story.

A few friends like the post. Industry people.

And then, it happens.

WrongSaidFred likes your story.

Her ex is paying attention.

She smiles with triumph. Then she notices me watching, and she shrugs with feigned indifference. It isn't necessary. I judge her for plenty of things. Wanting to hurt her ex isn't one of them.

I did a little snooping last night. The details on her socials, and his, and rumors from a few friends. The guy was sleeping with someone else behind her back. And he's now working with the other woman.

What an asshole.

Don't get me wrong. I'm sure if he was still willing to work together, Cassie would suck it up and play ball. She'd break her own heart into a million pieces for a gig like this.

A month ago, I would have judged her for it. Now, I admire the determination. The strength.

Fuck knows, I can't face that kind of hurt.

If she wants to enjoy the fringe benefits of her ex-boyfriend's pain, who am I to deny her? There's something about the victory on her face.

She's not the perfect friend slash mentee slash songwriter slash good influence. She's as flawed as anyone. She struggles too.

I *know* she's human. I know she deals with shit too. I know everyone deals with their own shit. But I rarely feel it.

Mom is always on task. When he's not using, Dad channels his hurt into his music (and pretends like it's the only way he ever deals with his pain).

Daphne buries her frustration in her med school coursework.

And Cassie—

Cassie is always there, as my sister's best friend and a music lover. No matter what happens, she finds comfort between her headphones or with her pen in her hand.

She has that.

But she has this too; a petty desire to hurt someone who hurt her. A drive to win at all costs.

I don't relate, exactly. I used to love music the way she did. I used to believe it could save me.

The bottle erases all that shit.

Fuck. This is not the time to get mawkish. Cassie is right. I also need this opportunity. And the cash. This contract has the potential to pay my rent for the next five to ten years.

Hell, I probably need the babysitter too.

I just don't know how the fuck I'm going to manage any of it. The fake love or the real songwriting.

At least that's a problem for tomorrow. I push it aside as Cassie leads me through another set of fake boyfriend/

girlfriend photos.

A neck down shot on the couch (obviously for her spank bank). A mysterious silhouette in the backyard. And then the image that really captures Cassie Steele. A picture of her notebook and pen next to my guitar.

Because she is in it for the music.

Because that's where she wants the guy to feel jealous first. As an artist, not a boyfriend.

Is that how he felt? Did he stray because she stopped seeing him as a man, a lover, a friend?

It's no excuse. I do hate the motherfucker. He's even smugger than Cassie. And, sure, yeah, he's a good-looking guy, but he's a bore.

He can't dig deeper the way she can. He's afraid of it.

Not that I can talk at the moment. I'm sitting here on the couch, watching Cassie stare at her phone, trying desperately to think of the baggage in her life instead of the baggage in mine.

I guess that makes our fake relationship more plausible. I'm her type. Another smug musician who refuses to face the music.

Ironic.

The kind of clever line she'd write.

No. It's not witty enough for her. But at least I realize that. Her douchebag ex doesn't even appreciate her intellect or her sense of humor.

Cassie gets a text from Daphne, says goodbye, fixes coffee in the kitchen.

When my sister arrives, she and Cassie revert to their high school selves. They cozy up on the couch, watch *The Matrix* for the ten millionth time, and they talk about whatever the hell girls talk about on their own.

Makeup. Fashion. Guys. Sex.

Not that either of them has much to say on any subject. They're both single, and they're both married to the styles they adopted in high school. My sister wears the same pair of jeans and sneakers all year. When it's *really* hot, she trades the long pants for shorts and ditches the sweater, but she sticks to the same neutral palette.

Cassie still dresses like the rock 'n' roll babe she is. Converse or combat boots. Dark jeans. Band t-shirts and tight tank tops. Leather jacket. Black dresses.

Okay, maybe I have one too many mental images of Cassie in that satin dress. Maybe I wonder if she wears silk under her clothes too. If she matches her bra and panties—

I guess, as her fake boyfriend, I should have some idea what she wears under her clothes. At the very least, I need a vision in my head. As an actor.

Check.

Cassie, in only a scrap of black lace and combat boots, eyes lined with the same dark grey, lips wine-red, attention on me.

Fuck, I'm already hard. I close my eyes and attempt to conjure another image, but all my parts refuse. Cassie hates me, *and* she's off-limits, *and* I'm playing with danger, kissing a woman I absolutely cannot touch.

Every single element of that is hotter than the last. Or maybe her hate is the hottest. My self-destructive brain isn't

sure what comes out on top. As long as one of us does.

I want her any way I can have her. Every way I can have her.

Cassie, in only her combat boots, riding me on the cream leather couch.

Fuck me. I need to go upstairs and relieve this tension now. How is that even possible? I fucked myself three times yesterday. There's nothing else to do in this big, empty house.

It's only been, what, twelve hours, and I'm already raring to go. How the fuck am I supposed to kiss her and not touch her?

I do the indecent thing. I go to my room, close the shades, and I make myself comfortable. Then I hear my sister and Cassie laugh downstairs, and I can't do it.

No voluntary thoughts of Cassie naked. Not while I have my hand around my dick, at the very least. And absolutely, positively, no thoughts of Cassie's hands around my dick. Not to mention her lips or—

Fuck me twice. I'm hard enough to cut granite.

I open my laptop for a visual distraction. One that will keep my thoughts elsewhere, even if that means indulging in some really fake shit.

My hands take over for me.

For once, they do something smart. I type the artist's name into the search bar and pull up his last album.

Instead of fucking myself, literally or figuratively, I research the project. I listen to the artist's last album. I sketch a few notes on his musical style.

For the first time in ages, I fall into that place where the world makes sense, where it's only me and melody.

Then the itch sets in. The desire to drink. Because the warm chemical numb makes it easier to access places that hurt.

How the fuck am I supposed to stay sober and write music?

It's impossible.

Thankfully, my sister interrupts before I can examine it too closely.

She knocks on my door and asks, "Are you decent?"

If it was Cassie, I'd tease *when have I ever been decent?* But with my sister, that's weird. "Yeah. Come in."

Daphne opens the door, steps inside, surveys the room. "Just like old times." When she smiles, I see the younger version of her. The teenager with long light hair and stick-figure legs and hope in her eyes. The kid sister who still believed in me.

It feels good. Like old times. Daphne, looking for the best in me. Daphne and Cassie hanging in the living room without a care while I perfect my art.

"Do you think Dad did this?" Daphne motions to the guitar in my lap. Then to the bookshelf of *Star Wars* extended universe novels. For some reason, he keeps the books here instead of donating them to a used bookstore. Something about how they brought him and Mom together.

Do I think Dad did *this*? Depends on the *this*.

Did he sit in his room and play guitar? Probably.

Did he stare out the window, wondering what it would feel like to sink in the Pacific and never come up for air?

That too.

Did he pace around the room, crawling out of his skin, desperate to numb the ugly thoughts in his head?

Absolutely.

Did he drown that feeling in whatever warm chemical high he could find?

Obviously.

I don't have the, uh, softness for Dad that Daphne does. She was younger when he relapsed the first time. She didn't see it. She didn't realize it almost killed Mom.

She saw the recovery. The second time too. She learned people can grow and change and improve.

I learned no matter how hard you try, you fuck up.

But, hey, I'm not drowning in a bottle. I'm here. I'm trying. And I'm fucking glad she believes I can do better. At least one of us does.

She sees this with a more even view. She tells me a lot is genetic. The predisposition to depression and alcoholism. There are a lot of morose addicts on Dad's side of the family.

On Mom's side, it's different. Medical professionals from here to Hippocrates. People who work out their shit via work. People like Daphne.

Once upon a time, I was jealous she knew how to cope. Now, I'm glad she's okay. Now, I realize she didn't have a choice. She had to learn to hold herself together. Because between me and Dad, there was no space for her to fuck up.

I've been drinking too much since she was a teenager. I ruined her sixteenth birthday party. Her graduation. Her twenty-first.

The indirect effects were worse. The romantic relationships that didn't work out. The choice to attend UCLA instead of an Ivy (or even UC Berkeley). The hours she spent tossing and turning, wondering if she'd get a call from the ER. Or the morgue.

I did that to her.

I hate that I did that to her. I look at her, and I see the pain on her face, and I *know* I hurt her in ways she shouldn't have to forgive.

It's easier to talk to Cassie. There's no room to disappoint someone who expects you to fuck up.

"Damon? Are you there?" Daphne asks.

Right. We're talking. I'm supposed to communicate with her. "I'm here."

"You and Cassie seem pretty friendly," she says.

"How much did she tell you?"

"Enough," Daphne asks. "Are you sure it's a good idea?"

Of course not, but who's sure of anything? "Which part?" I ask.

"The project is probably good for you. And Cassie doesn't drink much. But..." She looks me in the eyes, all sisterly concern. "Are you two really going to pretend you're a couple?"

"Is it that implausible?"

“That the two of you are dating? No. Of course not. You’re handsome. She’s talented. You both look like you’ll kill anyone who touches your headphones.”

“I thought that was just Cassie.”

“It’s more obvious on her, but I see it in your eyes too.”

My chest warms. My sister sees my love of music. It’s the weirdest place to find peace. Or maybe the most normal. I don’t know anymore.

“You could work well together, but...”

But a million things. She’ll kill me if I hurt her friend. Cassie needs someone kinder than me. I’m not ready to face the metaphorical or literal music.

She picks one I don’t expect. “She doesn’t know about your sobriety.” She doesn’t add *you should tell your friends*. We both know her stance there.

I’m glad she doesn’t get it. I’m glad she inherited Mom’s tendency to bury her pain in work rather than Dad’s tendency to pump heroin into a vein.

“I won’t tell her, but... do you think it will be a problem?” she asks. “Will this make it harder?”

“No,” I lie.

“Do you promise?” Pain fills her blue eyes. She looks like the exact mix of Mom and Dad. She has Dad’s blue eyes and Mom’s sharp features. They’re both tall, smart, and tough. “I can’t lose you, Damon. I don’t know what I’ll do if...” She can’t say it. That’s not like her.

Daphne is a future doctor. She knows her way around medical terms. She lives with a certain familiarity toward the subject of death. But even she can’t say *if next time you suffer*

from alcohol poisoning, you don't get to the ER in time. If next time, your heart stops in your sleep. Or you get into a car and drive off a cliff. Or you asphyxiate. That's how a lot of people go.

She doesn't bring up the incident that sent me into rehab. The hotel staffer who found me drunk in someone else's room. The blood alcohol level high enough to kill me. The doctor's warning I'm likely to die the next time this happens.

I don't mention it either. I'm not ready. I knew I had a problem, but I thought I had it under control. I didn't.

I don't know how to comfort my sister, to promise her it won't happen again, so I say, "I know."

"Cass has been staying with her parents," she says. "Do you think you should offer her a room here?"

Huh?

"It's a big place," she says. "And it could be good for you to have someone around."

It could. It would. Probably, I need a sobriety companion. An actual babysitter. But I don't say that. I say the wrong thing. "You don't trust me?"

"I do."

My shoulders soften. My throat relaxes. All those ugly thoughts screaming *you're a piece of shit* slow down. Her trust is the only thing I want. It outshines everything else. "Thanks."

"She needs it too," Daphne says. "I mean, you know her parents. Her dad especially."

Her dad hates me, yeah. But, of course, that's not what she's talking about. The world doesn't revolve around me.

Cassie's dad is uptight about addiction... and everything else. He pretends he's a relaxed guy, but he's high-strung. He works too much. He expects a lot from his kids.

But then Cassie is a model daughter. It's hard to imagine she's ever disappointed her parents.

"He's difficult, sure." That doesn't mean she should stay here. That's a bad idea for both of us.

"What if you had to live with Mom and Dad?" she asks.

"I have lived with Mom and Dad." I'm in their house right now. It's just this is their summer house. At any minute, they could decide to come here to crash my non-party.

"Exactly."

Point taken. But—"Cassie hates me. She'd rather stay with her parents."

"Aren't you working together?" Daphne asks. "It's kind of a romantic idea, isn't it? Locking yourselves in a house together until you finish a project?"

If you've never tried it, yeah, it sounds fun. In reality? Not so much. But I appreciate Daphne's passion. She loves music even though she doesn't know anything about it. "I'll consider it. Really."

She nods with understanding.

I don't add *the thing is, Cassie is way too sexy, and I don't trust myself around her*. "She can stay another night if she wants."

"Of course she can. We're having a slumber party. Do you want to join for ice cream or boy talk?"

“Which one is the part where you watch the rest of *The Matrix* trilogy?”

“All of it.” Daphne laughs, and for a minute, things are easy again. We’re kids without all these big, heavy problems. Then she shifts to the sister who’s afraid I’m about to fall off a cliff. “Did you start the song?”

“It’s an album,” I say. “And we have to pitch our take first. Then, we have to convince the artist to hire us. Then we’re going to write at his house all weekend.” Most likely, we’ll put together a few songs before the pitch, then another before the weekend. We need to go in prepared. But we need to agree on a vision. “But, yeah, I started researching his work.”

My sister glances at the guitar on the bed. “How come you inherited all the musical talent?”

Because I also inherited Dad’s fucked-up brain. But I’m not going there. No, if I want to convince my sister I can handle this ruse slash creative team-up, I need to keep the conversation light. “Cause you got the good looks.”

“Oh yeah, women hate tall guys. And those blue eyes.” She sticks out her tongue in a gesture of mock disgust. “The color of the ocean. Gross. Right?”

“The muscles too.” I nod. “They say it’s too much.”

She smiles, but there’s a sadness to it. She can’t quite fall into our usual sibling banter. “Are you ready for dinner? Cass made lasagna.”

“And here I thought you were going to cook.”

She laughs. “Can you imagine?” She shakes her head *the horror*. She also inherited Mom’s talent in the kitchen (none) while I got Dad’s (medium). “Will you cook for her if she stays?”

“If she stays, sure, but she’s a better cook.”

Daphne looks around the room carefully, memorizing the place, comparing it to the way it used to be. Then, she looks me in the eyes, and she smiles a real, pure smile. “I am proud of you, Damon. For trying to help someone who needs it. And I do appreciate you doing my best friend a favor. Really. Just promise me one thing.”

“Yeah?” I ask.

“Don’t fuck her.”

Chapter Eight



Damon

After I wash up, I head downstairs and find Cassie and Daphne at the dinner table discussing *The Matrix* as if they haven't seen it a billion times.

Of course, they don't focus on the good stuff, the rants about the evil of the human species, or even the need for humans to follow our baser instincts, if we really want to stay human.

Instead, they swoon over the romance of Neo and Trinity's death-defying, world-saving love. Which is weird. Neither of them is remotely romantic.

"Smells great." I force a compliment from my tongue. It does smell great. I just feel weird giving Cassie a compliment without sarcasm. As her fake boyfriend, I need to get used to it. "Thanks for cooking."

She looks at me like I grew a second head, but she slips into character quickly. Sorta. "Is that good manners from Damon Webb? I didn't realize a fake relationship led to a personality switch."

"I'm a gentleman," I say.

"You always make sure a lady comes first?" Cassie teases.

"Gross." Daphne's nose scrunches. "I guess it's realistic new couple behavior..." She shakes her head. "So you're really doing this?"

Cassie nods.

I do too.

“Can you at least keep it PG for my sake?” Daphne shoots me a look that says *I hope you know what you’re doing*.

Or maybe I’m projecting.

Either way, I need to be smart about this. To play my part without catching feelings. Or, at least, without fucking Cass.

I push the concern aside and slip into my role as fake boyfriend. “I’ll do my best, but no promises.” The words feel easy. Too easy. I keep thinking about Cassie naked. I keep picturing her spread over my bed, lips parting with a groan, eyes rolling back in her head.

Sex. That’s all it is. Dirty fantasies.

Only that’s not all it is. There’s more. Images of Cassie sitting next to me on the bed, resting her head on my shoulder, listening to me play the guitar.

Cassie and I lying together under the covers, trading secrets.

I want to know what’s in her head, the way I did when I was fourteen. I imagined the two of us as a real, happy couple.

I’ve never had that with anyone. I’ve never tried, really.

I’m twenty-eight, and I’ve never loved anyone or invited anyone to love me. I’m twenty-eight, and I’m still imagining a relationship the way I did when I was fourteen.

Is that progress or regression? I don’t know. But I know one thing.

I want her.

Because she’s difficult and bossy and stubborn and beautiful and determined.

I sit at the long dining table next to my sister. She's on the side closer to the piano. Cassie is sitting opposite her, so she has a prime view of the ivory keys.

Usually, the reminder of her obsession with music fills me with irritation. Envy, even. It's easy for her. It's not fair.

The jealousy flares in my stomach, but this time, it doesn't fade to irritation. It shifts into something much scarier. Pride.

Cassie loves music with her entire heart.

That's hard to do.

And it's good for me. As a human being, an artist, a career musician, a fake boyfriend. Her passion makes me look passionate. My parents won't be excited I'm in a relationship this quickly, but they feel the same way Daphne does.

Cassie is a good influence.

She doesn't drink; she doesn't party; she works out her pain via her passion for words and melody.

If I'm her boyfriend, I must be taking my work seriously, and that means I'm taking my sobriety seriously.

There's a certain logic.

And there's truth too. I want to take my career seriously. I want to be an in-demand songwriter. I want to feel the passion Cassie does, and I want the steady income stream from regular gigs and residuals.

She is right.

I can't crash at my parents' summer house forever. I can't hide from the world forever. I can't spend every day with *don't drink* as my primary focus.

Eventually, I need an actual life with goals and friends and relationships. Eventually, I need more than Daphne's trust and space without my parents' disappointment.

But one thing at a time. One day at a time. I've survived most of this one. Only a few hours to go.

Really, it's a beautiful night. The midnight-blue sky is dotted with stars. Tiny specs of light against the darkness. That's a metaphor, the kind she'd use in a song. No. That's too cheesy for her.

She'd use it in a pop song, sure—she's willing to do what the job takes—but she's more clever, when she has the room for it.

“Is this what you're going for?” Daphne interrupts my messy thoughts with a tap on the arm. “The quiet, brooding type?”

“Maybe... or maybe he's an agent.” Cassie shifts away from the topic of our fake relationship to their favorite topic, sci-fi movies. She refers to the villains in *The Matrix*, the computer programs that take over humans in the simulation. “Maybe the program glitched.”

“What do you think, Damon?” Daphne follows Cassie's lead, happy to move away from sensitive issues like deception, sex, love. “Do you crave pasta or electricity?”

“Does not compute.” I play their game. Easy is better. Jokes are better. “I mean, humans enjoy carbohydrates. Of course, as a human, I prefer pasta.”

“I buy it.” Daphne smiles with an ease I haven't seen in ages.

Then Cassie laughs and warmth fills the air.

It does things to me. Things inappropriate for the dinner table. Things I can't handle. It threatens to melt the ice around my heart.

She's just so fucking... Cassie.

Daphne is right. It's easier having someone here, having a distraction. If I can find a way to contain the lust racing through my veins. And the warmth spreading through my body.

At best, Cassie and I are frenemies. At best, we leave this full-blown friends. There's no room for the sort of affection that leads to whispering sweet nothings under the stars.

Daphne plates the food—big cheesy squares of lasagna—and passes them around the table. Cassie, me, her. She motions to the water glasses in front of each of us. “I told Cassie Mom and Dad don't keep alcohol here. So there's no wine to go with dinner.” Her expression stays neutral, but I feel the charge under it. *Don't make me into a liar. Don't make this complicated.*

It's already complicated, though. That's what other people don't get.

In the abstract, it's simple. I don't ingest mind-altering substances. Nothing stronger than caffeine.

But going back to any sort of life without that coping mechanism? That's not simple or easy.

And expecting me to share *by the way, I'm an alcoholic, and I finally realized it* with everyone I know—

That's like asking Daphne to introduce herself to everyone with *I'm Daphne Webb and I'm still not over my ex-boyfriend. We tried to make it work long distance, but it just didn't because...*

I don't know, actually. She never told me. We never talked about it. I wasn't there for her. That's most of it.

But some of it is her too. She doesn't walk around with her scars on display. She doesn't invite everyone she knows to pick at the scab.

Why should I, just because my affliction involves a substance everyone pretends it's normal to abuse?

"Really?" Cassie looks at me with apprehension. "No secret bottles of whiskey in the sock drawer?"

There's no accusation in her voice, but I feel the implication anyway. This is who I am to everyone I know. The guy who doesn't know his limits.

Cassie knew me when I was a kid, before I was that guy, but she still doesn't see the Damon who loved music first.

She sees the asshole with a problem.

My throat tightens. My eyes go to my sister. I don't know what I expect her to say anymore.

I'm asking her to split her loyalty. It's not fair. I know that. I just don't know how to do anything else.

Daphne looks back at me, frustration in her dark eyes. She nods *okay*, and I know exactly what she means. It's like when we were kids and we could transmit anything via a single glance. We had the sorta sibling telepathy people only expect in twins.

She doesn't want to lie to her friend, and she won't lie if she's asked directly, but she'll cover for now.

Daphne turns her attention to Cassie. She shrugs, as if the topic is casual, but she doesn't quite sell it. "I know it's hard to believe," Daphne says, "but Damon follows the rules now."

“That is hard to believe.” Cassie looks between us with suspicion in her green eyes. Because that’s the situation. The possibility of Damon Webb not drinking—unlikely. My sister selling it as casual—equally unlikely.

Daphne leans into the reality of the situation. “It was one of Mom and Dad’s terms for him staying here. No alcohol in the house. And he promised me he’d follow it.”

That’s true. All of it is true. Mom and Dad don’t keep alcohol in either of their homes (they’re rich enough to have more than two, but they “only” have their place in Malibu Hills and this place, which Dad inherited from his uncle. I think that’s why they haven’t sold it. Because it’s supposed to be a family place. It’s supposed to be ours.

I did promise Daphne I’d stay clean. I meant it. I’m trying, really. There’s no whiskey under the bed. There’s no gin in the freezer. There’s no rum in the toilet tank.

“You can search the house if you want,” I offer. It’s the wrong move. Too defensive. Too obvious. I might as well scream *this is a big deal. Everything is different. I can’t handle any of it.*

“No thanks.” Cassie smiles as she shifts to a joke. “I don’t want to find your porn collection.”

I’m not sure if it means she trusts me or she doesn’t care, but I take the win. I latch on to the opportunity to move to any other subject.

Really, I’d rather list the times I had whiskey dick. Though that’s not exactly a different subject. Sex and booze are all tangled for me. The whiskey dick and the whiskey dicking someone I barely knew.

Fuck. What were we saying?

Porn jokes. Right. I find my typical *I don't give a fuck* smile and my best troublemaking tone. “Oh, that’s all out in the open.”

“Ew.” Daphne’s nose scrunches. The disgust distracts her. Or maybe she’s as happy to change the subject as I am.

She must be tired of discussing Damon Webb, alcoholic fuckup too. She’s been doing it for as long as I have.

Cassie cuts a slice of her lasagna, oblivious to the Webb family drama. “He watches videos of himself.”

“Only self-love,” I say.

“Self-flagellation.” Cassie’s laugh nearly breaks the tension in the air. She’s in her element here, teasing me.

And I’m in my element teasing her back. But not in front of my sister. I owe her that much. “We won’t torture you with details though, Daph.”

“I swear, you are as annoying as a real couple.” Daphne doesn’t say *please don't fuck her* again, but it fills the air anyway.

Or maybe that’s me.

Maybe I’m unable to sit three feet from Cassie without thinking of her body tangled up in mine.

Or at the very least, hearing her groan. The one she makes over coffee, dinner, music. The one that means *yes, exactly like this, always, forever*.

Chapter Nine



Damon

After dinner, I retire to my room, try to slip into my usual routine of reading before bed. Only the mystery doesn't grab my attention. My thoughts keep going back to Cassie.

For the first time in a long time, I want to spend time with someone.

I didn't know any of my old friends. Not really. Alcohol bridged the gap between us. Without the warm chemical numb, we don't have anything to say to each other.

Cassie may not like me, but she knows me. And I know her. All this time, I found her annoying as fuck, and all because I know her so well.

At least, I thought I did.

She's not nearly as pompous and phony as she is in my head.

She's passionate and authentic and way too sexy. But I can ignore that part. I think.

I look out my bedroom window. See Cassie in the clear blue water of the pool. She looks right there, surrounded by the tiny dots of stars in the indigo sky, lit from the aquamarine below her.

She's glowing.

From the pool lights, yeah, but from something inside her too. I want that light. I need it.

I want to fuck her, yeah.

But the really scary thing is how much I want to talk to her.

CASSIE IS STANDING IN THE MIDDLE OF THE POOL IN A SKIMPY black bikini. The kind with thin straps barely holding the fabric together. The tough yet sexy outfit suits her. And the skin on display.

Fuck me.

Sculpted shoulders, perky tits, curvy legs, the lyrics tattooed to her ribs—

I would have cursed her as a cliché last month.

Now, I want to trace the lines. And, yeah, I still want to tease her about it, but I want to follow it up with a whole lot of teasing.

Nope. Not going there. Cassie is gorgeous. That doesn't mean I need to indulge my fantasies of untying her swimsuit top and tasting her nipples.

Cassie shoots me a curious look as I set my towel and water bottle on a lounge chair. She turns away from me and dives under the surface, making shapes under water, exploring every inch of the space.

After a few minutes, she surfaces and moves to the edge, the one that looks out on the ocean. It's not an infinity pool. We're not pretending we're on the verge of falling into the ocean.

I ditch my t-shirt and slip into the water.

Cassie stares at the ocean for a long time. It's too dark for me to make out her expression, but I can sense something inside her, that same need for calm, peace, distraction.

Maybe she hates me because she sees herself in me.

Or maybe I'm an egotistical jackass.

Probably that.

As if on cue, she looks to me, and she speaks in a soft voice, "Daph wanted to do a slumber party, but she fell asleep."

"That sounds like her." My sister has always been an early riser. That was why Cassie and I started talking, at first. Because she wanted to stay with Daphne all summer, and Daphne fell asleep hours before she did.

Cassie smiles at the shared memory of my sister. "She sorta threw out the idea of me staying here, but I wasn't going to ask."

"You'd kill me, yeah." And I'd die of blue balls.

She nods. "Did she try to sell you on the romance of locking yourself in a room to work on a project too?"

"She did." A laugh spills from my lips. It's easy. The first easy thing I've felt in hours. "That's how you know she's not an artist."

"And that's what Bryce is doing, anyway. If we get the job," she says. "Do you know the timeline?"

"More or less."

She reminds me of the details. A pitch session this week. A follow-up next. Then, a weekend of work with the artist for the winning team.

The artist and his producer are confident they can get most of the work done during those intense three days, but Cassie and I know better. It's more likely we'll work hard all weekend, then come in for a few more sessions over the next month or two.

People are always throwing out tracks, finding new ones, shifting to meet trends and expectations of people in charge. There's very little of the emotional arc Cassie loves in an album. Artists aren't telling a story with their songs. They're jamming a bunch of singles together.

This guy says he wants a story, but a lot of artists say a lot of things.

For a few minutes, our conversation feels like old times. We trade thoughts on the appropriate musical and lyrical style. Then, we shift into other, familiar dynamics.

Her very public love of self-destructive chanteuses like Amy Winehouse and Fiona Apple. Her very secret passion for early and mid two thousand pop punk.

Cassie Steele, the diehard feminist, the girl who will take any opportunity to insist Hole is better than Nirvana (really, she stopped a friend of mine at a party once), loves songs by men who call their ex-girlfriends sluts for sleeping with a new man.

She claims she loves the music with a sense of irony. She's laughing at the guys, inside, even if she used to relate to a more generalized hurt, even if she's just as angry as they are, for just as unjustified reasons.

No, I'm sure her reasons are a lot better.

There's really nothing defensible about a guy blaming his ex-girlfriend for every single fault in their relationship. Even if

the guys have a clever way of saying it. Even if she cheated.

But then Cassie would relate to that at the moment. Since her ex cheated. Does she blame him for everything too? Or does she take responsibility?

Fuck if I know how relationships work.

She makes fun of my love of grunge music and my so-called hatred of my dad's music. I hate it a lot for a guy with a similar style. But maybe that's genetic too.

"At least we know we're convincing here." She leans against the side of the pool with a laugh. "We debate music like a real team."

"A real couple."

She shakes her head. "Frederick and I didn't banter like this."

Because they really agreed? That's hard to imagine. But it's harder to imagine Cassie biting her tongue. "Other people do."

"Maybe."

I arch a brow, the way I did when we were kids, inviting her to challenge me.

For the first time in a long time, she does. "Usually, women start listening to the music their boyfriends like."

"You've done this?"

She nods.

"No." I shake my head. "I don't believe it." Really, I can't see it. Cassie never lets anything get in between her and her music. How could she stay in a relationship that got between her and her tunes?

“It’s happened.”

“Wait. Is there a loophole here? Like he loved Garbage and you pretended you weren’t already a fan?”

“No,” she says. “He loved Mumford and Sons, and I made jokes to Daphne about the brothers double-teaming me.” She shoots me a *get real* look.

But I don’t. I say, “That’s hot,” and I let the mental image bloom. Cassie and two hipster musicians. Only they’re in hoodies and jeans, with generic hipster beards (no idea what the dudes look like), and she’s on the bed in only her combat boots.

And then they’re gone.

And I’m the one in the room with her, and we’re in my bed upstairs.

We could go there. We could fuck, right now. We could even stay quiet enough my sister wouldn’t hear. Or play music loud enough to cover it.

This is restricted airspace. The enemy will shoot in three, two, one—

“I see you more as a Belle and Sebastian kind of girl,” I say.

“Because there’s a girl in the band?” she asks.

“No.” Well, maybe. “You do love a clever woman.”

“Oh my god, Damon, you didn’t say anything stupid when I had my first girlfriend. You wait until now?” She shoots me a look I don’t expect from her—disappointment.

It’s played up, yeah. It’s covered in an over-the-top annoyance. But it’s there too.

She expected better of me. Maybe for the first time in years.

Somewhere deep down, she wants to trust me again. Or at least to find me tolerable.

Truth be told, I forgot about Cassie's girlfriend. I forgot about the months she spent pinning rainbow flags on everything she owned.

I was already drinking too much to notice then.

So, yeah, I didn't make a big deal of it, but I did say some stupid shit to some friends about wanting to watch Cassie with her girlfriend.

Because even though I do understand the appeal of that common male fantasy, I don't share it.

I want her all for myself.

Ahem.

This is not the right wardrobe for these thoughts. There's nowhere to hide my interest in a fucking swimsuit.

"You're right. It's stupid. You wouldn't have a threesome," I say.

Instantly, her cheeks flush, her eyes turn down, her chest caves. She's embarrassed.

"No fucking way," I say.

"No, what?"

"You had a threesome?"

"Like you haven't had a threesome." She shrugs as if she's not bothered by the revelation, but she doesn't sell it. "Like you think they're a big deal."

“I haven’t,” I say.

Surprise spreads over her expression. “Really?”

I nod.

“But you sleep with a new girl every three days?”

“Sure, my relationships only last three days.” Not in a row, but yeah, it’s pretty rare I see anyone more than three times. I might as well wear the label of slut. Or womanizer even. The truth is sadder; neither of us is sober enough to connect to another human, much less savor the sensation. “But I only have a new one every—”

“Four days?”

Right. That’s who I am. The alcoholic party boy. And I can’t explain why it isn’t true anymore. “Please. Five.”

She laughs that easy *you’re so ridiculous* laugh. The way she laughed at me a long time ago. “I guess, if we really are boyfriend and girlfriend, we need to get our stories straight.”

“Oh, we’ve had a threesome?” I ask.

“Absolutely not.” Her voice is firm. Hurt even.

I almost come back with sass, but something stops me. I don’t want to hurt her. I want to listen, understand. “What happened?”

“Huh?”

“Something happened,” I say. “Something that still bothers you.”

“Damon, let’s not.”

“Not what?” I ask.

“Pretend like we’re confidants.” Her voice stays firm. “You hate me. I hate you. We have great hate sex, as far as anyone else knows. The rest, we can keep private.”

“No.”

Her brow furrows. “What do you mean, no?”

I mean, I’m still thinking about our kiss. I want to kiss her again. I want to take her to my bed and kiss her forever. And I mean kiss. Yeah, I want to fuck her—now—but I want to kiss her more. There’s something wrong with me. But there’s a logic too. “You begged me to do this.”

She nods, sure.

“I’m doing it right.”

Cassie stares back at me.

“We’re in love, as far as anyone else knows.”

“We’re pretending.”

Of course, we’re pretending, but—“The best lies are based on the truth.”

“Right. The story we’re selling is true.”

“And, as your boyfriend, I’d be there to listen when you’re hurt.”

“What’s true about that?”

“Whatever this is, it’s still bothering you. You would have told me about it.”

“But that isn’t true.” She stares into my eyes. “I don’t trust you.”

“You trust me enough to ask me to do this.”

“I didn’t have another option,” she says.

“Even so,” I say.

She fights a frown.

“Did it happen with Frederick?” I ask.

“What’s the difference?”

“It might help our ruse.”

“How?” she asks.

“We can use it to fuck with him,” I say.

She swallows hard. She wants to fuck with him. She wants the job first, but she wants to hurt him too.

I get it. I want to hurt him. I hate him for hurting her.

I’m not sure where I get off, hating the bastard for hurting my frenemy, but, hey, I’m not supposed to get off anyway.

“We don’t need to trade sexual histories,” I say. “It’s not like you have that kind of time.”

She laughs at the joke, but her shoulders stay rigid. “Right. It would take four years to hear about every person you’ve fucked.”

It’s not as many as she assumes, but it’s not like I keep count either. “You know I slept around. You know it didn’t mean a lot to me. That’s what makes it special, that we’re together now. Because it finally means something.”

“That’s the story?” she asks.

It would be true, too. It is true. That kiss meant something. But I can’t say that, so I say, “Exactly.”

“And you know I’m bisexual and I don’t sleep around.”

“And something happened with your ex.”

“Yeah,” she says. “But—”

“I want this job, too, Cass, but I don’t care what it does to Frederick.” That’s a bluff, but she believes it. “I don’t care if he really buys it.”

“He needs to buy it. He’ll rat us out. He’s not above that.”

Maybe. Maybe not. “It’s up to you. Tell me enough we seem like a real couple. Or keep it to yourself and give him room to doubt.”

“Is that really why you want to know? For our ruse?”

“No. I’m curious. But I am right and you know it.”

Chapter Ten



Cassie

I *am right and you know it.*

He is. That's the annoying thing.

As my boyfriend, the boyfriend working closely with me post-Frederick, and as a songwriter in direct competition with Frederick and the woman he fucked behind my back, of course, Damon would know all about my ex.

Women always tell men *the last guy was nothing compared to you.*

That's not totally true. Some of the sex was great. But a lot of it was really, completely terrible.

I just—

I don't want to share. Not with anyone. And especially not with him.

He's on his best behavior with Daphne upstairs, but I know better than to believe it. I can't trust him with my secrets, and he'll never trust me with his.

But he is right.

We're supposed to be in love and that means we're supposed to trust each other.

So, I guess I'll have to fake it.

I wish it was an over-the-top erotic story. I could share that with Damon a lot more easily.

But telling him I was so desperate to reconnect with my boyfriend that I invited someone else into our bed?

Ugh.

Why does everything require so much intimacy? I want a fake boyfriend and a real songwriting partner who need less from me.

But I begged him to do this.

And it's all for this job, a job that asks me to dig deep every time I pick up a pen. (Not that I know any other way to write).

This is what I want. I need to get the fuck over my hesitation. I need to trust him.

For real.

And soon.

I take a deep breath and let out a steady exhale. "This stays between us. Everything we share here stays between us?"

"Of course."

"Really. I don't want you to tell Daphne."

"You didn't?"

"I didn't." I could barely admit it to myself. I couldn't say it out loud. I couldn't hear the words in my voice. Even in my head, it sounds desperate and impossible. *I thought a threesome would fix our relationship.*

It was more than that. I thought he wanted a different kind of person. And I thought I was that kind of person. Someone open-minded and creative. An artist. And artists experiment with all sorts of things.

Whoever heard of the prudish artist?

But it wasn't me. It's not me.

It's not that I'm completely vanilla. There are things I like. Normal enough things, sure, but I like some of them beyond a normal amount.

Just not in a way that was exciting enough for my ex.

And not in a way that compares to Damon's history. The guy has so many notches his bedpost is a nub.

"The first meeting is Friday." It's obvious I'm trying to change the subject, but I need to nail down the details first. In case I pass out from embarrassment. "I think we both have enough to start on our own. Then we can meet back here next week. Maybe Tuesday or Wednesday. We'll see how it goes."

"Just text first this time," he teases.

My cheeks flush. "Close your door this time." It doesn't feel like a barb. It feels as scary as the rest of this. I was watching. I wanted to watch. I wanted to be there, with him, being watched.

It almost seemed like it was about me.

And I wanted that. Not from him, exactly, but from someone. I want someone to want me that much.

Maybe Frederick did once, but by the end...

Shit. I should get into it, but I'm still not ready. I don't care how obvious it is I'm trying to delay. I'm sticking with it. "We should post some more pictures. Tease people."

"Whatever you want to do, Cass. I trust your instincts."

That's something. It's not a lot, but it's something.

My eyes go to his broad chest. The Latin quote on the right. The long line of his torso. The low waist of his navy swim trunks.

When did he get such muscular thighs? He wasn't this buff the last time I saw him. He certainly wasn't this fucking yummy.

It's really not fair for someone so difficult to be so sexy.

But this isn't a road I can take. I'm not going to fuck him to distract him from the sad story about my ex-boyfriend.

He notices my hesitation, but he doesn't poke me the way he usually does. He stays soft. Gentle even. "If I know the details, I can use them," Damon says.

"How would you do that?"

"Your ex... he can't feel good about losing you."

I scoff. He obviously doesn't care about losing me. He threw me away.

"Yeah, he's an asshole, but deep down, he knows he fucked up. And we can remind him a little."

"How would we do that?"

"Do you trust me?"

"No," I say.

His laugh is easy, but there's something else in his eyes. Disappointment. "Fair enough. Let me show you next time. He'll be at the pitch, right?"

The one in six days. I nod.

"Tell me as much as you can, and I'll fuck with him the best I can."

"As long as it's good for the deal," I say.

Damon nods. "The music comes first. I know you, Cass. If you could get off the music before you came, you'd do that

too.”

“That doesn’t even make sense.”

“Not all of us are lyricists.”

My chest warms too. I’m pretty sure he’s buttering me up, but it’s working. A long time ago, Damon appreciated me as a person and a musician and a writer. He respected me as an equal. As a superior talent, even. The same way I respected his composing skills. He was way better than I was. He still is.

Okay. I’ll share something. Enough for the ruse, at least.

“It’s kind of hard to explain to someone who’s never been in a long relationship. Something happens after a while. The initial passion fades. The honeymoon too. Things are hard sometimes. Not always. But sometimes.”

He nods.

“Maybe you’ve had phases in your relationship with something. I know I have times when the words come easily and when they don’t.”

“When I struggled to connect with music?” he asks.

“Have you?”

“Yeah.” His lips curl into a frown, but he doesn’t elaborate.

I want to ask. I want to know. I want to share the way we did, once upon a time, but that’s a lost cause. “Think of it like that. If it makes sense.”

“It does.” His eyes fix on me.

The attention makes me flush, but I push on. “At first... well, at first, things with Frederick and I weren’t that good. I was on SSRIs when we started dating.”

“You couldn’t come?”

“You’ve taken them?”

“A few times, yeah. I had that problem once.”

It’s hard to imagine Damon with a sex-drive issue. But maybe that helped his reputation. The guy who lasts forever. “Did you still want sex?”

“Yeah, but it was never about that. It was a fun thing to do.” There’s something in his voice, something I can’t really place. He continues before I can figure it out. “I only stayed on them a while. Didn’t like the other side effects.”

Or that one, probably.

“I was on them for the first year or so.” It was terrible. Sure, I felt calmer, I felt more even, and I completely lost touch with the sexual side of myself. I couldn’t come. I could barely get excited. I wanted to feel close to my boyfriend, and I wanted to want sex, but I didn’t. So I faked it. And that... it was easier when I switched meds. I finally found my libido. “When I switched meds, I found something that gave me a little more oomph, and I found the spark again.” Sort of. It was too late. We were well past the new relationship energy. And I’d let him believe I was interested in all sorts of things I didn’t really like. But there were a few things that fit. We hit them often enough. And those times were good. Great even. “It was a little awkward at first, but I got there. I found all that desire. And we were good together. Really good. Then, one day, we weren’t.”

“From sixty to zero?”

“No. It happened more slowly, but it felt sudden. Like I woke up one day and I finally saw it.”

He nods without judgment.

I blush anyway. This is more than I've shared with anyone. Even Daphne. We've never been the type to share dirty details. Only rough sketches. "I tried to talk to Frederick, but he denied the problem. He said he was stressed. I let it go for a while, but it started to nag at me." I wanted to replay the rush of our first few months so I could really feel them. Or at least, I wanted to get as close as I could. "So I tried to bring the spice on my own. I bought lingerie. I sent flirty texts. I seduced him."

"How did you seduce him?" Intent fills his blue eyes.

My stomach flutters. I like the interest in his expression. I like it too much.

He's only my fake boyfriend. He's not my real fuck. Daphne would never forgive me. At least, that's one benefit of this subject; it kills the mood.

I can't sleep with him.

It doesn't matter how sexy his v-lines are or how much I want to trace his ink with my tongue or how real our kisses feel.

I can't fuck him.

I try to make my voice neutral. "Normal stuff. I'd send him a picture. Or tell him what I was wearing under my dress." I don't want to remember how desperate I felt, so I skip over that part. Even so, the feelings rise to the surface. The sting of rejection. The thrill of success. The voice asking *am I really so abnormal?* "It worked sometimes. Other times, not so much." I don't give him a chance to respond with snark or sincerity. I push on. "I tried to up my game. I guess I felt competitive." Like I needed to beat my best efforts. "So I suggested bigger

things. Public sex. BDSM. A threesome. That was the one he wanted to try.”

“What did you want to try?”

The public sex. But what does that matter now? “They were in order of interest.”

“How would the BDSM work?”

I try to block the memory of Frederick’s revulsion. He was *not* into bondage, role play, or even light pain. He looked at me like I was a freak for even suggesting it. “Why? Is that part of our story?”

Damon looks into my eyes. “Sure. Do you want to tie me up? Or do I tie you up?”

So much for unsexy thoughts. The way he offers, casually—I know it’s a joke, but it still sends blood south. Are people really this open about sex? Do they really talk like this? “Both. But you like tying me up. You like the chance to finally be in control.”

He smiles, but it’s not smarmy or smug. It’s actually sorta sweet.

What the fuck? I think I’ve gone off the deep end. “We try everything. Sometimes, we like it, sometimes not, but we’re open.” That’s who I want to be. How I want to be.

He nods *of course*. “As long as there’s no one else.”

Is that because he knows this threesome thing hurt me, or is it how he really feels? It doesn’t matter. It’s a story. And this is how I want to tell it. “Other people can watch,” I say. “But that’s it.”

“Was that what happened with you two?” he asks.

No. That's what I should have said. We can invite someone to watch. The end. But I didn't listen to myself. I tried to be someone I wasn't. "No, I was game to try an everyone plays with everyone type of thing."

He doesn't say anything stupid. Or even look at me like he's desperate to hear more details about me touching another woman. He stands there, sympathy in his blue eyes, attention on me.

It's too much, but I push on. "We invited a friend of his, one who'd expressed interest. She was cute." She was smoking hot, actually. My type too. Tattoos of lyrics, sexy short hair, and a down-for-anything attitude. "And sweet. I got into it for a while. When it was us and he was watching. It was kinda performative, but I liked something about that."

"You like being watched?"

My blush deepens.

"You do." He smiles. "That's why public sex first."

"This is not—"

"I think your boyfriend would know you like being watched."

He'd be wrong. Because Frederick barely noticed, but hey, why think about that? "That's the kind of boyfriend you are?"

"Attuned to your sexual needs, yeah."

Is he joking or sincere? I can't tell anymore. But then I shouldn't think about that. It's way too tempting. I need to stick with unsexy thoughts, like the epic fail of my threesome. "It was going well, until he touched her... I hated that. I hated seeing them together. I hated her hands on him. I hated the way he looked at her. It changed something." Or maybe it

didn't. He was already seeing *her*. He was already touching someone else.

Damon studies me carefully. "Fuck, Cass, I'm sorry."

I don't know what to say, so I look at the sky. We're far enough from the city to see stars, but we're too close to see most of them. There are only a few handfuls of dots in the darkness.

"I know my opinion doesn't count for much," he says. "But the asshole didn't deserve you."

No. But it doesn't matter now. "Thanks." I let my gaze shift to the endless expanse of ocean. It is beautiful here. I forget that sometimes. "And what about you?"

"What about me?"

"What do I know about your sexual interests?"

"I like to watch," he says.

"Is that all?"

"And I like to tie you up." He looks toward me.

I let my gaze find him.

He continues, "unless you want a different story."

"Is that true?" I ask. "Do you like to watch?"

"I haven't tried." It's there in his voice. *I want to try*.

It's a bad idea. Dangerous. I need to leave before I do something stupid, but I want to stay too.

I want to hear the truth from him. Some sign of vulnerability. Any sign of vulnerability.

"Is any of that true?" I ask. "Do you like tying women up?"

“I haven’t tried that either.”

“What do you *actually* like?”

He looks at me intently. He opens his mouth, like he’s going to speak, but he doesn’t. He steps backward. He shifts away, toward that other Damon, the one who doesn’t take anything seriously. “I should get to bed.”

“Sure.” Maybe I imagined his compassion, his interest. Maybe I imagined all of it.

There’s no connection between us.

No closeness.

Nothing real, anyway.

He’s listening because he’s my fake boyfriend, not because he’s my real friend.

Any kindness Damon is showing me is fake. I need to remember that.

AFTER BREAKFAST, I HEAD HOME TO MY PARENTS’ PLACE. And, tragically, my place too. I moved out right after college (I did stay here in the summers, but it was too far to commute during the school year; I stayed in the dorms). I never thought I’d move back.

But the drive to Malibu Bluffs is familiar. I make it all the time now. I’ve been staying at Mom and Dad’s house since the breakup.

Like Malibu itself, Malibu Bluffs is sort of a small town. It’s far from the rest of civilization, it’s filled with people with the goal of getting away from city life, and it’s close to nature,

both the untouched coastline and the Santa Monica mountains. There's also limited access to typical city creature comforts. There are two grocery stores, one bar, three restaurants, one coffee shop, a gym, a Pilates studio, and a spa.

But unlike most small towns, everyone lives in a mansion with at least a little property, and everyone is loaded. My parents moved here from the Orange County city where Dad grew up when Mom got pregnant with my older brother Jackson. They didn't want to raise a family in the suburbs or the glitz and glamour of Los Angeles.

And since Mom was putting her photography business on pause for a while, and Dad still made a living as a drummer in a rock band (and was either home or far away, on tour), it didn't matter they were in the middle of nowhere.

They didn't invite the Webb family to move with them. They just did, a few years later. They live two miles from my parents.

Our families grew up together.

I don't even remember befriending Daphne, really. More a sense, we were always friends. We grew together. Sometimes, we grew apart too, but we always came back together. We always found a way to bond, whether it was over her love of coffee cake or my hatred of chocolate ice cream (it doesn't taste like chocolate).

Things get more familiar as I turn onto the main street, pass the post office and the grocery store, head up the hill to my parents' place. It's mission style, with a red brick roof, white arches, and cacti everywhere.

It's home.

I just wish it was home in the metaphorical sense and not the place I actually live now. I'm twenty-six. I shouldn't be living with my parents. And, well—

They smother.

They pretend they don't, but they do.

Thankfully, they're not home at the moment. No doubt they're both working. It's just me and the seven-bedroom mansion—one for each of us, plus a studio each for Mom and Dad.

The driveway is empty. The downstairs is clean. The upstairs is quiet. And my room is exactly as I left it yesterday. And way back in college.

It's not that the space isn't me. It is. The star decals on the ceiling, the homemade art on the walls, the white desk covered in colorful lyrics, and the sci-fi movie posters—they're all me.

But they're a different version of me. The teenager with dreams. The girl who didn't know better.

I was never naive, exactly. I've always been somewhat... difficult. But I used to believe music would save me. I believed pouring my heart into my words was enough. I believed someone would love me and heal me with their love.

Okay. I was extremely naive. Just not the way people usually mean it. I wasn't a starry-eyed romantic. I was an angry, jaded romantic. I hated the world, and deep down, I wanted someone to save me.

Now, I know better. People save themselves. Music helps, but it's not everything.

Still, when I sit at my desk, I feel the way I did as a teenager. There are too many feelings inside me. I need to pour

them onto the page. That's the only way I know how to deal with them.

For hours, I listen to Fiona Apple, and I spill my thoughts. Slowly, the words shift into something I can use. A chorus. A verse.

I add a few lines of a bridge.

It's not perfect, but it's a start.

The high of creation fills my veins. Life is good and beautiful and pure and no one can ruin that.

And then my kid brother, Zack, knocks on my door, and I come back down to Earth.

He's seen the posts and social media, and he's only interested in one thing: whether or not I'm fucking Damon Webb.

Chapter Eleven



11

Cassie

“Wow, Cass. Wow.” Zack saunters into my room with a smile. An evil smile. The sort of evil smile he wears like his favorite pair of jeans. There’s nothing in the universe he loves more than making other people’s lives difficult. Nothing. “These are some spicy pictures.” He pulls out his cell phone, which is already displaying my last Instagram story.

A picture of Damon standing at the edge of the pool in only his jeans. He has his back to the camera, and he has his usual brooding posture, as if he’s ready to dissolve into the blue sky around him.

It might not say *happy lover* as much as it says *miserable creative*, but we are working together, and anyone who’s ever partnered on a project knows it’s fifty percent wonder, fifty percent misery at best.

“Wow, what?” I stop myself from rolling my eyes. The picture reveals skin, sure, and Damon is tall and well-built, yes, but the photo isn’t erotic in any way. It doesn’t even hint at sex.

Of course, my brother ignores my objection. He stays on mission. The same mission he always has, being as annoying as possible.

Was he born with some sort of live-to-cause-trouble gene, or did he learn it from our parents? Well, from Dad. When he’s not wound tight, trying to keep the universe—or at least the family and his indie label—in order, he stays busy poking everyone else’s problems.

Mom says it's his way of trying to stay in control, that it's easier for him to focus on the flaws in someone else's logic than his own. Which is true. But also a bit more forgiving than he deserves.

Don't get me wrong. He's a great guy, and I've always felt I had his love and support, but I've also always felt the pressure to follow in his footsteps and keep everything in order.

Mom is a little more relaxed and a lot more low-key (she stays out of other people's problems), but she has her own issues with control. Her pre-Dad relationship history is messed up. Not that she's ever shared all the details. She only alludes to them with warnings about picking the right men (always men, even though she knows I like women too), followed by apologies for scaring me, and a *of course I trust your judgment, Cassie* accompanied with a state that says *I do not trust your judgment*.

They try, really.

And I love them, I do. It's just easier to feel good about that from a safe distance. Like more than the twenty feet between my bedroom and theirs.

Zack interrupts my trip down family dynamics lane to pull me back into the more immediate problem of my fake relationship with Damon.

"There's some very subtle messaging here too." Zack brushes a dark strand of hair from his forehead. He looks down at the phone and clears his throat, like an actor preparing a monologue. He has the same casual-yet-designer t-shirt and jeans, handsome face, and lean musculature of a guy who plays the love interest on a CW TV show. "BAE is so cute

when he's thinking." He looks to me. "You know people stopped saying BAE five years ago, right?"

Of course, I know that! I work with actual teenagers. I'm behind the scenes in the industry that defines what is or isn't cool. Which is weird, now that I think about it. Why are executives my dad's age deciding what teenagers should or shouldn't like? Not just executives my dad's age. My actual father.

When we were kids, Dad spent a lot of time touring. His band was still together. He disappeared from our lives for weeks at a time. I didn't really understand it then, and I didn't understand it was strange. I thought it was just what fathers did.

When Jackson started middle school, he retired from touring and started a small label. He spent more time in the Los Angeles area, but he spent just as much time with his head at work. That's just who he is. He wants to take over the world.

When I showed an interest in music, Dad offered me a job at his company. No doubt, I get a lot of jobs because of my last name, but Dad only signs musicians who write their own material, so he rarely has a gig I can actually work.

Occasionally, a band needs a little extra wit in their lyrics, and... okay, so he's never offered me one of those jobs. But he will. One day. When I've proven I'm as talented as his current roster of writers.

Ugh.

I don't want to talk to my brother. Or my other brother. Or my sister. Or my parents.

I want to work on this project. I'm like Dad that way; I understand the world via my work. I stay in control via my work. I need my fucking work.

People like Zack, who don't feel the need to stay in control, who enjoy causing chaos rather than order, don't get it.

He's still standing there, amusing himself to death. He finds my use of BAE incredibly hilarious for some reason.

"It's a throwback," I say. It's the truth. Mostly. It fits the era of music we're adopting for the first few songs for Bryce. It also *happens* to be what Frederick called me when we started dating.

"Sure, Cass. Sure." Zack knows the history. After all, Zack was friends with Frederick. Zack is friends with everyone. That's just the kind of guy he is. He has all of Dad's charm and none of his vaguely hidden need to control the universe. "Are you and Damon fucking? Or is it love?"

He slides his phone into the front pocket of his designer jeans, no doubt supplied by our younger sister, Laurel, who works in fashion.

Before I have the chance to answer, he continues. "Or is this a ruse to make your ex jealous?"

Yes, it's obvious we're advertising our fake love affair, but it's not obvious it's fake. I think. "What makes you say that?"

"Which part?" He motions to my desk chair *may I?*

I nod *sure* and he takes a seat.

I push myself up from my spot on the bed. I need to get my wits about me. I'm too much in my teenage mentality in my childhood bedroom. Sure, I redid a lot of the decorations

during my college summers, but I still feel like I'm in high school.

The shelf of vinyls, the black bedspread, the twinkling string lights on the walls.

The decor felt mature when I was nineteen. Now, it feels like a teenage girl trying too hard to prove she's a rock star poet. It feels as desperate as this ruse and this team-up.

At least the desk is covered in quality lyrics. Even if half of them are by guys who can't stand their ex fucking someone else.

There's no excuse for the *way* they slut-shame their exes (what is this obsession with makeup running or rubbing off on pillows, really?), but I do understand the sentiment.

He said he'd love me forever.

He said he never wanted anyone else.

Then he found her, touched her, fell for her, waited for me to realize he only wanted her.

Fuck exes.

"Cass. You there? Are you lost in a dirty dream or flailing to figure out a cover story?" Zack laughs at his own joke.

"Why are you wearing sunglasses inside?" I motion to the sunglasses hanging off the v in his v-neck.

"I'm not wearing them. I'm storing them. We live in California. The sun is out every day."

That's true. It's still bright now. The light is streaming through my sheer curtains. But it must be early evening if he's here. It's Sunday. And every Sunday is family dinner night at

Mama and Papa Steele's house. Even when one of them is out of town, they expect us to arrive here and share a meal.

"Stop trying to distract me." He forgets my momentary change of subject and zeroes in on his mission to annoy. "I'm not going to stop asking."

"Why do you ask though?"

He chuckles *is that a real question?* When I shoot him a death glare, he shrugs. "Don't shoot the messenger, Cass. Then no one will tell you the truth."

I value honesty, yes, but I didn't ask for his opinion. "Could you try a little tact?"

"Never heard of it, no." He smiles, pure Steele charm. All the charm of our father. I forget he's not *actually* related to me or Dad sometimes. Our parents adopted him and Laurel when we were kids. I rarely think of him as my adopted brother. Only when I wonder why he's got all the charisma.

I'm sure, to a certain type of person, I'm appealing, but he's effervescent. Laurel too.

But now, I'm getting distracted from my mission.

"Seriously, Zack, spill. Tact or no tact," I say.

"Why I think you're faking this thing with Damon?" Again, he laughs, as if it's obvious to anyone with half a brain. "You've had a crush on him since you were... since always."

"That was a long time ago."

"Past tense. I see what you're doing." Zack shakes his head. "Fooling no one."

"Can you get to the point?"

“Yeah. You don’t sleep around.” He drops a hint of the bullshit in his voice. “If that’s changed, great. I’m all about it. Have fun, let your freak flag fry. All that shit. As long as you wrap it up. Damon’s slept with more people than I have.”

“I’m still not seeing a point.” I know better too. I know Zack is playing ridiculous to distract me from any sincerity underneath. I guess he’s like Damon that way. Only he’s way better at it.

“You weren’t seeing Damon the last time I was here.” He doesn’t add *last week, for family dinner, the way I always am. And you’re always here! You live here.* “All of a sudden, you have ten pictures in three days?”

It does seem a little obvious when he says it that way. “Maybe we’re finally ready to go public.”

“I hope that’s true, ‘cause...” He shakes his head in mock concern. “You do know our older brother, Jackson? The surprisingly buff lawyer who’s always tense ‘cause he hasn’t gotten laid since college?”

Jackson is always tense because he also inherited Dad’s tendency to take control of everything. Only he also tries, hard, to protect everyone he cares about. I’m not nearly as good at that. The only person I’ve really tried to protect is Daphne, and, mostly, from her older brother. But, hey, I’m not letting *my* brother distract me with his asides. “Why are you so concerned with your siblings’ sex lives?”

“I’m not concerned. I’m open. It’s European. Try it.”

I don’t want to think about anyone in my family having sex, but I suppose it is silly to pretend they don’t have sex. Still. It’s weird to talk about it all the time! “Again, the point.”

Zack puffs up his chest and lowers his voice to imitate Jackson. “Our brother isn’t as enlightened as I am.”

“Really? You’re the enlightened Steele brother?”

He nods *obviously* and returns to his normal tone and posture. “Believe it or not, I’m not that interested in your love life. One guy for three years. Where’s the drama? Sure, the breakup was juicy, but that was months ago. Jackson though...” Again, he shakes his head *some people just can’t see the light*. “He had choice words. I believe they were, ‘What the fuck do you know about that fucking fuckhead Damon Webb fucking with Cass?’” His voice gets ten percent more serious. “I maybe have forgotten a fuck or two.”

That’s not like Jackson. He’s protective, yes, but he’s not vulgar. Either Zack is playing this up, or Jackson is legitimately worried.

Both, probably.

Jackson has plenty of reason to hate Damon. Like me, Jackson had an up close and personal view of Damon at his drunkest and most obnoxious enough times to write him off. Not that Jackson needed all that extra evidence. After I told him Damon broke my heart (ugh, fifteen-year-old Cassie, why), he went from disliking the guy to despising him with every fiber of his being.

“Yeah. It’s pretty bad, I know.” Zack shakes his head in his typical *can you believe our brother is so unreasonable* sort of way. “You don’t want to hear what Laurel said.”

“But you’ll tell me anyway?”

He nods *of course* with a troublemaking smile. “I want to tell you, really. The words were beautiful. Dirty poetry. But it would be wrong to steal her thunder.”

“It’s early.” Family dinner isn’t for another hour and a half.

Zack shakes his head. “Everyone is downstairs.”

Everyone is downstairs because they want to discuss my sex life. Awesome. “Or we could not do that.”

“Sure. If you’d rather discuss it at dinner with Mom and Dad,” Zack says. “I figured you’d prefer a little privacy.”

Awesome. If my choice is siblings or siblings and parents, that’s easy. “Let the suffering begin.”

Chapter Twelve



Cassie

Our siblings are waiting in the large backyard. They aren't lounging in the long, rectangular pool, walking through the small succulent garden, or attempting to spy on the faraway neighbors.

They're sitting at the glass patio table, sipping their usual cocktails, dressed in their usual attire, with totally unusual *wow, is Cassie really dating Damon* looks on their faces.

Okay, maybe the looks aren't that specific. But they are very much *is this true*.

On Laurel, that looks fun and excitable. Her dark eyes are bright. Her red lips are pressed into a wide smile. With her cosmopolitan and her snug white sundress, nude sandals, and simple gold jewelry, she looks like she's here to pose for a family dinner photo shoot, one where she plays the curious little sister.

In his typical evening outfit, a button-up cotton shirt (always white), casual navy slacks, and brown loafers, Jackson looks like the guy who plays an uptight lawyer. The uptight lawyer who's about to use his cross-examination skills on his poor, unsuspecting sister.

He has the same medium-brown hair Mom has, but his is cropped short. He has her broad shoulders and calm poker face too, but his expression is all Dad-like protective energy.

It's like he's about to say *I'm not mad, I'm disappointed*.

Which is fair, I guess. I didn't think hard enough about the possible consequences of fake dating Damon Webb. I let my

love of music overpower rational thought.

It's not that I would have made a different choice if I made a list of pros and cons. No matter how much time I spent considering my options, I would have picked this one.

But I could have prepared for the consequences a little better.

If my older brother is this upset, what the fuck is Dad thinking? He says he doesn't check our social media, but none of us believe that.

If he doesn't know now, it's only a matter of time until he finds out.

And, yes, our families are friends, and once upon a time, Dad adored Damon. But once Damon started drinking, Dad started waving red flags. He instructed all of us to avoid Damon as often as possible. He saw the path Damon was walking and wanted us far away from it.

Back then, I didn't get it. Back then, I thought Dad was acting like a judgmental jerk. I guess he was, but he was right too.

After the third time Damon crashed my and Daphne's movie night, drunk, I started to see the logic. I didn't write him off until after the kiss incident, but I saw the signs earlier.

And then he just got so difficult, constantly needling me, taunting me, baiting me.

I don't really know what changed.

It's not like I can argue *no, Dad, you're wrong, Damon isn't a bad influence. He promised to keep alcohol out of the house and I haven't caught him breaking that rule yet.* I don't have a case.

There's really only one play here.

The truth.

Well, a part of the truth.

This is because I love music. Because I need him as a partner. The end.

The realization brings me back to Earth. I look around the table again. Laurel is still sitting there, sipping her cosmopolitan. Zack is still shaking his head. Jackson is still staring at me in horror, ignoring his old-fashioned.

The scene is familiar. The four of us have spent so many evenings here. But we don't huddle around the table for group talks anymore. We're all adults with our own lives, jobs, homes.

Well, they have their own homes. I'm the only one with the misfortune of continuing to live here.

"If no one is going to talk, I'll start." Laurel flips a long, wavy strand behind her ear. "Damon is hot. Way to go, Cassie." She raises her glass to toast.

Jackson shoots the pink cocktail his patented death glare. It's subtle yet effective. That's Jackson. If he wasn't a lawyer, he could be an assassin. "Damon is not hot." He looks our sister in the eyes. "And that's beside the point."

"Sorry, J." Laurel shakes her head. "Damon is objectively hot." She pulls her phone from her faux leather purse and shows off a picture of Damon.

One we took at the house. A close-up of his arm around my waist, his tattooed bicep on display against my loose band shirt. The things that define both of us.

She nods her approval of the photo. “He has all the markers. Symmetry. Shoulder hip ratio. Tattoos.”

Zack laughs. “The ladies love it.”

“He’s tall, too. And damn, his arm is huge. Did he spend the last three months at the gym twenty-four seven?” Laurel asks. “I don’t remember him being this well-built.”

“Can we get to that’s beside the point?” Jackson adjusts his glasses and rubs his temples. He’s already halfway to a headache.

That’s what Zack and Laurel’s antics do to anyone who isn’t equally ridiculous.

“Damon is an asshole.” Jackson looks to me with sincerity in his green eyes. “You know that, Cass.”

Laurel waves him off. “He’s a hot asshole. And women love assholes. Don’t be naive.”

“Why do women love assholes?” Zack asks.

“I’d think you would know.” She doesn’t add *since you are an asshole*. She says it with her hair flip. “It’s not the jerk thing. It’s the directness. You’re the same way, J. You’re just more... contained about it. Like Dad.”

“Wow. Did you just say he’s as uptight as Dad?” Zack laughs. “That’s harsh, even for me.”

“I didn’t say he’s *as* uptight as Dad. I said he’s like Dad. Only, you know, without the fun part.”

Zack mimes her taking a shovel and digging.

Oh. She’s digging her own grave. That’s kind of true. Or it would be if Jackson cared about their opinions. Or if Jackson was in denial about his need for control.

Like me, he knows he's his father's child.

Like me, he knows Laurel and Zack live to cause trouble.

Unlike me, he's pretty good at ignoring them.

He takes another sip, and he turns away from their antics.

Laurel continues. She looks me in the eyes and, with an excited voice, she asks, "Is he a talented asshole too?"

"He's a gifted musician," I say.

"I love the dexterity. Does he back it up with creativity too. Oh, I know, let's rank each thing on a one to ten scale: technical skill, stamina, creativity."

I know she's talking about sex, but those all apply to music too, so I say, "Perfect ten out of ten."

"No way. The hot ones are never as creative. They don't have to learn," she says. "And what about size? Guys with big dicks are the worst lays, I swear. They think they have to show up and pump. They don't learn any technique. And they've apparently never heard of cunnilingus."

"That's why women love me," Zack says.

Laurel laughs like she's going to burst from it. "Are you seriously so obsessed with talking about your dick that you bring up you have a small dick??"

"It's not that I have a small dick," Zack says.

"But you do?" She laughs. "This is a first. A man bragging about his tiny penis. Should we call a psychologist?" She looks to Jackson for support.

He shakes his head *I cannot with you two*. "People don't talk about their siblings this way."

People don't. They do. They do it because it frustrates him. That's the number one reason.

And since he is obviously annoyed, they continue.

"No. Women love me because I'm hot but I try," Zack says.

"You try 'cause you have nothing to back it up." She continues to laugh.

"Please. You know I'd own it if I had a small dick. I have a perfectly reasonably sized dick," he says. "I'm not going to claim it's some sort of monster. Women don't like that anyway."

She nods *that is true*. "But you aren't hot."

"What happened to the objective measure of tattoos?" Zack asks.

Jackson lets out a tired sigh. Maybe he's not as good at ignoring them as he seems. "Can you two stop bullshitting for one minute? We need to discuss this?"

"We are discussing this," Laurel says.

Jackson does the only thing anyone can do—ignore them. He looks me dead in the eyes, and he asks with a clear, even voice, "Are you actually sleeping with Damon?" He projects the sort of authority he does in the courtroom or across the conference table, I guess. No bullshit, no games, just a willingness to do anything to get what he wants.

"Why do you say it like that?" Like I'm not sleeping with him. I could be. He would sleep with me. I mean, if Daphne wouldn't kill him. And I asked. I have no doubts about that. Not that it's really a mark of pride. Damon isn't known for his high standards.

“Cass.” Jackson drops about ten percent of his firmness. Then twenty. Thirty. He looks to me with sympathy. “Do you really want me to list the reasons?”

“Oh yeah, list them. Please,” Zack says.

Jackson doesn’t even flinch. He doesn’t so much as glance at Zack. He stays on his path. “You hate him, for one.”

“I said that too,” Zack says.

“No. Hate sex. It’s hot,” Laurel says.

“How would you know?” Zack asks. “You don’t hate anyone.”

Jackson continues ignoring him. “You don’t sleep around, for two.”

Zack shoots Jackson a look of triumph. “That too. Great minds, huh?”

Jackson groans the way he always does. At Zack for being ridiculous. At himself for indulging it.

“And these pictures do scream overcompensating.” Zack looks to Laurel for backup.

She takes a long sip of her cosmo. “He is your best friend’s brother. That would be like Jackson sleeping with Daphne.”

For the first time all afternoon, Jackson loses his composure. He blushes. He stammers. “Why would you say that?”

Is my older brother actually uncomfortable? He *never* shows any sign of awkwardness.

He doesn’t talk about his love life. There must be someone there. Or else...

No.

There's no way he likes Daphne.

Or is there?

They're similar in so many ways.

"Would you rather I say Zack?" Laurel doesn't notice Jackson's fluster. She moves right to disgust at the notion of anyone sleeping with Zack. "I could, but it's so much less plausible. Daphne has standards. She'd have to be drunk to even consider kissing Zack."

"Hey!" Zack pretends to throw something at her.

She pretends to catch and throw it back. They have a similar silliness. Dad's silliness.

"Do you three need me here for this?" I ask. "Or should I go and let you continue?"

Zack and Laurel continue their back and forth.

Jackson finds his composure and looks at me with concern. "What's really going on, Cassie? Are you and Damon seeing each other? Or is this some sort of game?"

Chapter Thirteen



Cassie

*A*re you and Damon seeing each other? Or is this some sort of game?

This is it. The start of my lie to my family. Sure, I'm telling them a part of the truth, but I know better than to call this honesty.

A lie of omission is still a lie.

It's also the only reasonable option. Loose lips sink ships. And siblings with secrets share said secrets to people who share them to people who share them with Frederick.

Or, worse, with the artist in question.

That's where I'm going to focus, on the work.

"We're working on a project together," I say. "For Bryce Bradey."

Jackson and Zack don't recognize the name. They love music too—we all do—but they're not up on the latest and greatest. Well, the latest and most popular.

Laurel is. Even if she didn't work in fashion, where she needs to know what's trendy in other creative mediums, she'd know. She loves to live on the cutting edge. "He's hot, as an artist. And a man." She takes a long sip and lets out a wistful sigh. "How have you surrounded yourself with so many attractive men?"

"Is it really that implausible?" I'm not a supermodel, but I'm not a troll either. I exercise, I dress well, I rock my winged

eyeliner. And I'm a talented lyricist. That's why these guys are here, because of my brain, not my boobs.

"Nah, babe, you're hot too," Laurel shrugs. "You're just not usually driven by appearances."

I'm not. Well, I like to tell myself I'm not shallow, but I guess this is all for appearances. Appearances for a good reason—to get an amazing job I'm going to ace—but still, appearances.

"Can we focus on the main issue?" Jackson looks me dead in the eyes. "Is that all it is? A project?"

"We've been hanging out for a while," I say.

"Fucking?" Laurel asks.

"That's really none of your business." There. That's the truth. It is none of their business. It implies we are fucking, but it doesn't state it.

"Does that mean yes, but you don't want to talk about it, because it's not great?" Laurel asks. "Or does it mean no?"

"It means I'm an adult woman and I can date whoever I want," I say. "I can also sleep with anyone I want. As long as I do it safely."

Jackson tries to come up with some logic to argue against it, but he doesn't quite find it. "You know he's an asshole, right?"

"Of course," I say.

"Does he know I'll kill him if he hurts you?" Jackson asks.

Zack laughs at the threat. "Get real, J." When Jackson cringes at Zack and Laurel's favorite nickname, Zack smiles.

Mission to frustrate accomplished. “Maybe you’d hire someone to kill for you, but you’d never get your hands dirty.”

“That’s still murder,” Jackson says. “Have you never seen a cop show before?”

“I think you could do it, Jackson.” Laurel stays as difficult as Zack. “You could murder anyone you want, any way you want. There’s nothing wrong with delegating.”

Jackson rubs his temples. “Fuck, can you two take anything seriously for more than thirty seconds?” He stands and shakes his head *I cannot with you two*. He crosses the space to me. “Let’s talk.”

“We can talk,” I say. “But I’m not going to change my stance.”

“I know.” He motions for me to follow him away from the table. When I do, he leads me around the pool, to the far corner of the backyard with the olive tree we used to climb when we were kids.

The place we sat when I told him I liked Damon.

When I told him I kissed Damon.

When I told him Damon forgot it.

When I told him about a million times Damon frustrated, annoyed, or hurt me.

The karaoke night he crashed. The birthday of Daphne’s he forgot. The graduation party where he showed up drunk and picked a fight with Daphne’s boyfriend.

The time he found my notebook of lyrics, read without permission, and laughed at my attempt to bare my soul.

He was tipsy or drunk all these other times. I haven't seen him drink once.

But why?

Maybe he's following his parents' rules. Maybe he doesn't drink and work. Maybe he doesn't drink around me.

But he must be indulging after we part.

Do I need to watch him carefully at the pitch to make sure he doesn't go too hard?

No. He has a high tolerance. Unless he starts doing shots, he won't get plastered at a twenty-minute meeting. But if we go to a party...

We need to talk about that, but how the hell could I possibly tell Damon Webb *I'll only do this if you don't get drunk.*

He'll back out.

And I need him.

Jackson notices me drifting into my thoughts and clears his throat.

I find my footing. The feeling of the dirt beneath my boots. The cool breeze. Music from a faraway neighbor's house.

"I understand why you don't want to tell those yahoos anything." Jackson leans against the tree and looks at our siblings from afar. Of course, they're still trading barbs and sipping cocktails, as if they haven't even noticed our absence.

They are uncouth, yes, but who uses the word yahoos? "Yahoos, really?"

"Don't, Cassie. I know that game. You're not going to distract me." He lets out an exhausted sigh. "Everything is a

joke to them. It was cute when they were teenagers. Not anymore.”

“They’re not that old.” I’m twenty-six. Zack and Laurel are both twenty-five.

“They’re old enough to know better. You are too.” He leaves *you’re old enough to know better than to fuck Damon Webb* unsaid.

“It’s about the project, Jackson, really.” That is true, at least. “He may be an asshole, but he’s a talented musician. And he’s turning over a new leaf.” He is, actually. Damon has been oddly... okay. Almost sweet, even.

“You believe that?” Jackson asks.

“I don’t know,” I say.

“So you’re not sleeping with him?” he asks.

I shoot him a *don’t* look.

“No. I’m always going to protect you. Especially from guys like Damon.”

A month ago, I would have agreed with his hatred and distrust. I would have hugged him and said *thank you* and struggled with everything I wanted to add about how Damon hurt me.

Now?

This whole conversation feels silly. What could Jackson possibly do to protect me from Damon, short of actual murder?

Even if he killed Damon, he wouldn’t erase my feelings. I’d still feel drawn to him and unsure I can trust him. I’d still need him.

I take a deep breath and let out a slow exhale. Jackson is trying to help. I do appreciate it. I just wish he, and Zack and Laurel, would give me more space to make my own decisions without their opinions. “We’re committed to this project together. If we get it, we’ll spend a lot of time together. Are you going to babysit our jam sessions?”

“You know I will if you ask.” He looks me in the eyes with that same perfect clarity. He’s willing to do anything if it means the best for me. “I don’t trust him.”

I want to tell him the truth. I don’t want him to worry himself to death. “How does the attorney-client thing work?”

“Did you kill someone?” he asks.

“The secrecy part?” I ask.

“Privilege? It means an attorney can’t share anything a client tells him as a part of normal attorney-client relations. If you did murder someone, and you hired me to defend you. If you confessed, I couldn’t take that to the cops. And the court couldn’t compel me to testify either. But I can’t suborn perjury. I can’t put you on the stand to say you didn’t do it.”

“Is it just with the courts? Or does it include brothers and sisters?” I ask.

“Ethically speaking, it includes everyone who isn’t a part of the team.”

“Can the team be you and me?” I ask.

“Of course, Cass, but if you did kill someone, I recommend a different attorney. I won’t be objective.”

“Do I have to give you a dollar or something?” I ask.

“Did you see that on TV?” He laughs with a levity I don’t expect. He laughs the way he did when we were kids, and we

shared jokes about Mom and Dad, and Zack and Laurel, and we didn't expect ourselves to have the world figured out. "Sure, yeah." He pulls a bill from his wallet (a hundred, of course) and hands it to me.

I return it and we shake. "The artist, Bryce, wants to work with a couple. So Damon and I are playing a couple. For the job."

"And to make your ex-boyfriend jealous?"

Why does everyone think that's a prime motivation? "That's a fringe benefit."

Jackson raises a brow.

Okay. It's a nice benefit. I admit it. "Yes, I enjoy his envy." At least, in theory. "But it's more that Frederick is competition, and he's not above telling the artist Damon and I are..."

"Competition how?" Bryce asks.

I explain the mechanics of our arrangement as quickly as I can. Hopefully, I don't have to see Frederick for any of this. Most likely, he'll be there at the pitch sessions. There could be one. Or a lot.

"It's just Frederick, on his own?" Jackson asks.

"No." I don't say the words. I don't say *we're competing with my ex and the woman he fucked behind my back* but they fill the air anyway. I curl into myself.

Jackson frowns. "So you're not sleeping with Damon?"

"Try not to look so happy about it," I say.

He shakes his head *no deal*. For the first time all night, he smiles.

Which is annoying. I appreciate his desire to protect me, I do, but I'm an adult woman. I'm perfectly capable of making my own dating choices. Even if I have no intention of sleeping with Damon, I'm not letting him think he gets to dictate that. "I might still sleep with him. That's my choice to make. Even if you think it's a mistake."

"And murdering him is my choice to make, even if you think it's a mistake. Wait." He shifts into attorney mode. "There's no privilege if there's a criminal conspiracy."

"Is this a conspiracy?"

"It's arguable."

"Everything is arguable to an attorney," I say.

He laughs an easy, hearty laugh. One I haven't heard in a long time. "I'm worried about you, Cass. You've been struggling with the breakup. You put on a brave face, but I see it."

"Because I live with Mom and Dad. They're insane. Did you know they ask me to eat dinner with them every night?" I ask.

"Dad isn't home in time for dinner every night."

"Mom either! She's working a photography gig half the nights." Mom runs a boudoir photography business. She spent most of her time managing the business when we were young. Once we were old enough and we wanted to spend nights with friends, she added herself into her rotation of photographers. She offers to take portraits of us all the time. And she's talented with those too. But it's weird, knowing she usually takes photos of people wearing way fewer clothes.

"So you're sitting there, alone?"

“Sometimes, yeah. They ask me to text them while I eat!”

Again, my older brother laughs.

“It’s not funny. They want pictures of my food! They want to make sure it’s a nice, homecooked meal,” I say.

“You are a good cook,” he says.

“Don’t start. I can’t take you doing it too,” I say.

“You know I won’t agree to that. I love you, Cass. I can’t stand to see someone hurt you. Especially someone who got a second chance to hurt you.” He pulls me into a hug.

I sink into it. For a minute, I’m a kid again, accepting my brother’s protection, sure nothing will hurt me as long as Jackson is here to defend me.

But he couldn’t save me from falling for Damon once.

And he can’t do it again.

That’s all on me.

I STRUGGLE TO FALL ASLEEP. I WAKE DROWSY. AND THEN I SEE it. Not just the likes from friends and colleagues. Not just the other woman’s fake I’m happy for you comment.

An email from the artist himself.

Cassie,

Frederick reached out about the meeting Friday. I demanded your contact info. I think he knew I wanted to work with you. If your partner has the right sound, the job is yours.

I love to see two people in love.

Especially when one is as cute as you.

Keep it coming.

Can't wait to meet you and your mystery man.

XO,

Bryce Bradey

He believes it.

And he wants us.

We just have to nail the pitch and the passion. Which means I need to step up my game. As a fake girlfriend and a creative partner.

So I text Damon.

Cassie: Tomorrow. Noon. I'll be at your place. Be ready.

Chapter Fourteen



Cassie

The drive to Damon's place is familiar. I've made it so many times. The feeling in my veins is familiar too.

Nervous energy.

I want to see him. I want to work with him. I want to kiss him.

Fake kiss him, sure, but I want to do it again and again, until we're sure our make-out session is flawless.

When I arrive, I park in the driveway. I walk through the front door. I look around the space with new eyes.

The same house where we spent a million summers. The piano, where he taught me to play *Losing My Religion*. The couch where we kissed Saturday.

Shit.

Those old feelings bubble to the surface. My desire to slap him is there too, but now it's competing with a desire to gently stroke his face. Which is ridiculous. We're working together. We're pretending we're a couple.

That's it.

Sure, it's a little complicated, but I can deal with it.

Then, music fills the space. Damon on the guitar. He's working on the new song. The style fits perfectly, a more upbeat version of late nineties college rock, with a touch of the pop that put Bryce on the map.

That's the key to long-term success in the music industry. You need to evolve with the times while keeping the sound that made you famous. Most people can't do it. Hell, it's almost impossible to do it. Trends change. The sound that made a musician unique goes out of style. The people who last long-term reinvent themselves all the time, like Madonna or Lady Gaga.

If they manage to hold on to the promise they made their fans, they hold on to those listeners, and they have an easier time riding their ups and downs.

That's what I want to do for Bryce. Not because I love his music—it's a little too pop for my taste—but because I love doing this. I love finding that core promise and delivering.

With Bryce, I know exactly what it is.

He's a romantic with a sharp tongue.

The way I was once.

Now...

Fuck, there are way too many butterflies in my stomach. How am I this nervous to work with Damon? I take a deep breath and try to push my nerves aside. Today is a workday. We're working. That's it.

I move up the stairs with steady steps. Even though I can hear him playing guitar, I do the smart thing and knock. "Is it safe to come in?"

"I play in the nude, but the guitar is strategically placed."

The image fills my head immediately. Damon sitting on his bed completely naked, the guitar positioned right in front of his pelvis. It's a good idea for a picture, actually. Cheeky and sexy. "If you are, I'm posting it on Instagram."

“See for yourself,” he says.

I turn the handle and step inside.

Sure enough, Damon is sitting on the bed with his guitar, but he’s not in his birthday suit. He’s in his usual uniform. Jeans, t-shirt, tattoos, wicked smile.

“Is that disappointment on your face?” He winks. “I can lose some layers if you want.”

“I want a picture. That’s it.”

“We can do better than that.” He sets his guitar on the bed and stands. “If it’s not too early in the day to make out for the camera.”

“No. Not too early. Why don’t you do this one?” I motion to his cell phone, sitting on his desk. “Since you haven’t posted much.”

“Sure.” He grabs the phone. “Let’s do what you said.”

“You’re going to post a picture of yourself naked?” I ask.

“No. I’m going to post you.”

I shake my head.

“Really? You’re shy?”

“No.” Kind of. I don’t want to get naked right here, in front of him. But it’s more. “It’s different for women.”

“However you want to do it, Cass.” He motions to his bed.

He’s right. Sitting on his bed with his guitar gives a clear *intimate singer-songwriter couple* impression. “Is it clean?”

“Washed the sheets last night.”

I pick up his guitar and sit on the bed. “How’s this?”

“Terrible.” He shakes his head. “You look uncomfortable. Maybe you’re hot. Take your top off.”

I flip him off.

He smiles and picks up his phone. “That’s what I want to see. Cassie Steele, in her element.”

“Your bed?”

“In your dreams.” His smile gets wider. “Annoyed with me.”

“With a guitar in my lap.”

He snaps a photo. “I bet you wish your hands were on something else.”

Dammit, I do. I say nothing. I shoot the camera another glare. Then a smile.

He snaps both. “That’s the caption. I wish those hands were somewhere else. Or is it too suggestive?”

“No. It’s perfect. Did you get it?”

He nods. “Let’s do one more.”

“I’m not taking my top off.”

He smiles, but I can’t tell if it’s a smirk of superiority or genuine delight. “A kiss. Like you said.”

Right. A kiss. Sure. I can fake kiss him again. No. Problem. “Right here, maybe.”

“Who’s going to take the picture then?”

“Set a timer.”

He nods *sure* and sets the phone on the desk. “Thirty seconds.” He angles the phone so it’s looking at me, then he moves to the bed.

He drops to his knees, right between my legs.

He's in just the right spot to touch me properly. I can already imagine his sassy reply too. *I didn't say where I'd kiss you, baby.* Only, in my head, it's not annoying. It's hot as fuck.

It is too hot in here. And then his hand curls around my thigh and I'm on fire. The denim is too thin. I can feel too much of his palm. I can feel the calluses on his fingertips.

What would those feel like on me?

Shit.

"How's this?" He looks up at me.

"Maybe a little too much." For me to handle. And a little too obvious. Like my siblings said. We want to look sincere.

He nods and pushes to his feet. This time, he sits next to me on the bed.

His leg brushes mine. His hand goes to my cheek.

Damon looks me in the eyes as he pulls me into a soft, slow kiss. There's the light hint of his lips. Then something firmer, deeper.

My lips part.

His tongue slides between them.

He kisses me like he means it, like he's going to die if he can't kiss me forever.

Then the camera clicks and he pulls back like it was nothing.

Maybe it was. No. It is. This is pretend. The songwriting is the part that's real.

He moves off the bed to grab his phone. I feel the loss of heat, the shift of weight. I want more. I want him here with me. That's dangerous. Too dangerous.

He checks the photos and asks for my approval. They look great. We look madly in love.

I nod.

He posts.

And then he sets his phone down and it's just us and the music.

All of it is strangely familiar. We were here so many times when we were kids. It started when we were so young that no one thought twice about us in the same bed. Then we got older and something changed for me. I thought it changed for him, but I don't know anymore.

He must have felt that kiss too.

No. I push the thought aside. I focus on the room. The same posters of nineties bands. The same white sheets. The same bookshelf of paperbacks.

And Damon, leaning against his desk, dissolving into that space where there's nothing but him and the music.

He's too attractive here. Way too attractive. Which is why I need to focus on the song. Only the song.

"Do you want to start with the first song? The one with the college rock vibe?" I move off the bed to grab my notebook from my purse.

He returns to his spot next to his guitar. "Perfect."

There are a lot of ways to write a song. Some people start with music, some start with lyrics, some create both at the

same time. We're using a variation on the factory style, crafting the parts separately, combining them into a fun pop song.

Unlike the factory model, we're not tossing out three songs a day, pitching them to whichever artist we think fits. Instead, we're going to work to intertwine the two parts of the song to make sure they melt together and fit Bryce and his producer's vision.

"It's your kinda thing," Damon says. "Pop layered onto rock and sadness." He doesn't wait for a response. He starts playing.

A fast-paced intro, straight into a melodic chorus, and a verse with a rock-inspired sound. I don't have the talent he does. I can't imagine the details of the bass and drums. But I can sense the feeling.

It is the perfect hint of rock. Enough to help Bryce stand out in a sea of hip-hop and EDM-inspired pop music. Enough to give him a little edge. So all the girls and boys who adore him see him as a rebel.

Words flit through my head. Possibilities for the chorus. It's a little short for the song that fits the best, but I can make it work.

I pull my notebook from my bag, and I scribble a few words. "Play that again."

"You can sit next to me, Cass. I won't bite. Not unless you ask."

Fuck. My cheeks flush. My chest too. "You will bite. Just in a different way, if I ask."

He smiles *true* and pats the spot next to him.

I take it. I set my notebook on the comforter and spread it open. It feels like I'm opening myself. In a way, I am.

Even though these lyrics are for Bryce, they're personal. They're from the heart. That's as scary as kissing him. Scarier even.

I thought the music was the easy part of this, and it is, in a certain way. We fit together here. We work well here.

That's the problem. We're too good here. It's overwhelming.

I push my fear aside. This is the one place where I know how to be brave. "You go first," I say. "Whatever you have for it."

At first, I keep my eyes on the paper as he plays. I scribble a few words. An edited version of a line. A shorter chorus. A longer verse.

Then I turn and I look at him. And he's there in that place where he's lost in the music, and I want to be there with him so badly.

As a collaborator. And as so much more.

I thought it was dangerous playing his girlfriend. But this is a million times more dangerous. This is my heart and my career on the line.

Chapter Fifteen



Damon

All week, Cassie works me hard. She arrives every day, just after ten, and she comes straight to my room. She's always in the same outfit—jeans and a tank top, winged eyeliner, high-top sneakers. And I always struggle to ignore the way the fabric hugs her chest and ass. I struggle to ignore the intensity in her eyes and the passion in her voice.

And when she sings the lyrics to the melody I wrote?

She's not an annoying try-hard.

She's a gorgeous, engaged chanteuse.

The time passes in a blink. Wake up, work out, breakfast, Cassie, lunch, Cassie, dinner, Cassie. I fall asleep with her voice in my head, and I wake up desperate to finish our work.

When we finally get to Friday, I don't need to try to step into my role.

I don't need to practice.

I may not like Cassie Steele, but I want her so bad I can barely breathe.

BRYCE'S PRODUCER LIVES ABOUT AN HOUR FROM MY PARENTS' house, past Ventura, almost all the way to Santa Barbara.

Despite the distance, his house looks like every other Southern California eight-figure mansion. All money, no taste.

A rectangular shape, white walls, big windows that look out on the ocean, with bamboo shades.

Of course, there's a Tesla parked in the driveway. The producer's car, no doubt. The flashy red thing next to it must belong to Bryce. Which means the sensible grey sedan is Frederick's car.

It suits him. He's bland, and he seems safe and reliable, but he's not. (My mom has a weird obsession with Consumer Reports and their ratings on cars).

Cassie doesn't notice the lack of style. She's too, well, starstruck. This producer is Babyface level big. She could only be more excited if we were actually meeting Babyface. In that case, she'd probably die from anticipation.

Could I fill her with that kind of anticipation?

I could tease her for hours...

No fly zone. Absolute no-fly zone.

I step out of the car and lock the door. "How are you feeling?"

"Great." She smooths her black dress and adjusts her leather jacket. "And the story is good, right? Our story."

I nod. "I drive you crazy." And she drives me crazy. Especially in that professional rock star outfit. Why does she look so good in combat boots? It's criminal. "Crazy in love." I offer my hand.

She takes it. "Right. That's good. That's really good. And our pitch? Should we practice again?"

"You got it, Cass." Once she starts discussing music, she falls into the zone right away. She could talk to the ghost of Mozart and feel confident.

She smiles at the compliment. For a second, her nerves disappear, and my heart thuds against my chest. She's cute like this. Sexy too. There's something about seeing her vulnerable side—

I like it too much.

I take her hand and lead her to the door. We knock and wait.

Then, all at once, Cassie's confidence disappears.

Her ex-boyfriend Frederick pulls the door open. He stands there, tall and proud and handsome, like that guy on the first season of *Bridgerton*, only with huge glasses. "Cassie. Hey." He ignores me completely to focus on her. "Did you find the place okay?"

"Because we missed the turn and we were late. That's why we're still here. Well, that and all the snacks." A melodic voice cuts through the space. Even though she's speaking, she sounds like a singer. A Christina Perri type, with vocal range and emotion in every note. "You know how Freddie is. Helpless without Maps, but he insisted he knew how to find the place."

Frederick pulls the door open a little wider to reveal the source of the voice. A slim woman in an oversized pastel blue sweater and jeans.

She looks like an alternate universe version of Cassie. They're both a few inches shorter than I am, with strong shoulders and curvy hips.

Only this woman is soft everywhere Cassie is sharp. She's got round glasses, a small nose, a wide chin. She's a little paler than Cassie too, with strawberry-blonde hair and light eyes.

They're both dressed like artists; only this girl looks like she doodles flowers in her notebook—messy bun, huge glasses, mom jeans. Cassie looks like she'll kill you if you touch her headphones.

“You must be Damon.” The woman looks to me with a wide smile. One that is all sincere *let's be friends* and no *we're in competition*, much less, *I stole your girlfriend's ex-boyfriend*.

I suppose, as Cassie's boyfriend, I should be glad this other woman took Frederick out of the picture. But I should also hate that she hurt the woman I love.

“I'm Tinsel.” She continues without noting the irony of the situation. “It's really nice to meet you.” She offers her hand.

I shake.

Cassie stares at Tinsel's hand like it's laced with arsenic. She nods hello and pulls her hands back to her sides. “Did you two take a gig as butlers?”

Tinsel laughs. “We wanted to keep things friendly. Bryce is in the backyard.”

“Bryce and the producer?”

“No.” Tinsel looks around the room. “We haven't seen him, actually. What is he doing?”

Frederick whispers something in her ear.

Cassie presses her lips together. “So you're done with your pitch then?”

“Yeah, we've just been hanging out and talking.” Tinsel smiles. “We thought we'd grab you. So all five of us can hang out and talk.”

Cassie fights a frown. It's not exactly a normal setup for a pitch. And it's beyond oblivious to expect her to enjoy "friendly" conversation with her ex and the woman he chose over her.

Fuck these two.

I wrap my arm around Cassie's waist reflexively. "What do you think, baby?" I turn to face her. I pull her body into mine.

Cassie looks up at me with surprise, then she blinks, and she sinks into the ruse. She brings her hand to my chest. She stares into my eyes with pure affection.

My heart thuds against my chest. The interest in her gaze is intoxicating. I have to fight to hold on to my senses. "Do you want to talk? Or would you rather keep not talking?"

"Why would anyone want to talk to you?" Cassie's lips curl into a smile. She teases me with the same tone she always uses, but it sounds different somehow, laced with affection and desire. "You're so much more fun when you're not talking."

I don't think. I bring my hand to her cheek, and I pull her into a kiss.

Her lips brush mine. It's soft. A hint of her. The subtle taste of mint lip gloss. The one she always wears.

It tastes like home.

Is that what happens when people fall in love?

No. I'm mixing things up.

She's close. She's there, in my subconscious, because I've known her a long time. That's all.

Then she digs her fingers into my chest, and my conscious thoughts dissolve. She feels like more than home. She feels

like everything.

I need more.

My teeth scrape against her lip reflexively.

My body hums to attention. My breath. My heart. My dick.

Fuck.

She pulls back with a gasp as my hard-on presses against her stomach.

After a week working with her, I'm quick on the trigger. The drop in masturbation doesn't help.

Four times a day was a bit much. But four times a week isn't nearly enough to ease the sexual tension in the air.

Cassie gives me a long, slow once-over, but she doesn't mention the state of affairs. She smiles in that knowing Cassie sort of way. "Not talking is much better. But I can survive a few minutes of conversation."

"Five?" My body hums with a strange mix of need and pride. I may be a fuckup, but I'm a fuckup who makes her come. As far as these assholes know.

They watch us with blank stares, like they're not sure why we're making out, but they're not about to object.

Cassie smiles and offers me her hand. "Ten minutes of conversation, max."

The display does nothing to dampen Tinsel's enthusiasm, but Frederick can't manage to hide the jealousy in his stare.

It feels good. Way too good. But I don't care. I need the thrill. I need it like I need oxygen.

"Are you two gonna offer drinks too?" I lace my fingers with hers. "Appetizers, maybe?"

“There are drinks outside.” Tinsel smiles and motions *follow me*. When we do, she leads us through a massive, modern living room to a breezy deck, right on top of the sand, a mere twenty feet from the Pacific Ocean.

Cassie takes in the space as she moves through the living room. She steps into the backyard and looks around, noting the view of the ocean, the bright blue sky, the infinity pool, and the long, round table where Bryce Bradey is sitting.

He’s dressed in a sensitive artist meets celebrity douchebag get-up. Designer sunglasses, shiny red bomber jacket, Nirvana t-shirt, ripped jeans, high tops.

He stands and greets us with a nod. “The Cassie Steele.” Bryce smiles. “I’ve heard so much about you.” He turns to me. “You must be the boyfriend.”

He’s full of shit. I see it instantly. Addicts spot other addicts easily. We also spot other people who are just as full of shit.

I don’t know if he’s unable to moderate his food, drugs, booze, sex, gambling.

But I know he’s got that same inability to sit with himself.

If my radar is still good. Maybe it’s not. Maybe I’m judging him too early.

It doesn’t matter who he is as a person. This is a job. That’s it. I’m here to play my part as a fake boyfriend and a musician. I’m not here to make friends.

I look my fake girlfriend up and down, and I stage whisper, “Does he know you’re using me for my body?”

She aces the ruse. Easy smile. Confident, teasing tone. “I think everyone who looks at you knows.” Cassie releases my

hand and shakes with Bryce. “It is nice to meet you, Bryce. I love your work. Your ability to mix heartbreak and wit is unparalleled. We could do amazing work together.”

“I’m sure we could.” He smiles. “But pleasure before business.” He says it casually, like he’s talking about having fun, but I hear more too.

He wants other pleasure with Cassie.

Who wouldn’t, yeah, but he better stay the fuck away from her. I don’t like the tone. At all.

“This is my pleasure.” Cassie keeps her eyes on Bryce. “Talking about music and lyrics. It’s my favorite thing in the world.”

Bryce smiles with approval.

Frederick and Tinsel exchange one of those couple looks. They’re sharing a secret. One at Cassie’s expense.

Fuck both of them.

“Music is your second favorite thing.” I pull her into my arms again.

Her back sinks into my chest. Her ass brushes my crotch. She smiles as she looks up at me. “No. That’s my second favorite thing. But it’s close.”

“What about when we have a soundtrack?”

“Even so.” Her body melts into mine.

I hold her close. I bring my lips to her neck.

She groans as I place a kiss on her skin. “Damon...” There’s no put-on in her voice. Only pure, raw need.

I want more of it. I want all of it.

“You really took that note.” Frederick and Tinsel trade another look. “Pleasure first.”

I glance in their direction, take in their general annoyance. It feels good. Really good. But then this feels good too. The warmth of Cassie’s skin. The softness. The scent.

She feels like home in a way no one ever has. Because she’s my rival. Because she despises me. Because she’s Cassie Fucking Steele.

For a moment, I lose myself in the sensation of her body against mine. That, too, is a rare feeling these days. But it’s easier with her here. With music. With conversation. With whatever I should call this.

When I release her, I’m dizzy.

My surroundings return to me slowly. The blue sky, the expanse of ocean, the carafe of water and glasses on the table.

No alcohol.

Is it too early or did I peg the guy too well? Maybe he’s in recovery too. Maybe that part of this will be a lot easier.

I push the thought aside as I pull out Cassie’s chair for her. We’re here for work. It’s not standard to say *no drinks on the job* but it’s common enough.

I hope.

I force a casual tone. “I agree with the stance. Pleasure before business.”

Cassie sits with a smile. “In practice, that means we always play music when we’re...”

“Of course.” I sit next to her.

Frederick just stops himself from rolling his eyes.

Tinsel squeezes his hand. She nestles into his body, wrapping her arms around him as she shoots him goo-goo eyes.

He returns the affection with a soft, sweet kiss.

All the light leaves Cassie at once. First, from her green eyes. Then her wine lips. Then her entire body deflates.

They're not pretending.

They're not crazy in lust. It's worse. They're in love.

I never understood that idea before. How it would be worse if your partner fell in love with someone else than if they fucked someone else for fun.

Looking at Cassie, it's obvious. The betrayal cuts through her mind, her heart, her soul.

And I want, so badly, to ease that for her.

By making this guy hurt.

By winning this gig.

And by all the other things boyfriends do. Or friends.

But I don't have time to linger in that realization, because Bryce asks the one question I can't answer. "Is water good? Or does anyone want something a little stronger?"

Chapter Sixteen



Damon

A breeze blows over the deck. It sends goose bumps down my arm. It whips Cassie's hair around her face.

She keeps her green eyes on me. She studies me, careful, curious, concerned.

Does everyone else see it? Or just her?

Bryce continues, oblivious to my discomfort. "I have wine, champagne, beer. Any cocktail you can imagine. We've got a fully stocked bar. And you know how to mix drinks, right, Tinsel?" He laughs at the visual.

"I was a bartender for a while." Tinsel nods.

"She was just telling me a few stories." Bryce shrugs, already bored by the possibility of a cocktail or two.

But I barely hear the guy.

I barely catch Tinsel's tale of oddballs and drunkards. She moves into a second story. Then a third. That one, I hear. Mostly.

A guy came to the bar with two friends. The three of them decided to compete on who could go home with the hottest girl. And when he kept striking out and kept drinking whiskey, he got pissed at one of his friends and challenged the guy to a duel for the woman's honor.

An actual duel.

She kicked him out before he could cause trouble. It's more of a funny story than a scary one, but I can't find the humor at the moment.

It's too familiar.

It's too painful.

Everyone else laughs. Everyone else responds to Cassie's polite no *I don't drink until happy hour* and moves on to drinking water.

She saves me without even trying. And I used to curse her for not being cool.

Thank fuck she's a square.

Thank fuck she hates the feeling of being under the influence.

Thank fuck for these painful bartending stories.

Tinsel tells another. This time, it's about a couple interviewing for a threesome. They met three different women over the course of the night. They had them all scheduled, like they were hiring a cocktail waitress.

There's no malice in Tinsel's voice. There's no sign she knows about her boyfriend's attempt to spice things up with his ex. It's not the kind of thing most guys would advertise. *By the way, I expect you to have threesomes with other women. Only the last one I had fucked shit up.*

Frederick has the decency to look embarrassed.

But that does nothing to wipe the frown off Cassie's face.

She saved me without trying. It's my turn to save her. As soon as I catch my fucking breath.

"What was their verdict?" Bryce leans into the table, soaking up every drop of the conversation. He's easy, casual, ridiculous. "Did they go home with everyone?"

Tinsel laughs. That too, is easy. She's not bothered by the prospect of drinks or drunkards or boyfriends fucking other women. "They came back the next weekend with one of their potential partners. I didn't see them after that."

I try to find something to say, but the words are tangled in my throat. *I can't fucking do this between your boyfriend is a piece of shit.* It's not clever. It's not smart. It's not the right play.

Cassie sits there, but she's not awkward and tense the way I am. She's pissed, and she's sending all that energy in her ex-boyfriend's direction.

The classic Cassie Steele *I fucking hate you* glare. Only it's not the same way she stares at me, the way she stared at me. There's that same tinge of disappointment, like she can't believe someone she cared about would do that, but it's tinged with actual malice.

Pure, honest hate.

Or maybe that's hurt. I don't know anymore. I just know I want to make it better and I'm fucking not.

I do what I can. I take her hand. I lean in to whisper. "You good?"

"Yeah." She brings her lip to my ear. "But this looks a little odd." Her breath warms my skin. It sends goose bumps down my neck and chest. "Like we're whispering sweet nothings about sharing."

"No. I don't share," I say.

"Say that again. But loud enough they hear."

Okay. I can do that. Easy. "No, baby." I let my voice rise. "I'd never share you. Not with anyone."

“Thank you,” Cassie whispers. She shifts into her seat with a blush and a sheepish shrug. Is she actually shy or pretending? I don’t know anymore.

I only know I like it. I like it way too much.

Bryce smiles, amused by the interplay. There are people who believe competition makes you better. That’s true in some situations. Competing with Cassie makes me better.

But I doubt that’s why Bryce agreed to this. It’s more likely he finds our squabbles entertaining. He enjoys the pain and anger in Cassie’s expression.

He wants us to play these games.

It’s fucked up, but it’s not out of the ordinary. Not in the music industry. Not in other businesses too, probably, but absolutely not in this one.

Would he play the same games with my sobriety if he knew?

I don’t want to find out.

“What do you think of that idea?” Bryce zeroes in on Cassie. “For a song or the entire album even?”

“A threesome?” Cassie shifts into lyricist mode instantly. The pain falls from her face. Curiosity returns to her green eyes. “You and two women, having sex?”

“A triad,” he says. “Something modern.”

“No.” Cassie doesn’t hesitate. She speaks with a clear, authoritative voice. “That would be a mistake.”

“It would?” Bryce shifts toward her. Interest fills his voice, but I can’t tell if it’s a play or a genuine desire for her point of view.

“A major mistake,” she continues. “Your fans see you as a romantic icon. They don’t want to see you with two women. It’s greedy.”

Something in Bryce changes too. He’s not *just* full of shit. He’s actually listening. He nods *go on*.

“You could do a love triangle, maybe, but it would be hard to make a triangle with two women work. That’s not what your fans want. They want to see you as someone who is available to them. They want to see you heartbroken from unrequited love.” Cassie looks him dead in the eyes; no fear, no deference to authority. “They love you because they believe you could love them.”

“They love me when I’m suffering?” he asks.

“Yes.” She doesn’t mince words. “That’s who you are to them, a man who suffers for love. You can sell them another version of Bryce Bradey, but you’d have to start from scratch.”

“And that guy doesn’t struggle to choose between two women?” he asks.

“No,” she says. “Bryce Bradey falls hard and fast. Too hard and too fast.” She names three songs from his last album. All about his unrequited love.

“What if I need something different?” he asks.

“We can do different,” she says. “But not a threesome. Even if you spin it as sex addiction, or a desperate attempt to numb your pain. Even if you try to go for that *I fuck and I drink because I hurt inside thing*... I can write it. You can sing it. But it will be hard for any PR person to sell it.”

“And a triangle?” he asks.

“We can play with it,” she says. “I’m open to ideas. But I don’t think it’s the best move.”

“What is?” he asks.

“You’re right. You do need to shift enough to stay fresh to your fans, to demonstrate growth as a person. So far, you’ve been sweet and romantic. So we can give you what you want, love that merits love songs. Or we can give you what your fans want, love that breaks your heart,” Cassie says.

“Unrequited love?” he asks.

“An arc,” she says. “You have love. You lose it. You struggle with the pain. Maybe we throw in a song about meaningless sex. But it needs to feel like it hurts you. It can’t feel fun or joyful. It can’t be one of those *let’s party* songs.” She names a few comparable songs, where guys try to spin their slutty ways as their only method of coping with pain. “We end with an epiphany. A realization you can’t drown your pain. You have to live with it. You have to open yourself back up.”

“To the right woman?” he asks.

“Yes, of course.” Cassie looks him directly in the eyes. “You must know, better than anyone, how much your fans want to fall in love with you because of your beautiful, broken heart.”

I don’t know how she says it with a straight face to a guy who clearly enjoys fucking with people. There’s something broken about the bastard, but there’s nothing beautiful about it.

For a full minute, Bryce turns over Cassie’s words. He stays in his role as contemplative artist as he turns to the other happy couple.

Fuck. I forgot they were here. That's how much I only see Cassie, especially when she talks about music. When she says shit that hits me in the core.

Is she speaking to me, about me, or am I that self-involved?

Maybe this is why I love music, why anyone does, because we find ourselves inside it, even when it's not meant for us, even when it's only meant for the person with the pen.

Especially then.

There's something universal about specificity. There's something about honest vulnerability. People like Cassie who are brave enough to share their hurt, their flaws, their ugly parts.

We all have them.

Most of us just can't admit it.

Look at me, pretending I don't give a fuck what we drink.

Bryce returns to business before I can finish my thought. "What do you think, Frinsel... or do we like Tindruck?" He laughs at the possible portmanteaus. "Do you agree with Ms. Steel's assessment?"

Even though Tinsel is the lyricist on the team, Frederick speaks first. "It depends what you want to do with this album." He shoots Cassie a look that says *you aren't always right, all the time*.

Which is ridiculous. She is always right about music, and she's definitely in the right now. Whatever she did, she didn't fuck someone behind his back.

Fuck, I hate this guy. I know I make her life miserable sometimes, but that's different. I do it because she's difficult.

Because I like how difficult she is.

Shit.

I like her way too much. But that is beyond the issue at the moment.

I tune back in to Frederick's boring pitch.

"Do you want to keep your image as a soulful guy?" Frederick asks. "Or do you want to break into the mainstream? People might talk shit about you, if you land on DeuxMoi because you slept with two models, but they'll talk about you. With all due respect to Ms. Steele, she's a little idealistic. Your diehard fans are a small group compared to your potential reach. If you write the album to incorporate this idea of a party boy looking for something real, a dalliance could work with your image, not against it."

"Do you agree, Tinsel?" Bryce asks.

"In theory, yes," Tinsel says. "But as a fan, I don't really see it. I'd hate a threat to my belief you're a romantic. And, yes, you want to reach new people, but you need to bring your fans along. They're the people who are going to spread the word about you. They're the ones making TikToks and begging influencers for gossip."

"All press is good press," Frederick says. "If you hook up with a lingerie model, people will talk shit about you, but they'll talk about you."

"Yeah, but that will change things forever." I surprise myself with my stance. "Once a woman sees you as a player, she doesn't let go of that image. Even if you fucked around to ease your pain. Even if you had a threesome as a desperate attempt to save a loving relationship." I shoot Frederick a smile.

He frowns.

Fucking victory.

That feels way too good. Better than sex. The sex I've had.

Sex with Cassie—

Not going there.

Bryce notices the friction, but he doesn't mention it. He just laughs. "Don't worry about my image, ladies. I don't share." He turns his attention to Cassie as he shifts back to serious artist. "But I like the triangle. The heartbreak. I'm the man who wants a woman who chooses someone else. Unrequited love. Tell me more about it."

Cassie falls back into that place where it's just her and the music. She doesn't even notice her ex-boyfriend glaring in her (my) direction. "The way I see it, you start brokenhearted and betrayed. You pretend it doesn't bother you. Then you let it in. You feel the pain. You let go. You find someone else. Maybe that's an implication. Maybe it's the final song, the denouement. Either way, the album is one big emotional arc. It forces you, and the listener, to confront their pain, to really face it."

Bryce hangs on every one of her words.

She continues. "That gives us space to meet all your goals. We can bring the emotion and wit your fans love, we bring in that rock and roll sound, and we can stretch your image to include sex or drugs. We can do an inverse of a party song, one about how the party fades, and you're trying to fake it till you make it, but you just can't. We always come back to the same thing, you're a guy who wants something real. And the woman just couldn't see that. She couldn't appreciate you for

who you are.” Cassie takes a deep breath. “It’s not the only way to go. But it’s the way I’d go.”

Bryce nods. “I love it.” He turns to the other couple. “Now. What about you two? What do you see?”

But it’s clear, from the look on his face, he’s not really listening. He’s fixed on Cassie. Her idea, her passion, her green eyes.

He wants to collaborate with her. But not just on lyrics. On something else too. Something a lot more horizontal.

Cassie would do anything for music.

Does it include fucking her way into a job? I don’t believe it. But I do believe in the Cassie who mixes love and work, who falls in love with the image she’s crafting and confuses that for who Bryce is.

I want to protect her from that, but how the fuck can I do that?

Chapter Seventeen



Damon

We take turns fleshing out our pitches. By the time we're finished, the sun is sinking into the horizon, and the air is cool. It's past happy hour, but no one has suggested a drink. Yet.

I swallow my discomfort. It's not a big deal. No, it is a big deal, a huge deal, but I know plenty of ways to fake participation. I can throw a shot, I can pretend sip, I can fix myself a mocktail.

It requires an extra layer of planning and deception, sure, but we're already lying here.

None of my techniques are necessary.

No one suggests a drink. We're too tired. And Bryce has plans with someone else, plans that take him elsewhere.

He pulls us into a huddle. "I love all four of you. I can't decide here. I can't decide at all. There's a party tomorrow. In Hollywood," he says. "For a new record at the label. Or an artist. Fuck if I remember. A friend of mine will be there. She's a genius with this stuff. I want her take. Party starts at seven, but I never know when she'll show up, so plan to be there until midnight." He shrugs with mock self-deprecation. "Musicians, you know?"

Cassie shoots her ex an *oh, I know* look. I'm not sure what it means, but I like the hate in it.

"It's an open bar, so it won't be too bad." He stands and offers Cassie a hug. "I'll email details."

She accepts the hug and he moves on to the rest of the table. Only he doesn't hold them the way he held her, like he really wants them closer.

He gets to me and I offer my hand.

Bryce smiles. "I get it. You're protective of your girl. It's sweet." He looks to Cassie. "Can I borrow your boyfriend for a minute?"

"Depends what you want to use him for." She pushes her lips into an over-the-top smile. "There are certain things I consider off-limits."

"Strictly to talk about his father," Bryce says.

"Oh, then it's your funeral." She winks at Bryce and looks to me with concern. I hate talking about my father. In any context.

But the guy is the biggest songwriter this side of Max Martin. He's also a former rock star, TMZ regular, and sex icon. Sure, the gossip of today is different, but it's the same sort of thing. Who is the star fucking? How does he fuck? What does he take before he fucks to make it even better? In Dad's case, that was everyone, indiscriminately, everything, but preferably heroin. Until it was only Mom and without a single substance... for a while, anyway. But I don't usually ask for those details.

Everyone wants to talk about him.

Bryce waits while Cassie hugs me goodbye, then she joins her ex in the living room. Is he fucking with her, or did she take the knife in her back and use it to slit his throat? Metaphorically speaking, of course.

Not that I doubt Cassie's ability to kill. She's tough.

Bryce watches me watch her. “It must be a lot, growing up in the shadow of someone like Miles Webb.”

It’s not a question. I answer anyway. “I’m used to it.”

“Do you have women asking about him?” he asks.

“It’s happened.” I’m not sure why Bryce cares. His interest in Cassie is clear enough. I guess he could be into men too, but he’s not sending lust my way, and everyone agrees I’m the spitting image of my father at twenty-seven.

Maybe that’s it. Maybe he’s got a thing for older guys.

I wouldn’t put anything past him. But, hey, I’m not here to judge. I’m here to play boyfriend and write music, which means I’m playing nice with this guy.

And, well, he is right. Women have cozied up to me in an attempt to get to know my dad. It’s pretty rare these days, but ten years ago, it was common enough. It was always older women—they were the ones who came of age when he was a sex icon—but that didn’t exactly bother me. There’s something about a woman who knows what she wants and exactly how to get it—

It’s hot.

“Why do you ask?” I need to think about something besides fucking Cassie. She’s not older, but she knows what she wants, and she takes it. She demands it. Is she the same when she’s naked?

Fuck, I hope so.

I don’t have a submission kink, but I love when Cassie is bossy. I love when any woman is lost enough to demand a certain touch, but the thought of Cassie pinning me to the bed and riding me like I’m a toy strictly for her pleasure.

Or Cassie ordering me out of my clothes.

Or between her legs.

Fuck.

“It’s been a while since I was in your position,” he says.

“With a famous father?” I ask.

“With someone who only wanted me for me,” he says.

“How do you know that’s the case?” I ask.

“Do you doubt your girlfriend’s motives?” Bryce chuckles, again amused by my potential struggle. He doesn’t want me to answer. He continues. “You’ve been friends since you were kids. She’s known you since before she knew what fame was.”

“And her dad is as influential as mine,” I say.

“No. He’s not. But he’s a big deal too,” Bryce says.

Cassie’s dad would hate hearing that, no doubt, but it’s true. It’s hard to go toe to toe with the American Max Martin and win in a *who influences the music industry more* game. Not that they’re competing.

Or maybe they are. I’m not exactly in Dad’s inner circle these days. I’m certainly not in Mr. Steele’s inner circle. He started looking at me with apprehension the day I turned thirteen.

“It must be nice...” He shakes his head with frustration, as if he’s sharing something real.

Maybe he is.

Maybe I misjudged him.

“Women think they know who I am, because of my songs. They don’t see the guy I really am.” Bryce looks to the empty

living room. “Most don’t, anyway.” He turns back to me. “I was excited to work with Cassie and Frederick as a team.”

“They did great work,” I say.

“They did? Or she did?”

“I’m sure you can guess my opinion on the matter.” It’s obvious she’s the more talented one, but I don’t need to spell it out. He can see it too.

“Is that why you’re together?”

“Am I using her for her talent?” I ask.

He nods.

“As a creative partner.”

“Your motives as a man are a lot less pure?” He laughs at his own joke. “I can’t say I blame you.” He offers his hand to shake. “I look forward to hearing your sample. And having some fun Saturday, with both of you.”

Fuck, I don’t like the sound of that. Still. I shake his hand. I try to shrug off my concern as I move through the living room.

Tinsel is in Frederick’s car, taking a call.

Cassie is in the driveway, talking alone with Frederick. They’re close together. Too close. For a moment, jealousy flares in my stomach. Then I see it—They’re not sharing. They’re arguing.

“You don’t have to take this personal,” Frederick says.

“My pitch had nothing to do with you.” She smooths her dress and presses her wine lips into a *you can’t bother me* smile.

“Why does it sound familiar then?”

“It’s what I suggested the first time you played me Bryce’s work.” She smiles even wider. “It made sense then, before you were fucking someone behind my back. It makes sense now that you’re fucking her in front of everyone.”

He frowns. “It’s always about sex with you, isn’t it?”

Cassie’s smile disappears. She looks in Tinsel’s direction, but she doesn’t say her name or spell out the implication.

I want to scream it for her. *You fucked someone else, asshole. Of course, it’s about sex.*

“It’s ironic, considering...” He doesn’t explain what he means, but she knows. It’s all over her face. He’s said enough to hurt her. “I wanted this to work as much as you did. You don’t have to believe that, but it’s true.”

“The pitch has nothing to do with you.” Again, she finds the fake smile, but this time, it’s not remotely convincing. “And what I think about you is no longer any of your business.”

He nods *fine*, takes a step toward the car, stops himself. “I wanted to stay friends.”

“Maybe you should have thought about that—”

“Before I fucked her. Yeah. I know. It’s hard to have a conversation when that’s your come back to every single thing I say.” Frederick shakes his head. “I hope it’s different with him. For your sake.” He leaves with triumph, sure he’s had the last word.

Not if I have anything to say about it.

I cut through the driveway. I wrap my arms around her and pull her into a long, deep kiss.

She kisses back with an intoxicating mix of lust and need. I don't know if it's real or fake. Only that I want more of it. All of it.

“Fuck.” She pulls back with a sigh. “Does this look as desperate as it feels?”

Maybe. I certainly feel frenzied. I need to erase that pain. I need to show him someone else wants her.

I need to show her.

Cassie shifts enough to glance at Frederick. She must like what she sees, because she goes back to kissing me.

She hooks her leg around my hip.

I wrap my hand around her thigh.

I forget why we're here and what we're doing. I lose myself in her lips.

I'm in high school again. I'm content to kiss her for hours. Forever.

Then the sedan pulls out of the driveway, Cassie releases me, and I'm not sure where we are or what we're doing.

She looks up at me with hazy eyes. “Let's go to your place.”

There's no way she means *to fuck*, but that's all my body hears.

“We need to get started on the next song,” she says. “We need to fucking ace this.”

She's right, but still, the only thing I think is *we need to get naked in my bed*.

Chapter Eighteen



Cassie

The blissful mix of rage and inspiration keeps me glued to my pen. Damon and I work until we crash. Well, until I crash. I fall asleep in his bed and wake up with the sun. He's in his parents' bedroom. The house is quiet.

I should probably stop and consider the implications of dreaming in my enemy's sheets, but I don't. I fix breakfast and coffee and trade a few *what's up with you* texts with Daphne, then I dive into the song.

When Damon wakes, he joins me. He doesn't even stop to tease me about falling asleep on him or wanting to sleep with him or inhaling the scent of his pillow. He slips right into work mode too.

We fit together so well here. I almost forget I used to hate him. I almost forget we're competing with my ex-boyfriend and his new flame. I *do* forget we're pretending we belong together.

Because we do belong together here. We're perfect here.

We work through lunch. He puts the finishing touches on the song and we go through it twice. Then it's just technical work, all on his end, so he sends me downstairs with a joke. Go, watch *The Matrix* again, or dive in the pool. Get fresh for tonight.

Fresh isn't the word I'd use, but it fits well enough. I feel awake and alive and on fire, the way I do after a long swim or a great movie or a fantastic session of sex.

The world is a big, beautiful place, and I want to soak in all of it. For a few minutes, I do. I brew another cup of coffee. I head to the backyard, sit on a pool chair, stare at the endless blue sky and azure ocean.

And then I remember.

We're supposed to attend a party in three hours. A party an hour's drive away. And I don't have any clothes here. No, I don't have appropriate clothes anywhere. Parties aren't my scene.

Frederick always loved them. He had this deep need to be surrounded by cool people so he could feel cool himself. That's why he wears designer frames and drinks dirty martinis and dates people like, well, me.

Because I have that effortless, I don't give a fuck thing. At least, on the outside, I seemed that way.

Men always want that. It's like the speech in that movie *Gone Girl*. The best compliment a man can pay a woman is "cool."

Only it's true everywhere. Everyone wants someone easy-going, someone without too many needs, someone who accomplishes without effort.

Frederick didn't want to know about my orgasm issues. Or my dislike of his favorite movie. Or my apathy toward his hippest friend.

So I shaped myself into that person, the person he wanted. I was used to the role. My parents take up a lot of space. They mean well, but they do.

When I was little, Dad was gone for long stretches, and Mom needed us. Mom needed easy.

She never said it. No one said it. But I learned. I got compliments from everyone. *Cassie is such an easy kid. Always listening to music on her own. And so naturally talented.*

That was what people wanted to see.

Especially men.

I never thought about it, really. I played the part I expected. I was the cool girlfriend.

And what did it get me?

My boyfriend found an even cooler girlfriend. Tinsel is as effortless as I am, but she's feminine and graceful too.

I'm... not.

But I know how to fake it. Well, I know who can help me fake it.

I text my sister Laurel.

She answers immediately.

Laurel: I'll be there in an hour with options.

EIGHTY MINUTES LATER, MY SISTER KNOCKS ON THE DOOR. Laurel doesn't mention her lack of punctuality (she never does). She speaks with the confidence of someone fifteen minutes early, her usual MO. "Put on your clothes, kids. I'm here." She knocks again. "Actually, leave them off. I have new ones."

I spring from my spot on the couch to let her in.

Laurel and I were never like other sisters. I don't know if it's because her relationship with Zack predates her relationship with me, because she didn't feel like she fit into the family when she was young. I never noticed, and she never said anything, so maybe she did, or because we just didn't have a lot in common.

She always loved clothes and makeup and princesses and glitter.

I didn't have the same natural passion. And I'd already learned the lesson smart girls don't love unicorns and pink.

Which is stupid. I know that now. I'm smart enough to see the internalized misogyny now.

But at ten years old, I knew I wanted to be like my dad, the musician, and I knew he didn't care about fashion or silver eyeliner or designer handbags.

I was there if she needed help with homework or music, or boys even, but she never did. She leaned into her interest in art early. She's gorgeous and charming—she never had trouble with guys. And as for music—

She's like most people. She loves what she loves, and she doesn't care why or if anyone else deems it good or bad. She doesn't want to talk about whether or not the lyrics are inane. Really, pop songs don't *have* to be stupid. The stupidity is optional!

Laurel enters the house with her usual easy smile and effortlessly chic outfit. Fashion is another field where no one wants to look like they're trying too hard. She wheels a rack of clothes into the foyer like she's done it a thousand times.

It's the sort of thing people wheel around on TV show sets or at fashion magazines. I've seen them at her office, too.

But—“How did you drive with that?” Seriously, she has a *tiny* car.

“Practice.” She wheels the rack to the couch and studies the space. “Where is my mirror? I was promised a mirror.”

“Upstairs.”

Laurel shakes her head. “No good.” She yells toward the upstairs. “Damon. Can you hear me? Bring the mirror you use to watch yourself have sex. I need as much surface area as possible. And as many angles. If you have two or three mirrors, I want all of them.”

“Subtle,” I say.

She smiles with pure Laurel energy. That sort of work hard, play harder, and look great doing it smile.

She does. She’s wearing a hip mini-dress in a gorgeous shade of red, heeled sandals, and subtle silver jewelry. She looks like the stylish, creative, fun-loving woman she is.

“Thank you for saving me, Laurel.” She motions *this is what you should say*. “You are the most fashionable person I know. Without you, I would have to show up at this big, Hollywood party in a pair of jeans and combat boots.”

“Combat boots are my signature.”

She continues mocking me, “Yes, I know, I am so uncool I think Doc Martens are still hip. I love rocking a tired, boring look.”

“Doc Martens are classic.”

She shakes her head *it’s so sad you think that’s true* and continues her Cassie impression. “Thank goodness you’re here with trendy stuff that isn’t even available to the public. I get to be the only girl with a new dress from Riot.”

I won't be the only woman at the party in a not-yet-available-to-the-public dress, but I will be the only one with a look from her company, and her company is the new Reformation. They define eco-friendly, cool girl style. Plus, she dropped her plans to help me. I should thank her. Even if she was fashionably late. "Thanks, Laurel."

"You're welcome." She beams in that radiant Laurel like way. "I'll even come with you to fix your makeup."

"You weren't invited," I say.

She shrugs. An invitation is not something she considers necessary. She has Dad's mix of charisma and endless confidence. She's sure everyone wants her at the party (and she's right). "Are you taking a limo or driving?"

Why would we take a limo? The party is in the Hollywood Hills. That's not far but it's not close either. "No."

"Are you the DD then?"

We haven't talked about that, actually. "You're crashing. You can be the designated driver."

She laughs. "Really, Cass?"

Yeah, that's like asking Damon to skip drinks. Only I haven't seen Damon drink once.

Is he better at hiding it now? Maybe he waits until he's home. Maybe he stops at a bar on the way home. I don't know. And it's not my concern.

We're not really lovers. We're collaborators. That's all.

"I'll drive." I'm willing to compromise. I'm not willing to concede. "If I have too many, we'll take a rideshare back, and we can fetch the car together tomorrow."

“Only if you buy the coffee in the morning,” she says.

A good deal. I offer my hand. When she shakes, I snap back to my mission. “Make me beautiful.”

She smiles. “Happy to oblige.” She shifts into work mode as she looks me up and down.

It’s odd seeing my little sister all serious and responsible. Odder, watching her examine me like I’m a celebrity client she needs to dress. She works at this clothing company full time and styles on the side. “Oooh, I see it. Off. Everything except shoes.”

“Underwear too?” Maybe ordering people out of their clothes is normal for her. It is not normal for me.

“If you must, okay. But no bra. Do you have heels?”

“Only the shoes I wore last night.”

“Let me guess. Boots?” she asks.

“What do you have against boots?”

“Not the Danskos, Cassie.” When I don’t answer, she shakes her head *how could you commit this crime against style?* “Do you want to look like a teacher or a nurse?”

“I want to look like a person in comfortable shoes.”

“Comfort isn’t sexy! Don’t be stupid. That’s like saying you want to write a pop song that makes people think. It’s just not how it is.”

That’s not totally right, but I understand her point. Pretending you have no physical needs is sexy. High heels and push-up bras and sex in the shower without silicon-based lube.

I played that role so many times.

Now...

I don't know. At least I'm smart enough to not attempt sex in water. Seriously, who convinced people that fully submerged sex is hot?

It's not. It's the worst. All that liquid and it's so fucking dry.

Has Damon ever had sex in a pool? In that pool.

The image fills my head immediately. The two of us, stripping out of our clothes to skinny dip, meeting in the middle of the water, kissing and touching and—

“Cassie. Off!” Laurel doesn't notice my mind drifting to dirty places. Only that it's drifting. “Now.” She pulls an orange-red dress from the rack and sets it on the couch. “Put this on. I have some shoes in the car. You're a size nine, right?”

I nod.

“I can work with that.” She motions to the long sheath and skips to the door.

Usually, I don't wear orange, but I asked for her expertise. I should trust it. I hate when artists don't trust my skill with lyrics. Why hire someone to ignore them?

Trust isn't my natural instinct, even with my sister, but I push aside my doubt anyway. Trust.

I can do trust.

In theory.

I turn my back to the front door, and I do away with my tank top and bra.

My skin flushes at the thought of Damon upstairs. He's close. Too close. He could easily step into the hallway and

watch.

My blush deepens as I slide out of my jeans too.

The heat stays as I slip into the dress. Sure, I'm not naked anymore, but I'm still dressed for sex appeal.

Silky fabric, low back, high neck, long skirt. An adult elegance. It shows enough skin to hint at dirty thoughts and covers enough to claim innocence.

Laurel is good at this.

But I can't reach the buttons to secure the high neck.

Right on cue, a door opens upstairs. Damon moves into the hall with heavy steps. He carries a three-panel mirror down the stairs and sets it down in the living room, between the couch and the piano.

His eyes find mine through the mirror. His pupils widen. His jaw drops. "Fuck, Cass." His voice drops to a breathy tone. One that screams *I want you out of that dress, now*. "You look hot."

My cheeks flush. "Like an elegant artist?"

"Hot as fuck." He moves around the couch so he's behind me. "Do you need help?"

"Yeah. The buttons." I point to the top of the dress.

He moves closer, close enough to touch me. He brushes my hair over my shoulder.

His breath warms my neck. His fingers skim my skin. The bottom of my neck. Then my back. The sides of the dress.

My body hums. My stomach flutters. Which part of this is real, and which part is pretend? He is my songwriting partner,

and he's helping me get ready for an event. That's normal. Platonic. Professional even.

The way his hands linger on my skin? That's romantic. Sexual.

Only we're not alone. My sister is outside, getting shoes. She might come in at any moment. This might be for her benefit. Or practice.

Or all him.

Because he wants me.

"Thank you." I say the only thing I can.

He replies without a hint of sarcasm. "Should I dress up too?"

"If you want." I don't know what works best for his image. Musicians wear what they want. A suit might say, well, I'm a suit. But then a suit might also say *I know how to fit the occasion* or *I can be whatever you need and still be myself*, which is exactly what we want as a work for hire team.

"I don't have anything this nice." He secures the first button. The second. "What do you think?" He runs his fingers over the neckline of the dress in a gesture that can only mean *I want to touch you*.

Then he releases me and I don't know what anything means.

This is confusing. I don't like confusing. That's why I write because it helps me put my messy thoughts in straight lines. Because it offers clarity. And Damon pretending he's my boyfriend while helping me make beautiful music—

It's only natural my brain is jumping to the more euphemistic use of the term.

That's a side effect I'm willing to suffer.

Anything for the job. That's why I'm here. To ace this assignment. That's what matters.

Only the words don't feel true the way they did when I asked him. They don't feel as true as they did yesterday.

Something is different.

We're different.

I push the thought aside to focus on the task at hand. Whatever happens tomorrow, I need to hit the ground running tonight. My eyes go to the mirror.

We look good here, like a couple getting ready for a night out. I guess that's the case. We are a couple of sorts.

I'm standing in this long orange-red dress, barefoot, hair down, makeup-free, and he's behind me in jeans and a t-shirt.

Laurel interrupts before I can contemplate the matter further. She saunters through the door with a stack of shoes in her hands. She looks at us, then at me, then at the mirror. "Oh, yes, Damon, thank you. Wow, you have great sex angles."

His nose scrunches in distaste. "This is from my parents' room."

"Go Mr. And Mrs. Webb." She laughs and shifts straight back to work. She looks me up and down and shakes her head. "No. This isn't the dress. Let's try..." She drops the boots on the couch and pulls a plum dress from the rack. It's shorter and cut low in the front instead of the back. "I like the shape of that one." She motions to the orange dress. "But I don't have it in another color in your size. Remind me to send you the black one next week."

A free dress? I'll take it. "Sure."

“Okay. Off.” She hands the dress to Damon. “Hold it for her.”

“Laurel.” My cheeks flush. I bite my tongue before I can object further. If he’s my boyfriend, he’s seen me naked. I shouldn’t be nervous to change in front of him. I find another excuse. “He’s not a coat rack.”

“Of course not.” Laurel shoots me a *don’t be dense* look. “He’s here for a male opinion.”

“Why do we need that?” I ask.

She laughs. “Cass, come on. Don’t pretend it’s not obvious. You want to make Frederick jealous.”

I do, but it’s not my primary goal. At least, not as a man. As an artist, yes, I want to make him cry. As a man, well—

I guess I also want to make him cry there.

Still. I’m not completely obsessed. Why is everyone acting like I’m only doing this for some sort of revenge?

Laurel continues, without noting my displeasure. “And the artist is a guy, right? I want to give him the right idea.”

“What idea is that?”

“He should want to fuck you, but think you’re too classy for that,” she says it as if it’s obvious and normal and not even a little bit icky.

Damon nods in agreement. I guess that’s a reasonable goal to the two of them.

“Great talking, kids, but we’ve got a deadline. Clothes off.” Laurel motions for me to strip.

My entire body flames. I don’t have another excuse. Only the truth. And there’s no way I’m telling Laurel the truth. Not

under normal circumstances—keeping secrets is not her skill set—and not when she’s attending the party with us.

“I’ll undo you.” Damon brings his lips to my ear. “I can go work upstairs.”

“Is there more to do?” I ask.

“No. Sent the song before I came downstairs.”

“Can I hear the final?”

“Right now?” He laughs. “Wouldn’t you rather wait until we’re alone?”

“Why would I do that?” I ask.

“I used your vocal track,” he says.

Somehow, I get hotter. A different kind of hotter, like my heart and mind are on display too. No. There’s no like. They are.

It’s standard for the songwriter to lay out a temp vocal track to get the melody right. But usually, I let my partner do it. I’m not a trained singer. I have limited technical ability.

But I am a woman and my past partners were all men. My range is higher than Damon’s or Frederick’s. Neither has an especially deep voice, but then Bryce does love to hit the high notes.

“You shouldn’t be shy about it,” he says. “You sold the emotion in every line. Who cares if you’re not as technically proficient as a professional?”

I do. And I care about the first part too. It’s one thing to hand my lyrics to someone else. To actually spill my guts to the world myself? No thanks.

“Hey!” Laurel clears her throat. “Less pillow talk. More clothing removal.”

“Sure.” I make eye contact through the mirror. Nod. “Go for it.”

Damon undoes the first button. Then the second. He steps aside so I can push the dress off my shoulders.

He’s between my sister and me. He doesn’t have anywhere to go. So he looks to the couch as I push the dress to my waist.

The fabric falls at my feet.

His eyes go to the mirror. He looks me up and down, from my bare feet to my beige panties, my bare stomach, my breasts, my neck, my eyes.

Then back to the breasts.

Fuck. It’s hot in here. How is it so hot in here?

The way he stares erases all the insecurities in my mind. I don’t worry about my singing voice or my small breasts or my swimmer’s shoulders.

Desire overwhelms me.

He wants me.

And I want him to want me. I want it so fucking badly.

“Yes, yes, we get it. You love each other’s bodies.” Laurel motions *go ahead*. She makes a show of rolling her eyes, as if she can’t believe how boring we are. Or maybe how unconvincing we are.

I can’t tell anymore.

“Help her into it, please,” Laurel instructs Damon.

I try to think of something to defuse the tension, but I don't have anything.

Damon's fingers brush mine as he hands me the dress. I step out of this one. Bend to pull the other one.

It slides on easily.

Damon watches as I pull the fabric over my hips, stomach, breasts.

Through the mirror, his eyes meet mine. They offer something I can't explain, something that says *I love you like this*.

Naked physically or emotionally?

I'm not sure. I only know I want it. I really, really want it.

Again, Laurel rolls her eyes. "Oh my god, could you too keep it in your pants for ten minutes. We have a deadline." She motions for him to zip me.

Again, he moves closer. Again, he lets his fingers brush my back as he pulls the zipper up.

"Oh yeah." Laurel looks me up and down, already back in stylist mode, unconcerned with the chemistry between my fake boyfriend and me. "I like this. We just need the shoes. Don't worry. They're boots. You can rock your 'signature.'" She picks up a pair of heeled boots and hands them to Damon. "You want to help her into them?"

"Why? Do you need a picture for your spank bank?" He says it like it's a joke, but it lands like a promise to me.

"Of my sister? Weird. No. It's for the rest of the internet. Unless you got bored of posting thirst traps," she says. "I mean, some of them might as well say, 'is my ex-boyfriend

seeing this? I want him to know my new boyfriend is hotter.’
But that’s just me.”

“How about you take some that say something more subtle.” I find a hint of sass, but I don’t feel it. I feel exposed.

Laurel doesn’t notice. Or she doesn’t call me on it.

She positions us on the couch, me sitting on the cushion, Damon between my legs, helping me into my boots.

He rolls socks over my feet. Then he slides the boots on, one leg at a time, running his fingers over my calves as he checks the zippers.

Without prompting, he places a kiss on my upper calf. The inside of my knee. The very bottom of my inner thigh.

Laurel keeps shooting the entire time. “Keep it PG-thirteen, kids. This is for the Gram. Or do you have an Only Fans I don’t know about?”

“I do.” Damon holds his position right between my legs for another photo, then he pulls back and pushes himself up. “But it’s all feet pics.”

“Hot.” Laurel laughs. She motions for me to stand. When I do, she continues issuing orders. “Twirl.”

“For the camera?” I ask.

“Yeah, sure, let’s make a Reel for our account.” She motions *twirl* again.

So I twirl.

The skirt is just loose enough to swirl around my thighs.

I land, look at the camera, blow it a kiss.

My sister laughs. “Oh, that is so perfect. Should we do another one of you two?” She looks between us. “No. I don’t

need you to go all rated R again.” She smiles. “Okay, Damon, get lost. It’s time for hair and makeup.”

“Show’s over?” he teases.

“For now,” she says. “But I’m coming for you next.”

Chapter Nineteen



Cassie

Even though hair and makeup aren't her expertise, Laurel transforms me into the version of myself who belongs at a Hollywood party. And makes my ex cry *how did I throw that away* tears.

Maybe, he will swallow his bullshit *I threw you away* with those tears. Let's face it. I look hot. Better than hot. Beautiful, creative, and professional.

The low-cut dress, boots, and glam makeup turn me into the perfect musician trophy girlfriend. Add the leather jacket, and boom, I'm cool on my own.

There is something triumphant about knowing my ex will be jealous I'm the perfect trophy girlfriend. But there's something false about it too. Is this really who I want to be?

Before I can consider the idea fully, Laurel interrupts. She parades Damon down the stairs like he's the one who's the real trophy.

He does look good in that suit. Way too good.

But I don't have a lot of time to consider the implications of that either. Laurel drags us to the car, calls shotgun, and insists on picking the music for the entire drive before I can say *I have ideas for that tie*.

Damon shoots me a look through the mirror. A pure couple look. *Your sister sure is a character*.

For a moment, I feel it. The sense we're really in love. Then I remind myself this is pretend. I remind myself I hate

him. But it doesn't feel pretend.

And, at the moment, I can't recall why I hate him so much.

At the moment, he doesn't feel like my fake boyfriend. He feels like my friend, my partner, my lifeline.

And that's as scary as the possibility of losing this job.

THE PARTY IS AT A HOTEL IN HOLLYWOOD. ONE KNOWN FOR landing celebrities on *TMZ*. And I do mean *TMZ*. It's a real aughts artifact.

After we park with the valet, we walk in together. The three of us saunter into the well-decorated hotel ballroom like we belong there.

No, like we're too cool to belong there.

For once, I feel it. I'm not just creative and smart. I'm not just talented with a pen. I'm so sexy and cool I outclass a party at a has-been hotel.

Laurel pulls me into a tight hug, wishes me good luck, promises she'll text if she leaves without me, and goes straight to the bar.

She chats up the guy in line in front of her. A producer who stares at her chest the entire time. Not that I blame him. Unlike me, she is very gifted in this area, and her current dress seems to defy gravity in its ability to both reveal and contain her boobs.

Then Damon wraps his hand around my waist, and I forget about my sister. I forget we're here to pretend.

Right now, I'm not faking anything. I want to show off my talented collaborator.

"Do you want a drink?" I ask.

"Later."

Later is good. He's being responsible. But that isn't like him.

It means something.

What?

Damon interrupts my thought with the brush of his fingers against my side. "Let's find the bastard."

Right. It doesn't matter if Damon is drinking or not or how much or what he does when we're done.

That's none of my business.

As long as we get this right.

Pleasure before business. Or is this business before pleasure? It's all mixed up. Either way, I agree with the mission. I follow him around the room, only people stop us to say hello every three to four feet.

Finally, after half a dozen *wow, is that really little Cassie Steele* comments from friends of my father or Damon's father, we find Frederick and Tinsel standing at a round table, sipping clear liquor from martini glasses.

He thinks a dirty martini makes him look sophisticated, but really, he finds the drinks too strong, too bitter. Is she faking an interest too, or has he finally found a woman who is the person he pretends to be?

Damon laughs really loudly. "Pretend I made a joke."

"Pretend I made a joke," I counter.

He doesn't object. He wraps his arms around me and laughs like he can't believe how funny I am.

For a second, his eyes flit to Frederick and Tinsel. Victory, they've noticed us!

Then Damon looks at me and I don't really care about who else is watching.

He leans in to whisper, "How obvious do you want to go here?"

"Very obvious," I say.

"Say when." He presses his lips to my neck. A soft, sensual kiss. The light brush of his tender flesh against mine, again and again.

Then his mouth finds mine and my entire body buzzes. He tastes like mint and Damon.

The kiss feels right.

Way too right.

My lips part. My tongue slides into his mouth.

He moves in time with me, swirling his tongue around mine, pulling my body into his.

All of it feels real. My stomach flutters. My heart pounds. My veins buzz with desire. The sensation spreads through my pelvis, all the way out to my fingers and toes.

I feel the way I do when we write music together. Awake and alive and exactly where I'm supposed to be.

This is how people describe sex in pop songs. People like me.

Have I written something this false? Or is it true?

Is anything I've said about sex true?

My thoughts disappear as his cock brushes my stomach. He's hard under his slacks. I want that.

I want it too much.

I don't care about music or lyrics or ex-boyfriends or jobs. Only my body against his. All of him, however I can have him.

When I pull back, I'm dizzy. I forget where we are. I forget everything except how much I want to touch him.

He looks down at me with heavy lids. "Too much?"

"Perfect." I don't think. I close my eyes and bring my lips to his. I fall back into him.

His hand settles on my hip. The other goes to the hem of my dress. He kisses me like he's claiming me, then he pulls back with a sigh that can only mean *I need you too*.

My eyes don't go to my ex-boyfriend. They go to Damon.

"Where did you learn to kiss like that?" he purrs.

My shoulders tense immediately. He's not lost in this. He's full of shit.

That voice. It's the same put-on seduction.

Because he doesn't know how to be real here or because this isn't real. Both, maybe.

No. I'm out of my mind. We're fake boyfriend and girlfriend. Of course, this isn't real. I'm just... I'm getting mixed up. I need to get my head straight.

I need to find our old dynamic. Not the one where we hate each other, the one where we tease like friends. "My first girlfriend."

His pupils dilate.

“Most guys aren’t good kissers.”

“Is that a setup to say *especially you or you’re the exception?*”

I shoot him a coy smile, but it doesn’t push him further. It invites him closer. It’s the sort of teasing that leads to orgasms, not the sort that leads to tears.

“Baby, you wound me.” His tone is playful, but I don’t know what the fuck that means anymore.

I don’t have time to consider it. Tinsel waves us over. “Hey, Cassie! Damon! You both look great.”

Right. We’re not here to make out for the hell of it. We’re here with a mission to convince everyone we’re here to make out for the hell of it.

At least Tinsel buys into our ruse. She’s actually... smiling at us, like she’s super happy to see us. Which is odd. She knows I know she fucked my boyfriend behind my back. And we’re in competition.

Why in the world is she happy to see me?

Tinsel shifts her weight between her feet, uncomfortable in her silver high heels. She looks great in the stilettos and the snug dress, and she looks totally out of her element.

So she’s not Frederick’s perfect woman. Just another woman who can’t meet his ridiculous standards.

Or maybe that’s all women and all men. They think we should wear heels all night to impress their friends and happily fuck them afterward, in only our pumps.

I'd like to see Frederick don stilettos. After fifteen minutes, he'd run off crying, and he'd trip and sprain an ankle in the process.

For a moment, I feel triumphant. Hah. His girlfriend isn't the trophy he wants. She hates dressing up more than I do.

But I don't savor the victory. I don't feel good that he has someone different, someone lesser.

I just feel for her.

She's not the evil witch she is in my head. She's been totally and completely nice at every turn.

Still. She's my competition, as a lyricist.

As a woman—

She can have the asshole.

I return her smile. A big *I'm so happy to see you* smile, as if I am so evolved slash so disinterested in my ex-boyfriend, I totally adore the woman he was fucking behind my back.

"Tinsel, hey. I didn't notice you." I nod hello to my ex-boyfriend. "Is that the tie your dad bought for graduation?"

He frowns. Not because I studied his outfit. Because I noticed he wore the same "power suit" he always wears. Because I called out his lack of originality.

I don't care. But I care he cares.

"I know, he wears it everywhere." Tinsel laughs. "But he looks so good in it. Who can blame him?" She looks at us. "You two clean up nice."

"Mostly her." Damon presses his palm into my lower back and leads me to the table.

The firm touch steadies me enough I hold my smile.

“You do look great,” Tinsel says. “Doesn’t she, Frederick?”

He arches a brow *really* but he nods. “Beautiful.”

“Sexy.” She laughs. “Sorry. These are strong.” She finishes the last sip of her martini. “I know this is beyond weird.”

Beyond and, well, beyond.

“Maybe we should sit down,” Frederick says.

“No. You talk. I’ll get more drinks for everyone.” Tinsel smiles at me. “What’s your poison?”

I don’t drink much. I don’t know what to order. Only that I hated the martinis Frederick always drank. Vodka and vermouth and olive juice. Blech. I need something very much not that.

“Gin and tonic,” Damon answers for me. “That’s her favorite.”

How the hell does he know that?

Maybe people who love alcohol notice what other people drink the way I notice what other people listen to.

Or maybe he pays attention to me. Maybe, all this time, he’s hated me *and* wanted me.

I do like gin and tonics. They’re a great mix of sweet and bitter with that kick of citrus. And I’m pretty sure he’s teased me about that too. *An entire lime. That’s the only thing as sour as you, Cass.*

Was it mean or playful?

Or did I hear it as mean, even though he meant it another way?

That's the tough thing with relationships. Once one thing goes wrong, everything else looks different. Every step in the wrong direction is bigger than the last, and every step puts you further from friendship.

"And what about you, Damon? What's your poison?" Tinsel asks.

"Sweetie, I don't know if that's a good idea," Frederick says.

It's patronizing as fuck, but I can't blame him. She's swaying. And she's small. Another martini will send her over the edge.

"A club soda," Damon says. "I'm the designated driver."

"Not even one?" Tinsel frowns. "Are you sure?"

I feel every ounce of her confusion. Damon isn't drinking. It means something. I just don't know if it means something good or something bad.

Damon nods. "How about I help you with those, huh?" He looks to me *is that okay?*

Sure. It's okay. It gives him a chance to incept her with some sort of jealousy-causing, song-ruining information.

Even if she is nice, even if I forgive her for fucking my boyfriend, even if he sold her some lie about an open relationship—

I'm not letting her win this contract.

"Go for it." I give my fake boyfriend a real goodbye kiss, then I turn to my ex. "Are you driving her to drink?"

"She's nervous about the pitch," he says.

“You know,” I say. “You could put her first. Drop out of the competition so she has space.”

“Cass, don’t.” He shoots me a cutting look. He doesn’t, for a second, believe I’m willing to consider his girlfriend’s best interests.

I am, though. That’s the weird thing. I mean, yes, absolutely, I want them to drop out so I’m closer to the gig, but I think he should do it too. She’s struggling. I remember that.

“Let’s honor the terms we agreed to,” he says.

“Sure.” I’m happy to beat him fair and square. “How’s the song going?”

“Good. You?”

“Great,” I say.

He drains the last sip of his martini. “Can I give you some advice?”

“Excuse me?” It’s growth for him to actually *ask* before he gives unsolicited advice, but he can go fuck himself if he thinks he has any right to pretend he has *my* best interests at heart.

He doesn’t stop, of course. He stands there, all tall and smug and handsome. “This thing you’re doing with Damon is transparent.”

“What thing is that?” I ask.

“Making out in front of me. It’s pathetic.”

“The world doesn’t revolve around you.” Seriously, I’m pathetic? He’s the one who thinks I’m kissing a guy solely for his benefit.

It’s only tangentially for his benefit.

He scoffs in a way that's supposed to say *please, we both know that isn't true*, but it sounds more like *yes, the world does revolve around me. That's pretty obvious*.

“Look me in the eyes and tell me you didn't think about that night in Paris when you put on that dress.” He motions to the low neckline.

What the hell is he talking about? “What night?”

“Please, Cassie. I know you. You stood there, staring at yourself in the mirror, replaying every minute in your head.”

“I don't even know what you're talking about.”

His voice drops an octave. “Yes, you do.”

Oh. That night. It all comes rushing back to me at once. And in surround sound, too.

A hot day in July. A long wait for the Eiffel Tower. A night walking around the city.

Then, the dark, quiet bar. I was wearing a top like this, one cut low, without a bra. He kissed me with all that need and intensity. Then he whispered *should we put on a show* and he peeled the fabric from my skin so anyone could see.

So everyone could see.

My skin flushes. My sex clenches. Damn traitorous body. How dare it get hot at a memory of the guy who betrayed me?

But that's the thing. He's not just the guy who hurt me.

He's the guy who loved me. The guy I loved.

And we were great for a while. That beautiful time between when I switched medication to when his passion faded—

There was a lot of fan-fucking-tastic sex.

I can pretend it never happened, but that doesn't change anything. It still happened. I still wanted him.

I still loved him.

I still believed him when he told me he'd love me forever.

All the Alanis Morissette songs in the world won't change that.

"You're thinking about it now," he says.

"You asked me to think about it." Anger overrides any hint of sentiment. Or sense. Seriously, where the fuck does he get off trying to dirty talk to me? "What's the difference to you?"

"We broke up. I know it hurts. You don't have to walk around, trying to make me jealous."

"THE WORLD DOESN'T REVOLVE AROUND YOU!"
I say it again. Okay, I yell it.

A few people look our way.

A few more.

Ugh. Whatever.

I'm not standing here and listening to this bullshit. "I wore this dress because it makes me feel good. And because I want my *boyfriend* to touch me. It has nothing to do with you. Sure, that night was hot. It was the best sex we ever had. But I don't think about you that way anymore. I don't dress for you. I'm wearing this for myself. So I can top that night tonight. Because I want to." Shit. I basically admitted Frederick was the best I ever had. But whatever.

I am so out of here.

I shoot him my best *fuck off* smile; I march to the bar; I grab my fake boyfriend, and I pull him away from the other

woman.

I take a long sip, but the drink does nothing to slow me.

“What are you doing?” he asks as I drag him to the glass doors.

“Something rash.” I step through the door to the courtyard. The one with a pool surrounded by tall ferns.

“Okay.” He wraps his arms around my waist. His eyes flit to the table where Frederick is standing.

He is watching us.

Victory.

I don't wait. I rise to my tiptoes and I kiss Damon.

He kisses back with hunger and need. One hand goes to my hips. The other goes to my cheek. It's tender and sweet and it feels good.

But I need more.

I need to show this.

“Touch me.” I bring my lips to his ear. “Please.”

“Cass—”

“I need him to see.” I wrap my fingers around his wrist. I bring his hand to my chest, the spot just below my collarbones. “I need to make him jealous.”

“What did he say?” he asks.

“Does it matter?” The words come out desperate. Maybe the bastard is right. Maybe this is a pathetic charade. Even so. I need to make him hurt. “Please, Damon. If you don't want to —”

“Are you okay?”

“No. Please.”

“Fuck, Cass.” There’s nothing phony in his voice this time. Only real need. “This is not how I pictured you begging me to touch you.”

“You pictured it?”

“Yeah.” His voice drops. “Too many times.”

“So do it.” I need this. I need him. I need someone to want me enough they don’t throw me away. “Touch me, Damon. Please.”

Chapter Twenty



Damon

Touch me, Damon. Please.

It's official. My fake girlfriend is out of her mind. Even worse, I'm out of mine.

This is a bad idea.

The worst idea.

Beyond stupid.

And I don't give a fuck.

I offer her douchebag ex one more glance, then I surrender to the desire racing through my veins.

My hands find her hips. She shifts so she's flat against me, so my hands slide around her ass.

Cassie groans as I dig my fingers into her flesh. The silky fabric of her dress is in the way, but I can still feel her softness, her warmth. I need it. I need her.

She brings her mouth to mine. First, the light brush, the faint taste of lime and tonic water, and Cassie's mint lip gloss. The tiny hint of gin.

Even under all that, even with my fake girlfriend making out with me in front of everyone, I still look for a drink. I still go there.

Fuck.

Cassie pulls back with a sigh. She looks up at me, hazy with pleasure. Is she lost in this or pretending? I don't know anymore.

I have emotional vertigo. I don't know if we're soaring to the sky or crashing back to Earth. Both, maybe.

I need the fantasy, and I need reality.

We're not really together. No one wants me like this, like there's some part of my heart and soul they can absorb through osmosis.

No one wants my heart and soul. Because I pushed people away. Because I hurt the people I love. Because I fucked up a million things.

Of course, Cassie doesn't trust me as her real boyfriend. After the way I acted the last few years, I earned worse.

But I still want it.

I still want to linger in the pretend.

Cassie cuts me off. She shifts back to strategy mode, bringing her lips to my ear, whispering, "Is he watching?"

This isn't about me. This isn't about us. It's about him.

Someone like Cassie would never want someone like me. Not the way she's pretending to want me. Not with all this affection and trust and belief I can comfort her.

I want to comfort her.

But how the fuck do I do that?

Even after all this time, there's one tool in my box. Without it, I don't know what the hell I'm doing.

I can offer her another drink. That's it.

But I can make her ex jealous too. And that's something.

I release my hand. I let my eyes find him. "Yeah." The guy is watching us. He looks annoyed too. It shouldn't feel good,

but it does. “What are we trying to do here?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I have time.” I want to understand what this is. Why she’s frantic and rushed. If any part of it is a desire for me.

But that’s ridiculous. Worse, it’s dangerous. She’s off-limits. This is a bad idea.

None of that changed in the last week.

She doesn’t expand.

I don’t ask. “Let’s text Bryce.” So we can get the fuck out of here ASAP. “Find out if his friend is around.”

“In a minute.”

No. We need to do something now. I can’t give Cassie music or sex or booze, but I can give her something calming. “He can meet us by the pool.”

“There’s a pool?” Her eyes go wide. Her shoulders soften. It’s funny to see the sort of relaxation at the mention of a California hotel with a pool—they all have pools—but that’s Cassie. She understands the water. She belongs there.

“This way.” I motion for her to follow me along the stone path.

She looks around the tall stalks of bamboo. “Of course, this is the Chateau Marmont... he’s not thinking about Paris because he’s thinking about me. He’s thinking about it because of the name.” She shakes her head. “Why is this party here, anyway? Didn’t this place peak with Lindsay Lohan in the mid aughts?”

With who? How would I possibly know that?

“You know, the TMZ era. With all those terrible upskirts.” She turns her head sideways. “Don’t tell me you didn’t watch the Britney Spears documentary.”

“Was she partying here too?” I ask.

“Everyone was partying here in two thousand and four.”

My lips curl into a smile. “Why do you know so much about the aughts? You were barely born.”

“You know why,” she says.

Because that’s her favorite era of pop music. The last era when there was meaningful rock influence in pop music. Now, the closest we come is Billie Eilish and Olivia Rodrigo.

Not that Cassie would pass up the chance to work with either. She’d murder someone just for the chance to pitch a song to Eilish or Rodrigo (or their team). But they don’t have those heavy guitar riffs Cassie needs to feel settled in a song.

Does she follow current gossip too? Or is it all her love of old lyrics, sending her to old gossip? Memories, maybe. Articles.

It’s weird to think celebrities didn’t get to craft their own image twenty years ago. They didn’t have Instagram and TikTok. They only had what news sources chose to print. “You read old celebrity gossip?” I ask.

She blushes. “Shut up.”

A laugh spills from my lips. “It wasn’t an accusation.” It’s kind of cute, actually. Tough as nails, Cassie Steele, poring over twenty-year-old celebrity breakup stories. “Which of your muses was hanging out here?”

“No comment.”

“You’re encouraging me to guess.”

“Damon!” Her blush deepens. “I don’t have time for your nonsense. I need to... I don’t know. I can’t let him win.” She says it with conviction, but her shoulders stay soft,

I don’t ask if she means the job or the relationship race. After all, he’s with a real girlfriend and we’re... something.

I don’t want to look at her ex anymore.

“This way.” I take her hand, and I lead her more directly.

She lingers outside the party for a moment, then she follows me along the path to the crystal-blue pool.

It’s quiet out here, even with the hotel ballroom booming.

The cozy space is ours and ours alone. For a few minutes at least.

It’s a nice night, clear and warm, with a light breeze. Cassie settles into the space slowly. Enough, she stops breathing hard. Enough, she cools down and wraps her arms around her chest.

“Here.” I slide my suit jacket off my arms and drape it over her shoulders.

“That’s very boyfriend of you. Thanks, Damon. You’re good at this.”

My cheeks flush. My chest too. I can take a lot of compliments. That isn’t one of them. “What was all that?” I motion in the direction of the party.

“Something he said.” She swallows hard. “That I was doing this to make him jealous.”

“Aren’t you?”

“Maybe.” She slips her arms into my jacket. “Partially. He brought up this night in Paris. The sex we had in Paris. He was doing that... touching me in public.” She watches light reflect off the pool. “The way he said it... he knew he was the best I’d had. He thought it was pathetic that I thought I could make him jealous with you, when he’s having much better sex with Tinsel.”

Fuck, where do I start with that? “Was he?”

“The best I ever had?” She swallows hard. “For a while, yeah. I still think about that night.” Her cheeks flush. “I replay it sometimes.”

“There’s no shame in that.”

“Really?” She looks me dead in the eyes. “You replay your trysts?”

“Sometimes.”

“Which ones?” Her voice lifts to a challenge. The Cassie I know.

Does that mean she feels better or worse? “Why do you want to know?”

Her green eyes fill with defiance. She starts to say something sassy and stops herself. “I don’t want to be the pathetic girl who holds on to her ex.” She sits on a lounge chair and slips off her boots and socks. “I want to know it’s normal.”

“Of course, it’s normal.”

“Then it’s not a big deal to tell me.”

That’s perfect logic. I can’t counter it with anything less than the truth.

And I can't say *I already want to fuck you senseless, Cass. I can't start replaying masturbation-worthy sex, or I will take you right here.*

So, I say something slightly less stupid. "What do you want to know?" This is also a bad idea. A terrible idea. My body is still buzzing. My blood is still south of my brain.

Cassie sits at the edge of the pool and dips her feet in the water. "One memory. That's all."

"Then you share one?" That's a worse idea. But I don't open my mouth to say *never mind, I'm already losing touch with conscious thought.*

She doesn't say the smart thing either. She watches the water ripple as she kicks her feet back and forth.

I find a tiny hint of sense. Not enough to shut this down. I certainly don't have the will to say *I want you, Cass, I do, but we can't do this. It's a bad idea for both of us. The first step on a path that leads to ruin.* I do pause. At least, I have that. "We can go, Cass. We don't have to stay here."

She shakes her head. "We're supposed to see Bryce."

"Let's see him, then go."

"No. I need a minute. If you don't want to talk about this, that's okay, but can you talk about something? Anything? Even how obnoxious you find me?" Her voice is soft, vulnerable. She's used up every ounce of fight she has.

That's hard to square with my image of Cassie. Does she really get tired the way I do? Make bad decisions? Put her pride ahead of everything? Self-destruct?

I *know* she's human. But even after a week of working closely, even after all those fake kisses, I don't know how to

see the real Cassie, the one who exists today.

In my head, she's still the perfect child, the master songwriter, the girl who never makes a mistake.

But she's not.

She's human.

She's hurt.

Why is it so hard to remember that?

Because it's terrifying. Because I want to do something to take all her pain away, and I don't know how. Worse, I know I'll make it worse in the end.

I fuck everything up in the end.

I can't fuck this up too.

"Damon?" She glances in my direction. "If you don't start talking, I will start shaming you for hanging out some place so uncool with aughts gossip."

"How do you know I hang out here?"

"The way you move around the space. You know where everything is. You're not usually so spatially talented."

Shit, she's right. I get lost all the time. And she's right about this too. I spent more than a few nights in suites with other wannabe Hollywood bad boys. Not that I remember most of them. "That's a terrible threat," I tease her. "I want the gossip."

She shoots me a *please* stare and turns her attention back to the water.

It's picture-perfect. Cassie, in her plum dress, her wavy hair pulled into a low bun, her makeup glam in a way that still screams *badass artist*.

Her long legs dipping into the long, rectangular pool.

The soft lanterns. The bamboo shielding us from prying eyes.

We're both where we belong. In a million ways.

"A lot of nights are blurry," I say. "A flash of sensations. The taste of whiskey. A warm hand on my skin. A cool cotton t-shirt. I drank too much to remember." I expect her to issue a judgment.

She doesn't. She listens closely, with that Cassie Steele intensity. All her attention on me. All of it, mine.

"I don't usually go to memories when I enjoy myself," I say.

"Only the videos of yourself?" She refers to my joke. Only it doesn't feel like a joke. Something about it feels honest.

I don't watch videos of myself, but I do think of myself when it's time to fly. Not in a voyeuristic way. More that, I rarely add anyone I know to the occasion. Only people I really shouldn't picture. "Sometimes, yeah. Mostly, I imagine different scenarios with anonymous women." Not so much lately. Lately, my sexual thoughts go straight to Cassie.

"What sort of scenarios?"

"The usual."

She shoots me a *do you really think you're getting away with that answer* face. "For example?"

For example, my sister's best friend marches into my room as I undress and demands the rest of the show.

For example, I pull my collaborator into the pool in her clothes and kiss her until we're both too tired to move.

For example, I drag my fake girlfriend to the party where her dickhead ex is hanging, and I make her come in front of everyone.

We're not doing examples.

But I can offer her a memory. "I think about my first time a lot."

"Really?" Surprise fills her expression. "My first time was not even a little sexy."

"Mine wasn't either. Not by any woman's definition." A laugh spills from my lips. "I was with an older friend." I wasn't drinking all the time. Just sometimes. I wasn't wasted. Only tipsy. "A few years older. We'd played truth or dare the last time we were out, and I'd admitted I hadn't had sex. That night, she came up to me, and she asked if I wanted to have a good introduction."

"Where were you?" Cassie asks.

"We were at a house party," I say. "A friend of a friend." Of course, I don't remember the friend anymore. Not his name. Not his job. Nothing. "It was someone's grandparents' house, way out in the suburbs. They were house sitting and they were excited to break into the wine collection."

"You drink wine?"

I shake my head. When I was in desperate need of a fix, I'd drink anything. Otherwise, it's strictly spirits. "Cheap vodka and orange juice. I still remember that. The taste of citrus on her lips." People say vodka doesn't have a taste, but that shit was pure rubbing alcohol. I can still feel the sting in my throat.

"What happened?" Cassie asks. "After the discount screwdrivers."

“We went upstairs. She closed the door and took off her top—she wasn’t wearing anything under it.” It went like that. Not robotic, exactly, but routine. She had done this before. She knew the steps.

Maybe that should have bothered me, but it didn’t. I wanted to learn the routine. I wanted to know what to do.

I never really considered the idea of slowing down, enjoying myself, losing myself in the moment.

Staying in the moment isn’t exactly my strong suit.

“I’d kissed other women. Touched other women. But never with this sort of intent. She took off my shirt next. She pushed me onto the bed. She took my hands and showed me how to touch her. Here first.” I motion to my chest. “Then between her legs. By the time she came, I was revved up. I came in about thirty seconds, but she didn’t make me feel bad. She just told me we’d go a little longer next time.”

“Did you?”

“Yeah.” A laugh spills from my lips. “Forty-five seconds.”

“Really?”

“I didn’t time it, but probably.” Again, I laugh. “The third time, she gave me head first, so we’d have more time for foreplay, for her.”

“Was that your first…” Her cheeks flush. “Your first blow job?”

“Yeah,” I say.

“Really?” Surprise fills her face. “You weren’t getting head from all those girls who hung around all summer.”

“What girls? You were the girl around all summer. And I wouldn’t have forgotten that.”

“Did you think about that?” Her blush deepens. “After? Is that what you meant by friends?”

“Cass—”

“I won’t tell Daphne.” She looks up at me. “I thought about you, back then. I still do, sometimes.”

Fuck me.

“I just... fuck. Do I sound as desperate as I feel?”

No. She’s vulnerable and it’s sexy. Way too sexy. “You know I liked you. I know you liked me. We both know why it didn’t happen.”

“You kissed me.”

I remember. I remember every moment.

“At my sixteenth birthday party,” she continues. “Then, the next day, you acted like it didn’t happen. At first, I thought you were fucking with me. Then you started drinking more and I thought maybe you really did forget. Maybe you blacked out.”

I did. I forgot large chunks of that night. Enough, I tried to pretend the entire thing didn’t happen. After all, if I remembered kissing Cassie when I was relatively sober, what the fuck did I do when I was drunk? “I didn’t forget.” I tried to forget, but I never could. “I realized it couldn’t happen.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that?”

She deserves the truth. “Because I can’t face anything hard.” Because I still can’t talk about this with anyone. I can

barely say it. *I'm Damon, and I'm an alcoholic.* It feels as cheesy and bullshit as every twelve-step meeting ever has.

She nods, absorbing the information without reacting. “How long were you with her? The older woman?”

“A few weeks. But I mostly think about that first time. The thrill of it. The trust.”

“Anything more recent?” she asks.

I should say *let's text Bryce. Or how about we go. Or sex is not a smart subject to cover.* I don't. “It's your turn.”

She looks up at me. “You have to promise you won't laugh.”

“Why would I laugh?”

“That you won't judge me. Call me a loser. Or a prude... or anything.”

“I promise.”

She takes a deep breath and she begins.

Chapter Twenty-One



Damon

“**T**here is one night I remember.” Cassie fights a blush. “A similar situation, actually. We were outside at a party, by a pool, like we are tonight—”

That puts a very vivid image in my head, but I try to push it aside.

“Only it was winter, so it was freezing, and no one else was outside, and we kept a lot of clothes on. She was gorgeous, even in her coat. Especially.”

I try not to react to the pronoun. It shouldn’t make a difference. No, it helps. It makes it harder to imagine myself in the scenario.

“I kept mine on, too, but she rolled my top up my stomach and chest, so it was all pressed here.” She draws a line above her breasts. “I was on display for her. Only for her. It was just...”

Hot as fuck. The images in my head are way too vivid. Only there’s no one else in them. It’s me and Cassie, right here, her dress pushed to her waist, her nipple in my mouth, her groans in my ear.

“I guess that night with Frederick was the same,” she continues, without noting the lust in my eyes. “We were at the perfect point in our trip. We’d been in Paris long enough we were past our jet lag, but not so long the city lost its magic. It was beautiful. All those old buildings against the big, blue sky. After sunset, we found a quiet bar. I was wearing a snug crop top, one that didn’t require a bra. It wasn’t quite as low as

this.” She motions to the neckline of her dress. “But it was just as easy for him to slip his hand under the fabric. To touch me in front of everyone. There. Then here.” She runs her fingers over her thigh. “He teased me for so long, I nearly came from it. Then he rubbed me over my jeans and I did come from it.”

Fuck. I hate that bastard, but that is the hottest thing I’ve heard in months.

Teasing Cassie for ages—

Driving her out of her mind—

It’s like I’m sixteen again. I’m going to come in my fucking slacks.

This is such a bad idea.

The worst idea.

No. The second worst idea. Just below stopping.

This is the best I’ve felt in a long time. I’m not numb in a chemical bliss. I’m experiencing every moment of agony and ecstasy.

“We went back to the hotel,” she says. “I was enthralled. I was lost in it. It was the best I ever, the best we ever... there were other nights, too. For a long time, we were so good there. Then it just stopped and I didn’t understand why.”

I don’t know anything about relationships, much less keeping them spicy long-term. But I know one thing—“It wasn’t you.”

She shakes her head.

“If it was that good for you, it was good for him too.”

She looks up at me with surprise in her eyes. “But how do you know?”

“Because that’s good sex.” I’m not an expert, by any means. Most of my fucks don’t qualify as great, but some were better than others. “You’re in tune with the other person. Their pleasure is your pleasure. You touch them because you want to hear their groan. And they touch you because they want to hear yours.”

Her smile is bittersweet. “You’re such a musician.”

“Would you prefer I describe it as poetry?”

“No. I’d rather you say what you really think.”

“It is like music.” It’s better when you trust someone, but that isn’t always necessary. And it’s better with someone else, but that isn’t always necessary either.

“It’s different when you love someone. At least, it is for me,” she says. “The love and sex get tangled. I don’t know what comes from where.”

“Maybe.” I have to take her word for it. “But did you—”
Fuck me. Why am I asking this? “You touched him?”

“Of course?”

“Sucked him off?”

Her cheeks flush. “Sometimes.”

“You liked it?”

Her blush deepens. “Sometimes. He was kind of... It was a lot to take.” She hides between her hands. “Did I just tell you my ex-boyfriend had a big dick?”

“Yeah, you did.”

“Pretend I didn’t say that.” She peeks out from behind her fingers.

“No deal,” I say.

She turns away from me. “It was too much sometimes. Uncomfortable. It takes me a long time, I guess. To really relax there. And back then I was on SSRIs, so I didn’t have any natural lubrication, and I could only come half the time.” She says it matter-of-factly, without shame.

Is that who she is, or has she worked through this? I don’t have a problem laughing at my past whiskey dick, but I can’t stand here and say *now that I don’t drink alcohol, I don’t know how I’ll ever fuck someone else. That’s what’s tangled for me. Sex and booze. It’s really the same as sex and love, though. Because that’s the only love I know.*

That’s self-pitying bullshit. Even in my head.

But enough of it is true.

It feels like love sometimes. Like a fucked-up kind of love.

“That was the first year or so. That’s why it wasn’t good for me. But it seemed like it was still good for him, even though...” She trails off. She doesn’t want to finish the sentence. To ask herself how he could enjoy it when she was obviously uncomfortable.

I don’t have that same qualm—I hate the bastard enough to assume the worst—but I don’t have an answer either. “Was he as into it later?”

“No.”

“So he liked it more, when you liked it.”

She keeps her back to me. “Maybe.”

“And when you did suck him off—”

“Can we use less evocative language?” she asks.

It's doing things to her, the way it's doing things to me. Thank fuck she's not looking at me. At my dick, specifically. I stare at the water. I channel unsexy thoughts. Baseball. Ice baths. My sister murdering me in cold blood because I fucked her best friend.

Nope. No good.

Knowing Cassie is off-limits only makes me want her more.

It's even worse. Certain parts of her are off-limits. Others are wide open. She begged me to kiss her, touch her, hold her.

For someone else's sake, sure, but she still begged me. And it's way too easy to carry that to its logical conclusion.

Cassie Steele, on her knees, begging for my cock.

My dick takes the driver's seat. "When you did that, you loved him?"

"After a few months, I think."

"Did you do it because you loved him?"

"No. Well, I guess that was part of it. Just not the primary reason. I think..." She stares at the water for a long time. "I did it because I was expected to do it."

"What was that like?"

She sits back, gathering her thoughts. When she starts, her voice is soft, but it's without shame. "I had a lot of conflicting feelings. I wanted him to want me. But I wanted him to not care about sex either. Because it was too complicated. And that... there was something simple about it. I liked that. I showed up. I made him come. I wasn't expected to groan enough to make Patrick Stump jealous. Only to not hate it."

“Did you hate it?”

“No,” she says. “I liked the sensation... Am I really saying this?”

Daphne will murder you. Murder. Dead. Forever. “I promised not to laugh.”

“Is it that bad? Is the thought of my oral sex skill laughable?”

Far from it. “That’s not what I mean. I mean...” What the fuck do I mean? It can’t be *the thought of your skill is so sexy I’m about to come in my pants.* “Everyone is insecure sometimes. It’s normal.”

“You are?”

“Yeah.”

“About your sexual abilities?”

“No.” I shouldn’t answer this either. I do anyway. “But not because I know I’m a gifted lover.”

“Did you just say lover?” she asks.

“You can turn around and look at me, you know.”

She shifts her body toward mine, but she doesn’t look me in the eyes. It’s too much for her too.

“It’s because I don’t care about the people I fuck.” It sounds worse out loud, but there’s no sense denying the truth. That’s what got me into this mess, constantly running away from my feelings. “For me, sex has always been a casual thing. A way to feel good for fifteen minutes. And that shit is really hit or miss.”

“It is?”

“Yeah. A lot of times, you just don’t click with someone physically. You’re not in tune.”

She smiles. “Tune again.”

“I am a musician.” I smile back.

For a moment, it feels normal, like the sort of friendship we could have. Then her cheeks flush, and my blood rushes south, and there’s nothing normal about my reaction to her.

I try to ignore it. I try to keep my voice even, so she thinks I don’t care. “I’m not having any sex right now.” No good. The words send an electric charge through the air. “Before that.” Well, before rehab. “It ran the gamut. Some good. Some bad. Never great, really.”

“Never?” She turns all the way toward me. “Not even with the older woman?”

“It was great because it was new. Not because we were in sync.” I laugh at my inability to find another metaphor. “What if I use dance?”

“That’s still music.”

“What if I say we’re using different steps?” I ask.

“Then you have to demonstrate dance steps,” she says.

Another laugh spills from my lips. I don’t love dance the way some people do, but it’s like any activity set to music; I love connecting to the sound. I just don’t know how to do it anymore. “Sometimes, we’re not in the same key. We’re both playing the right notes, but we don’t fit together. Or we’ve got the wrong instruments.”

“Or you’re on a different time register,” she offers. “Or you forgot the words.”

“I only know the chorus.”

“What does that represent?”

“I don’t know.” I look into her beautiful green eyes. Find only vulnerability. It’s way too appealing. “When did things change? With Frederick?”

“When I switched medications,” she says. “I could finally come again. But he had no idea what I actually liked, so it took a while to teach him that, and back then... I wasn’t direct the way I am now.”

“Now it’s all orders, all the time?”

“Obviously,” she says. “That’s why I’m only on FetLife. No. Well, maybe. I can only do it when I’m comfortable with someone. That’s probably why there hasn’t been anyone else,” she says. “That and... I promised myself I wouldn’t do that again, what I did with Frederick, where I played up my interest to save his ego. Only, I am. I’m here, ordering you to kiss me, and it’s all about what Frederick sees again.”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

“You mean, you can kiss me, just to kiss me?”

Kiss you, touch you, fuck you. “We still have the job.”

“Yeah, and I need him to believe it for that.” She nods. “But we don’t have to actually kiss for that.”

“We can stop kissing.”

She shakes her head.

Relief floods my body. I don’t want to stop kissing her. I want to kiss her forever. “We can ignore him. Forget him.”

Again, she shakes her head. “I’ll still be thinking about him. Even if I pretend to ignore him.”

I know how to work with that. “Does it turn you on?”

“Huh?” She turns to me and looks me in the eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Does making your ex-boyfriend jealous turn you on?”

“Yes.” Her cheeks flush. “Fuck. Am I a monster?”

“No. It turns me on too.” *Red alert. Red alert. The plane is going down.*

“It does?” Her pupils dilate.

“Yeah.” I try to keep my voice even, as if the subtext of my words isn’t *I want to fuck you in front of your ex-boyfriend.* “That means it’s for us. For you. You’re doing it because it makes you feel good.”

“It does, but that’s not why I’m doing it,” she says. “I’m not going to lie to myself.”

“What if that was why?” I ask.

“We’re not having sex. What turns me on doesn’t matter.”

Yes.

That’s the logic missing from my words.

We’re. Not. Having. Sex.

The end.

“Do you think that’s why he left?” She looks in the direction of the party. “Did he want someone easier to please?”

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe he’s right. Maybe she’s better. More talented, more willing, more beautiful.”

“Does it matter?” I ask.

“I don’t know what’s worse, if he left because we didn’t connect there, or because we didn’t connect somewhere else.” Heartbreak spreads all over her face. “He said he wanted softer. That’s what everyone says. Either I leave before they expect it or they end things with the same speech. *I’m sorry, Cassie, but I need someone more supportive.*”

“You’re supportive. Just not in the way everyone expects.”

“I am?” she asks.

“You push me to be my best.”

“You do too. Sometimes.” She half-smiles. There’s a sadness in it, but it still sends warmth through my limbs.

Here’s the only thing worse than wanting to fuck Cassie. Wanting to love her.

Daphne will be pissed if I fuck Cassie.

But if her best friend fell in love with me, and then I broke her heart?

She’d murder me, dig up my corpse, set it on fire, and hang it in the town square with a note that says *bastard*.

Or the modern-day equivalent. Like never speaking to me again.

Thankfully, Cassie manages to find her senses. That’s one thing I’ll say for women. They’re a lot better at thinking when they’re horny.

Or maybe she’s not nearly as far gone as I am.

Both, probably.

“I guess I should text Bryce.” Cassie pulls her cell phone from her purse and taps a few keys.

He replies right away.

She stares at the words with confusion. “He wants to see all four of us, again. In his... room.” She looks up at me. “That’s weird, right?”

“It’s probably so he can drink and sleep.” I don’t trust him, but I don’t want to put her on edge. I’m here. If something gets fucked up, I can handle it. “If shit gets weird, I’m here.”

She nods *okay*. “You don’t think he...”

Wants her? Absolutely. But I don’t think he’ll act on it. Not in front of me. “Probably not.”

“Okay. Yeah. Okay.” She takes my hand. “Well. Here goes nothing.”

Chapter Twenty-Two



Damon

Thankfully, Bryce isn't alone in his hotel suite. He's with a woman. An up-and-coming pop star.

It takes me a minute to place her. Lisa Love. Obviously, a reference to Courtney Love—she's got the same bleach-blond hair and thick black eyeliner too—but it sounds more like a porn star's stage name.

She does straddle the line between pop and riot grrrl well, with a long red flannel shirt open over a tight black dress. I've never listened to her music by choice, and last time I was researching female pop acts, she wasn't big enough to make my list, but Cassie loves some of her stuff. Covers.

She played a few for me, for ideas for one of our breakup songs.

If this is our second judge, we're in the money. Cassie *knows* this woman in a way I can only imagine. She's listened to her music and dove into her lyrics, enough to see into her soul.

That is, if the work reflects her soul in a meaningful way.

A year ago, I would have looked at Lisa and thought Cassie belonged with her. After all, Lisa is obviously pretentious and cutthroat. Cassie thinks about music all the time, but it's not because she's trying to be some visionary artist. Her love is pure too.

The way she dissolves between her headphones—

It's sexy. Way too sexy.

Red alert. Red alert. The flag is flying in...

No. This is the time to show how much I want her. I wrap my arms around Cassie and pull her into a tight embrace.

She looks up at me with curiosity. Then she blinks, and there's only desire in her gorgeous greens.

Fake or real? I don't know. I don't care.

I bring my lips to hers. I soak in every ounce of her kiss.

Her tongue slips into my mouth. Her fingers curl into my neck.

Right on cue, the door opens, and Frederick and Tinsel step inside.

Tinsel lets out a nervous chuckle. Frederick growls. It's out of character for him.

Cassie jumps back in surprise. She takes one look at them and she launches into my arms. This time, she kisses me like she's going to take me right here, in the massive den, in front of everyone.

"Are you feeling any regret right now?" Bryce asks Frederick. "Or are you thinking, 'thank goodness I don't have to deal with her exhibitionist streak any more?'"

Bryce's pop star friend kicks him hard. "Sorry. He's an idiot. You two are sweet. I'm Lisa Love."

Frederick stops himself from rolling his eyes. I can almost see him and Cassie in the middle of an argument about whether or not the Counting Crows wrote good music.

Did he agree their lyrical prowess overrode their lean into pop-rock? Or did they both love the dive into an easier sound?

I can't see Cassie rolling over about a music debate. Did she really let his opinion trump hers?

Even if he has bad taste, he must honestly love music. Cassie wouldn't spend three years with a phony.

Tinsel doesn't comment on the new pop star in the room. She jumps right to defending her boyfriend. "We have a really great sex life." She looks around the room, unsure why everyone is turning her way. "We're just not showy about it."

"You don't have anything to prove?" Bryce offers.

"Bryce, baby, don't toy with the poor kids." Lisa brushes a white-blond strand behind her ear. "They're here to work for you."

It's odd for her to call us kids. She's Cassie's age. She's younger than me and Frederick.

Lisa whispers something in Bryce's ear. He whispers back. "I wanted to work with your dad, but he turned me down." She directs the comment at us, but she doesn't specify which of our fathers she means. "He said he doesn't write for young women anymore."

My father.

And since when?

I guess that's a conversation I missed somewhere between drowning my thoughts in bourbon and drying them to death.

But that's not the point here. What the hell is the point? I don't know how to judge normal human interaction anymore. I don't know if she's mentioning Dad as a friendly gesture to remind me I'm here because of nepotism (no doubt true, but it's not thanks to my father directly; it's thanks to my family's

friendship with Cassie's), or to underline her desire for a female lyricist.

I am lucky I was born into music industry royalty. But it means I spend my life running from my father's shadows.

People see that when it comes to work.

They don't remember the addiction. Or they pretend it doesn't exist.

"Good thing I'm here then." Cassie smiles at Lisa. "And don't mind Damon's frown." Cassie reaches out and runs her fingers over my jaw. "He hates being compared to his father. Who doesn't?"

Bryce nods. Lisa too.

"I love being compared to my father," Tinsel says. "He's a great guy. Smart and hardworking. Well, those parts. He's an accountant, so he's not Mr. Creative. But he is the best."

Frederick nods. "He's great, yeah."

"Should we move onto Mommy issues next?" Bryce laughs and whispers something in Lisa's ear.

She shakes her head. "No. Let get right to it." She smiles. "Ms. Steele already guessed why I'm here. Bryce asked for help picking songs for his albums, but I have ulterior motives. I want to steal you."

Cassie takes my hand and squeezes hard.

"See, Bryce loves your drafts." She names the song we submitted a few hours ago and another song. The other team's. "But I love it too. And he won't relinquish it."

"It would be better for you," Cassie says. "It's cutting and people don't want that from Bryce. He's like... a hot Ed

Sheeran.”

Lisa laughs. “That’s what I told him. But he wants it all the same.”

“We can pull back,” Cassie says. “So it fits him. For you, we can do something similar.” Cassie offers Lisa all her attention. “I know exactly the style. Something with that hint of hard-rock grunge, that mix of anger and hurt. Like your covers.”

Lisa’s face lights up. She looks at Cassie like Cassie is the star, finally paying attention to her.

“I love them,” Cassie says. “I listen every time I need to feel... anything. They shouldn’t work. All that anger and all that hurt shouldn’t fold together as well as they do, but they do. You make it happen. I want to help you make that happen. Whatever it takes.” Cassie releases me and moves to the couch. Without asking, she sits next to Lisa. “Can I borrow this?” She motions to the phone Bryce is holding.

He hands it over.

Cassie pulls up a streaming app and plays a song. It’s a deep cut from the nineties. One I don’t know. But Lisa recognizes it immediately. “Only we do it your way. With all that pain in your voice.”

“I love that.” Lisa puts her hand on Cassie’s. “But, well, that’s what I was getting to... we want both of you. All of you.”

Bryce smiles. “Yes. All six of us, at the house, next weekend.” That was the plan. Only it was supposed to be the three of us. “We’ve got a studio there. We’ve got food, drinks, an assistant willing to fetch us anything.”

“And the view there... gorgeous,” Lisa says.

Bryce whispers something in her ear, then turns to us. “Come Friday. We’ll work all day Saturday and Sunday. My producer will show up Monday. Help us sort through everything.”

Lisa takes the floor. “We’ll take the songs you submit this week, what we work on this weekend, and then we’ll pick what goes where.”

Cassie bites her tongue. She wants to protest, to mention the superiority of a cohesive album, but she doesn’t. She works with the client. “Sure. If it’s okay with you, baby.”

A weekend, with these two weird celebrities, and her ex-boyfriend and his new girlfriend.

Three days straight of pretending in front of Bryce is one thing. We can focus on work. Ignore the bullshit.

Adding her ex and his girlfriend means we need flawless execution. He can’t see us break character once. And he knows Cassie well. Too well.

Still.

The choice is easy.

We both need this opportunity. Now, with the chance to take twice the opportunity, we need to play both our parts four times as well.

We have to rise to the occasion.

And, well—

I need to do this with her.

For her and for me.

So, of course, I say, “More than okay.”

She beams. “Can I pitch you my vision?” Cassie asks Lisa. “I’ll make it fast. I promise.”

“Only if we can do it over drinks.” Lisa stands and stretches her arms. “Bryce, babe, can you grab us some ice?” She looks to Cassie. “What’s your poison?”

“Gin and tonic,” Frederick says.

Lisa raises a brow *interesting*, but she doesn’t mention it. “You don’t mind me borrowing your girlfriend, do you, Mr. Webb?”

“As long as you return her in one piece,” I say.

Her smile is wicked. Just like Bryce’s.

Is she flirting? Or am I jealous of everyone and everything?

It’s an unfamiliar feeling. I’ve never cared enough to feel envy.

Still, when Cassie shoots me a *please* look, I melt. How could anyone turn that down? She’s such a fucking music nerd. It’s adorable.

I nod. “Text me when you’re ready to go, baby. And not too late. Your sister is staying with us.”

Cassie laughs at the thought of Laurel wanting to leave a party or wake up earlier than either of us. But she still nods. “An hour, max.”

Lisa escorts her to the bedroom and closes the door.

Jealousy rises in my throat. It’s not the same as the acid I taste over Frederick. I don’t hate the woman for hurting her.

I don’t hate her at all.

She's the kind of person who could win Cassie's heart for real. And that's really fucking scary. Too scary.

Just when I think my night can't get any more complicated, I run into the one person I don't want to see.

My father.

Chapter Twenty-Three



Damon

The great Miles Webb is working the room. Even though he's old as fuck, he charms every person he sees. The second he bats his baby blues, the ladies swoon. The guys sigh. *If only I could be with slash be like him.*

The party is in full swing. The executives in designer suits pretend they want to let loose. The interns in H&M jackets limit themselves to three drinks. The talent—

Well, anything goes there.

Typical music industry stuff. Loud music, laughter, liquor. There are a few reasons why I haven't been in touch with my creative side lately. My inability to face the metaphorical music is only one of them.

The other is here, in neon letters.

Yeah, the term is still sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll, but it's really closer to booze, booze, music industry, drugs.

No doubt there are people in the bathroom—or upstairs, or by the pool—with party favors.

A guy who used to offer me cocaine shoots me an *I got you* smile.

And right then, at that very moment, Dad spots me. He follows my eyeline to Mr. Coke and shoots the asshole a *fuck off* Papa Bear stare.

It's bullshit. Dad probably knows the guy supplies because he's bought something harder from him. But now that he's on

the straight and narrow, we pretend like he's not going to fuck up again. Like he's not waiting for me to fuck up again.

Dad crosses the room to me. He says nothing about the dealer. Instead, he pulls me into the fray and introduces me to a dozen groups of people. *My son is so talented. He must get it from his mother, huh?*

Everyone laughs as if we're some big, happy family.

It's fucking torture.

Then it gets worse. He leads me outside, back to the pool where Cassie poured her heart out, and he sits down on one of the lounge chairs, like he's expecting me to follow her example.

Cassie isn't a fuckup.

It's a whole different ball game.

Maybe if I dive into the pool—

Will that save me from this conversation?

“You want to sit?” Dad asks.

No, but protesting will prolong the pain. I sit on one of the loungers opposite him.

He looks me in the eyes. He does have the same blue eyes I do. That's what Mom always says. That's what everyone says. *You look so much like your father.*

They don't come out and say *you're a fuckup, just like him.* They only imply it.

“Is this your first event?” Dad doesn't add *since you got sober.* He leaves that implied too.

I should answer sincerely. That's the responsible thing to do. That's the mature thing to do. That's the smart thing, too. It

suggests I understand the importance of my actions. It suggests I can handle living at my parents' massive mansion, alone. It suggests I deserve their charity.

And it is charity, no matter how much I hate it.

I should say something honest.

I really should.

But I can't. "Yeah, what's this industry called again? Moo-Sick? Is it about keeping cows well?"

"If you're going to be sarcastic, at least be clever."

That's fair.

Dad doesn't take the bait, of course. He continues with that torturous *I'm Miles, and I'm a drug addict* sincerity. "Do you know how old I am?"

"I can't count that high."

He ignores the joke. "I was younger than you when I got sober the first time."

Is he really admitting he had to get sober multiple times? That's new. "And?"

"I played all the games. I learned all the tricks. There's nothing you can say I haven't thought before."

Probably, yeah, but it's different, saying something in your head or hearing it from someone else. "You don't want to hear what I have to say."

"I do."

"You don't," I say.

"No. I do." He looks directly into my eyes. He speaks with pure fatherly wisdom and compassion. That mix of *I expect*

the best of you, but I'll love you at your worst too.

I don't believe it. I just can't.

He continues, "I've done this before. I know how it goes. I know how much it hurts to hear the things someone has bottled for years. And I know how it feels to hold on to them."

It sucks, yeah, but I still know better than to fall for an invitation to say anything. If I tell him how I actually feel, he'll ship me back to rehab. Or install a sobriety companion. Or chase Cassie away.

I'm not sure which option is the worst.

"Try me," Dad says. "Anything, Damon. I won't hold it against you."

"What's the fucking point?"

He waits for me to expand.

I can't say it. I can't tell him this entire exercise is pointless. The attempt at honesty. The fake family values. The concern.

The rest of it.

I can't.

But the fucker is right. I can't hold on to all of it either.

I try to find the least worst thing. The futility of everything. "What's the point of working so hard to stay sober if you're destined to slip anyway? If everyone is going to spend every moment looking at you like you're a ticking time bomb?"

"What's the point of anything?" he asks.

"Is that a real question?"

He nods *yeah*.

“Seriously, Dad? I already took Philosophy 101. I don’t need to take it again.”

“If I recall correctly, you almost failed out of college,” he says.

And he went to a West Coast Ivy, *yeah*. Another way he bests me. He’s smarter, more educated, more aware of the world. “I passed the class.”

“I never took it.”

That can’t be true. He had his eyes on law school, and lawyers always take philosophy classes. But, okay, sure, we can play games. “Let’s start with *The Matrix*. It goes into a number of basic concepts. Metaphysics. What is reality. That’s a big area of the film. We’re all living in a simulation. Is it better to live in a lie if you don’t know it’s a lie?”

“I’ve seen *The Matrix*. It’s your sister’s favorite movie,” he says.

“Then you have it covered.”

He shakes his head. “If you want to play bullshit, I can play. I’ve been playing this game since before you were born. I’m older and more clever than you are.”

“And?” I ask.

“It’s an honest question, Damon. One you have to answer. Why are you here?”

He doesn’t specify if he means here, on the planet, in the state of California, or at this party, so I answer the easier question. “Cassie and I need to impress an artist.”

“Why?” he asks.

“Because we want a contract with him,” I say.

“Why?” he asks again.

“Because it’s a great opportunity.”

He motions *why* again. “Keep answering.”

“Because the album is already a blast. Challenging and fun. And she’s perfect for it.” I want her to have this opportunity. I want to help her grab it. “It will lead to other gigs. And money. Which I need, if I want to live without strings over my head.”

He doesn’t take the bait there, either. Just nods and motions for me to continue.

“Because Cassie asked me.”

“Why did you say yes?”

“She was desperate,” I say.

“Is that the only reason?”

“Because Daphne would want that. Because you and Mom would want that.”

“What about you?” he asks. “Did you want it?”

“I wanted a project.”

“And your relationship with Cassie?”

Right. Fuck. What the fuck did Daphne tell him? “It’s complicated.”

“Complicated isn’t good.”

“What happened to no judgment?” I knew this was a fucking trap.

“No judgment,” he promises, but it doesn’t send any relaxation through me. “Concern.”

That's a parent way of saying judgment.

Dad leans in closer, lowers his voice to his most sincere tone. He's right. He's better at this game and he's more clever. But he's better at leaving his wit behind to embrace sincerity too. "Do you care about her?"

"We've been friends for a long time." Since we were kids. Sure, we were rivals sometimes. Enemies even. But I've always cared about her.

"Are you fucking her?"

"Dad." That's none of his fucking business.

"You think I was never young?"

"Yes, Dad, I know you were young. I know you fucked half the women in the state. I've heard the albums. I've seen the news stories."

He chuckles at his past. Then, he shifts back to his paternal posture. "You know your sister will kill you if you break her heart," he says.

Of course, I know that. I nod.

"She can ask Mom how to do it as painfully as possible too."

"Are you done?" I ask.

He smiles, enjoying torturing me. "Is it serious?"

"We're not talking about forever." That's true, at least. "She's just out of a relationship."

"And if you have to let her use you, huh... I remember when it felt like that with your mother."

That is way too much information.

“Does she know you’re sober?”

I swallow hard.

He takes that as a no. “You should tell her.”

“I know.”

“Trust me. If she finds out from someone else—”

“I got it.”

He leans back, satisfied with torturing me. “You don’t want advice from your old man. I get it. I’m not cool anymore. I can’t hang.”

Hang generally means get wasted, so, yeah, he can’t hang. Neither of us can hang. Not that anyone still says hang.

“Do you and Cassie need a ride?” he asks. “I’m on my way out?”

“I drove. It’s fine.”

“You sure? It’s late.”

“It’s only late for an old man like you.”

He chuckles, stands, motions *come here*. When I do, he pulls me into a tight hug. “I’m proud of you, Damon. It’s not easy to stay sober. Especially at first.”

No. I’m not doing this. I’m not playing this game. But, this time, I am doing the smart thing. I accept the hug. I put on my best *I’m serious about this* voice. “Thanks, yeah.”

“I don’t say it enough. I’m sorry for that.”

For a brief moment, I feel okay. Easy. At peace.

Then he says the one thing that ruins everything. “I hope it sticks this time.”

FOR THE NEXT HOUR, I HANG OUT AT THE POOL. TWO GUYS IN suits come outside to smoke and cut a deal. A couple makes out on a lounge chair. A former teen star in her rebellious adult phase jumps into the water in her bra and panties.

She shoots me a *wouldn't we look good on DeuxMoi* look? Or maybe it's *wouldn't we look good on some TikTok channel you've never heard of, old man*.

I can't fault her. I'm doing the same thing she is. Only it doesn't feel the same.

Cassie and I *do* care about each other. Maybe the majority of her feelings for me fall into the hate column, but I can't find much to dislike about her at the moment.

Yes, she's a music snob, and she dresses like she wants everyone to believe she's a rock star, and she can't listen to a song without dissecting the lyrics, and she doesn't understand that sometimes people don't want to think about what something means.

And I love all of that about her.

I miss her.

It's been an hour and a half, and I miss her.

I need her here, to erase the memory of my father's distrust. To ease the pain of it.

After the former teen star shoots me another *join me* smile, I give up on the pool. I return to the ballroom, sipping club soda, watching people flirt and trade info, and order drinks at the bar.

They smile when the bartender drops off their glass. They drop their shoulders in relief. Finally, the liquid courage, the distraction, the extra boost of pleasure.

Then Cassie steps into the party, meets my gaze with a smile, and I feel it. That same sense I used to get after I ordered my first drink.

Maybe things aren't going to be great. But at least now they can feel a little bit better.

I meet her in the middle of the party. Even though we're surrounded by people, I know exactly what she needs.

"Let's get out of here," I offer.

She nods *yes* and takes my hand.

I lead her through the ballroom, past the front desk, to the valet stand. "How was your *private* meeting?"

"Oh my god, Damon, just because I'm bisexual, that doesn't mean I want to fuck every hot girl I meet."

"She's your type, isn't she?"

"She does love music."

"There's more to the formula than that?"

She flips me off.

Finally, my shoulders soften. My chest eases. This feels good. That's the entirety of it.

"I have other criteria."

"Name one other criteria," I say.

"They need to make me laugh."

"Frederick made you laugh?" I ask.

“Not the way you do. Not with the same bite.” She says it as a compliment.

She likes the edge to my humor.

We both match there, I guess. We both see the cloud, not the silver lining.

She continues, “He was really sweet, for a really long time. I don’t know why it changed.” She shakes her head. “No. I’m not going there tonight. Not anymore. I had a great talk with Lisa. I feel good about the album. I drank enough I’m silly. But it could go the other way. To that miserable nostalgia. So no more of that.”

“Okay.”

She looks at me with surprise. “I was expecting you to object.”

“Why would I object?”

“Why do you ever torture me?”

“Cause it’s fun?”

She watches the valet race to the stand.

I find the ticket in my pocket and hand it to the guy. Then he’s off, running again, expected to hustle without breaking a sweat.

“This job must keep him in shape, huh?” Cassie asks. “Can you imagine running that much?”

“Can you imagine working a normal job?”

“I was a waitress for a year, you dick head.” She play swats me again. “I was good at it.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I never got orders wrong, and I gave great recommendations.”

I tease her. “Oh, sir, I know you said you want a grilled cheese sandwich, but have you considered the Caprese melt? It’s much more layered and sophisticated.”

She smiles in that sheepish *you got me* way of hers.

The last hint of tension in my chest disappears. This is easy. The easiest thing in the world. “Maybe the sharp cheddar and fig jam instead.”

“We didn’t serve either of those,” she says. “And when did you learn about cheese sandwiches?”

“I can barely cook. What else am I going to eat?”

She steps back enough to look me up and down. “This physique is made by cheese sandwiches?”

“Body by cheddar, yeah.”

“No way.” She presses her lips together. “Do you still have abs, right now? After actually eating all day?”

“Are you going to check?”

“If you’re going to claim your six-pack is made of cheese, yeah.” She reaches for the bottom button of my shirt.

My skin flushes from the brush of her fingertips. I need her touch. All of it. Everywhere.

The gesture is quick. She drops the shirt the second she hears footsteps.

A couple approaches the valet. No. Not any couple. Frederick and Tinsel. She’s still swaying. He’s holding her close, so she won’t tumble to the ground in her high heels, but it looks more like he’s snuffing out her light.

Asshole.

“They really timed that for you,” I mutter under my breath.

She does the mature thing. Well, the slightly less immature thing. She leans into our ruse, sliding her arm around my waist, turning her back to her ex and his new paramour, pretending they aren't even here. “I talked to Laurel. She's got another ride home. So I gave her my key.”

“Sure,” I say.

“Are you good to drive?”

“Yeah. She made me the DD.”

“And you listened?” She looks up at me with surprise. “When do you ever listen to that?”

“Today,” I say.

“My favorite people.” Tinsel's voice breaks the tension. She's still drunk. Very drunk. “Even if you're on track to win this job.”

Frederick whispers something in her ear.

Cassie rises to her tiptoes to whisper something in mine. “Can I do this one more time?”

“Do what?”

“This.” She brings her other hand to my chin and pulls me into a deep, slow kiss.

The second her lips hit mine, I forget we're on display. I sink into her. She sinks into me.

My hands go to her hips.

Her fingers skim my jaw.

My body hums with the sort of energy I only feel when I play piano. I'm lost in her. I want to stay lost in her forever.

I need to have more of her. All of her.

The beep of a horn breaks us apart.

The car. Shit.

The valet slides out of the driver's seat. I tip him and take the keys.

Cassie waves goodbye to her ex and his new girlfriend. She slides into the car and she reaches across the center console and interlocks her fingers with mine.

She stays that way as I drive away from the hotel. She stays that way for miles.

Eventually, she rests her head on the door, and she watches the city whiz by the windows. "Thanks, Damon."

"For what?"

"Tonight. You were the perfect partner."

"You too."

She stays there, thoughtful and quiet, until she falls asleep.

After I park, I carry her out of the car and into her room.

She stirs as I lay her down on her bed. I unzip her boots and peel them off her feet, one at a time.

"Hey." She looks up at me with a smile.

"Hey."

"Can you help me with this?" She rolls onto her side, pushes herself up, points to her zipper.

"Sure." I pull the thing down her back slowly. I try to keep the gesture platonic. Or professional, at least, but my fingers

disobey my orders. They linger on her lower back.

When I release her, she turns to me. She lifts her hips and pushes the dress off her ass.

Cassie Steele, sitting on her bed, in only a pair of skin-tone panties.

Then she does away with those too.

She looks up at me with need in her gorgeous green eyes.

“Cass—” It’s all I can say. It’s *right now*, and *we shouldn’t*, and *I’ll die if I don’t touch you*.

“Damon.” She cups my cheek with her palm and runs her thumb over my temple. Then, in one swift motion, she swings her leg over mine and shifts onto my lap.

“We shouldn’t,” I say.

“I know.” She presses her lips to mine. A soft kiss. A hint. “But I want to anyway.”

Chapter Twenty-Four



Damon

We shouldn't.

The words flash in my brain.

Then Cassie knots her hands in my hair, and the sentiment disappears.

She feels good. Right now, I need that. Not just the escape from my head. The possibility of a future where I connect with someone, where I'm good at something.

Am I good at this?

Six months ago, I would have said yes. Now, I'm not so sure. I can't remember the last time I had sex sober. If I've ever had sex stone-cold sober.

"We can stop." She shifts her hips, rubbing her pelvis against mine, so she's grinding me over my slacks.

Maybe she can. I'm not sure I can.

She settles in my lap. "If you don't want to—"

"You can feel how much I want to, Cass."

"I know." A groan escapes her lips. She rolls her hips over mine again. "I love it."

Fuck me. I need that sense. Some of it. Somewhere. "Are you drunk?"

She shakes her head. "Only tipsy."

I'm not sure about that.

"You can test me if you want."

Okay. That's a smart idea. A way to slow this down so blood can return to my brain. "What do you think of Lisa's music?"

"I could answer that drunk." She laughs and launches into a discussion of Lisa's lyrical influences. She's right. It's not a great question. The nuances go over my head. They might be nonsense, but she expresses her ideas with the grace and SAT words she has when she's stone-cold sober. "There. Believe me?"

Yes. That was a bad idea. The worst idea. My inhibitions are far away. "It's fucking hot when you talk about music." There. I grab on to my last, tiny, minuscule scrap of sense. This is it. This is my last smart play. It's simple. Three little words. But they feel important. Monumental. "Are you sure?"

She answers without hesitation. "Yes." Her fingers dig into my shoulders. Her eyes fix on mine. She stays there, tuned to me, ready to touch me, kiss me, fuck me, but waiting for me to start.

I don't know what to say, so I soak in the sensation.

The brush of her lips against my lips.

The softness of her chest against mine.

All of Cassie melting into all of me. It's different than my other kisses. Because it's not just physical. It's emotional, mental, spiritual.

It's different than my other kisses with her too. There's no pretending this is for everyone else.

It's for us.

Only us.

My inhibitions dissolve as she moans against my mouth. She kisses me hard, rocking her hips against mine, rolling over me again and again.

Thank fuck these are wool pants. They're thick. So thick, I only feel the soft brush of the fabric. A hint of friction.

I need more.

I need all of her.

The details of the room fade away. The night. The complications. The world.

Everything is Cassie.

The taste of her lips, the citrus scent of her skin, the sweet friction of her hips.

I want to tease her forever, but I don't have the stamina for it. Not now. Not when she's driving me out of my fucking mind.

I bring my lips to her neck and cup her breast with my palm.

She groans as I draw circles around her nipple.

"You have the world's most beautiful groan." I scrape my teeth against her skin. "It's music."

She lets out another perfect groan. Low and deep and packed with need. "It's been a while."

"For me too."

"Really?"

"Yeah. If I'm too fast, I'll make it up to you." I kiss a line down her neck.

"I'll take it as a compliment."

“No sass?” I ask.

“Not here.”

“What if I have a brat fetish?”

“You would.” She laughs.

The charge in the air shifts. It’s still electric, but it’s not the sort of over-the-top, wordless, two people falling into each other sex I see on TV.

It’s the two of us. Old friends who trust each other. Collaborators who know things don’t always go according to plan.

“If things were different, I’d give you hell for it,” she says.

“Not indulge it?”

“Next time. Right now. This. No more talking.” She wraps her fingers around my wrist and slips my hand between her legs. “Warm me up so I can fuck you.”

Fuck. She’s bossy here too. That’s way too fucking hot.

She brings her lips back to mine, kissing me hard as she guides my hand.

I curl my palm around her upper thigh. I bring my thumb to her clit.

I pull back enough to look at her. To watch pleasure spread over her face.

Her eyelids flutter together. Her brow softens. Her lips part.

She’s there, lost in bliss.

She groans as I draw soft circles with my digit.

It is music. She's soft and responsive and demanding and beautiful.

Everything I know about Cassie.

Everything I love about Cassie.

Everything.

Without the dull of alcohol, my senses are overwhelmed. The sweet sound of Cassie's groan is too honest. The soft skin on her thigh is too tender. The feeling of her flesh is too intense.

This is too real.

I can't take it.

I close my eyes and try to inhale calm. I need her. I do.

And that's terrifying.

She notices my stiffness. My other stiffness. "Hey." She shifts back on my thighs, breaking contact with my hand. "Are you okay?"

That's the million-dollar question, but I have the same answer I always do. I don't know what the hell it means to be okay anymore.

I want to dissolve in this. I want to lose myself. The way I lost myself in alcohol.

Only this is different. That dulled the rest of the world. This brings the room into sharp focus.

The flecks of amber in Cassie's green eyes. The olive tone of her skin. The mauve color of her lips without any adornment.

"Let's slow down." She runs her fingers over my jawline. "Why don't you tell me what you want me to do."

“You’re perfect.”

Confusion fills her eyes.

I have to explain this to her. But I can’t tell her the full story. I can’t tell anyone. Not yet. I reach for the closest thing I have. “It’s overwhelming.”

She nods with understanding and looks around the room. “Did you bring my purse?”

Does she have a *press in case of male failure* button in there? “Yeah.” I motion to the lyric-covered desk.

She shifts off me, moves to the desk, grabs something from her bag. Her phone. She taps the screen a few times.

Music fills the room. A college rock band I loved when I was a kid.

“Does that work?” She turns to me. “Or do you prefer something more traditional?”

“What does Cassie Steele consider traditional sex music?”

“Emo music, obviously. It’s all about how men are desperate to contain the sexuality of their ex.”

“You revel in their pain?” The joke eases the tension in the air. The room is less charged. But it eases the tension in my shoulders too. This isn’t as overwhelming.

“What’s hotter than that?” She smiles and runs her fingers over her phone. “It depends on my mood. On the person.”

“What about right now?” It’s easy to talk about music with her. It turns the world into a place that makes sense.

“Right now, I want to play whatever would make you feel comfortable.”

Has she always been this considerate?

“Does this work?” She motions to the music pouring from the stereo.

It’s a sweet suggestion, but it doesn’t work. This album is tied to too many memories. I need something safer. Something that doesn’t say *Damon Webb is a fuckup*. “*The Matrix*.”

“What?” She laughs. “The movie?”

“EDM with a bondage club vibe, yeah,” I say.

“When have you ever listened to EDM without a bondage club vibe?”

A laugh spills from my lips. She’s right. And she’s making this easy.

Cassie stares at her cell, carefully picking an option. When she finds it, she hits play, and an electronic beat fills the room.

It’s sexy in that industrial way.

My shoulders relax.

My stomach too.

She was right. This is what I need.

She’s what I need.

That’s terrifying too. More terrifying and less terrifying at the same time.

Cassie sets her cell on the table and turns her attention to me. “How’s that?”

“Perfect. Come here.”

“Are you sure?”

I reply by standing and meeting her at the desk.

She looks up at me as I wrap my arms around her waist. She moans as I pull her into a soft, slow kiss.

Again, the sensation of Cassie overwhelms me. The taste of her lips, the scent of her skin, the softness of her body. This time, I sink into it. I let it flow through me. Let it find a balance.

She breaks our kiss with a sigh. “Do you have a condom?”

“In my room, yeah.”

“Too far.” She reaches for her purse again. Pulls a foil packet from it. A three-pack.

“Ambitious.”

“Always.” She tears off one packet and tosses it on the bed. “Usually, I’m handing them out to friends, not using them myself.”

“Don’t feel embarrassed about it.”

“I don’t,” she says.

My lips curl into a smile. I love how little shit she takes from me. No one is this willing to challenge me. “I like that you’re selective.”

“I didn’t do it for your approval.”

“I love that you said that.” I bring my lips to hers. This time, I kiss her hard. I part my lips. I scrape my teeth against her flesh.

Again, it overwhelms me.

Again, I let the sensations flow through me, sink deeper. It is easier with the music. I get lost in it without thinking. I remember how it feels to lose myself in something productive and beautiful, something that won’t destroy me.

I bring my hand to her chest and toy with her with soft circles of my thumb. Again and again, until she’s groaning

against my mouth. Until she's as lost as I am.

Cassie undoes the knot of my tie. Then the buttons of my shirt. She nearly throws the fabric off my chest.

I undo my belt and do away with my slacks.

She kisses me hard as she pushes my boxers off my hips.

And then we're there, in the guest room, without a single scrap of clothing, pressed together.

I'm naked with Cassie Steele.

A million high school fantasies come to life. Only better than all of them. Because she's real. Because this isn't perfect. It's fucked up and complicated and sexy as hell.

That fucking thought overwhelms me too. And this time, it's harder to let it flow through me. This time, I feel the weight of the decision.

Then she looks up at me, with all that need in her gorgeous green eyes, and she says, "Fuck me."

My other thoughts dissolve. I back her onto the bed.

She shifts onto the sheets.

I shift on top of her.

She wraps her hand around me and pumps me with a steady stroke. It's too much. I'm too close already.

"Fuck, Cass. You're gonna make me come."

She doesn't stop. She pumps me again.

I push her all the way onto her back.

She gasps as she bounces on the sheet, but she looks up at me with a *do that again, please* smile.

Of course, she likes it bossy here. Demands from her. Demands from me.

Exactly the Cassie I know.

Hot as fuck.

I *am* going to come at this rate. And I don't want to come here. I want to feel her first.

I kiss a line down her chest. Over her stomach. To the soft skin of her upper thigh.

She groans as I bring my mouth to her. She tastes like heaven and knowing this is Cassie under me—

Fuck.

I pin her thighs to the bed and lick her up and down. A long taste. Because I need her. Because I crave her.

Then, I find the spot she needs. I test different strokes. A little faster. A little softer. To the right. To the left.

There.

She groans as I hit the right pressure, the right spot.

“Fuck.” She reaches for me. One hand knots in my hair. The other scrapes at my shoulder. That perfect, pure sense of need, and it's mine. All mine.

I pin her a little harder, and I give her exactly what she needs.

Her fingers dig into my skin as I bring her closer and closer. Her groans run together. Her breath hitches.

Then she's there, pulsing against my lips, bucking against my face as she comes. She gets sweeter, wetter, even more mine.

I work her through her orgasm, then I bring my lips to her inner thigh.

She doesn't pause to catch her breath. She reaches for the condom. Tears the packet with her teeth.

I move up the bed, next to her.

She rolls the condom over my cock. With one swift motion, she pushes me onto my back and climbs on top of me.

It's the hottest thing I've ever seen.

And then she drives onto me, and *that's* the hottest thing I've ever seen.

The sensation overwhelms me. The soft, sweet, wetness. The feeling of her body stretching to take mine. The bliss rolling over her expression.

The sweet sight of Cassie naked on top of me.

She's gorgeous. And she's sexy as fuck. Not just because of the curve of her waist, or the perky breasts, or the line of her collarbone.

Because she's lost in me too. Because she takes what she wants. Because she expects me to do the same.

How could anyone let her go?

I bring my hands to her hips, and I guide her up and over me. She indulges me for a few thrusts, then she presses her palms into my shoulders, and she rides me like I'm a fucking pony.

Like she's taking everything she wants from me.

"Fuck." She slows to catch her breath. Her eyes find mine. They ask for everything and offer even more.

Somehow, I know exactly what she wants. “Use me, baby. Use me to come.”

Her eyes go wide. It’s like I unlock her. Like I push her to do exactly what she wants to do. She keeps her hands on my shoulders, and she rocks back and forth.

Fuck.

That’s—

Fuck.

I have to close my eyes to contain myself. I don’t want this to end. I want to feel her for longer. Forever.

Then she switches to a perfect figure eight and she undoes me.

I come on the spot. Pleasure rocks through my body as I spill inside her. The world goes white. Only the feeling of her around me and the steady EDM beat and the sense of satisfaction.

For the first time in a long time, I believe the world is a good place. I believe there are good things in life.

I believe someone like me might have a future with someone like her.

And then she shifts off me, and she brings my hand to her clit, and orders me to make her come again.

And I’m someplace I never thought I’d go.

Heaven.

After, we clean up, Cassie showers, changes into her pajamas, invites me to spend the night in her bed.

I expect to toss and turn. I expect to feel strange, falling asleep next to her. I don’t.

My sleep is deep and easy.

When I wake, the bed is warm. The world is beautiful.
Cassie Steele is naked with me.

For a few minutes, I soak in the bliss.

Then a familiar sound interrupts. The door downstairs.
Footsteps.

Daphne.

“Hey, Fake Loverboy and Fake Lovergirl. I have bagels,”
Daphne calls. “And coffee. So get your lovesick asses down
here.”

Fuck.

Chapter Twenty-Five



1. The first part of the chapter discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions, including sales, purchases, and expenses. This is essential for determining the net income of the business and for tax purposes. The text emphasizes the need for consistency and thoroughness in record-keeping.

2. The second part of the chapter focuses on the calculation of net income. It explains how to determine the gross profit by subtracting the cost of goods sold from the net sales. Then, it shows how to arrive at the net income by deducting all operating expenses from the gross profit. The text provides a clear step-by-step process for these calculations.

3. The third part of the chapter discusses the impact of various factors on net income, such as changes in sales volume, prices, and costs. It highlights how these factors can affect the overall profitability of the business and provides strategies for managing these risks.

4. The fourth part of the chapter covers the importance of budgeting and financial planning. It explains how a budget can help a business anticipate future needs, control costs, and maximize profits. The text provides a framework for developing a budget and monitoring its performance.

5. The fifth part of the chapter discusses the role of financial statements in providing a comprehensive overview of a business's financial health. It explains how the income statement, balance sheet, and cash flow statement work together to provide a complete picture of the business's performance and financial position.

6. The sixth part of the chapter discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions, including sales, purchases, and expenses. This is essential for determining the net income of the business and for tax purposes. The text emphasizes the need for consistency and thoroughness in record-keeping.

7. The seventh part of the chapter focuses on the calculation of net income. It explains how to determine the gross profit by subtracting the cost of goods sold from the net sales. Then, it shows how to arrive at the net income by deducting all operating expenses from the gross profit. The text provides a clear step-by-step process for these calculations.

8. The eighth part of the chapter discusses the impact of various factors on net income, such as changes in sales volume, prices, and costs. It highlights how these factors can affect the overall profitability of the business and provides strategies for managing these risks.

9. The ninth part of the chapter covers the importance of budgeting and financial planning. It explains how a budget can help a business anticipate future needs, control costs, and maximize profits. The text provides a framework for developing a budget and monitoring its performance.

10. The tenth part of the chapter discusses the role of financial statements in providing a comprehensive overview of a business's financial health. It explains how the income statement, balance sheet, and cash flow statement work together to provide a complete picture of the business's performance and financial position.

Cassie

Damon Webb is naked, and I don't have a single second to enjoy it.

Daphne is downstairs.

She'll see Damon sneaking into the hall. Or, worse, she'll come up here to wake me up, and she'll walk in on her brother naked.

Fuck.

Wait.

How does she know I'm here? I didn't tell her—

But I left my car last night. It's in the driveway. So I can't pretend I'm not here. I need a story. Fast.

We don't have to tell Daphne sounded so good in my head yesterday. So did other impeccable pieces of logic like *Daphne and I are too old to constantly share the details of our sex lives*, and *Daphne isn't going to question my chemistry with Damon because she knows we're fake dating*.

So, now, I need to pretend I'm not interested in the guy I'm pretending I'm dating.

My sex life is no one else's business.

The words feel hollow, even in my head. They're true. My sex life is my business. But it's also true, if I was fake dating anyone else, I'd divulge all sorts of details.

I will. Eventually. She is my best friend. I'm not going to hide this from her forever. Not if it's real. No, it is real. I just

don't know if it was a maybe-while-we're-faking-dating thing or more of an actually-I-do-really-want-you thing.

"I can hide in the closet," Damon offers. "Or under the bed."

"This is your house," I say.

"Tell her you crashed after the party," he offers.

That is the truth. But it's worded in a way that suggested I didn't crash into my best friend's brother, naked.

How much honesty do I owe her?

I don't know what normal means anymore.

"Hey," I call downstairs.

"Cass?" Daphne calls from the kitchen. "What are you doing here?"

"Drank too much last night." That is *absolutely* the truth. And it explains everything. Only it doesn't explain anything. Because I'm stone-cold sober, and I'm even more eager to have Damon again. And again. And again.

"Damon?" she calls. "Are you up too?"

Will she hear the sound coming from the same room?

I motion for him to zip his lips.

He does.

So, I whisper, "I'll keep her distracted for a few minutes," then I call to Daphne. "Give me a sec. I have to get dressed."

"Since when do you sleep naked?" she calls back.

I'm in an oversized t-shirt and panties, but it's better to let her believe she shouldn't come into the room. "It's not like I packed pajamas," I say.

Downstairs, she laughs. “Did you at least wash your makeup?”

“Of course, Mom.”

“You’re the one who’s always on my case about it,” she says.

That is true. “Can you make the coffee? I’ll be down in five.” I need the caffeine, and I need to distract her. It feels deceptive.

It’s one thing tricking the guy who hid an affair from me. Or the artist who thinks he can dictate his collaborator’s romantic lives. It’s another, lying to my best friend.

Thankfully, she doesn’t object. She grumbles something about lacking skill with the French Press and fumbles through the drawers.

I push the door closed and turn back to Damon.

He’s sitting up in the bed, watching me. Desire fills his eyes as he looks me up and down. The sheet over his waist does nothing to hide the state of affairs.

Fuck. I want to mount him right now. I really do. “We don’t have time for that.”

Damon’s laugh is soft. “I didn’t say anything.”

I motion in the general direction of his dick.

“That’s involuntary,” he says.

“So is my desire to ride you,” I say.

A smile spreads over his lips. It’s the perfect combination of his usual wicked grin and pure *I adore you* energy.

This isn’t a one-time thing. I don’t know how many times it is, but I know it’s happening again. As soon as Daphne

leaves.

“Stop looking at me like that.” I push off the door. “It’s entrapment.”

“That would make me a cop.”

“Well, you do have your nightstick out.”

He laughs. It’s sexy as hell and way too loud.

But Daphne doesn’t respond. Maybe she can’t hear. I hope she can’t hear.

Damon makes a show of covering his eyes and mouth. I slip into a backless sundress—the good thing about having small breasts is I can easily skip a bra—and a pair of cotton panties. Then, I race through my morning routine and rush downstairs.

Daphne is in the kitchen, staring at the French Press like she’s not sure how to unlock its secrets. “Is it working?”

“Take me through the steps.” I slip into my usual dynamic with her. She’s good at a lot of things. Preparing food and beverages don’t make the list.

“Coarse grind, water at two hundred, four minutes.” Her brow furrows. “Is it four minutes?”

“Perfect.” I wrap my arms around her. “Thanks for the coffee.”

She sinks into the embrace. “Thank me when you taste it.” She laughs, the same *I can’t cook to save my life, can I* self-deprecating humor she’s been using since we were kids.

For a little while, we’re normal.

This is normal.

Two best friends hanging out together.

Only she didn't know I was here. So she must have come to see Damon. So there's nothing normal about this.

The timer beeps.

Daphne presses the plunger of the French Press. She stares at the device with distrust for a moment, then she moves to the bagels. "By the pool or in the dining room?"

"The pool, of course." It's a nice day. More importantly, the pool is well out of earshot of the action upstairs.

We set up on the patio table, take our seats, gush over the view.

"Does Damon know you're coming?" I ask as I pour coffee for everyone and select a bagel; they're all plain, of course. Daphne is a bagel purist.

"No," she says. "I just wanted to stop by and say hi. It's a nice bonus you're here too."

Right. It's normal I'm here. For some reason, I need to articulate.

"What happened last night? Did Damon torture you?"

Not the way she means. I offer my most non-committal shrug.

"No?" she asks. "No bragging about how you got too drunk? Just wait until he wakes up. He'll start banging cymbals as revenge."

Huh? "When have you ever got drunk?"

"After..." She clears her throat in a gesture that can only mean *after my long-distance relationship fell apart in horrible fashion, and I tried to drink my way out of heartbreak.*

That was a few years ago, but it still hurts her. It's just hard to imagine any morning where she showed up hungover and Damon was sober enough to tease her about her headache and nausea.

Come to think of it—

Have I seen Damon drink at all in the last few weeks?

There's nothing here, supposedly. Maybe there's something in his room. Or in one of the drains in the pool. Maybe he sneaks out here with whiskey.

We've been working together, day and night, but it's work, not play. I have no idea what he does when he's finished.

He had a drink last night, didn't he? Something with a lime.

"Has he been torturing you, in general?" she asks. "With the project?"

"Only in an artistic way," I say.

"He won't let you use enough of the... oh, who's that artist you love, who you always want to write like?"

"Which one?" I ask.

She hums a chorus, but I have absolutely no idea what it's supposed to be. When I don't catch it, she waves never mind and looks to the big, blue sky. "It's a beautiful day."

"It is," I say.

"Are you and Damon working all day?"

We should start on the project, yes. If we can keep our hands off each other. "Probably."

"What about family dinner?"

Shit. I have to face *all* my annoying family members. “Until then. Why? Do you want to come?” I say it more as a question than an invitation, but I want her to come. I miss her. The Daphne who sits and makes fun of *The Matrix* with me, who isn’t constantly worried about her brother, who has time for silliness. The version of me who’s here, right now, who isn’t weighed down by heartbreak. “Please come.”

“Oh, maybe.” She feigns disinterest as she sips her coffee. “Will Jackson be there?”

I arch a brow. “Why?”

“No reason.”

“Really? No reason why you mention my older brother?”

She swallows another sip of coffee. “No. I just... would you hate me if I had a crush on him?”

“No!” Inside, I squeal. Jackson and Daphne would be a completely adorable couple. And he’s the kind of guy she needs. Responsible, mature, level-headed. “You two would be great together.”

“It’s not like that. I don’t want to date anyone seriously right now. With school and then residency. I want to have a fling. And don’t worry. I don’t want your brother for that. Even though he is so fucking hot.”

“Okay, now you’re being gross.”

She laughs. “Sorry. I guess I’m used to friends talking about Damon’s charms.”

“Which charms are those?” I ask.

She sinks into the familiarity of the joke. “I think they’re Uzi and A.K.” She flexes her arms in a showy fashion, alluding to Damon’s guns.

“I’ve seen better.” Really, he wasn’t nearly as built when we were younger. Or even six months ago. Does he live in the gym?

“The tattoos too.”

“The personality ruins the whole thing,” I say.

“Of course. But some women aren’t as evolved as you. They don’t want the person. They want the muscles.”

“Any women sitting right at this table?” I ask.

“Did you just ask me if I want my brother?” Her nose scrunches in distaste.

“No. Gross.” Not as gross as her wanting my brother, but I’m going to just ignore that implication. “If all you want for your fling is muscles.”

“No. Muscles and personality. But how do you find someone you can trust with your body and then not fall for them?”

“It’s a delicate balance,” I agree. “Wait. Is that why you’re thinking of Jackson?”

“No. I... maybe.” She bites her lip. “Would you kill me?”

“No. But if your parents found out...”

They wouldn’t kill her. It would be much worse. They’d plan the wedding, they’d put a down payment on the house, they’d paint the future nursery.

And my parents would help.

Everyone is desperate to see Jackson settle down.

She nods *I know*. “Better to find someone else.”

Probably better for him too. He takes everything seriously and always commits a hundred percent. He'd promise her a month and block his calendar for years. That's his nature.

"You didn't come here to see me though," I say.

She lets the words hang in the air. "Dad said something last night... I guess I got worried. I wanted to come by. Make sure Damon was okay."

"What did he say?"

"It's hard to explain." She starts to speak but stops herself.

There's something there. I almost see it, but the image is fuzzy, like it's behind a pane of frosted glass.

When did it get so hard for us to be honest with each other?

She smiles, but her heart isn't in it. "I'm sorry, Cass. I want to tell you. I want to talk about it with someone. With you. But I can't. It's a family thing."

I get it. I have my own family things. But it still hurts, being outside their circle, not being someone my best friend trusts.

I can't talk at the moment. I'm hiding the fact I fucked her brother.

"It's okay," I say. "We're adults now. We don't have to share anything."

She nods. "I hate keeping secrets."

"Me too."

"Would you tell me if he wasn't okay?" she asks.

"I would." That, I mean. But she is getting at something. What is it. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

“Cass.”

Right. It’s a family thing. I shouldn’t press. Okay. That’s fair.

The sound of footsteps interrupts us.

She reaches for her sunglasses and pushes them over her face. “Hey, loverboy.” She drops the concern. “What are you doing kidnapping my best friend?”

The concern fades from his voice and finds its way into my head.

What the hell is going on in the Webb family?

Chapter Twenty-Six



Cassie

After playing up my feelings of affection toward Damon for two weeks, I struggle to deny them. I keep laughing too hard at his jokes, lingering too long with my stares, and blushing when he looks at me like I hang the sun in the sky.

Daphne notices, but she doesn't say anything. We talk about nothing in particular over breakfast. Then Daphne and I take a walk to the beach, and I shift my focus to her. What exactly does she want for this short-term fling? Where do we want to find Mr. Right Now?

By the time we head back to the house, we have a short list of non-negotiable traits and a strategy for our search. Well, her search. She tells me in no uncertain terms that I'm welcome to help when she asks and only when she asks.

For a while, I forget I'm hiding something from my best friend. I forget I slept with her brother. I sink into our usual dynamic; I wade into the water; I drink too many iced lattes.

Thankfully, when we get back to the house, Laurel is already there. And she's busy having her way with my fake boyfriend, dressing him in different styles and snapping photos for her Instagram.

By the time she's done with him, we're due to leave for dinner. And since everyone insists on taking their own cars, I hug my best friend, and I wave *see you soon* as she pulls out of the driveway.

Relief floods my body as her car disappears.

I hate it. I hate keeping secrets.

Then Damon wraps his arm around my waist, and he whispers, “How about we say we got a flat?” and desire pushes away all the other feelings in my body.

I want him so badly.

So much I can barely breathe.

I nod *of course*, drag him into the house, have my way with him right there on the leather couch.

WE WALK INTO MOM AND DAD’S HOUSE TO AN AUDIENCE OF obnoxious siblings.

Laurel and Zack are sitting at the head of the dining table in their usual styles—Laurel has already changed into a cocktail dress and heels; Zack is in his typical t-shirt and jeans—sipping their usual drinks.

Right on cue, they stand and launch into a slow clap.

“Great use of time,” Laurel says. “Sneak in that quickie.”

“A little too quick, if you ask me.” Zack laughs. “You only got here eleven minutes ago.”

Laurel laughs. “I stopped for coffee.”

“Then why did you get here at the same time as Daphne?” he counters.

“Cause she drives like a maniac,” I say.

Laurel nods *that is true*.

I don’t take their bait. I need to stay on mission. Only I have two missions right now: to convince my siblings I’m

dating Damon for real and act as if it's fake in front of Daphne. That's not at all confusing. "Where is Daphne?"

"Outside with Jackson," Laurel says. "Wonder why she wants privacy with him." She raises a brow and adopts a typical Laurel expression. *There's only one reason to want privacy with a man. There's only one reason to want anything to do with a man, really.*

"Maybe she wants to get away from your obnoxious ass?" Zack suggests.

"My ass is not obnoxious," Laurel says.

"No. That's your face," he counters.

"They'll do this all night," I say.

"Only most of the night," Zack says.

No. All night. It's even worse when Mom and Dad are here. They act even more like teenagers.

I take Damon's hand and start to lead him to the backyard.

Laurel stops me. "What if we promise to be good?"

"Are you capable of that?" Zack asks.

Already, they're in their own universe, the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of the Steele family.

Damon laughs. "You two really do oversell it."

My obnoxious siblings share a look. Zack turns it back to me. "We oversell it? Not the two of you?"

Ahem. "What are you talking about?" I ask.

"You're still going with this relationship thing?" Zack asks.

Damon shoots me a curious look. He wants me to explain, I know, but I've told him everything I know. I claimed relationship. They sorta kinda bought it. The end.

Is it better if they don't buy it? Then they won't start asking questions about our sex life. They won't tease Jackson about it. He won't come to me with concern.

I don't want him to come to me with concern.

Only what if the concern is well-placed?

What if there's another reason why Damon is hanging out at his parents' house, a house without alcohol? If there's another reason why he agreed to work with me?

I don't know what it means. Only that it means something.

"Damn, is it really that bad?" Laurel asks. "You look like you're going to throw up, Cass."

Damon moves close enough to whisper. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Good." I nod. "Just parched."

"What do you want to drink?" he asks. "I'll grab it."

Laurel raises her eyes *good boyfriend move*.

"A gin and tonic," I say. "Thanks."

He nods *sure* and moves around the table into the kitchen. No mention of the temptation of alcohol. Or me numbing my discomfort with alcohol. Or him assuming the role of designated driver.

Because he doesn't want to discuss it? Or because there's nothing to discuss?

No. There's something to discuss, somewhere. If I didn't know better, I'd think Damon is a guy who simply doesn't like to drink.

Only I know better.

I know that isn't the case.

“Seriously, Cass, we're not that obnoxious,” Zack says.
“Are you okay?”

“Fine, yeah.” I take a seat next to Laurel.

She looks me up and down. “Your dress is a little ruffled.” She studies my face. “And your lipstick is smudged.”

“It is not.” I fixed it in the car.

“And you're still flushed.” She looks to Zack. “I think they really are having sex.”

Footsteps grab the troublemaking twins attention.

Jackson and Daphne step into the hallway. They're in the middle of a conversation, and they're both totally tuned to each other.

She brushes a hair behind her ear.

He leans in close to whisper something to her.

She laughs and holds out her hand. He offers his drink. She brings it to her lips and takes a slow sip, like she knows he's watching her.

Like she has no idea the four of us are watching her.

They stay in their own world for a moment, then he takes his drink back, and he moves toward us, and he stiffens. Back to the brother I know. The one in control of the universe.

He likes her too.

She likes him.

But what the hell are they doing with that?

Laurel and Zack trade a knowing smile. At the same time, they both look to the possible pair.

Laurel starts the torture. “Don’t you two look nice together.”

“What?” Daphne jumps away from my brother. She smooths her dress as she stammers. “We’re just talking about drinks. I don’t usually... I...”

“What she’s trying to say is, we’re glad you’re here, Daphne.” My mother’s voice fills the space.

My dad is next. “And you would make a cute couple.”

“But you’re adults who make your own choices and we respect that,” my mom says.

They’re even worse than Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Which means Laurel and Zack trade another look of triumph.

Jackson shakes his head *ridiculous*, and Daphne forces a smile. She looks to me and mouths *sorry*.

I shake my head. There’s no reason to apologize. I want her to be happy. Even if that makes things complicated.

Thankfully, my parents don’t just stand in the kitchen and project their voices. They enter the room with dinner. Dad sets a tray of enchiladas on the table. Mom places the plates of fixings next to them.

Dad doesn’t say anything. He scans the room, raises a brow, looks to Mom. Somehow, he conveys everything in his mind to her.

She nods, absorbing the information, and shakes her head *don’t*.

But he does. “Do we need to have the talk again, Cassie?”

Ugh. Kill me now. “No, thank you.”

“Are you sleeping with Damon?” Dad asks.

“We’re seeing each other.” I use my practiced response.

“Seeing each other naked, yeah,” Zack adds.

Mom shoots him that same *don’t* look. “Nobody wanted me to date your father, either.”

“Hey!” Dad raises his arms in mock protest.

“I’m still surprised my brother didn’t kill you.” She laughs, lost in a memory.

“He was waiting for an excuse, yeah.” Dad nods. “Just like your brother is.”

This is such bullshit. “What if, instead of this patriarchal obsession with who is claiming my body, we could all stop acting as if it’s normal for a man to threaten to kill because another man is touching a woman?” I offer.

Zack waves his hand *get real*. “If anyone is going to kill Damon, it’s Daphne.”

And there it is—

As if summoned by Zack’s stupidity, Damon joins us. He’s holding two short glasses of clear liquid and ice. One with half a lime. One with a single lime slice garnish.

They’re different drinks.

That means something. I think.

Damon looks around the room, noting the tense mood. “Why do I get the feeling no one wants to talk about me?”

Zack laughs. Laurel too.

Mom and Dad not so much. Daphne or Jackson either. The four of them look at Damon with the same concern.

They know something. Or they see something.

And while I do appreciate them looking out for me, I don't appreciate the attitude. I'm an adult. I can date anyone I want.

"If you have something to say about my boyfriend, say it." I address the entire room. "Otherwise, can we please sit and eat?"

"Can we eat and say things about your boyfriend?" Zack tries to break the tension with a joke.

The air stays thick.

Ugh. "Seriously. If you have something to say to me, please say it now. This is the moment at the wedding. Speak now or forever hold your peace."

Chapter Twenty-Seven



Cassie

Dad looks at me the way he did when I was a kid and I was sick. *Fuck, I'm worried, but I don't want you to know I'm worried.*

He's better at hiding the concern these days, but I'm better at seeing it too.

Despite the *this is fucked* expression on his face, he agrees we shouldn't make my love life the center of attention, sits, tells everyone else to sit.

No one takes the floor. We all settle into our seats, serve ourselves, discuss family outings, vacation plans, the typical *how was your week* stuff.

Laurel is killing it at the fashion company. Jackson is working a billion hours a week at his law firm. Zack is effortless in the off-season. Somehow, despite his *I take nothing seriously* attitude, my brother is a well-paid professional athlete.

When it's my turn to share my week, I give everyone the rough outline of our plans. The songwriting, the album, the opportunity to work with two different musicians, even the strange weekend collaboration. Thankfully, everyone accepts this as a legitimate excuse for not making dinner next week.

Slowly, I settle into the conversation. I drink another gin and tonic. I tease my sister about her dress. Damon gushes over my songwriting skills. Daphne and I explain the plot of *The Matrix* for the ten millionth time.

Jackson watches her carefully, lighting up when she laughs.

No one mentions it, but everyone notices.

For two hours, everything is easy. We finish dinner, clear the plates, help with cleaning. I don't think about the status of my fake relationship. I don't worry about Damon's personal life. I don't care whether or not my parents approve of my choices.

Then I head outside to grab a little air, and I find Dad at the patio table, all that concern in his eyes, and my lightness disappears.

Somehow, I know what he's going to say the second I look at him.

"Have a seat, Cass," he says.

"Why do I feel like I'm in trouble?" I ask.

"When were you ever in trouble?" He smiles in that Dad sort of way. "You got straight As."

"A lot of teachers scolded me for writing poems instead of paying attention."

"Did I?" he asks.

"A few times, yeah." I sit. "You're more strict than you act."

"You should have seen me back in the day." He takes a long sip from his glass of whiskey. "With Miles."

Damon's dad.

"I was worried," he says. "All the time. I kept thinking I'd wake up to a call from hotel security. That someone found him, in his bed, over-dosed."

I don't know the details here. Only the rough sketches. Daphne doesn't like to talk about her parents' personal or marital problems.

I know her dad is an addict. I know it puts a strain on their family. That's all.

"I don't want that life for you, Cass," he says.

I swallow hard. "It's my life though."

"So he told you?" Dad asks. "He was honest about it?"

I know what he's going to say, but I ask anyway. "About what?"

"That he's an alcoholic."

Chapter Twenty-Eight



Cassie

Damon is an alcoholic.

Of course.

It's the only thing that makes sense.

There's no alcohol in the house. He skips drinks at parties. He volunteers as designated driver.

Dad explains a little more about the situation. I'm not supposed to know. His father and my father disagree on the way to handle the situation. Dad promised discretion until it was necessary. It's necessary now.

It's always my choice, of course. He trusts my judgment. But he wants me to make choices with my eyes open. Fully open.

And so he gives me all sorts of details I'm not supposed to know. The three times Damon drank enough to need medical attention. The month at rehab he kept from everyone. The deal Damon and his dad struck.

As long as he stays sober, he can stay in the house, but his family has open access. They can come anytime, test his sobriety anytime, check for stashes of alcohol anytime.

They don't trust him.

No one trusts him.

And now I don't know if I can trust him either.

FOR THE REST OF THE NIGHT, MY HEAD BUZZES. WHEN I finally say goodbye to my family and take my spot in the passenger seat of Damon's car, I don't know what to think.

How could he not tell me?

How could he ever tell me?

He slides into the driver's seat, turns on the car, pulls away from the street.

Amy Winehouse fills the car. The album I insisted on playing on the way here.

Damon chuckles. "How did I forget you picked this?"

Right. Because Amy Winehouse is a typical Cassie Steele choice. A damaged woman who writes confessional lyrics. Because I love this kind of thing.

Not because she died of alcohol poisoning.

"My excellent taste overwhelms you." I try to keep my voice light. I try to make it a joke. I don't get there.

Damon glances in my direction. "Are you okay, Cass?"

No. I need to know everything. I need to talk about it. I can't take any more lies or secrets. "My family is a lot."

"They are," he says.

"Did they give you too much shit?" I ask.

"The usual amount," he says. "They care about you. They want you to find someone worthy."

"Right. Yeah." Someone worthy. Whatever that means. "They didn't like Frederick at first, either."

"That was a smart call," he says. "The guy's a prick."

"You're a prick too," I say.

He leans back in his seat, hurt.

“I don’t mean—”

“No. You’re right. It’s a dick move for me to say your ex-boyfriend sucks,” he says. “He does suck for cheating on you. But you already know that.”

Right. I nod.

“And you did love him,” he says.

“Things were good for a long time.” I watch the dark sky whiz by the windows. There’s more light here than there is at the house. I can’t see many stars. Only a handful. “We were happy for a long time.”

“No one can take that away from you,” he says.

“But what if he did?” I say. “What if I can’t find it anymore, because he hurt me so much?”

“Why do you have to find it?” Damon asks.

“It’s hard to hate him all the time. Exhausting.”

“So stop,” he says.

“That easy?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Not easy. Simple.” For a few minutes, he drives in silence.

I close my eyes and let Amy’s sultry vocals fill my ears. This is such a familiar album. I’ve listened to it a million times. I’ve let her self-destructive impulses into my heart. They comfort me. They make me feel normal. Like I’m not the only person who doesn’t always want what’s good for her.

When *Back to Black* finishes, I switch to a Florence and the Machine album about her struggle with addiction.

Damon doesn't notice. Or he pretends not to notice.

A lot of people don't listen to lyrics closely. Especially while they're driving. Even songwriters.

The first song fades into the second. The third.

The words fill my head and heart and soul. I need to say something. I just don't know how to broach this. So, I talk about myself instead. "I guess there were signs Frederick wasn't a great guy. Even from the beginning. He loved my passion for music, but he loved it most when it aligned with his passion. We didn't stay up arguing about whether Hole or Nirvana was better."

"Who would argue?" he asks. "There's really no question."

For a minute, my passion overrides my concern. "Don't even, Damon Webb. I know you're fucking with me."

"Hole is better."

Satisfaction fills my veins. Affection. Pride too. My face flushes. My chest. "You're not just saying that?"

"I don't want to say it now. I don't want to give you the satisfaction."

"Especially when you're driving and I can't reward you for it?"

"Reward? Really? I expect rewards for having the right opinions?"

"That's not what I meant." And I can't go there anyway. This isn't about my taste in music. It's not even about brilliant women going ignored. Or being blamed for their husband's suicide. The suicide that followed multiple drug overdoses.

And there we are.

Back to the elephant in the room.

“I know. I’m just giving you a hard time, Cass.” He shoots me that charming Damon Webb smile. “It’s more that you’re so turned on by other people noticing the same brilliance you do that you can’t control yourself.”

“I do not.”

He raises a brow *do you*.

Oh god, I do. That’s when I started *really* liking Frederick. After he agreed Kate Nash was criminally underrated. Don’t get me wrong. He was always handsome. Very handsome. I had a crush right away. But once I knew he was smart and gorgeous—“I get turned on, sure, but I control myself.”

Damon chuckles. “What qualifies as control?”

“I don’t mount every person who loves Hole or Amy Winehouse.”

“No, they’re too popular. You’d have to fuck half the LA area.”

I flip him off.

“But if it’s one of your more obscure references. Or someone who introduces you to new music. An acoustic cover of a nineties rock song, maybe.”

My blush spreads to my chest. He’s right. Dammit.

He glances at me. Notices. Smiles *called it*.

It’s sweet and fun and distracting. I want to lean into it. I want to say *fuck all this complication, let’s park the car and have sex right now*.

But I can’t do that. Not until we talk about this.

Only, I still can't find the words. "I guess you could call it my weakness. Laurel's is nice thighs. Mine is appreciation of great lyrics."

"What are you saying about my thighs?" he teases.

I don't take the bait this time. "That's why I fell for him, at first, because we aligned there. But he had other good traits, too. He was a great boyfriend for a while."

"I know," Damon says.

"It's funny when you're with someone. You see those warning signs. I noticed he shut down conversations when I didn't appreciate one of his influences. I noticed he always left my friends' parties early. I noticed he thought sex was done after he came. But I always had an explanation. A reason."

"It's not a criticism, Cass. We all have weaknesses."

"You do?" I mean it more generally. *What's your weakness, Damon? Just tell me. Please. We're supposed to be honest with each other.*

But he doesn't answer that. He moves away from anything real with a dumb joke. "Great tits."

My cheeks flush. "Mine are kinda small."

"Yours are fucking fantastic."

"So that's it? My tits?" I don't quite find the humor.

"Don't sell yourself short, Cass. You have a great ass too. And legs for days."

"I'm glad I meet your standards."

"You're beautiful." His voice drops to a serious tone. "And sexy. But that's not the reason why I like you."

"You like me?" I ask.

He nods. “Yeah. I always liked you.”

“You did?”

“That’s my weakness,” he says. “Women who love music. Who lose themselves in it the way you do.”

“What about Tinsel?” I ask.

He glances at me *what the fuck?* “What about her?”

“Is she your type, then?”

“No,” he says. “She might love music the way you do, but I haven’t seen it. I haven’t seen that look you get when you slip on your headphones, like the world finally makes sense.”

It does. That’s why I love music. That’s why I love this job. Because writing is the only way I know how to make sense of my life. And writing lyrics is the best way.

What would I write now?

I close my eyes and try to let the words come to me, but they don’t. I can’t write without a pen and paper. Or enough privacy for my thoughts to unfurl.

But it’s more than that too.

It’s not safe to dive into my thoughts as long as this is hanging over our heads.

“Her songs are good though,” I say. “Have you listened to them?”

“Not as good as yours, but yeah.”

“Did you hear the last one?” I ask. “It’s about addiction.”

He doesn’t react to that. “It’s a popular subject.”

“Yeah. Right. All those songs that sound like love songs, but they’re really about heroin.”

He looks at me funny. “Sure.”

“Do you have a favorite?” I ask.

“I don’t have a list compiled.” He keeps his eyes on the road. “Why? Is that the way you want to go?”

“Why didn’t you have a drink tonight?”

“I did,” he says. “You saw it.”

“An alcoholic drink.”

He clamps his hands on to the wheel. “Would you prefer I drive drunk?”

No. Of course not. That’s not what I mean.

But he knows that. He must.

“The grunge songs about addiction are always the best,” I say. “Besides your dad’s.”

He doesn’t reply.

“But some of these new ones... I think people expect love to feel that way, like an addiction.”

“Is it accurate?” he asks.

“It is.” Is that why this feels so heavy? Why there’s a pit in my stomach? Because I don’t just want Damon. I don’t just like him. Because I love him.

Do I love him?

A part of me has loved him for a long time. Since we were young.

But that other part—

I can’t do it.

I can’t connect with someone who lies to me again.

I switch the album again. I focus on the music. I wait until we're at home, parked in the driveway, car off, world quiet.

I can't lie to myself anymore. I need to be straight with him. I need to actually talk about this.

So I swallow my fear, and I push through my anger, and I say the one thing I really don't want to say, "Why didn't you tell me you're an alcoholic?"

Chapter Twenty-Nine



Damon

This is what it comes to with everyone I know. This is what it comes to with anyone who cares about me.

Damon Webb, fuck up.

Damon Webb, alcoholic.

Damon Webb, ticking time bomb.

The weight of it fills the car. It sucks up all the oxygen.

Cassie sits there, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes on me, her hopes fading with every second.

I don't know what I'm supposed to do here. I know it's not this.

"It's none of your business." I slide out of the car, I move into the house, I lock myself in my room.

I stay there until she goes home.

In my head, in my room, in my fucking prison.

FOR THE NEXT THREE DAYS, I AVOID CASSIE, AND SHE AVOIDS me. Finally, I get back to my routine. The thing that keeps me sane. A morning at the gym. Breakfast at the place next door. Painful small talk with someone I know from way back when.

Then a shower, another drive, coffee, the sand, the ocean.

The days feel long again.

The nights are agony.

The routine doesn't keep me sane.

The project does.

Cassie emails lyrics, along with instructions for the song. This one is slow and cynical. This is fast and hopeful. This is agonizing.

Finally, Thursday, after a long session at the gym, a shower, a lunch by the pool, I find her waiting in the living room.

She's sitting on the couch, arms crossed against her chest, looking fierce in a black sundress and thick eyeliner.

She speaks without a hint of emotion in her voice. "We're due to go over these together."

"My guitar is upstairs."

"Sure." She follows me up the stairs without a word. She opens the door without a smile. She sits at the desk, lays her notebook on the surface, stares at her scribbled words. "Where do you want to start?"

"*A Different Sort of Love Song.*" The one about hate.

She nods. "Can you sing while you play?"

"Sure." I pick up my guitar, I sit on the bed, and I play the song from memory. It's a simple chord progression with a catchy melody.

Cassie listens carefully. She waits until I'm finished, then suggests changes. We go through it a few times.

Then, to the next, a cynical breakup song.

The third and final, a song about addiction. It's not obvious from the outside, but I know the way she writes. I know what she gets at.

She asks me to sing.

I oblige. Only, this time, I don't keep it professional. I don't focus on the pitch. I stop fighting the ugly thoughts in my head. I put them in the song instead.

Damon Webb, alcoholic fuckup.

Damon Webb, terrible fake boyfriend.

Damon Webb, pushing away the only person who didn't look at him like he's going to break.

No. Who doesn't.

She doesn't look at me like she's going to break. Not the way everyone else does.

She looks at me like I've already broken her heart.

I finish the song and set my guitar on the floor. "I'm sorry."

Her eyes stay glued to mine.

"I should have told you," I say. "But I couldn't face it yet. I still can't."

She presses her lips together. "We don't have to talk about it."

"We do," I say. "We don't have to be lovers. We don't have to be enemies. But I need you as a friend, Cass. I always will."

Her brow furrows and softens as she takes in the confession. She looks me in the eyes, the same tough, in-control Cassie I know, but with a new softness, the vulnerability that comes out when we're here, working together. "I can't be your friend if you treat me like your enemy."

"I know."

She brushes a wavy hair behind her ear. “I’m here. I’m listening. I’ll try not to judge. But only if you talk to me like we are friends.”

“As long as I don’t say I love ABBA?”

She jumps straight to Cassie-Steele-Music-Critic. “ABBA is iconic.”

“But the lyrics...”

Her shoulders fall as she smiles. She sinks into the joke. She finds her ease. “You think you know me so well.”

“Sometimes.” I know this side of her. I know the Cassie who lives and breathes music. And the Cassie who hates me. It’s the Cassie who cares about me I don’t quite understand.

She’s not family. She’s not obligated to care about me, but she does. Why?

I have to trust it. Somehow. I return her stare. I try to find my own vulnerability. “I know I hurt you.”

She doesn’t deny it. She nods in agreement and shifts away from my attempt at humor. “If you want to get serious...”

“You swear you’re not judging?”

“No, I can’t promise that. But I can promise to try.” Her eyes bore into mine. “If you promise to try too.”

I can do that. In theory. “Can we do it right here?” I pat the spot next to me on my bed. “Or do you need all that distance?”

“I hate all this distance.” She rises to her feet and sits next to me on the bed. “But I need to trust you to stay closer.”

“I want you to trust me,” I say. “I do. I just... don’t know where to start.”

“At the beginning, maybe.”

It's a reasonable request, but it's hard to place it. There's the minute Dad took his first drink. The day he met Mom. Conception. The doctor announcing *it's a boy*.

How much of this was fate, and how much was my action?

It still feels like destiny, like I'm doomed to repeat my father's mistakes again and again. But I have to take responsibility. I know that.

I take a deep breath, and I look into Cassie's gorgeous grey eyes, and I begin. "Daphne says it's biology. The predisposition for addiction. I'm sure that's part of it. But it can't be all of it. Or Daphne would be staying up late with a bottle instead of a textbook."

Cassie's lips curl into a bittersweet smile. There is something funny about the mental image of my sister drinking her way through a study session. It's absurd. It's totally out of character.

It fills me with relief.

I'm a mess, yes, but Daphne is okay. She's strong and capable. She's without these kinds of demons.

Softness spreads through my limbs. Then I feel Cassie's knee against mine, and I tense again. This isn't as easy as looking at Daphne as a role model.

This is tangled and messy and impossibly complicated.

"I know I'm the one in charge of my actions," I say. "I'm not trying to deny any of that."

Cassie nods. "There's not a lot of scientific debate, is there? On the inherent ability of alcoholism?"

"A predisposition to alcoholism, yeah." I nod too. "I don't think so. You'd have to ask her."

“Does it feel that way?” She turns a little more toward me. “Do you remember when we were kids and everyone said you’d be tall one day, just like your parents?”

“Of course.”

“Does it feel like that?”

“More.” No one said *you’ll grow up to be an addict one day, just like your dad*. It was in their actions. In the way they looked at me, talked about me, got quiet anytime anyone mentioned drugs or alcohol in my presence. “It’s one of those things that was always there. Even when I was a kid. I didn’t realize it, at first. I didn’t know what it was, only that people were worried about me. I’d seen adults drink before, but never Mom and Dad. I thought it was something they just didn’t like, the way I didn’t like fish sticks.”

Cassie offers her hand.

I take it. “Then, Dad slipped. I was eight or nine. I’m not sure. He was outside, in the backyard, all fuzzy and distant. I didn’t understand why. I just knew it was off. It happened a few times. Then he went somewhere to get clean.”

“Did you know what was happening?”

“I did and I didn’t. I knew something was wrong. I knew he disappointed Mom. I knew she looked at me and saw the possibility I’d do the same thing to her. She explained that adults liked to have a drink sometime, for fun, or to relax or to get a little silly. Only, sometimes, they had too much, and got too silly, and they needed help taking a break. A time out.”

Cassie rubs her thumb over the space between my thumb and forefinger. She rests her head on my shoulder, sinking into me, trusting me, giving me space and time.

Right now, our connection feels easy. Safe even. It doesn't make sense. This is shit I don't talk about with anyone. Shit I can't face on my own. "Can I borrow some of your braveness?"

"Huh?" She looks up at me with confusion in her gorgeous green eyes. "What braveness?"

"When you write lyrics, you pour your heart onto the page."

"Sometimes," she says.

"You're fearless about it."

She blushes. "Don't distract me with compliments. I want to have this conversation."

"I don't know if I can."

"Okay." She rubs my hand with her thumb again. "Let's talk until you run out of words. Then we can write a song about it."

"For Bryce?"

She shakes her head. "For us."

"Are we a band now?" I ask.

"We'd be a duo, not a band, and no. It's not for public consumption. It's for you. To have the space to express yourself. If you decide you want to share it with other people, we can do that, but it's not the point."

"You write without purpose?"

"Don't you?" she asks.

"Not anymore."

She nods. “I do it less than I did before I made it my gig. But I need it. I need it to breathe. You probably do too.”

“I lost it somewhere,” I say. “It got to be too hard. Too painful.”

“Still?” she asks.

“No. It’s been easier working with you.”

She sits up all the way straight. “Did you just say I helped you reconnect with music?”

“Don’t let it go to your head.”

“Too late.” She smiles, and this time, there’s nothing bittersweet about it. “Fuck. Sorry. We’re talking. You can’t drop a bomb like that on me.”

“I can’t?”

She shakes her head. “Not if we’re going to keep our clothes on.”

“Who said we need to keep our clothes on?” I ask.

Her smile widens. “Trust me, Damon, I want to have my way with you right now. But we need to talk first.”

“How about after?”

“After is from the end of the conversation to the end of the universe.”

“Is that a yes?” I ask.

“It’s a start talking if you want to get to after.”

Chapter Thirty



Damon

THE WHIR OF THE AIR CONDITIONER FILLS THE ROOM. IT MELTS into the steady rhythm of Cassie's breath.

Long inhale, slow exhale. She's not running away or freaking out or looking at me like she's sure I'm going to fuck this up.

She's here.

Calm isn't a word I'd normally use to describe Cassie. She's fiery, passionate, expressive. But she's steady too. She really is.

"Wait." Cassie holds up her finger *one minute*. "I know how to make this easier."

"Taking off your clothes?"

She laughs. "Strip confession? Take off your clothes every time someone else shares?"

"Sounds great. You start. I think you could lose the entire outfit at this point."

She pulls her cell from her jeans pocket. “It’s easier for me when I have music.”

“Is this your go-to move?”

“Stop distracting me.” She kicks me softly and taps the screen a few times.

A soft guitar riff fills the room. Then moody vocals. A confessional singer-songwriter from the seventies.

Somehow, it’s perfect.

She’s really fucking good at this.

“How’s that?” She studies my expression. “Better?”

I nod.

She sets her cell face down on the desk and sits next to me. “Whatever you want to say. Wherever you want to go.”

I close my eyes and let my breath sync up to the beat. The rhythm fills my veins. Steadies my heart. “I’ve ignored this for too long.”

“Music?”

I nod. “When we were kids, it felt good to escape into it. Even when I started drinking. When I started drinking way too much. Then one day, it wasn’t enough. It didn’t feel like an escape anymore. It felt like a reminder of the person I used to be, the person I wasn’t. It was a pressure to dig deeper, and I couldn’t. I needed to feel something else. Anything else.”

“You didn’t have music?”

I nod.

“No wonder you were such an obnoxious shit.”

“Hey.”

She looks up at me with a sweet smile. “It’s true.”

It’s fair too. I stare back into her eyes. “You look right here.”

“I feel right here.”

I lean down and press my lips to hers.

She kisses back for a moment, then she pulls away. “I want to...”

But we need to talk first.

I get it.

“Let me back up.” I already laid down the foundation. Now, I need to go back to the beginning. I want to explain this to her. I want her to understand. *I* want to understand myself. “At first, I believed Mom. I believed Dad would come back and be the same guy. That he needed a little help to avoid his temptation. But when he got home, he was different. Moody and distant. And that hurt her too. All of it hurt her. They tried to hide it from us. I think they did hide it from Daph. But I saw.”

Cassie rests her head on my shoulder. She reaches out and takes my hand again.

It’s enough to steady me. “That was what I learned. Dad had a problem. He would always have a problem. No matter how hard he fought, he’d always feel that temptation, and, eventually, he’d slip, and it would hurt everyone who loved him.”

“I’m sorry,” she says.

“I guess we all have shit from our parents.”

She nods into my shoulder. “I’m still sorry. That’s hard.”

“Yeah. I always knew it in my bones, but I didn’t really think about it until I was older.”

“Until you were partying?” she asks.

“Yeah. At first, I thought, *wow, is this really what Dad let get in front of our family?* Of course, it wasn’t. He was in NA, not AA. He’s totally sober now, but alcohol was never his preferred fix.”

“Is it yours?” she asks with only curiosity, but the words still land with a thud. She’s so clear and matter-of-fact. Straight to the point.

I appreciate it. I need it. It’s too easy to paper over everything with bullshit. “Yeah. It took a while, but one day it just clicked. I was upset about something. I don’t even remember what. And I kept drinking at a party and that pain faded into that soft, warm numb, and I got it. This is why Dad threw away everything, all those times. Because he needed the pain to stop and it was so fucking easy to pick up a bottle.”

“Did you think about it that way?”

“Sometimes,” I admit. “Mostly, it felt inevitable. Everyone looked at me like a ticking time bomb. They were sure I was on the path to rock bottom. I might as well enjoy it. Feel something else for a while.”

“Do you think that was most of it? The expectation?” she asks.

“Fuck, Cass, can’t you start with a softball?”

Her laugh breaks the tension in the room. “No. I don’t do softballs.” She runs her thumb over the outside of my hand. “But it’s okay if you don’t know.”

“I think it was everything. Genetics, expectations, opportunity. There was no one moment when I suddenly became an alcoholic. It was a little every day. And, some days, it was better. I was better. I drank less. Hell, when I took Daphne to the East Coast for college tours, I didn’t drink at all. It was only a week and a half, but it was a long time for me.”

She doesn’t judge. She just nods.

“I guess that should have been a sign, that I counted ten days without alcohol as a major accomplishment. But I didn’t see it. I didn’t want to see it. I knew I drank too much, but I figured I could stop anytime.”

“When was that?” she asks.

“Off and on, since I was seventeen, eighteen maybe. I had good days, weeks, months, even. Then I was back into it.”

“What did the good days have in common?” she asks.

“Music,” I say. “When I could find that, it was the only thing that felt stable.”

“Only music?”

“Mostly,” I say. “Other distractions worked too. Anything that filled my mind, so I didn’t have to sit with my thoughts.”

“I know what you mean.”

“You do?” It’s hard to imagine Cassie struggling to sit with her thoughts. She’s the most introspective person I know.

She nods. “When I was depressed, before I started treatment, I would stay up late, playing rounds of solitaire again and again, until I was too tired to think. Because I didn’t want to lie down and be with my thoughts.”

“When was that?”

“A few different times,” she says. “It got really bad my senior year of high school. Therapy helped that time. But the next time, it didn’t. I needed medication. But I hated the medication. It gave me headaches and killed my libido.” She bites her lip. “I swear I’m not trying to bring it back to sex.”

“I know.”

“Or to steal the spotlight.”

“You’re not.” I run my thumb over the outside of her hand. “When was that?”

“College. Junior year. I went off the medication for a while. I swore off it for a while. I didn’t want to lose that part of myself again. But then things got too bad. Whenever I let out my thoughts, to write a song, I wrote something miserable and angry, and I didn’t feel better. I felt worse. So I went back and...”

“Then you started dating Frederick and you didn’t get to enjoy the new relationship energy?” I relay the story she told me earlier.

“Yeah. I switched to a different class a few years ago. That helped.”

“Helped you come?”

She laughs. “You don’t have to spell it out.”

“Are we spelling it with an *o* or a *u*?”

“Ew, gross. An *o*. Always an *o*. A *u* is trashy.” She laughs. “And, yes, it brought back my libido. It brought back other parts of me that felt muted, but it still raised the lows. It was better. A lot better. I finally found a doctor who listened to me. The others... they always insisted the drugs didn’t have

serious side effects. That I was somehow unusual for hating them.”

“That’s fucked.”

She nods. “Do you think that’s it?” she asks. “With you? Do you think it’s depression?”

“That I was self-medicating?” I ask. “I don’t know. Maybe that’s how it started. But once I was drinking all the time, I felt like a fuckup because I was drinking all the time, and I drank to forget that feeling.”

She nods. “I know what you mean.”

“When have you ever been a fuckup?”

“Plenty of times.” She looks up at me. “I just don’t do it as publicly as you.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

She shakes her head. “No. Do you?”

“Yeah. But I’m happy to not talk too.”

Chapter Thirty-One



Cassie

I *'m happy to not talk too.*

I want that. I want to let go of everything in my head and melt into him. I want to be here, connecting with my heart and my body.

But there's only one way I know how to do that.

With my head. By talking first, sharing first, fitting together here first.

"Would you rather talk?" I ask.

"Than fuck you?" He chuckles. "I like talking to you, Cass, but don't be stupid. It doesn't suit you." The playfulness in his voice pushes the clouds in the room away. These are big topics, but they don't have to feel heavy. They don't have to feel like secrets.

They can feel... okay. I'm not my depression or my prescription or its side effects. He's not his alcoholism.

We're two people with problems we share with each other.

Can it really be that easy?

It was once with Frederick. For a long time. Then it stopped. That's what I don't understand. When did things change? Why didn't I notice him turn into someone else?

If I didn't notice with him, I won't notice with someone else.

Or maybe it's different with Damon. Frederick and I didn't talk like this. Not in the beginning. Not even in the middle.

We shared, yes. He was there when I needed him, and I tried to be there when he needed me. But I was always holding something back, trying to preserve his opinion of me.

That's why it's easier with Damon. Because he's known me for ages. Because he's seen my weaknesses. Because now, I know better. I know I can't swallow my fears and needs and feel okay with it.

It's hard, but I have to trust him with my feelings. I have to work at it.

Love isn't the fluffy confection it is in a pop song.

Sometimes, it's easy and fun and free. And sometimes, it's hard work and sacrifice and facing everything you'd rather bury.

"Are you okay, Cass?" He squeezes my hand. "You're off somewhere."

"Can we write the song first?"

He chuckles. "Is that really what you want to do right now?"

Yes and no. "I don't know how else to explain what I'm feeling. Okay. How about this. You sit there and look cute. I need five minutes with my notebook."

"How about I go to the bathroom and get fresh, and when I come back I—"

"Sit and listen to my new song."

"And then throw you on the bed," he says.

"As long as you listen to the song first," I say.

His lips curl into a wicked smile. The Damon Webb signature. "I wouldn't miss it for anything." He kisses me

softly, pushes himself to his feet, lets himself out of the room.

A million things fill my head. My desire to connect with him. My fear of losing that intimacy. To a miscommunication. Or a rift. Or something much worse and more permanent.

No wonder Daphne is on pins and needles all the time.

I don't want to put more on him, to be another person who looks at him like he might break. I know how that feels too. Not to the extent he does, but I remember the way my parents reacted when I told them I wanted to see a therapist to address my depression.

They said *great idea, what a healthy choice* with their mouths and *what the fuck, how have we failed our daughter* with their eyes.

They don't crowd me the way they once did, but they don't give me space either. Not enough.

Damn. Too many thoughts, too little time.

I close my eyes. I let Carly Simon serenade me for a moment, then I sit at the desk with my pen and my notebook, and I pour my thoughts onto the page.

They're strange scraps at first.

They come together, bit by bit.

A verse and a chorus.

All dressed up and nowhere to go

Someone to kiss, somewhere to woah-

Anything but that

Anything, as long as you don't know

Wit is so last season

After I go over the verse one more time, I look up, find Damon in the doorway, his blue eyes glued to me. “Don’t stop on my account.”

“Why does that sound sexual?”

“I told you, Cass. There’s nothing sexier than your passion for music.”

My stomach flutters. My sex pangs. There’s something about the mix of sharing and teasing. It’s really hot. “Promise not to laugh.”

He doesn’t sass me. He just nods. “I promise.”

I pause the music—sorry, Carly, but this isn’t the right backing—and I start.

I keep my eyes on my notebook as I sing the words. I don’t know why, but it’s always easier to sing them than it is to say them.

When I look up, Damon is still fixed on me. Only this time, I see the interest in every part of his face. The line of his brow. The softness of his jaw. The angle of his body.

All of him wants all of me.

And all of me wants all of him.

“Should we talk more?” I ask.

“If you want to,” he says.

“Later.”

He nods and pulls his t-shirt over his stomach. “My turn to strip first this time.”

Yes. Damon Webb, naked in front of me. I love it. But first things first. I hold up my hand *one second*.

“Baby, my ego.”

“I need the full experience.” I pick another EDM album.

Damon smiles as I set the phone on the counter. “Cassie Steele, sometimes you’re a parody of yourself.”

“Is that a compliment?”

“I love it.” He takes a step toward me. “Is that better?”

“I was promised stripping.”

He nods *of course*, takes one more step toward me, undoes the button of his jeans.

Slowly, he slides them off his hips. The denim falls at his feet. He steps out of it and kicks it away.

Damon Webb in only his boxers. I take in the sight for a moment. The messy dark hair, the gorgeous blue eyes, the strong shoulders, the tattoo on his chest. *Be Brave, Live*.

A month ago, I cursed him for his hypocrisy. He wasn’t trying to live. But I wasn’t either. Not the way I am now.

I meet him in the middle of the room. I curl one hand around his waist, soaking in the softness of his skin and the hardness of his muscles. I bring the other to his cheek.

I let my eyes flutter closed as I bring my lips to his.

He tastes like mint and promise and Damon. He kisses back like he needs me more than anything. Or maybe I’m the one who needs him more than anything.

I’m not sure anymore.

My tongue dances with his.

He backs me up to the bed.

I break our kiss enough to do away with my tank top. My bra.

He grabs a condom from the table and tosses it on the bed, then he stands in front of me and pushes his boxers aside.

And there he is, in his full glory. Damon Webb, naked, for me. All for me. All mine.

He really is beautiful. All of him. Even his cock. I've never thought of one as beautiful before, but there's something about the shape, the size, the way it fits the rest of him just right.

He groans as I wrap my hand around him. "Fuck, Cass."

I move slowly, exploring him with my thumb, watching his reactions. His eyes close. His lips part. His chest shakes.

Right now, he's under my spell. Right now, we're connected.

It feels so good. Too good to stand here and watch.

I pump him one more time, then I do away with my jeans, my panties.

He looks me up and down, appreciation in his blue eyes. "You're beautiful."

"You too." I bring my lips to his.

This time, his kiss is softer, like he really does want to make love. There's an intimacy to it, a patience. His tongue dances with mine. His fingers curl into my sides. His body melts into mine.

He cups my breast with his palm, teasing me with slow strokes of his thumb, again and again, until I want him so

much, I'm dizzy. Then he moves to my other breast, and he does the same thing.

I pull him onto the bed. "Fuck me. Now."

He unwraps the condom and slides it over his cock. Then he positions himself between my legs and nudges my thighs apart.

Slowly, he lowers his body onto mine. His chest, stomach, hips.

His cock brushes my pelvis. Then, I shift my hips so we're aligned.

His tip brushes my sex.

Desire floods my body. I need that. I need him. I need to feel him inside me.

"Fuck me," I groan again.

And he teases me again. A soft brush. Then another. Another.

When I'm sure I can't take it anymore, he slides all the way into me. One perfect inch at a time.

My body stretches to take him.

He sinks deeper and deeper.

Until I have all of him, and he has all of me.

He brings his lips to mine, and he kisses me hard as he pulls back and drives into me again.

He stays there, slow and soft and loving, as he drives into me again and again.

Bit by bit, I dissolve into the rhythm of our movements. The thrust of his hips. The rock of my pelvis. The recoil of the

mattress.

The EDM beat, the sound of his breath, the taste of his lips.

And always the sweet feeling of fullness inside me.

The tension in my sex winds tighter and tighter. Close to what I need, but not quite there.

He notices. “Touch yourself, baby.” He scrapes his teeth against my ear. “I want to feel you come on my cock.”

Fuck. That’s almost enough to send me over the edge. Almost, but not quite.

I need a different pressure. A different posture.

I bring my hands to his shoulders and push him away. My body whines from the loss of him. The feeling of his skin against mine, his cock in my sex, his breath on my neck.

It’s torture, flipping onto my stomach, waiting for him to lower his body onto mine.

He gets into position, and he teases me with a brush of his cock.

Again.

Again.

Until I’m dizzy.

Finally, he slides inside me with a steady thrust.

I arch my back to take him deeper. To make room for my hand.

I stroke myself as he drives into me again and again.

The two of us work together, in perfect harmony, driving each other to the edge, bringing bliss closer and closer.

A few brushes of my thumb and I'm at the edge. All that tension winds tight, so tight I can't take it, then it unravels. It rolls through me in waves of pleasure.

My sex pulses. My toes curl.

Pleasure overwhelms me. It takes over my body. I move faster, taking him deeper, taking more of him.

That pulls him over the edge. Then he's groaning, pulsing inside me as he comes.

It's music.

No, it's better than music. It's raw and real and completely in the moment.

All of him and all of me.

WE SPEND THE NEXT FORTY-EIGHT HOURS IN A HAZE OF BLISS. We work on the new songs, we talk, we have sex, repeat, repeat, repeat. In his bedroom. In the den. Outside, by the pool. On the beach.

Okay, we don't have sex at the beach, we just kiss until we're too achy to take it anymore. Then we run back to the house and have sex against the wall in the foyer.

For two days, we really are in the perfect work, friend, sexual relationship.

Then we pack for the weekend of torture, slide into the car, drive to Bryce's house, and prepare for war.

Chapter Thirty-Two



Cassie

When we arrive, Bryce, Frederick, and Tinsel are already in the backyard, on the deck, sipping Aperol spritzes as they pick at charcuterie plates.

Bryce proclaims the greatness of the Italian concept of aperitivo—the time before dinner to snack and drink, all to stimulate your appetite—as he leads us to a guest room.

It's a nice size, twice as big as my bedroom at home, and it's decorated with a Y2K theme. A tie-dyed pink and orange comforter and matching sheets sit atop the California King bed, which sits on top of a minimal metal frame. Neon lights in kitschy shapes and framed posters of late nineties and early two-thousands artists adorn the walls.

Plus, the framed vinyls and a shelf full of awards.

The room screams *look at how well I did twenty years ago*.

Bryce explains the lay of the land. Our room is next to Frederick and Tinsel's. The walls are thin, so we should all agree to quiet hours—he suggests two a.m. to noon—or at least to playing good music if we're going to get busy.

His room is at the end of the hall, and it's strictly recent hits of the producer's. All the rooms are decorated like this, so guests can see the guy's glory on the walls.

It's surprising. He seemed more down to Earth.

But I really shouldn't be surprised by this kind of thing anymore. The male ego is the most dangerous force in the world.

Bryce nods a goodbye for now. “I’m going to freshen up before dinner. Lisa is going to be late, but she’ll be here for drinks. She’s looking forward to another solo with you, Cassie.” He winks. “Enjoy the alone time, kids.” He steps into the hall and closes the door before either of us can respond.

“He’s flirting with you.” Damon sets his overnight bag on the sleek silver sheets.

“He flirts with everyone,” I say.

“Not me,” he says.

“He flirts with Tinsel.” I think. It’s hard to tell with someone like Bryce. He’s like so many celebrities. Mercurial about everything except everyone knowing how mercurial he is. “Are you jealous?”

“If I am?”

My cheeks flush. I shouldn’t like it, but I do.

Damon notices and smiles. “You have a jealousy kink.”

“Since when is that a kink?”

“A cuckolding kink?” he suggests.

“Don’t even.” That’s beyond ridiculous. A laugh spills from my lips. “Don’t distract me. I have to unpack.”

He unzips his duffel. I unzip my small suitcase. For a few minutes, we settle into the room.

Damon takes the top drawer of the big silver dresser and offers me the bottom two. We arrange our toiletries on top of the dresser—we’re all sharing the bathroom in the hall, tragically—and I take ten minutes to freshen up in said shared bathroom.

Apparently, when Bryce said every room was decorated with an era, he meant every single room. The small bathroom is all eighties new wave, with electric blue frames, bright pink towels, and photos of happening concert venues.

The entertainment industry is so fucking weird. Sometimes, I'm not sure if I can handle it for the rest of my life. But the alternative is worse.

Failure.

Nothing is worse than failure.

So, I wash my face, put on my makeup, slip into the bedroom, and change into a dress that says *I'm an intellectual songwriter* and *I'm a ton of fun* in equal measure. Then the leather jacket and the boots.

There. I'm ready.

Damon rolls over on the bed. He sets his paperback book on the sheets face down and props himself up on his elbow.

"You fit right into the space." I draw a line around his face. "Beauty." I motion to the framed albums. "Ego."

"Beauty." He motions to me.

"You think?" I ask.

He nods *of course* and motions *come here*.

"You'll mess up my lipstick."

"I will?"

I nod.

"What if I don't kiss you on the mouth?" He pushes himself off the bed and meets me in the middle of the room. "What if I only kiss you here?" He wraps his arms around me

as he brings his lips to my cheek. He kisses me softly, then he moves to the line of my jaw, my neck.

His lips brush my skin with just the right pressure.

My entire body blushes. My entire body screams for his.

“Don’t stop.” I breathe.

“Never.” He kisses a soft, slow line down my neck, over my collarbone. He traces the neckline of my dress with his fingers, then he pushes that aside. He groans when he realizes I’m not wearing a bra. “Fuck, Cass. Are you trying to kill me?”

Slowly, he rolls the fabric over my breast, exposing me. It’s only the two of us in this room, but with that big, open window looking out to the ocean and the balcony below it, I feel on display.

If someone was on the deck and they wanted to watch, they could.

Bryce. Tinsel. Frederick.

Hell, some random billionaire on a yacht in the ocean. Or a paddle boarder who wandered a little too far from the nearest popular beach.

Anyone could see me.

“Does it turn you on?” Damon wraps his lips around my nipple and teases me with a soft flick of his tongue. “Knowing someone might see you?”

“Yes?”

“Knowing your ex-boyfriend might get jealous?”

“Yes,” I breathe. “Is that pathetic?”

“Depends on why it turns you on.”

“Do I have to question it?”

“No.” He teases me with another flick of his tongue. “As long as it’s about you. And not him.”

“Fuck.”

He teases me again. “Do you want him to see?”

“Yes.”

“Because he’ll be jealous?”

“Yes.”

“Because you love being on display.”

“Yes.”

“Because you want him to know you’re mine.”

“Yes.” The words fall from my lips without passing through my brain. Am I his? Maybe. Not everywhere, but here. Here.

“Good.” Damon moves to my other breast and teases me there. “I like it too.”

I dig my hands into his hair.

He lowers himself to his knees. And right as he pushes my skirt to my waist, someone knocks on the door.

Motherfucker.

“Hey kids, five-minute warning.” Bryce laughs. “Clean up for dinner.” His footsteps move down the hall.

“That’s not enough time,” I say.

“No,” he says. “But I have time for this.” He reaches under my dress, hooks his fingers around my cotton panties, rolls them off my ass.

The fabric falls to my ankles.

I swallow hard.

Damon brings his hands to my hips and shifts me onto the bed.

I fall onto my back as he pushes my legs apart.

He brings his lips to the inside of my knee. A soft brush. Then a little harder. A little higher.

Again and again, until he's so, so close.

He teases me with one long, slow stroke of his tongue, then he moves to exactly where I need him. He tests me with his tongue. A hard flick. A slow lick. A perfect zigzag.

There.

I tug at his hair.

He works me with that same sweet motion.

The perfect mix of pleasure and anticipation floods my senses. I need to come. And I need more of him. All of him.

This is all we can do right now.

And I want it so fucking badly.

But I want everything too.

Then he licks me just right, and I don't care about anything except his soft, wet mouth against me. I tug at his hair. I arch my hips so I'm rocking against him, so we're both exactly where we need to be.

With the next flick of his tongue, I go over the edge. My sex pulses as I come. Pleasure spills through my body, from my pelvis all the way out to my fingers and toes.

The world goes white.

Nothing but the blinding light of bliss.

He licks me through my orgasm, then he releases me. He pulls my panties from my ankles. He rights my dress, stands, helps me up.

Then he slips my underwear into the front pocket of his jeans.

Fuck.

He notices my stare and shoots me a wicked grin. “You can have them back after I have my way with you,” he says.

“What if I get cold?” I ask.

“I’ll get a blanket,” he says.

“When did you get bossy?” I like it way too much.

“When was I ever not bossy?” Damon rights my dress, offers his hand, leads me to dinner.

I barely taste a thing. I hardly notice the ocean breeze. I don’t look at the view.

Instead, my entire body stays tuned to Damon’s. My head screams *sex now, sex now, sex now*.

The conversation stays minimal. Small talk. Movies and hot spots and vacations.

Then, Lisa finally arrives, Bryce greets her with a hug, and he announces his true intent for the evening.

Never Have I Ever.

With shots.

Chapter Thirty-Three



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Cassie

The air changes. Not the temperature or the breeze or the scent. Some impossible to explain quality. Some sense in the air.

Desire doesn't flee my body—I'm too revved up for that—but it steps aside for concern.

Shots.

Why would six adults, working together in a professional capacity, play *Never Have I Ever* with shots?

Because there's no such thing as a truly professional capacity in the music industry. We're well behind other parts of the entertainment industry.

Me Too barely made a dent here.

So, lesser forms of inappropriate behavior are totally normal.

Three months ago, I would have rolled my eyes at this suggestion. Shots and a game for teenagers. Dumb and dumber. Seriously, nothing says *I have no creative ideas; I learned about fun watching bad TV shows* like a suggestion of shots.

Now, I lack the levity to dismiss Bryce as a try-hard. Now, I know my fake boyfriend is an alcoholic. Now, I care about his sobriety.

My heartbeat speeds up. My shoulders tense.

No wonder Daphne is constantly stressed. This is intense.

I don't want that life for you. Dad's words echo in my ears. Usually, I dismiss my parents' advice. They're out of touch.

This time, I can't.

The knowledge is hard-earned. It's from his own experience loving someone who struggles with addiction.

Damon's father.

I never saw that side of him. I never saw him on the downswing. I never thought twice about the weeks or months he disappeared for "work." That was what the adults in my life did.

Is that my future too?

A million things flit through my head. Need, affection, worry, hurt, anger, pride.

Somehow, my desire to protect Damon wins against everything else.

"No shots," I say. "I can't write with a hangover."

Bryce pouts. "We'll do sips. I'll make my signature."

Lisa laughs. "His signature of mixing vodka and ginger beer."

"Plus the lime," Bryce says. "The lime is essential."

"He bought one set of copper cups and he thinks he's a mixologist," she says.

"Oh damn, there are only four cups. Someone has to go without." Bryce frowns.

"You can have mine," Damon says. He keeps his voice even, as if he's suggesting a normal gentlemanly move, not threading the needle of asserting his inclination to skip drinks without sharing his sobriety.

“Ladies first,” Frederick agrees.

Bryce nods *all right*. “What will you gentlemen have instead?”

“I got it,” Damon says. “A martini, right, Frederick?”

Shock spreads over Frederick’s expression, but he shakes it off. “Thanks.”

Unlike Damon, he’d never volunteer to fix drinks for a romantic rival. And, well, he has to wonder if Damon is using the chance to poison him. I wouldn’t blame him.

“What a gentleman.” Bryce claps. “Come on. You and me, D-man.”

D-man. Seriously? How old is this guy?

Damon whispers in my ear. “I’ve got it handled. I promise.” He presses his lips to my cheek and squeezes me with a gentle hug, but I don’t feel comforted.

Only concerned.

Lisa distracts me with a question about nineties music. My favorite girl power song. It pulls me from the darkest corners of my mind.

But I don’t quite shift back into the ease of the moment, even when Bryce returns with four copper mugs, and Damon returns with two martinis.

He drops the one with an olive in front of Bryce, sits next to me, sets the glass adorned with a lemon peel in front of him.

It’s water. I’m pretty sure it’s water. I don’t smell the awful mix of vodka and dry vermouth. Only the salty air and the freshly squeezed lime.

Damon takes my hand, intertwines my fingers with his, runs his thumb over my knuckle.

The gesture comforts me, but it's not enough. I still feel tense and awkward. I still worry.

"Everyone ready?" Bryce settles into his seat. He's across the table from us, next to Lisa.

Frederick and Tinsel are to our right, on the side of the table facing the ocean.

Bryce looks around the table, deciding we are, in fact, ready. "We'll go clockwise. The usual rules. Everyone has ten fingers. When it's your turn, you sit up straight, and say Never Have I Ever. Anyone who has, loses a finger and takes a sip. I'll go first." He holds up both hands. "Never have I ever, decorated a room with a Grammy."

No one drops a finger.

Lisa laughs. "You're supposed to start with sex and drugs."

"My game, my rules," Bryce says. "Besides, what have I not done there?"

She nods *true*. "Never have I ever had a threesome with another woman." She shoots me a knowing look.

Because Bryce relayed my rant about greedy men. Or because Frederick told her something. Or because she wants to have a threesome with me and Damon. Me and Bryce.

I have no idea.

I shrug as I drop a finger.

Tinsel's eyes go wide.

"For you gentlemen, that means with two women." Lisa looks around the table. When Bryce drops a finger, she shoots

him a knowing smile.

She barely notices Frederick go from ten to nine fingers.

But Tinsel does. Epiphany spreads over her pale face. Then worry. She looks at me with a wish in her eyes, a wish I could tell her things are different.

But they aren't different. She's with an asshole. And, sure, she was the other woman, and she got what she deserved, but I still don't wish her harm. She's suffering enough with Frederick as a boyfriend.

Tinsel shakes off her concern to take her turn. "Never have I ever had sex in public."

"Is a car public?" Bryce asks.

Lisa laughs. "Why? You've had sex on a balcony."

"I want to count my escapades," he says.

Lisa makes a show of rolling her eyes. *Men, huh?*

Everyone drops a finger. Again, Tinsel fights a frown.

Frederick's eyes narrow. His lip corners turn down. He stares daggers at me. "Never have I ever faked an orgasm."

Really? Is that the best he's got? I drop a finger and take a sip.

Tinsel and Lisa do the same. Bryce too. When everyone looks at him, he shrugs. "Sometimes, it's just not happening. I don't want to make the poor girl feel bad about her lack of skill."

Lisa whispers something in his ear.

He shakes his head and laughs. "Never, of course."

The buck passes to Damon. He's never had breakup sex.

Everyone else has.

And then it's to me. I take a deep breath and try to find some sense of calm. Patience. Logic.

There's none.

Only anger and hurt and frustration.

"Never have I ever cheated on my partner." I return Frederick's sharp stare.

He drops a finger, takes a drink, tosses an accusation right at me. "Never have I ever withheld important information about my health from a partner." He motions to my copper cup. *Drink up, sweetheart.*

What the fuck? "Oh really?" If he wants to play, I'm ready to play. Kid gloves off. Bullshit done. "Having unprotected sex with another person isn't important health information?"

"It wasn't unprotected," he says.

"Really? You were using dental dams?" I swallow the last sip of my drink. "No one uses dental dams."

"Did you walk away with an STD?" He stands.

"Yeah, I was infected with asshole for months." I let my cup fall to the ground. "Where the fuck do you get off?"

Bryce laughs awkwardly. "With someone else, apparently."

Ugh. Fuck him too. Fuck all of this. "How can you act superior? You had a full-blown affair. You kept that from me."

Frederick ignores the peanut gallery. He stays glued to our conversation. "You kept yourself from me."

What the fuck does that mean? "I talked to you about everything." I need more of this vodka and ginger beer. I need

to dull my thoughts, my feelings, my inhibitions. I need to silence the voice saying *don't push him off the deck*.

“You didn't tell me you were on medication,” he says.

“Everyone our age is on medication!” I say. “And it was none of your business.”

“All those fake orgasms were none of my business? You, lying about whether or not you wanted to connect sexually, was none of my business?” He glares at me. “How the fuck do you think that made me feel when I realized you weren't *there?*”

“You never asked,” I say.

“I did,” he says. “I asked point-blank. You looked me in the eyes, and told me you loved me, and lied to my face.”

“Fuck you.” I don't give him another chance to claim superiority. I turn and storm away from the table.

The living room is too crowded. The house is too bright. The entire world is too fucking bright.

So I set my phone on the railing, climb over the deck, and I dive into the dark waters of the Pacific Ocean.

The only place I can be alone here.

The only place no one can find me.

The only place I don't have to face all the things I don't want to say.

Chapter Thirty-Four



Cassie

For a while, the frigid temperature of the water and the pull of the waves keep my thoughts at bay. Then they aren't enough. A million memories overwhelm me at once.

Frederick has no right to act superior—he slept with someone else behind my back—but he's not wrong.

I did deceive him.

I didn't lie, exactly. It's more that I contorted myself around other people's wants, needs, expectations.

Everyone thinks I'm tough as nails. I guess, in some ways, I am. I'm good at cutting people out. I'm happy on my own. I'm better on my own.

But it's not just because I'm strong and independent. It's because I don't know how to be with someone without drowning under the weight of their expectations. Of my expectations. Of the world's expectations.

Frederick never came out and said *you need to feel sexy right now. You need to be present when we make love. You need to come. You need to enjoy it. You need to make sure I enjoy it.*

No one said that, directly.

The entire world said it indirectly.

All the pop songs, all the movies, all the girls I knew in high school. Even Daphne. Even though she's the consummate good girl, she knew what she wanted and how she wanted it well before I did.

When I asked her about my relationship with Frederick, if it was normal that I didn't feel into it, she went straight from a reasonable medical explanation—my current prescription was well-known for its libido and orgasm killing side effects—to a You-Go-Girl one.

I needed to take charge of my own pleasure. I needed to assert my needs. I needed to insist I enjoyed myself.

All good, in theory.

But I didn't know what I wanted. And I couldn't enjoy myself. Physically, it was impossible. And focusing on the Sisyphean task only drained the mental and emotional joy from sex.

It was easier to tell myself I wanted something else.

It was easier to lie to myself.

That meant I lied to him too.

Frederick could have done more. He could have paid more attention to my hesitation. He could have slowed down. He could have talked to me.

But I wouldn't have been honest. I wasn't honest. Back then, I didn't know how to talk about this kind of stuff. I didn't know I could.

I never said *listen, my medication is just not putting me in this frame of mind, but I still like feeling close to you. Just don't expect me to enjoy it in the same sort of way.*

I made excuses. I claimed shyness. And when that wasn't enough, I faked enthusiasm, interest, orgasms.

It doesn't justify anything he did.

But what he did doesn't justify my actions either.

I need to do better. I am doing better with Damon, aren't I?

But then I just jumped into the ocean instead of facing the metaphorical music.

Fuck.

I dive under the water one more time. I soak in that strange feeling of safeness. Cold and dark and comforting all the same.

Then I emerge, and I walk back to Bryce's house, and I find Damon alone on the deck, waiting for me with a towel.

He helps me over the railing, wraps the towel around me, pulls me into his arms.

He doesn't say anything for a long time. He holds me close, soaking up all the hurt and the cold inside me.

Eventually, he pulls back enough to look me in the eyes. "Do you want to talk?"

"Not right now." I want to talk to him later, I do. And now, I know I need to talk to him too. For me. For him. For our creative, platonic, romantic, and sexual relationship.

I will. Later.

First, I need something easy.

I rise to my tiptoes and press my lips to his. A soft kiss. A caring one.

He kisses back with an intoxicating mix of love and need.

How much of it is real? How much of him loves me?

I don't know.

I release him; I excuse myself; I shower and clean up and change into dry clothes, and I sneak to the backyard. The one

with a pool, lounge chairs, a fire pit, and a big wooden table.

The one where Damon is sitting, writing something in a small blue notebook.

“Lyrics?” I ask.

He nods. “They’re not as good as yours, but...”

“That might suit this pair,” I finish his sentence. “Can I see them?”

Damon’s beautiful blue eyes fix on mine. They ask for something, but I don’t know what it is. I don’t know what anything is anymore.

He opens the notebook to a page with freshly scribbled ink and hands it to me.

I drink in the words.

They said I’d hit rock bottom

But another one keeps coming

If I break another bottle

Will I finally tap a vein?

A rush of whiskey and pain

Baby, don’t tell the truth

‘Cause I can drink it

But I can’t take it

They’re not for Bryce.

They’re his and his alone, and he’s sharing them with me.

The trust is intoxicating.

His fingers brush mine as he takes the notebook back.
“What do you think?”

“The style suits you.” I feel it everywhere.

“It’s not supposed to be anything.”

“Isn’t that what we used to do?” I ask. “We’d sit outside and trade notebooks of lyrics.”

“I was always worried you’d think mine weren’t clever.”

“This isn’t supposed to be clever,” I say. “That’s why it works. Because the narrator lets his guard down. He stops hiding behind wordplay.” I don’t ask if that’s how he feels. I know it is.

He knows too. “Do you like them?”

“I do, yeah. They’re honest.”

He half-smiles. “It’s always about wit and honesty with you.”

“Did you want my opinion or someone else’s?”

His half-smile turns into a full smile.

He sets the notebook back on the table, takes my hand, leads me to the bench seat by the fire pit.

“I know you don’t want to talk about it.” He sits and helps me onto the cushion next to him. “We don’t have to talk about it.” His eyes shift to the deck around the corner, as if there’s some other it he could mean. “But I do have to say, that was totally fucked.”

“Which part?”

“Frederick trying to pin the blame on you.”

“I did lie,” I say.

Damon half-smiles. “I love that about you, Cassie. You always take responsibility for your actions, your choices, your

behavior.”

The words *I love* and *you* are way too close together in that sentence. “Not always. Not back then. He was right. I didn’t tell him what was going on. I didn’t know how, yes, but I’m sure that hurt him too.”

“You give him too much grace,” he says.

“No. I just... I have to be honest with myself about what happened. I wasn’t there. I wasn’t ready to be there. I wasn’t ready to claim my sexuality.”

“Are you now?” He asks it without a hint of seduction in his voice.

My cheeks flush anyway. “Yes.”

“He’s been looking out here.” Damon motions to the middle window. The sheer white curtains are drawn. The lights are off. “Every five, ten minutes.”

“Oh.” It’s all I can think to say.

“If you want to talk, let’s talk. But if you don’t want to talk...”

“You want to have sex in front of him?” I ask.

“If it’s what gets you off.”

My blush spreads to my chest. “Is that the only reason?”

“Do I need a better one?”

I shake my head.

“It’s because I hate the bastard too.” Damon slips his hand around my waist. “Because I want him to see what he’s missing. What he lost.”

It feels petty when I think it, but on his lips, the desire is romantic.

“I guess it turns me on too.” He runs his hand over the hem of my tank top. “Knowing I have what he doesn’t. Knowing someone who wants you is watching.”

Why does that sound so fucking sexy? “Is this the start of some sort of exhibitionist kink?”

“Maybe, yeah.” He presses his lips to mine. Softly to start, then harder. Promising something harder than romance. “But it’s up to you, Cass.” He traces the hem of my top again. “I don’t want to be like that asshole. I don’t want to touch you unless you want me to. Unless you’re in agony, because you want my touch *that* much.”

I want that too. I want to slip into this place with him. One where we fit together just right. “Please.”

“No, Cass. I need more than please.” His fingers skim the skin of my stomach. “I need you to lead. To show me exactly how you want me. Can you do that, baby?”

I want him too much. It’s overwhelming. “Are you sure you want to do this here?”

“Yeah. But I’ll fuck you anywhere. Take me wherever you want. Do your best, baby.”

He’s offering me his body. To do whatever I want with him. No. He’s not offering anything. He’s challenging me.

Damon Webb, my cocky rival, is once again pushing me to show him up.

He makes me better. He really does.

I shift onto his lap so I’m straddling him, so we’re both angled toward the window. A side view. If anyone wants to

watch.

If not—

That's good too.

Right now, any thoughts of revenge are secondary. Ruses and career goals are tertiary.

Right now, I want to be with Damon. On display with Damon.

Fuck.

I pull my tank top over my head and undo the hook of my bra.

He looks up at me with eager eyes as I toss the garment aside. He gives me a long, slow once-over, savoring the sight of my bare torso.

I'm in his lap, in only my jeans, in front of every bedroom in the house.

Not just my ex-boyfriend's but my potential colleagues too.

Double fuck. Triple fuck. A million fucks.

Heat spreads through me like wildfire. I need to have all of him, now, and I need to savor every moment of this.

Everything, all the time, forever.

I lean down to press my lips to his. A soft kiss. Then a harder one. My lips part. My tongue slips into his mouth.

Damon matches my movements, swirling his tongue around mine with just the right pressure. He keeps his hands on my hips, holding my body against his, so I feel his hard-on against my sex.

Our jeans are in the way, but the pressure is still divine. His need, his want, his passion.

And it's all mine.

This time, I don't want to prove him wrong or show him up. I want to be the person he believes I can be.

I take his hands and bring them to my breasts. I pull back enough to whisper in his ear. "Touch me, please."

He presses his lips to my neck. He looks up at me like I'm heaven-sent and cups my breasts with his palms.

His gaze shifts to the window.

Mine follows.

There is someone there, in Frederick and Tinsel's room. An outline of a shadow. He's watching.

Or maybe she's watching. From here, it's impossible to tell.

But it doesn't matter. Either way, knowing we're on display sends anticipation flooding through my body.

I lean down and press my lips to Damon's. I kiss him like I'm proving something. I guess I am. But it's not to anyone else.

It's to myself.

I can be in the moment. I can be honest and authentic here. I can embrace exactly what I want.

After I break our kiss, I knot my hand in his hair, and I bring his lips to my chest.

He takes my nipple into his mouth and sucks softly. Then it's gentle flicks of his tongue. Up and down, back and forth, around and around.

I savor the feeling until I can't take it anymore, then I move him to my other breast, and I soak in the bliss there.

He stays true to his promise, giving me his body, responding to exactly what I ask as I whisper *harder, softer, there*.

The perfect flicks of his tongue wind me so fucking tight. Until I'm not sure I can take more. Until I know I can't take more.

I need all of him now.

But I need to show him how much I want him first.

I pull back with a sigh. I tug at his t-shirt. He raises his arms to help me do away with it.

We're both here, on this bench, in only our jeans, on display for anyone who cares to watch. My ex. His new girlfriend. The strange musicians who might employ us. A sailor or neighbor with a telescope.

I don't care who sees. Only that someone can.

Okay, and maybe a little that my ex-boyfriend can. That I can show him what he's missing.

That I can show myself what he's missing.

"On your back." My voice drops to a tone I recognize. The demanding tone I use with him at other times. But never here.

His pupils dilate. His chest heaves. He hears it too. He likes it too.

Damon pulls a condom from his pocket, sets it on the green fabric, and he slides onto his back.

I straddle him again, then I shift onto his thighs, I undo the button of his jeans. The zipper.

He lifts his hips so I can roll the pants off his ass.

The boxers too.

The fabric collects at his thighs.

I lean down and bring my lips to his tip. A soft brush at first. A hint of the taste of him.

He shudders as I take him into my mouth.

I press my tongue against the underside of his tip, and I suck softly. I toy with him the way he toyed with me, testing different speeds and strokes, finding exactly what he needs, and taking him deeper and deeper.

“Fuck, Cass.” He reaches down and knots one hand in my hair. The other finds my chest. “You’re gonna make me come.”

It’s not my plan, but when he draws a circle around my nipple with his thumb, it’s the only thing I want.

I want to bring him the bliss he brought me.

I want to prove to him, my ex, and most of all, myself that I can do this because *I* want it.

Not because it’s easier or different or without the same sort of expectations.

Because it brings me pleasure.

Because, right now, he’s mine, and I can do whatever the fuck I want with him.

I take him deeper.

He toys with me, with those same circles, again and again. His hand knots in the back of my hair. He doesn’t push or pull. He just cups the back of my head, letting me lead, as I take him deeper again and again.

His eyes close. His thighs shake. His fingers make those perfect circles around me.

Then his hand knots in my hair and he groans. “Fuck, Cass. I... Fuck.”

He’s almost there.

I take him one more time, then I pull back. I release him from my mouth, and I take him with my hand. I bring his cock to my chest, and I let him spill over my breasts.

He groans my name as he comes, his thighs shuddering, his breath shaky.

When he finishes, I release him, and I sit up straight. It’s a beautiful fucking mess. He’s dripping down my torso and over himself.

“I better clean this up.” I take his t-shirt and I wipe myself clean.

He laughs as I help him clean. “Is that your new pajama top?”

“You know me too well.” I toss the cotton onto his stomach.

He pushes himself up. He lets the shirt fall onto his pelvis. “How much of that was for him?” His eyes go to the window.

I follow his gaze. There’s no one there now. The curtains are down. And I don’t care. “A little. And a little was for you. Mostly, it was for me.”

“Fuck, Cass, I’m going to have to have you again.”

“No.” I press my palm into his chest and push him onto his back. “I’m going to have you again. But not yet. Right now, I’m going to clean this up properly.”

I do away with the rest of my clothes, and I dive into the pool.

Chapter Thirty-Five



Damon

When we finish skinny dipping, Cassie and I return to the bedroom, and we have sex on every surface of the room.

For the first time, I understand the expression making love. The mood isn't soft or romantic, but the intensity is intimate.

I'm not sure how much is for me, how much is for him, how much is for her. Only that I love this side of her. I love seeing Cassie at her most demanding. At her most satisfied.

Fuck, I hope she's at her most satisfied. I fully intend to satisfy her again, but I'm too worn out. I fall asleep next to her. I sleep without a single toss or turn. I wake to the sound of humming.

Cassie, sitting at the desk, playing with the melody for a new page of lyrics. I lie there for a few minutes, watching her work. She's at peace here. She's exactly where she belongs.

Right now, watching her brow knit with concentration and soften with epiphany, watching her green eyes fill with pride, listening to the steady in and out of her breath, I'm exactly where I belong.

When I get out of bed, wash, dress, hug her good morning.

Even through a quiet breakfast and coffee.

Then the rest of the crew shows up, and I'm out of my depths again.

Frederick stares daggers at Cassie and me, but he doesn't say a word about his outburst last night. Or about what happened outside his window.

Tinsel watches Cassie carefully, the way I do, but she doesn't mention a thing.

Bryce and Lisa jump straight to shop talk.

We proceed like nothing of note happened last night. Maybe, for these four people, that's the case. Maybe a drunken outburst during a game for teenagers is par for the course.

Maybe they drank enough to forget.

Maybe they don't care about anything except their next fuck, high, success, whatever.

I don't know. I don't care. I don't like these assholes. I'm here because it's what Cassie needs, because I need this job too—

But fuck, I really hate these assholes.

I swallow the feeling with my next cup of coffee; I grab my guitar, and I try my best to fit here.

It's easy when it's just me and Cassie in a quiet room. With all these other people and trappings of success? Not so much.

For a few hours, Cassie and I take our turn with Bryce, playing with the songs we've already sent him and pitching new ideas.

Then we switch and spend a few hours with Lisa while Tinsel and Frederick take their turn with Bryce.

A strange, six-some lunch of Thai delivery. Cassie eats her usual favorite dish, the eggplant chicken that smells like oil and Thai basil. I order the red curry, extra spicy, and I let Cassie steal my coconut milk soaked fried eggplants.

She repays me by keeping the conversation focused on work. Then we fix more coffee, and we dive back into an

afternoon of work. We get sucked into it. All of us. We work through dinner. We work way too late.

Even Bryce is too tired to suggest games for teenagers.

Since she's stuck on a song, Cassie convinces me to work until we get it. Only we don't get there. We fall asleep in the sheets, wake up in the morning, attack the song again.

That makes the morning easy.

The afternoon too.

Then Bryce's manager shows up, ready to make final selections, and all that ease disappears.

This is it.

This is where we find out if we succeeded or failed.

And damn if I don't want to destroy the motherfucker who hurt her.

I want him to walk away with nothing.

Not a song, or a glance, or a shred of her attention.

UNFORTUNATELY, OR MAYBE FORTUNATELY, THE TEAM DOESN'T want us around for their discussion. They dismiss all four of us.

We walk out together in a haze. The air is too charged with possibility. The potential to score riches and success. The potential to fail.

This time, when we hit the driveway, Frederick steps aside to take a call.

Tinsel stares at Cassie with a mix of apology and curiosity in her eyes. Not that Cassie notices. She's swaying with exhaustion.

I lean in to whisper, "I think she wants to talk to you."

Cassie glances in Tinsel's direction.

Tinsel blushes enough, her cheeks match her hair. She holds up a hand to say *hello* and presses her lips into a sheepish smile.

"You want to go home?" I ask. "I can tell her to-"

"I do. But I've got it. Thanks." Her cheek brushes mine as she turns. Then it's the soft hint of her lips.

A slow, sweet kiss.

We're in front of Tinsel and her ex, but I can tell this isn't for them. It's for me.

Need pours from her to me.

Pride. Affection. Desire.

A million things I want.

I release her with a sigh.

She looks up at me with hazy eyes. "Go ahead. Get the air-conditioning running." She squeezes my hand and lets go.

I don't do as she instructs, though. I move to the car and listen from afar.

Tinsel shifts her weight between her legs. She looks as uncomfortable in her white sneakers as she did in her high heels. "Cassie, hey, this was a weird weekend, huh?"

Cassie nods.

“And this is odd too and I don’t know if Freddy would appreciate it, but I... I’m sorry.”

“Huh?” Cassie’s eyes go wide.

“About everything. I knew you were together. At first, I didn’t realize you were *together* together, but I didn’t ask. He told me the first time I kissed him, but I did it anyway. I kept doing it. I... I love him. Not that it’s an excuse. It’s more—”

“It’s okay,” Cassie says.

“It is?” Tinsel asks.

“We’re never going to be friends,” Cassie says. “And the betrayal hurt. It did a number on my trust and my self-esteem. But it was for the best. We weren’t right together anymore.”

“You don’t hate me?”

“I did. But no, not anymore. I’m glad he’s not my problem anymore.” Cassie offers her hand. “And, hey, may the best team win.”

Tinsel looks up at her with confusion in her eyes, but she shakes, and smiles, and gushes through another plea of appreciation.

I slip into the car, turn the key, let the AC run.

For another minute, Cassie and Tinsel talk. Tinsel goes in for a hug when they say goodbye, but Cassie sticks with another handshake.

She races to the car. The second she hits the seat, she releases her last bit of energy. She stops trying to hold herself together.

She looks at her phone for long enough to play Carole King, then she rests her head on the passenger-side door,

closes her eyes, and drifts into the road.

Is she asleep or lost in thoughts? I can't tell.

I let her rest on the drive home. She looks beautiful at peace. Angelic even. She's not a stereotypical angel. No halo, no flowing white gown, no serene speech.

She's an avenging angel. One with combat books and a guitar strapped to her wings.

She stirs as I park in front of the house. We didn't talk about where we'd go after this. I don't think either of us saw past writing as many songs as possible.

This is where I want to be. The place I call home. My parent's summer house.

But then I want to be anywhere as long as I'm with her. Everywhere. I want her by my side all the time.

It's intoxicating.

That's how people usually describe love.

Cassie lets out a high-pitched yawn. She stretches her arms over her head, pulling her tank top up her stomach.

"Hey." She looks up at me with hazy eyes.

"Morning, sleepyhead."

"Afternoon?" she asks.

I nod. "Should I put you to bed right here?"

She shakes her head. "Are you home?"

"Depends on the definition."

Her gaze goes to the house. The steps to the front door, then the windows above it. The second story. "Your room is basically our office."

“I do my best work there.”

“It is... oh. You mean sex.”

No. For once, I don't. But I want to go there. To dissolve into that easy place that feels good.

“I'm too tired to be clever,” she says.

“Cassie Steele without wit? Not possible.”

“Our secret.” She puts her finger to her lips in a *sh* gesture.

It's adorable. My entire body warms. She really is... everything. “How about I take you upstairs?”

She raises a brow.

“For a nap,” I say.

“Not celebration sex?”

“Say the word, baby.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “I'm too tired. I won't be alert enough to enjoy it.”

She's thinking about what she wants first. Putting her pleasure first.

She wouldn't have admitted that three months ago. Or with her ex.

It's a small thing, but the trust still overwhelms me. I want more of it. All of it.

I just—

There's a lot to consider.

First things first. I help Cassie out of the car and lead her to the door.

She smiles as I undo the lock. “Are you going to carry me too?”

That’s perfect, yeah. I kick the door open, then I scoop her into my arms, and I carry her over the threshold like a newlywed in an old movie.

She squeals as she digs her fingers into my shoulders. Slowly, she leans into the gesture, until she’s quiet in my arms.

We move with ease—thank fuck, for all those hours at the gym. She stays there, still and peaceful, until I lay her down on the bed.

She’s an angel again.

Only she isn’t here to save me.

No one saves anyone.

That’s not a fair expectation. And it’s not healthy.

It’s really fucking unhealthy.

“Hey.” Her voice is tired.

“Hey back.”

“Stay a sec.” She reaches for my hand.

I sit on the bed next to her. Intertwine my fingers with hers.

“I do want to celebrate,” she says.

“If we get songs on the album?”

“When we do, yes.” Her eyes find mine. “But even if we don’t.” The haziness in her gorgeous greens fades to clarity. “We did good work. A few of our songs are legitimately great. A few more are fantastic pop songs. We nailed the assignment. Even if Bryce and Lisa’s teams don’t see that.”

We did, I agree. But since when is that her focus? This entire thing has been about the deal. The songs. “You don’t care if we get songs on the albums?”

“I care. I care a lot. That will impact my life in a big way. I need the royalties, and the exposure, and I want the success. But I get that now. I want the success. I don’t *need* the success.”

What is she talking about?

She continues. “I know you need the money too, but—”

“I’ll survive without it.” I have options. I have family and friends who are willing to bail me out. A lot of people aren’t so lucky.

She nods. “And there will be other opportunities. But it’s not that, exactly. It’s more...” Her eyes go to the ceiling. She drifts into a dream. “Do you remember all those conversations we had under the stars?”

We spent a million nights in the backyard or on the beach, talking about everything and nothing. That was a long time ago. I don’t remember all of it. But I remember the feeling of being around her. The desire to know more of her, the pride at her growth, the need to share.

It felt good.

It still does.

“Which ones?” I ask.

“When we talked about music.”

“That doesn’t narrow it down.”

She smiles *true*. “Do you remember how we dreamed about the future? Sometimes, it was Grammys and mansions

and touring the world. But usually, it was the little things. We wanted to write a great song, for the pure love of music. Or because we needed to express an idea. Or because we wanted to feel understood. We wrote because we loved music. And we wanted to get better for the same reason. Not to get better deals or make more money or make our exes cry.”

“I think that one was you.”

She nods. “Yeah, it was. And a part of me still wants that. A lot of me still wants the money and the deals. But I’m still that girl who sits with her sketchbook.”

“You want to celebrate her?”

Again, she nods. “Her. And us. We did great work. Whatever happens, we should stop, and pat ourselves on the back.”

She’s right. I don’t think about the love of the art anymore. Not often. I have, with her, but that’s new. And we’ve still focused on results.

It feels good to remember that.

Terrifying, but in a good way. Like facing the truth.

“You’re wise,” I say.

“Sometimes.” I offer her my hand. “You killed it, Cass.”

“I know.”

My lips curl into a smile.

“But thank you for saying it.” She shakes. “You killed it too.” She returns my easy smile. “We make a good team, Damon Webb.” She uses the grip to pull herself up to a seated position. “But now, I’m going to crash.” She presses her lips to mine. A soft, sweet kiss.

This one is all for me too.

We've never discussed what happens after the end of the contract. Or when we'll stop faking it.

But then, this is real. My feelings for her are real. My protective instinct is real.

I love Cassie Steele.

And that's also terrifying and beautiful and wonderful.

And intoxicating.

And that part *is* a problem.

I SWIM A FEW DOZEN LAPS, SHOWER, CHECK MY PHONE FOR news.

Nothing from the team. Something from Dad.

Dad: Heard through the grapevine. So far, you've got six songs on Bryce Bradey's new album. Three singles. And Lisa wants to work with you exclusively. I'm so proud of you, Cass-a-frass.

Wait.

This isn't my phone.

This is Cassie's phone. We have the same new iPhone everyone has.

I should stop reading, but something on the screen draws my eye.

Dad: You and Damon made a good team.

Dad: Can we talk about that? Mom made me promise not to interfere. I won't. I won't judge, I promise. I just want to

make sure you're both ready for this.

He doesn't say what this is, but I can guess.

The creative partnership.

The relationship.

The life as a recovering alcoholic's loved one.

He's right.

We're not ready for it.

At least, I'm not.

I love Cassie Steele. I want to spend every minute soaking up the unadulterated pleasure I feel in her presence.

I want to make her my new medicine.

And that's why I need to end this.

Chapter Thirty-Six



Cassie

When I was a kid, I thought it was weird when adults said they slept like the dead.

Today, I get it.

I didn't just sleep. I stopped existing for a few hours. I was that tired.

Now, with the indigo sky and the moonlight streaming through the sheer curtains, I'm out of place. The way I am after an all-nighter or an international flight.

It's evening, but it feels like morning.

And I really have to pee.

I race to the bathroom, go through my post-sleep routine, go in search of fulfillment for my other needs. Food and Damon.

I don't think about our deal, about the possible news, until I hear music.

Damon, sitting on the piano. He's playing something I don't recognize. A song of his maybe.

I rush down the stairs.

He rises to meet me. "Did you see the news?"

I shake my head.

He pulls something from his pocket—my cell phone—and he places it in my palm.

It's right there. A text from Dad. We're up to eight songs on Bryce's album. And Lisa wants to work with me

exclusively.

Everything I wanted when I started this.

I would have killed for this result.

And I feel good, I do. Victorious.

But there's something else in the air. Something off.

Damon isn't happy.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

He frowns. "Cass—"

I know what he's going to say before he says it.

"I'm sorry. I love you, but—"

"Can we stop on I love you for a minute?" The words fill my ears, my heart, my soul. He loves me. Something I wanted so badly, so long ago. It should feel like victory too.

It does. In a certain way.

It feels good and bad.

Even though he's breaking up with me, I say it back. "I love you too."

His smile is sad. "It's too intoxicating right now. I'm losing myself in it. I want to dissolve in it. But I—"

"Need to put recovery first," I say.

"Yeah."

"Okay." My smile is sad too. "I understand. I'm proud of you, really. For these songs. And for standing up for that. It sucks, but I'm proud of you. And I... I'm going to go before I fall apart, okay." I take his hand. And I kiss him like it's the last time.

Maybe it is.

There's an urgency in that. I want to absorb as much of him as I can. It is intoxicating. I could lose myself in it. So much of me wants to lose myself in it.

But I've practiced holding firm. I've learned how to do this.

He hasn't.

I pull back with a sigh. "Goodbye, Damon." There are a lot of things to figure out, but I can't do it right now. I'm too tired. And I can't put my feelings on him. Not now.

So I get in my car, and I drive home, and I climb into my childhood room, and I fall apart there.

Chapter Thirty-Seven



Damon

Two hours later, Dad strolls through the front door with a handful of *Congratulations* balloons and a bottle of sparkling cider.

I try to ignore the distraction to finish the song I'm playing on the piano. He watches with a smile. With an expression I don't see often: Pride.

It's all coming at me today.

Is it the accomplishment or because I did the right thing?

Both, maybe.

He waits for me to stand. "New song?"

I nod.

"Already on a new project?" he asks.

"Something for myself."

"It's bittersweet."

It is, yeah.

"I'm guessing someone beat me to the punch. Since you don't look surprised." He doesn't add *or happy*. Maybe he already knows I ended things with Cassie. Maybe her dad noticed her crying and told my dad.

Or maybe he respects where I am.

He wants me to have space.

Dad holds up the sparkling cider. "Want a glass?"

I nod. "You know where they are."

He chuckles and shakes his head *kids today* in that classic Dad way.

For the first time in a long time, I'm glad to see him. I can't remember the last time I wanted to see him.

I've been holding on to so much anger for so long. It's exactly like Cassie said about hating her ex.

It's exhausting.

Dad grabs glasses in the kitchen, brings them to the table, unscrews the top. "You gotta give the edge to champagne. This is barely phallic." He chuckles as he fills the flutes. "Who sent the news?"

"Cassie's dad."

"Tom beat me to the punch? I guess that's like him." He releases the balloons and picks up the glass. "Where is Cassie?"

"We're taking a break."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Are you?" I ask.

"I'm sorry it hurts you, yeah, Damon. But I'm glad. It's too early."

"It is, yeah."

Shock spreads over his face. He looks to the thermostat. "Somebody better check the temperature, because I think hell has frozen over."

"Are you calling your own house hell? Come on, Dad, I thought it was, 'if you're going to be sarcastic, at least be clever.'"

He smiles. “I’m too surprised. My son agrees with me. This is a first.” He motions to the other glass.

Okay. I guess I should toast. I meet him at the table; I take the glass; I tap it against his.

“Congratulations, Damon. I mean it. I’m proud of you.”

“You are?” My voice breaks. It’s the one thing I can’t stomach hearing. The one thing I’m desperate to hear.

He nods. “I don’t say it enough. I should. I know how hard this is. And you’re killing it.” He takes a long sip. “You’re up to eleven songs total.”

It feels good; it does. But—“How come you and Mr. Steele know before we do?”

“People owe us favors,” he says. “Or they think they can curry favor with a congratulations.”

That does sound like the music industry. There is a lot of bullshit. Maybe too much. “Cassie’s dad doesn’t want us together.”

Dad swallows hard. “Is that why you ended things?”

“How do you know I’m the one who ended things?”

“I can tell,” he says.

Maybe it’s obvious. Or maybe he knows about Cassie pouring her heart onto her paper twenty miles away.

I want to take that pain away. I want to hold her and make it better. And let her hold me and make it better.

But that’s why I need the distance. Because that’s not right for either of us.

“I’m sorry about Tom,” he says. “Cassie’s Dad. It’s not your fault. It’s mine.”

Huh?

“He’s worried you take after me.”

“I do, don’t I?”

Dad doesn’t say anything. He just holds my gaze, waiting for me to continue.

I don’t want to have this conversation with him, but I need to do it. I need to face the truth here. “My entire life, everyone has looked at me like they know it’s only a matter of time until I follow your footsteps. You. Mom. Cassie’s family. Teachers. Mentors.”

“Damon—” Dad runs a hand through his messy hair. “You’re right.”

“Fuck, we should check that thermostat.” This is new.

He half-smiles. “I’ve been worried since your mom told me she wanted to start a family. When we met, neither of us were sure. We’d both lost so much. I was terrified I’d pass on bad DNA, destine you to this life. But then I saw that plus sign on the test, and it didn’t matter. I wanted to be a father. I knew I had to protect you. I thought I was.”

Is that really why he never explained it?

It almost makes sense. All the conversations we had when I was a kid about how sometimes people eat so much candy, they get sick, and sometimes adults drink so much they get sick.

Then he slipped and those conversations ended.

“Maybe you’ll get it one day,” he says. “If you have kids. I wanted to keep the world pure for you. But it’s not. I should have seen that. Your mom wanted to, but when I fucked up I...”

“When you went back to rehab?” I ask.

He nods. “I don’t know how much you remember. I had surgery. At first, I thought I’d be okay with aspirin and NSAIDs. Then, the pain was too much, and I thought I was recovered enough to try something stronger.” He doesn’t add *I wasn’t*.

It fills the air anyway. “Mom cried every night.”

“You saw that?”

“Heard it.”

“Fuck.” He sets his glass on the table and shakes his head. “I thought it was better to keep that reality from you. And Daph especially. She was so young.”

“Was that all of it?” I ask. “You were protecting us?”

“No. I didn’t want to change the way you looked at me, either. I was still Daph’s hero. But something changed after that. It was different.”

I shake my head. “She never looks at you like a fuckup.”

“Maybe not. But she knows I’ve slipped. She saw it. There were a few years, she was on edge around me.”

There were?

“You were already drinking all the time,” he says. “I didn’t know how to help you then. I thought maybe you’d get it out of your system. But... I’m sorry, Damon.”

For so long, I blamed him. I hated him. I pinned it all on him.

And some of it was him. The genetic predisposition. The influence. The inability to talk about what was really happening.

But the rest was me.

So I look my father in the eyes, and I say the thing I've needed to say for a long time, "I forgive you."

The tension in my shoulders dissolves. Then my chest. Some deeper part of me.

There's still anger in my veins, but I'm starting to let go.

Dad tried his best.

It wasn't enough.

That's life.

Sometimes we try and fail.

There are a million reasons why I turned to alcohol to ease the existential pain. It's easy to turn to it again.

We live in a society that romanticizes self-medication and blackout drinking.

I'm in an industry with a fucked-up relationship to moderation.

But I'm in charge of my life.

I have to put sobriety first. I have to heal first.

So I do the one thing I thought I'd never do.

I hug my father.

Then I sit down, and I talk to him, really talk to him. About music and Daphne and Cassie and how much I wish things were different.

But they aren't.

And I have to live with that.

Chapter Thirty-Eight



Cassie

In the morning, I get the official call from Bryce. He wants our songs. Nine of them.

And more, Lisa wants me.

“Just you, Cassie,” he says. “Not you and Damon. Just you.”

“I can’t write music,” I say it without thinking.

“She has someone else. Not your ex-boyfriend. A woman, actually,” he says. “You’d make a cute throuple.”

“Isn’t she your girlfriend?” I ask.

He just laughs *as if I’d have a serious girlfriend*. “That’s another thing, Cass. I know you and Damon aren’t really seeing each other.”

He does?

But we—

We do love each other.

Even if this started off fake, even if we’re on pause or broken up forever, we do love each other.

Of course, Bryce doesn’t wait for me to sort through my feelings. He continues his pitch. “Since Lisa is preparing to dump me publicly, I think it would be pretty epic if I slept with her songwriter. It’s like Fleetwood Mac times a thousand. Can you imagine the press?”

I can, actually. And I’m not into it. “I want to stay behind the scenes.”

“Just think about it,” he says. “She’s going to call you next. She adores you. Say yes. For me, okay?”

“That’s not fair to Damon,” I say.

“It’s just business, Cass. He gets that.”

“Even so,” I say.

“I called him first, to get his blessing,” Bryce says. “Not on the fake dating. On the music. He doesn’t want to clip your wings. He wants you to soar.”

That sounds right, actually. And it’s sweet. An act of love. I just hate it. I want to pull him closer, not set him free.

But that’s not what we need right now.

“I believe his exact words were, ‘she’ll kill that. Don’t let her turn it down,’” he says.

He’s right.

I will kill that.

But I don’t know if I’m ready for another project, especially not with these two, so I’ll say, “let me think about it,” and I do what I do whenever I can’t figure something out.

I pour my thoughts onto the page.

MY WORDS ARE A MESSY TANGLE AT FIRST. SLOWLY, THEY shift into something that makes sense.

I’m supposed to write a love song

What a silly little task

A girl like me

*All eyeliner and thorns
Everyone knows better
Than to believe
There's something beating in my chest*

I'M SUPPOSED TO WRITE A LOVE SONG

*Not wrap barbed wire
Around my heart
It's almost as sharp as my wit
All the boys with guitars
Want to serenade me
But I'd rather have a new ex*

I'M SUPPOSED TO WRITE A LOVE SONG

*Who am I, Taylor Swift?
A girl like me
All eyeliner and thorns
Who would believe I'm not broken?
This is a fucking mess*

IT'S NOT QUITE THERE—THE METER IS OFF, THE CHORUS ISN'T
simple enough—but it's a start.

I hug my notebook.

I lock myself in my room. I listen to breakup songs. I toss
and turn.

Lisa calls with the offer, and I ask her for another day.

The next morning, my dad tries to talk sense into me. He tells me to take the opportunity. I'll feel better if I start working.

He's right about that, of course, and I want to start working.

Just not necessarily with Lisa or Bryce.

After I promise him I'll think about it, I go back to my room, and I send Damon the lyrics.

Cassie: What do you think about this? For Lisa.

He replies an hour later.

Damon: Last I heard, she only wants you.

Cassie: I can't get notes from my favorite songwriting partner?

Damon: I think it sounds like you.

Cassie: It is me.

Damon: Is that really how you feel?

Cassie: It's a song.

Damon: Can we talk?

Cassie: I don't know if I'm ready.

An hour later, he sends a handwritten note.

You're supposed to write a love song.

But you hate fucking love songs.

Let's talk tonight. The beach by your house. Sunset.

I'll bring my guitar.

I know, all that eyeliner and wit

And you still have a crush on Liam Gallagher
(Don't worry. I won't tell)

I FIND DAMON EXACTLY WHERE HE SAID HE'D BE, ON THE sand, with his guitar in his lap.

“You look like you're about to play *Wonderwall*,” I say. I mean it as a joke, but it comes out wrong. Like an accusation and a plea. And also, I do not have a crush on Liam Gallagher. Anymore.

“I take requests.” He smiles, but that's wrong too. Sad. Definitive.

I shake my head. “Is that why you brought the six-string?”

“Miserable assholes are your type.”

My lips curl into a smile. He's right, of course. But the smile hurts. Because it's all there. The *I love you but I can't do this*.

“Cass...”

I swallow hard.

“Will you do me a favor?”

“I don't think you're in a position to ask for favors?”

“Even so.”

“You can ask,” I say.

“Take the gig.”

“I will,” I say. “I'll kill it.”

He smiles. “You will.”

“You’re not worried I’ll fall in love with her?” I ask.

“I’m terrified, yeah. She’s your type. And she’s gorgeous. And it’s an intimate thing, writing a song with someone.”

“But we’re over-over.”

“No,” he says. “I hope not, at least. But I don’t want to ask you to wait, either. I don’t know how long it will be and I don’t want to clip your wings.”

“As a woman or a songwriter?”

“Both.”

Fuck. I was afraid he’d say that.

“I’m sorry. I thought I could do this and not that, but if I write another song with you, I’ll fall even more in love with you, and I need space by myself, to get healthy. All the way healthy.”

I blink back a tear. “How much time are we talking?”

“Cass.”

“You don’t know, sure, but a ballpark, maybe?”

“Six months, I hope.”

Fuck, that’s a long time. But if it’s what he needs, it’s what he needs. “Okay.”

“Just okay?” he asks. “I was expecting a little more fire.”

“Okay, how about, take the time you need, but I’ll fucking kill you if you approach another songwriter first.”

He smiles. “That’s better.”

“And if I find out you’re sleeping with someone else, I’ll kidnap you, lock you in the closet, and force you to listen to your dad’s records all day.”

“Brutal.”

“But fair,” I say.

He smiles. “Absolutely.”

My heart thuds against my chest. I want to stay here and melt into him. But I can wait. If that’s what he needs, I can wait. “What do we do while we’re waiting?”

“This.” He motions to the sand and sits.

I sit next to him. “Really, this?”

“No, absolutely not. You’ll tear my clothes off. But today, we do this.” He smiles. “Now, what do you want to sing?”

“What do you mean, sing?”

“I’m guitar. You’re vocals. So what does Cassie Steele want to scream to the Pacific Ocean?”

“What about, I do, in fact, want to tear off Damon Webb’s clothes, but I’m going to learn to keep my hands to myself.”

“I don’t know how that one goes. You’ll have to hum it for me.”

I sing, speak. “I think it goes... I fucking hate waiting, but it might just be worth it.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine



A little more than six months later...

(Eight point five months, to be exact)

(Not that anyone is counting)

Cassie

My phone flashes with an alert.

Meeting with Damon Webb in two hours.

One hundred and twenty minutes.

Not that I've been counting the days. Not exactly. It's not as if we no longer see each other.

He comes to Daphne's gatherings. I occasionally join the newly instated Webb family dinner night. We run into each other at mixers. Or parties. Or lobbies.

It's been a while since we've kissed, but we've been friends all this time. We talk. We trade notes on lyrics and melodies. We tease each other about our favorite movies.

I never ask if he's ready.

He never asks if I've moved on to someone else.

Not because we can't handle honesty. Because it's not time yet. Because we both know he'll be ready when he's ready.

I set my phone on the table face down and sit at the piano bench. The one in my office. It's a small space, but it's all mine.

This tiny little apartment is all mine.

Even after three months, I'm not used to living alone. I wake up and expect to hear my parents' laughter. Or a partner's humming. I'd rather live with someone else—I almost asked Daphne if she wanted to room together—but I decided to spare her the agony of hearing the same riff a hundred times in a row.

Besides, I needed the time and space to myself too. Space to grieve and grow and get in touch with exactly what I want.

I reach for my phone. Stop myself before I can turn it over.

Damon and I are meeting in a professional capacity. Bryce's manager wants us to work with a new client.

We haven't worked together yet.

I've been on my own there too.

I pull up my computer instead of checking my cell. I read the email from the manager again. I check my notes.

The guy wants a *Jagged Little Pill* for the twenty-first century. No doubt, he wants the multi-platinum success, but he knows it looks different these days. Streams and sold-out venues and viral sounds on TikTok.

I listen to the artist's demo. She sounds like Lisa. Her voice is an octave lower, and she's got a bigger range, but she hits the same emotional beats.

Anger and righteous indignation give way to hurt and vulnerability.

A part of me hates that. A part of me hates that she can't stay angry, all the time, always. But the other part knows better.

Anger is a good thing a lot of the time. But too much and it overtakes you.

She's able to let go. Not because it brings her closer to society's ideal of a quiet woman. Not to let the ex who hurt her off the hook.

Because she can't hold on to it any longer.

Because she wants to be free.

That's what I need to capture. In the album.

She wants to do an actual album with an actual arc. Part of the attempt to capture Alanis Morissette's success.

I listen to the demo again, then I close my eyes, and I let the words flow through me. They're all scraps to start, but I trust them to take shape.

I lose myself in my notebook.

Then the doorbell rings.

Shit. It's time. He's here.

Which is not at all a big deal. Damon is here as a collaborator, not an ex or potential lover.

But I still jump when I hear his voice.

"Hey, Cass, I know I'm early. But I did bring coffee," he says. "Your favorite. Iced latte with macadamia milk."

From the place in Malibu near the summer house. Is he still living there, or has he moved somewhere else?

I try not to picture him in his room, but I do. I see Damon in his jeans and t-shirt, at his desk with his guitar, staring at the stars outside.

Then I see him out of his jeans and t-shirt, on his bed, staring at the person in the doorway.

Me.

Fuck.

“One minute,” I call. I repeat the mantra *we’re here to work, not fuck* in my head, even as I reapply lipstick, check my eyeliner, make sure my snug black dress isn’t too low or too high.

There.

Perfect.

Well. Perfect for how I actually feel. I want to jump his bones. But I’m not trying to deny that. I can want him and keep my hands to myself. I’ve done it for six months now.

I take a deep breath, and I cross the living room.

Damon smiles as I pull the door open. He looks right on the narrow balcony, framed by blue sky and palm trees and the far-off view of the Pacific Ocean.

“This is a nice location,” he says.

“Near home.” And far from the hustle and bustle of Hollywood or West LA. It’s a pain, driving an hour or two to each of my meetings, but let’s face it; the situation wouldn’t be much better if I did live in Hollywood. Sure, I could get to meetings in the city of Hollywood in twenty minutes, but the ones in West LA would still take an hour during rush hour. (And rush hour lasts most of the day here).

Plus, well, Hollywood is a shithole.

Everyone knows that.

Here, I'm a little too far from the gritty reality of the city. I'm in a small town that's a little too perfect. But it's worth it to be near my family and my best friend.

Damon motions to the living room.

Right. I'm not here to think about what's changed. I'm here to work with him. "Come in. Please."

He holds up the coffee carrier as he steps inside. Two matching iced lattes. One for him. One for me. "Where should I put this?"

"Here is fine." I motion to the tiny counter in the tiny kitchen. "Do you want to do this on the couch or in my office?"

"You have an office?" He smiles. "How many framed Amy Winehouse records are in it?"

"Why would I frame a record?"

His smile widens. "I missed you, Cass."

"I missed you too." A million words come into my mind. *Do I have to keep missing you? Are you ready? I'm ready.*

I have missed him. A lot.

But I've done as he asked too. I haven't waited for him. I don't sit on my couch, crying over old episodes of *The Twilight Zone*, wondering when he'll ask me to meet.

I've been busy, working and writing and living and, well—

He knows about that.

Unfortunately, everyone in the world knows about *that*.

Damon sets the carrier on the counter. He takes both cups and offers one to me.

My fingers brush his as I take it. “Thanks.”

“How’s Lisa?”

“So we’re talking about it?”

“Everyone else is.” He smiles as he takes a sip. “You make a cute couple.”

“We were never a couple!”

“No? This isn’t how you find your partners now?” He chuckles. “You fake date a musician until something clicks?”

“We weren’t fake dating.” Mostly, Lisa and I were working closely on the album. The process was intimate. Too intimate.

We both mixed things up.

It was short-lived. Fun in some ways. Difficult in others. She was a great kisser, and she was smart and wild.

But I wasn’t ready.

I wasn’t over Damon.

I wasn’t ready to be with anyone. I needed more space for myself.

So I took it.

And here I am. Still not over Damon. But okay with that. Ready to get over him. One day. If that’s the way it goes.

It will break my heart, absolutely, but that’s still okay.

I love him. I’ll always love him. I’ll always want him in my life.

If that’s as a friend or a colleague and not a lover, I can live with it. I can even learn to like it.

This isn't so bad, actually. I mean, sure, I want to throw him against the wall so hard I knock the coffee out of his hand, but, uh—

“Do you want to get to work?” That’s why I’m here. To work.

“Sure.” He motions *after you*.

I lead him into my office.

Reverence fills his deep blue eyes as he looks around the space. He notes the sheer curtains over the window, the outline of the ocean view, the framed portraits of famous songwriters, the shelf of music books, the shelf of speculative fiction under it.

He smiles. “It suits you.” He turns to me. “This too.” He reaches out and runs his fingers over the blunt edge of my bob. “You look even more like a punk-rock princess.”

“Is that a compliment?”

“You know it is.”

My cheeks flush. My chest too. I know it’s a cliché, the breakup haircut, but I love this one. It’s easy—as long as I cut it regularly, it’s wash and go—and it looks badass. “Thank you.”

His eyes stay on mine.

My heart thuds against my chest. There are so many things whirling through me, things I don’t know how to say. I need to start with work. But I don’t. “You’re not jealous?”

“Of you and Lisa?”

I nod.

“I was,” he says. “Especially when I heard your tracks. They were amazing.”

“Was that all it was? Songwriter envy?”

“Cass—”

Right. We’re friends. I agreed to his terms. If we begin again, we begin again. When he’s ready. “Right. Sorry.”

“No. We should talk about it,” he says. “You two were...”

“Not for long.”

“Why not? Was she bad in bed?”

“No.” Physically, it was good. She had excellent technical skill—women usually do—but it felt that way too. Technical. Like we were both performing on each other in an attempt to craft the best sex ever.

It wasn’t her fault. It was a mix of two things: chemistry and my inability to let go of Damon.

I wasn’t ready yet. I wasn’t ready to lose myself with someone else.

Since then... well, I’m still not into casual, and I’m still not ready to fall for someone else, but I have a *great* time with my toys and my lube.

But, uh, that is so not the conversation I’m having right now. I look Damon in the eyes, and I continue. “It was just a rebound, you know. Getting under someone to get over someone.”

“I thought you liked to be on top.”

My cheeks flush. “I like to mix it up.” Is this what we’re doing? Are we joking to move away from the subject? That’s okay. Sex is loaded. “We don’t have to talk about it.”

He nods, but he continues anyway. “Did it work?”

“Huh?” Oh. Did I get over him? “No. That’s why it ended. I couldn’t... I haven’t. Which is okay. We’re still friends. We can still work together. I respect your—”

“I don’t want to be friends.”

“Oh.” My heart sinks. I can lose a lot. But not that.

“No, Cass. That’s not what I mean. I want to be more than friends.” His eyes meet mine. “I miss you. I miss your laugh and your groan and the way you light up when you hear a song and the way you arch your back when you come.”

“I miss that too.”

“Fuck.” His eyes pass over me slowly. “I want to take you right here. This space, the love of music everywhere—it does it for me every time, you know.”

“That would make it hard to work together.”

“I want to work with you. But only for this project. Not forever,” he says. “I don’t want work to get in the way of us.”

“There’s an us?” I ask.

“There could be. I’m ready.” He looks me in the eyes. “If you’re ready.”

“I think so. But what does that mean?”

“We start over,” he says.

“I say, hi, I’m Cassie Steele.” I hold out my hand.

He shakes. “I’m Damon Webb.”

“And now I invite you to bed?” I ask.

He smiles. “And now, we talk, and we have fun.”

“And we have sex?”

“Not right away.”

“How long are we talking here?” I ask. “Months?”

“No.” He shakes his head.

“Weeks?”

“Closer,” he says.

“How about twenty minutes?” I offer.

He counters. “How about I kiss you and we take it from there?”

I reply by bringing my lips to his.

It starts softly. With the hesitation we both feel. Then that breaks and we fall into each other.

My lips part. His tongue slips into my mouth.

We dance together, exploring each other, offering ourselves.

One step at a time.

That’s what we’re doing now.

It’s hard, but it feels good to sit and savor this one.



Epilogue

Cassie

Jackson stretches his arms over his head. Then he twists left and right with the precision of a boot camp instructor. No. A martial arts instructor. Which form of self-defense does he practice?

He hates when I call it karate, because it's not karate, and it's important to respect the unique qualities of...

Kendo. Aikido. Ju-jitsu...

I have no idea.

I could ask my boyfriend, of course, but I enjoy how much they hate my indifference to their hobby.

Yes, Damon and Jackson now practice martial arts together. My brother actually responded to my request to *make nice with Damon*.

Of course, he did it by hitting him, as effectively as possible. Being a whatever-the-equivalent-of-black-belt-is, Jackson had the upper hand in their "totally fair non-fight."

But Damon enjoyed the unequal match. He fell in love with martial arts. The self-discipline, the group environment, the experience of sparring with my brother.

In a truly bizarre twist of fate, my brother and Damon became friends. He's the one who suggested we carpool.

We're in the lobby of the Mandalay Bay. Las Vegas, in late spring, is *not* the place I would choose to vacation with my sober boyfriend (even if he finally has his one-year chip), but

this trip is only half pleasure. And that half is a mutual friends' bachelor party.

We've also got a deadline. Which means, after the party, we're going to lock ourselves in our hotel room for the rest of the weekend.

A time-honored technique for distractible artists. Only we're now surrounded by every vice known to man.

I'm scared for him, but I trust him. I really do. His sobriety isn't even my biggest concern.

That's my best friend and my brother.

Damon says I'm over-thinking things, but Damon is oblivious when it comes to Daphne's crush on Jackson. I don't blame him for missing Jackson's attraction to Daphne. My brother is hard to read.

The entire drive, the two of them were sitting in the back seat, giggling at each other. Jackson. Giggling.

Beyond.

Bizarre.

Maybe that's it. Maybe I'm in an episode of *The Twilight Zone*.

My brother stretches toward the ground. Then back up again. He catches me watching and smiles in a way that is somehow serious. His signature.

"It was a long drive," Jackson says. "You need to move after."

"I'm going to hit the pool after we check in," I say.

His smile shifts to something else. Knowing. "Cass, do you have any idea how crowded the pools in Vegas are?"

“In May?” This is a hotel known for its beautiful pools—it’s supposed to be a tropical paradise, even though it’s in the middle of a desert—but still. It can’t be that bad, can it?

He nods. “Wall-to-wall people. Standing. Drinking beer.”

My nose scrunches in distaste. Why would anyone *stand* in a pool? Why would they stand there and drink beer when they could dive under the water and swim? That’s like standing on the dance floor with a martini. You can’t drink a martini and dance at the same time unless you want vermouth all over the hardwood.

“How about we take a walk after we unpack? Take in the strip?” he asks.

That’s a nice group activity, but I have a more fun alternative exercise in mind. One strictly for two.

Though I’m not sure how I’ll manage it. Obviously, I’m rooming with Daph, and Damon is rooming with Jackson. I’m not going to kick my best friend out of the space to have sex with her brother.

Right on cue, Daphne and Damon finish the check-in process. He slips a set of keys into his pocket and runs to the bathroom.

She waves to us and skips to our spot by the fake palm trees. Or are they real palm trees? It’s hard to tell here.

“Cassie, don’t be mad.” She offers me one of the electronic keys.

“About what?” I stare at the rectangular key. The same as every hotel key except for the ad for the *Thunder From Down Under* show at Excalibur. The same company owns Mandalay Bay, Luxor, and Excalibur. They have paradise, ancient Egypt, and chivalry. That’s a lot of potential fantasy.

“You’re rooming with Damon,” she says. “I insist. I know you two haven’t had time to be alone in a while. And, quite frankly, I don’t want to be witness to your union.”

That’s fair, but—“I would never—”

“Have sex in the same room as me, yes. Stay up late, working on a song, no. You would. You will. You have,” she says.

Okay, yes, that is what happened on the last Webb-Steele family vacation. That is true.

I can’t contain myself there. But I can’t put her in a hotel room with her crush either. “What about you and Jackson—”

Daphne shoots daggers in my direction.

Jackson looks between us curiously. “We’ve got a suite.”

In my head, I hear Zack and Laurel respond *I’ll say* in unison. They aren’t here and they’re still here.

Jackson does too. I see it in his eyes. He smiles and shakes his head *Cassie, you are ridiculous*. “We both want a quiet weekend. It’s no problem.”

And we both (Jackson and me) know how Zack and Laurel would respond to that. *Is that your kink, huh? Quiet? Maybe some sort of BDSM game to see who cracks first.*

Ew.

I’m thinking about my brother having kinky sex.

The drive drained all my mental energy. I need to get to my hotel room pronto.

I want to take it, claim it, throw my boyfriend on the bed, and have my way with him—

But only if everyone is good this weekend. Not because I'm putting my desires second. Because I want everyone to have fun. And I *really* don't want friction between my best friend and my favorite brother.

"Are you sure?" I'm not sure which of them I'm asking. Only that I know neither of them wants to complicate things with a tryst.

"Am I sure I don't want to hear"—Daphne hums the song we were writing over Christmas—"again? Oh, I'm sure." She pats me on the shoulder. "Go get 'em tiger." She motions to Damon, as he walks toward us.

"Hey." He looks down at me with eager eyes.

"Hey yourself." I reach for him.

He wraps his arms around me and pulls me into a tight embrace.

"See. Disgusting. Okay. See you crazy kids for the party." Daphne blows us a kiss. She looks to Jackson. "You don't really want to walk the entire strip?"

"It's a nice day," he says.

"It's ninety degrees," she says.

"It's dropping. The low is fifty tonight."

"Did you check that?" she asks.

"I always check," he says.

"So you can decide if you wear a suit or khakis?" she teases.

"Oh no." He laughs. "That's if the occasion is casual or formal."

“What if it’s a hot casual occasion?” she asks. “Do you break out the shorts?”

“Is that a request?” he teases.

Oh my god, is my brother seriously flirting with Daphne? Gross.

I turn back to them. “I thought you were getting lost?”

“Yeah, yeah, go make out in peace,” Daphne says. She pats Jackson’s shoulder and leads him toward the elevators.

They wheel their suitcases together.

They certainly *look* like a couple, walking next to each other, somehow matching and not matching at all. She has a hot pink suitcase, and she’s wearing denim shorts and a breezy white tank. He has a black suitcase (of course), and he’s wearing linen pants and a white linen shirt (also, of course).

They both have that aura of intellect, what with his glasses and the sci-fi stickers on her suitcase, but they express it in very different ways.

The doctor and the lawyer.

It makes sense.

But they’re not—

No way.

“Where are you going, baby?” Damon rubs my bare arms with his palms.

“You don’t think they...”

“Jackson? No. The guy is a monk.” Damon leans in to brush my lips to his. “He makes our instructor look like a party boy.”

That is true. And it doesn't matter. It's their life. Not mine. And neither one of them has made the sort of bad relationship decisions I made in the past. They're better at making the smart choice. "Okay. Let's go upstairs."

"Let's give them a minute," he says. "So I can start undressing you in the elevator."

"You know there's a security camera in the ceiling," I say.

"Baby, I'm counting on it."

TRAGICALLY, THE ELEVATOR IS PACKED. BETWEEN OUR suitcases and Damon's guitar, we barely fit into the thing. And there are a million stops. A family gets off on four. A bachelor party gets off on seven. A couple gets off on thirteen. And then probably in their room.

It's just us and a solo traveler in a Las Vegas t-shirt and shorts. He nods a *nice to see you* and gets off on fifteen.

The second the doors slide shut, Damon pins me to the wall. He kisses me hard, swirling his tongue around mine as he slips his hands under my dress.

"You wore that to drive me crazy, didn't you, baby?" He brings his lip to my ear as his fingers brush my inner thigh.

"Yes." This is the short, sexy black sundress I wore for our reunion meeting. I did pick it because I knew he'd want to take me. But I also picked it for me. "A little. Mostly, I wore it to drive myself crazy."

"Fuck, Cass." He presses his palm against me. Over my panties, but still, the friction is divine.

I have to close my eyes.

I have to let out a low sigh.

Then he slips his thumb under the soft fabric, and I nearly come from the pressure of his digit against my clit.

“More,” I groan.

The elevator groans in protest. The car arrives. The doors slide open.

There’s no one in the wide hallway, but the possibility of an audience still winds me tighter. I’m an exhibitionist. It’s true.

We don’t usually play these games in public. Not this public, anyway. We use mirrors or cameras. We attend bars and parties where this sort of behavior is within normal.

A few times, we fucked in a band’s dressing room during their set.

And once in an empty office at my dad’s work.

That was pretty fucked up.

And extremely hot.

And, we, uh...

Well, there is something we might do here.

“Are you still game?” I ask before I lose the nerve. Not that I can lose it before I come. No. I’m wound far too tight.

“Right here?” His voice drops an octave. His pupils dilate. “We’ll get arrested.”

“No.” I motion to the carpet outside.

He nods, releases me, wheels our suitcases out of the elevator.

I grab the guitar. “The club. Do you want to go tonight?”

“Oh. The club.” He shoots me a wicked smile. “Which one is this? The one where your ex-girlfriend is playing?”

“She was not my girlfriend, and she is not in Vegas.”

His smile widens. “The Thunder From Down Under.”

“Damon Webb!” We already have plans to go to The Thunder From Down Under as part of the bachelor party. This is for the after the party. For us.

“Yeah. I’m in for the club.”

My heart thuds against my chest. My stomach flutters. My sex tightens. My boyfriend and I are, in fact, attending a sex club. We are going to have sex in front of other people.

Not just some light touching.

Not just sex someone *could* see.

Sex other people will absolutely, definitely be watching.

Fuck, I’m going to die of anticipation. I really am.

“If we leave the party in time tonight.” He winks at the double entendre. “If not, tomorrow. I promise.” He leads me down the hallway to our room and unlocks the door.

Click, click. The fucking thing takes forever.

Finally, he pushes the door open and sets the suitcases aside.

I leave the guitar next to them.

The room almost distracts me. It’s a massive suite with a view of the pools below—they do look full. Dining table. Leather couch. Desk.

So many places to have my way with him.

Then he leads me into the bedroom and it gets even better. The four-poster bed is in perfect view of a massive, three-panel mirror. So we can watch and be on display at the same time.

Damon closes the door behind me. He pulls his phone from his pocket and he presses a few buttons. “Any requests for your show?”

“My show?” I ask.

“Yeah. Right now. You have three songs of my attention. However you want to use them. Or...” He taps the screen and *Criminal* by Fiona Apple fills the space. “We could use your entire bad girls playlist.”

It’s hours long. We’ll die. But I’m willing to take that risk. I nod and toss my purse aside.

He stays where he is.

I move to the bed.

He’s ten feet away. Impossibly far. But impossibly close too. Because I do have all his attention. Because we do understand each other so well here.

It didn’t happen by magic. It took practice and experimentation. But it never felt difficult with him. We came in with a different attitude. The way we do when we write a song.

We didn’t expect it to go perfectly right away. We knew it would take time to find just the right notes.

We’re still taking it slow. We aren’t full-time creative partners. We each take gigs with other people. Sometimes, I get a little jealous when Damon writes a killer song with someone else, but mostly, I’m happy for him.

We're taking our time in life too. We live in our own apartments. Well, he's still at his parents' house. Until they kick him out. Why not, right? A mansion for free. Worth it.

I spend a few nights a week at his place. He spends a few at mine. And, best of all, when I cook, he cleans.

Sometimes, I want him closer. Sometimes, I want to completely mix our lives together.

Other times, I'm terrified I'll lose myself in what he wants, the way I have before.

Mostly, I like our speed. I'm grateful we both try hard to keep our independence. We have our own lives, friends, hobbies. We're our own people.

We come together because we want to be together, not because we're two halves of a whole.

In a way, this distance is safe. And it's sexy too. I have space to miss him. To crave him.

I release my last practical concern, and I shift my hips in time with the music.

I kick off my shoes and toss my dress over my head.

I sink into my surroundings. The hard blue carpet. The gold-leaf wallpaper. The giant mirror reflecting my simple black bra and panty set, and my boyfriend, staring with wide eyes.

Right now, I have everything I want.

Right now, life is good.

I hold his gaze as I undo the hook of my bra.

His eyes follow my hands as I slip my panties off my feet.

He takes a step toward me, but I shake my head. Not yet. Right now, he's my captive audience.

He stays where he is.

I sit back on the bed and spread my legs.

His jaw drops.

His pupils dilate.

His palms press into his thighs.

He wants to touch me. He wants to join me. But he knows he has to play by the terms he suggested.

I slip my hand between my legs, and I touch myself. A soft stroke at first. Then a little firmer.

For a moment, I hold his gaze. But the desire in his blue eyes is too intense.

I have to close my eyes.

I work myself exactly how I need. A little harder, a little faster, there.

“Open your eyes, baby,” Damon purrs. “Watch.”

My eyes go to him first. The need spreading over his expression. The bulge in his jeans. The tension in his wrists.

He wants to touch me.

And I want him to touch me.

But not yet. Not until *he's* shaking with anticipation.

I let my gaze shift to the mirror. Even after all this practice, the sight of my reflection sends a shock through my core. I'm buck naked, on the bed, in an obscenely expensive suite, touching myself.

There is something absurd about it. But I'm too turned on to feel embarrassed.

I watch my chest rise. I watch my lips part. I watch my hand move.

Another brush.

Another.

So, so, close.

There.

The tension in my sex winds to a fever pitch, then it unravels. Pleasure spills through my body as I come. I have to close my eyes to contain it.

The bliss fades into the music. Another sultry bad girl with a jazzy pop sound. The perfect mix of surprise and familiarity.

When I blink my eyes open, Damon is pulling his shirt over his head.

He kicks off his shoes. Undoes the button of his jeans.

He meets me on the bed; he pushes me onto my back; he pulls something from his jeans.

Not the condoms we used to use. My IUD is enough protection for now. A small packet of lube. Because my current prescription leaves way too many parts dry.

Without a word, he does away with his pants and boxers, tears the package, and spreads the lube over his cock.

There's something so fucking sexy about watching his hand move over his body. There's something primal about it.

The voyeurism.

The sense he's taking care of me. Slow for me. Or fast for me.

But always tuned to me.

Sex and love are always tangled, but that can be a beautiful thing too.

He brings our bodies together, and he teases me with his tip.

Again.

Again.

Again.

Until I'm dizzy with lust.

Then, finally, in one quick, perfect motion, he drives into me.

There. I'm exactly where I need to be. I'm in paradise.

I soak in the sweet sense of fulfillment for a moment, then I raise my legs, and I turn to the mirror.

He holds my calves to his chest as he drives into me again and again.

We both watch the action.

My body stretched over the bed. My legs against his hard torso. The perfect sight of his cock disappearing inside me again and again.

Each thrust pushes me closer to the edge.

But I need a little more.

So I bring one hand to my chest. And I toy with my nipple as I work my clit.

I watch my hands move again, but this time, I'm moving with him, and that makes it all the hotter.

The pressure winds fast. With his next thrust, I come, pulsing around him, pulling him deeper.

My head falls back. My lips part with a moan. I lose myself in the bliss.

Then I find him. I lock eyes through the mirror, and I purr, "Come inside me, baby."

And that's enough to undo him. With his next thrust, he spills inside me, his cock pulsing, his groan vibrating down his throat.

And I get to watch every beautiful second from every angle.

After he's spilled every drop, he pulls back, untangles our bodies, lies next to me on the bed.

"Fuck, Cass." He turns to me and presses his lips to mine. "Where did that come from?"

"You played my music."

He smiles.

"There are four hours left on this playlist."

"You're trying to kill me?"

"Absolutely." I kiss him softly. "But I'll let you rest first. Three songs seems fair."

His smile gets wicked.

But a horrible sound interrupts. My alarm. We're supposed to leave for dinner in half an hour.

I don't usually mind time with my family. Today, I want the afternoon with my boyfriend. I want an entire day with him and without clothes.

Maybe I'll extend our stay and convince the label it was their idea.

"Duty calls." Damon helps me to my feet. "Let's shower first."

I nod and wrap my arms around him.

He sinks into me. I sink into him.

For this perfect moment, we're wrapped around each other.

And then we part, and we take separate showers, and we still come together to celebrate with our friends (even if we're too late to attend dinner), dance, fuck, sleep.

We know how to keep exactly as much space as we need.

In the morning, I wake up, ready to have my way with him again.

But a knock on the door interrupts me. Then a loud voice. Daphne's voice.

"Cass, hey. Can we talk?" she asks.

I grab one of the hotel robes and move through the main room. "Is everything okay?"

I see it the second I open the door.

There's a massive rock on her left hand.

In a quiet, worried voice, she says, "I accidentally married your brother last night."



Want more?

Want more of the Steele Family? Jackson and Daphne's book, *A Match Made in Vegas* is coming soon. [Sign up to be the first to know.](#)

[Subscribe to my newsletter for a special bonus scene from Kiss and Fake Up!](#)

Can't wait for *A Match Made in Vegas*? Fall in love with Miles Webb in Sinful Serenade book one, *Sing Your Heart Out*. Turn the page for a sample.



Sing Your Heart Out

Read Now

Between the throbbing house music and the dance floor full of beautiful people grinding, it's difficult to move. It's harder to think.

I need to pee. Now. Waiting in the line snaking around the corner is not an option.

How can there only be one bathroom downstairs? One hundred people plus one bathroom equals far too many tortured bladders.

Kara must know where the bathroom is. Wherever she is.

I push through the crowd, but there's no sign of my best friend.

Someone bumps into me, her hip pressing firmly against my pelvis. Dammit, my bladder is going to explode at this rate.

Screw upstairs being off-limits. This isn't a church. It's some up-and-coming band's Hollywood mansion. I'm not about to pee my pants respecting the sanctity of rock stars' bedrooms.

There's a couple making out on the curving staircase. I step past them and make my way to the second floor. The sounds of music and conversation fade to a murmur. I'm tempted to hang out here until Kara is ready to go home.

Parties are not my scene. Even my bladder hates them.

I scan the wall, trying to figure out which of the five doors is attached to the smallest room. There. Second on the left. That must be it.

I turn the knob and push the door open.

Not a bathroom.

Definitely not a bathroom.

There are two people on a bed. The woman is on all fours. The man is kneeling behind her.

They're naked.

They're having sex.

Then they're not. The grunting stops. Flesh ceases to smack together.

The man looks at me. There's no sign of embarrassment or awkwardness on his face. He's totally unmoved.

The woman shrieks. She scrambles off the bed, pulling a sheet over her chest. "Miles, you fucker. I told you I don't do threesomes!"

Miles. There's something familiar about him. I try to place him but my thinking abilities are back to zero.

He's tall, broad shoulders and chest, sculpted abs, and below his bellybutton...

He's hard.

He's hard and he's huge.

Save for the condom, he's completely and utterly naked.

A blush spreads across my cheeks. I stammer, attempting and failing to speak. I've never seen that before. Not in person. In movies, sure. Textbooks, of course.

But never in person.

I can't look away.

The guy, Miles, makes eye contact. His voice is even. Calm. "You mind?"

I take a step backwards. My foot sinks into the plush carpet. I only barely manage to hold my balance. "Excuse me. I thought this was the bathroom."

"Next door on the left."

I know I'm red. Beet red. "Thanks."

I pull the door closed so I'm alone in the hallway. Next door on the left.

I step into the bathroom, lock the door, and die of embarrassment.

It takes twenty minutes for my cheeks to return to a normal color. I slink back to the sprawling main room and do my best to blend in amongst the partygoers.

Every inch of the hardwood floor is packed with beautiful people talking, flirting, or making out.

It's like the up-and-coming models, actors, and musicians are attracted to each other. They have a certain glow that mere

mortals lack. And here I thought this was a normal college-students-with-a-keg-and-cheap-vodka kind of shindig.

Kara's friend invited us. He's in a band. Are they really this popular? I can't remember their name, but then it's hard to think of anything but Miles naked on the bed, hard and ready for action.

The lines of his hips and torso are burned into my brain.

And his...

Dammit, I'm not going there.

I find the closest thing to an empty corner and try to clear my head. I fail. My mind keeps going back to that vivid mental image.

Miles. He was unfazed, like the sex meant nothing to him. Like the girl on his bed meant nothing to him.

The man is a player. He's not the kind of guy I need in my life. He doesn't deserve my thoughts.

This stops. Now.

I scan the room for some better way to stay occupied.

It's no use. He's here. Miles is still effortless and aloof. He's still unaffected.

The guy has already moved on from the blonde in the bedroom. He's flirting with a redhead in a designer dress and stilettos.

She's model gorgeous with perfect hair and makeup. I'm standing here in an H&M skirt and blouse, my brown hair its usual frizzy mess, my black eyeliner doing little to enhance my plain-Jane brown eyes. Liner, mascara, and under-eye concealer are the extent of my makeup knowledge. I think I'm

the only woman here who isn't contoured. Hell, I know I'm the only one wearing canvas sneakers.

I don't belong here.

It doesn't make sense that Miles is looking at me instead of the pretty redhead.

But he is. His clear blue eyes are fixed on mine. They're gorgeous. I couldn't see them in the dark but out here, they're practically shining.

Heat spreads across my chest. I'm gawking.

He smiles, reveling in my attention.

I press my eyelids together to temper my out-of-control blushing. It's no help. My head fills with that beautiful image of him in nothing but a condom.

Why did I let Kara talk me into coming to this party?

I push my way through the crowd, trying to get as far from Miles's gaze as possible. A dozen steps and I'm standing in the clean, modern kitchen. It's dark and mostly empty.

"You're not big on respecting people's privacy, huh?"

It's the same voice I heard upstairs. Miles.

I could swear I've heard it before. A lot, even.

I turn so we're face to face. Why does Miles seem so familiar? I don't go to parties. Hell, I've been MIA the last few months.

I wouldn't forget his strong jaw, his messy brown hair, or his gorgeous blue eyes.

Those eyes are fixed on me. He's staring at me, picking me apart.

I don't like the scrutiny. Sure, I'm hiding. But I'm not admitting that to him.

I clear my throat. "No, I'm not big on alcohol. Can't find anything else to drink."

He reaches past me. His hand brushes against my shoulder as he pulls open the fridge. He nods to a row of water bottles on the middle shelf. "Help yourself."

"Thanks."

Miles looks so familiar. And his voice is familiar too. Almost like he...

No. That's not possible.

There's no way this guy is the singer of alternative rock band Sinful Serenade, the guy who sings *In Pieces*, the guy who's been haunting my thoughts for the last three months with his breathy, tortured voice. With all the pain in his soulful eyes.

I try to recall the song's music video but my damn brain goes right back to the image of Miles naked on the bed.

Damn. I watched that video a thousand times. It was a massive hit. The song hit the top 40 for a week or two, a rarity for alternative rock in this day and age.

More importantly, the video and the song went right to my soul. The singer was whispering in my ear. He promised that I wasn't alone. He promised that I wasn't the only person who had ever felt this way.

I understood him and he understood me. We were the only two people in the world who knew how badly it hurt, losing everything that mattered.

The man who sings *In Pieces* is a tortured soul. He doesn't screw one woman, wash up, then move on to flirting with lay number two.

Kara keeps playing down how famous her friend is.

He lives here. I know that much.

This Miles guy seems to live here.

Fuck.

Why didn't Kara warn me her friend was in *that* band?

Miles clears his throat. "You okay?"

I nod a yes and attempt to hold his gaze. "Don't walk in on casual sex very often."

"Mhmm."

"I was looking for the bathroom."

He laughs. "Is that the best you can do?"

"I was." I take a half-step backwards. "Excuse me. I should go."

His voice drops an octave. "You're not going to let me formally introduce myself?"

"Okay." My stomach flutters. "I'm Meg Smart."

"Miles Webb." He takes my hand with a strong grip. His eyes pass over me like he's trying to place me. "How is it we haven't met before?"

"I don't go to parties."

"Guess that makes this my lucky day." His hand brushes against my wrist. Then it's back at his side. He leans in a little closer, his eyes on mine. "Why'd you decide to come tonight?"

I should be the one asking him that. “My friend convinced me I wouldn’t hate it.”

“What’s the verdict?”

“I still don’t like parties.” I take a deep breath. “Why’d you come tonight?”

“That was my bedroom you burst into.”

Somehow, my cheeks burn hotter.

His eyes rake over me. “Can’t blame you for looking. I’d do the same.”

My knees go weak at the seductive tone to his voice. That’s him, the guy who sings *In Pieces*, the man who has been haunting my dreams.

That song is the centerpiece of my *listen on repeat and fall apart* playlist.

I try to formulate some excuse for why I need to leave immediately, but nothing comes. “You’re um... you’re in the band? The one that is throwing this party?”

“Yeah. Sinful Serenade. I’m the vocalist.” His eyes pass over me again. He takes his time, like he’s sure I’ll be in his bed in thirty minutes flat.

A pang of desire shoots straight to my core. My damn body isn’t obeying my commands. It can’t help wanting Miles Webb. There’s something appealing about the tattoos poking out from under his t-shirt. About the confidence in his eyes.

It’s not like me to fall for the bad boy.

Even when he’s so tall. Two inches taller than me at least. I’m 5’11’, a giant for a women. I tower over most of the men I know.

But not Miles.

I take a deep breath, trying to convince my body it doesn't want him.

He's bad news.

A player.

A rock star even.

But I can't stop staring.

I clear my throat. "I was looking for my friend, Kara. She's tight with some guy in your band. They go way back."

"Oh, yeah, Drew's friend. Heard a lot about her last tour."

"So, I should really find her." I step aside. "And go home. I have to study. You know how it is. Or maybe not, being a rock star and all. But I have a test tomorrow."

I turn and make my way out of the kitchen.

There are footsteps behind me. "Meg?"

I spin, eye to eye with Miles again. Once again, my mind flashes with the image of him kneeling on that bed, his cock hard, the muscles of his thighs and torso taut.

How is it possible that Miles is the guy who has been singing me to sleep? He's not a poet.

He's a manwhore.

"Yes?" I ask.

"Your friend isn't in a state to drive."

He points to Kara, curled up on the couch. Her dark eyes are filled with an expression of drunken excitement. She looks especially short and curvy next to her tall, muscular friend. That must be Drew. His black hair and intense brown eyes are

appealing. No wonder she's staring at him like she wants to devour him.

She bounces to her feet and throws her arms around me. "Are you having fun? Please, tell me you aren't completely miserable."

I hug back. "Only partially."

She laughs. "That's a start!"

Good. She still happy. Kara is an endlessly patient friend. She's been dragging me out of mourning for months now. I'm not going to ruin her night.

"I'm about ready to go home," I say. "I'll take a cab."

"No. I can drive. It's getting late," she says.

The dark-haired guy, Drew, butts in. "Kendrick, you are way too drunk to drive. If you even think about getting in your car, I'll throw you over my shoulder, carry you to my room, and strap you to my bed."

Her eyes light up the second he calls her by her last name. "I didn't know you were into that. Do you have rope or handcuffs or what?"

"I'll call you a fucking cab." His voice is equal parts playful and protective.

She nudges him and points to me. "This is my friend Meg, who you are so rudely ignoring in favor of lecturing me."

He pushes off the couch and offers his hand. "Drew Denton. Nice to meet you."

I shake. "Meg Smart."

"Miles giving you a hard time?" Drew asks.

"I can handle myself," I say.

“If you won’t listen to reason—” Drew turns back to Kara “—then I will drive you home.”

Kara looks Drew in the eyes. “You were drinking too.”

“I can.” I bite my tongue. Dammit, Kara’s car is a stick. I can’t drive us home. “Never mind.”

Miles butts in. “I’ll drive you guys home.”

Drew’s eyes narrow. He shoots Miles an incredulous look.

“Not letting you drive tonight.” Miles throws back a stern look. “You’d do the same.”

Slowly, Drew’s protective expression melts. He and Miles share a look of understanding.

The cocky singer turns to Kara. “Your keys.”

“It’s a manual.” She digs through her purse.

“That’s fine.” He smirks. “I know how to handle my stick.”

Read Now



Author's Note

Those of you who've been with me for a long time know how deeply and passionately I love the Sinful Serenade series. It was the first thing I wrote, that I loved, that other people loved too. It was exciting in a way nothing else will ever touch. Not only was it my first major creative and commercial* success, it was the opportunity to live out my high school dream.

You see, I never loved my rock star crush in a girlfriend-boyfriend sort of way. Don't get me wrong. I had plenty of dirty thoughts of him. I wanted him, sexually and romantically. But, even at seventeen, I knew "girlfriend" wasn't a role for me. Girlfriend was a support position. A trophy, a back up, a safe place to land.

I didn't want to be anyone's anything.

I wanted to be equals.

Creative equals.

I wanted him to read my lyrics and say *Crystal, I'm in love with the beauty of your words.*

What I didn't realize then was:

I wanted to be him more than I wanted to be with him.

I wanted to be the beautiful, damaged rock star, with the beautiful damaged soul. I wanted all the girls (and boys) to swoon over my words, desperate to understand my pain, obsessed with the beauty in my words.

When I wrote Miles's lyrics in *Sing Your Heart Out*, I was the beautiful, damaged soul. And I was the girl desperate to connect with the only person who seems to understand her pain. I've always loved Miles in more of an *I am like you* way than an *I'd like to be with you* way (if only I had his confidence). And, fuck, I LOVED that experience. I loved writing Miles. I loved being the beautiful, damaged soul.

But it wasn't enough.

What can I say? I'm as greedy as my heroes.

I needed to get a little closer to the role. I needed to see a woman occupy the position of the beautiful, damaged lyricist.

Cassie Steele is everything I wanted to be when I grew up. And her relationship with Damon is everything I wanted from my rock star crush. (Minus all that mutual animosity). Damon finds her annoying and pretentious, yes, but he never, once, for a single moment doubts her talent.

He knows she's good.

He respects her as an artist.

Readers, what is sexier than that?

I've been writing romance for ten years now, and I've been very pleased to see the genre expand to include more and more ambitious women. But I still run into so many books where the heroine slots so neatly into the "girlfriend" position. She is there to act as the hero's support, to tend to his emotional needs, support his dreams, live his life.

That works for some people. But not me. I don't want a guy who sees me as a future wife. I want a guy who sees me as a full, well-rounded human. I want a guy who respects my intellect, talent, drive, taste.

Some people say "romance is a fantasy." I've never really agreed. Sure, some things are dreams come true—saying playing the damaged lyricist or staying in a free Malibu beach house—but the core of romance is two people becoming their best selves to build a relationship.

That isn't a fantasy.

Reader, you deserve a partner who adores you as a person, who wants to be your equal partner, who enjoys making you come.

I hope you find someone who can make beautiful music with you. In whatever sense of the term appeals to you.

Happy reading.

Love,

Crystal



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As always, my biggest thanks goes to all the readers who are finishing their first Crystal Kaswell book. Thank you for taking a chance on a new to you author.