

i only look innocent...



lost in seoul

a my summer in seoul novel

#1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author

RACHEL VAN DYKEN

BESTSELLING AUTHOR

COLET ABEDI

Lost In Seoul
A My Summer in Seoul Novel, Book 2
by Rachel Van Dyken & Colet Abedi

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LOST IN SEOUL

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A Note On Content

We know that some of you like to know if there is anything in a book that may be difficult for you to read.

Some real-life issues are discussed/portrayed within these pages.

If you would like to see what they are, please click [HERE](#)

Or scan the QR Code



GUIDANCE

As always, thank you for reading!

Dedication

This is RVD,
I'm doing this dedication for Colet,
she's currently as I write this, visiting her father's grave. He would be so proud of her right now for jumping right into this book and adding what can only be genius. She's a producer and a writer and her detail on this has been so life changing.

So we dedicate this book to her dad, I hope right now as she's able to honor him, he's able to look down from Heaven and say, well done, because Colet, you did well. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

Author Note

You hear authors talk about passion projects, projects that they do because they want to because if they don't do them, a part of their soul feels like it's dying—this was that project for me.

Back in 2019, I had this idea to do a K-pop book while sitting at Apollycon in DC. There were so many readers, and the vibe of the entire place was off the charts. And because I was a huge fan of K-pop already and had a friend constantly sending me music videos, I decided that our table needed to have a bit of BTS' Mic Drop playing on repeat.

It was insane how many people would start dancing, singing, or how their nerves would just dissipate (let's be honest, book signings in the romance community can be insanely nerve-wracking for both authors and readers, just another reason I love the romance community!).

I told my agent and a publisher that I was going to do it; I was going to write this book—after all, I'd written a ton of rockstar romances; how different could this be?

HAH! Well, I knew that idols had a lot of pressure and that the K-pop industry was vastly different, but the minute I dove in, I realized that I seriously had no clue, NO CLUE. It was hard to include all of those details in just one book, so fingers crossed I can do more!

This is also a passion project for me because I was told by several industry professionals that I couldn't write it. Or that it wouldn't sell. Or that it was

too new. What genre did it even fit into? I've written diverse characters my entire career and have always been careful to research and use sensitivity readers no matter what, so I was a bit shocked. I had a few very key people tell me that if this story was in my soul; I needed to write it. If I listed all the people here, the list would be so long but thank you to everyone who reached out, who helped me, people from all over the world, from Korea to China, Africa, the States, Canada—this book would be nothing without your input. Truly.

Once COVID hit, I decided I would dive deep into K-pop that I'd spent nearly a year already attempting to write, little did I know that the pandemic would be ongoing and that I was forced to take some "free" time indoors and continue my research, and not just researching but watching YouTube videos (I swear my youngest probably knows Korean at this point). I even decided to start learning Korean and attempted to stick to a K-pop idol schedule to fully immerse myself—I didn't last long, and as a parent, I am used to zero sleep! It was so much fun, and now I'm happy to announce that's literally all my kids want to listen to. How amazing, right?

I'm so thankful for the experiences I had with this book, and I'm SO SO SO thankful to Seoul Street & Q4 Entertainment, along with Content Group, Will Yun Lee and Mark and Christine Holder, for believing in this story and adapting it for TV. You guys are amazing.

I'm newly adding to this, that one of my producers, Colet Abedi, is also in on this project and after the writers/actors strike we were like, let's just keep going. Let's not leave people hanging and wondering what happens next. I had messages from people asking to go to casting, I had one in particular (you know who you are) who identified as Jay and even did a special art piece depicting the group and himself and asked if he could audition. I was like, well I'm not in charge but, this is amazing and thank you. I think the

really cool thing about thinking outside of the box is that you learn things, so I hope you learn from not only Colet's industry experience and writing experience but from the research we both did. This is something that we had to do. You might cry, you will most definitely be shocked, and know a lot of this is fiction, but based on truth. Happy reading!

I hope you guys enjoy this book!

No, this experience ;)

K-pop Glossary

K-pop: Korean Pop (music)

Idols: The term for a Korean pop star or K-pop star.

Visual: The idol in the group with the best features and is also a main focus for their good looks. Think Jin from BTS or more recently in 2021 V, after 13 fancams reached over ten million views. If you're looking at fourth generation groups, you can look up Stray Kids, Ateez, or TXT, ITZY, AESPA, IVE.

Trainee: Someone under a record label who is training to be an idol with others in an attempt to debut either on their own or, typically, with a group. This can include as little as a few months of dance training, singing with coaches from the label as they invest their money into you, or it can take years. Some people train for years and never debut. Think of it as a record label boot camp. A lot of times they see others debut and watch them succeed while they still work.

Maknae: Youngest in a group.

Sasaeng: The fans who don't respect the idols' privacy—stalk them, put

them in dangerous situations, and feel ownership over their idols' lives. Another one of the reasons idols don't date or are encouraged to hide dating is because of these "fans."

Netizens: Online commenters, keyboard warriors

Bias: Your crush in each group, changes often depending on what groups you Stan.

Comeback: When an idol or musician releases new music and makes their "comeback" into the public eye with a new look, music video, tracks, mini album, or full album (collabs included).

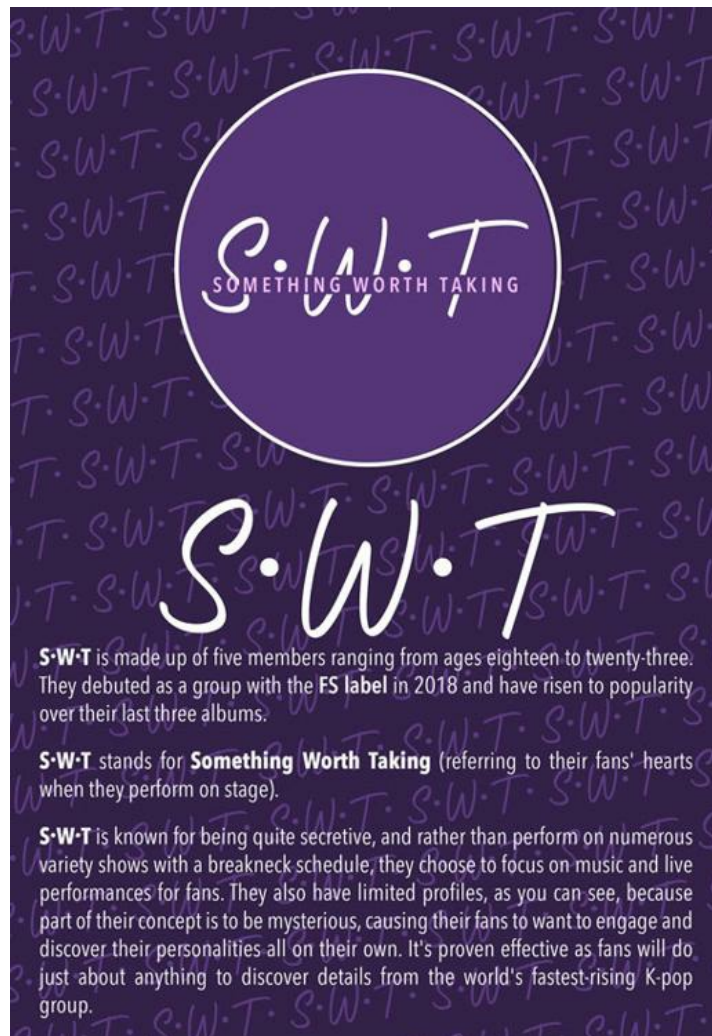
Variety Show: Shows that idols perform on. It can be musical performances, acting, skits, an intro to them, competition, etc. While the states have only a few of these, this is pivotal for a K-pop group to win and show success. Some might even say more important than hitting anything international would be to win a music show in your own country.

MV: Music Video

Showcase: Typically set for debut groups who don't have enough songs to do an entire concert, groups will pick up to five songs to perform. A newer group like SWT might also do this if they've only been releasing mini-albums and not a full-length one yet. For a good example of a Showcase, check out newer groups like Xikers or ZB1 (Zerobaseone).

Meet SWT

Something Worth Taking



S·W·T is made up of five members ranging from ages eighteen to twenty-three. They debuted as a group with the **FS** label in 2018 and have risen to popularity over their last three albums.

S·W·T stands for **Something Worth Taking** (referring to their fans' hearts when they perform on stage).

S·W·T is known for being quite secretive, and rather than perform on numerous variety shows with a breakneck schedule, they choose to focus on music and live performances for fans. They also have limited profiles, as you can see, because part of their concept is to be mysterious, causing their fans to want to engage and discover their personalities all on their own. It's proven effective as fans will do just about anything to discover details from the world's fastest-rising K-pop group.



Sookie

NAME: KIM HWAN-SOOK

STAGE NAME OR NICKNAME: SOOKIE

FAVORITE COLOR: BLACK

BLOOD TYPE: A

ZODIAC SIGN: PISCES

NATIONALITY: KOREAN

POSITION: MAKNAE, VISUAL, SUB VOCALIST, RAPPER

HOBBIES: SOCCER, LANGUAGE STUDIES, TRAVELING, SHOPPING, EATING



Rae

NAME: RAE-TOOK PARK

STAGE NAME OR NICKNAME: RAE

FAVORITE COLOR: GREEN

BLOOD TYPE: A

ZODIAC SIGN: TAURUS

NATIONALITY: KOREAN

POSITION: LEADER, MAIN VOCALIST, VISUAL, FACE OF THE GROUP

HOBBIES: WRITING MUSIC, HEARING FROM FANS, EXERCISING, & TRAVELING



Lucas

NAME: LUCAS BAEK

STAGE NAME OR NICKNAME: LUCAS

FAVORITE COLOR: RED

BLOOD TYPE: O

ZODIAC SIGN: VIRGO

NATIONALITY: KOREAN

POSITION: MAIN RAPPER, VOCALIST, MAIN VISUAL, CENTER, FACE OF THE GROUP

HOBBIES: DANCING, PLAYING THE PIANO



Kai

NAME: KI-MOON KANG

STAGE NAME OR NICKNAME: KAI

FAVORITE COLOR: ORANGE

BLOOD TYPE: O

ZODIAC SIGN: CANCER

NATIONALITY: KOREAN

POSITION: SUB-VOCALIST, VISUAL, DANCER

HOBBIES: RUNNING, BASKETBALL



Jay

NAME: SEVEN HAK

STAGE NAME OR NICKNAME: JAY

FAVORITE COLOR: BLUE

BLOOD TYPE: A

ZODIAC SIGN: CANCER

NATIONALITY: AUSTRALIAN

POSITION: VOCALIST, LEAD DANCER, RAPPER, VISUAL

HOBBIES: RUNNING, BASKETBALL

Prologue

Sookie

Two years ago

I'm in my school uniform, and it's the day of my graduation.

It's itchy, uncomfortably small, and it feels all sorts of wrong, like I shouldn't be in it. I know everyone is staring at me and judging in the way only a know-it-all teenager can do. Can I blame them? No. I know this isn't my best look. I wish I had the latest uniform and at least fit in with my peers in that one way, but my parents couldn't afford to get me the new one from last year and my back up one ripped because I grew too fast—welcome to manhood.

So life is a little shitty right now because they all know what my world looks like. They know I'm a trainee with a brand-new label that prides itself on finding and locking down talent while making sure they debut with only four dollars a day to spend on food, and worse, doing school homework and dance practice until five a.m.

This wouldn't be so bad if the odds were in my favor.

But no, the music label I signed with is still small and there's quite a good chance that I'm about to debut at a label that is about to go under. And

everyone knows it. Half the student body pities me, while the others are in awe of me for even trying to manage school while chasing my dream to become a singer.

Yesterday I had notes stuck to my locker saying that I was an idiot and a failure and had no talent.

No talent.

After everything I've gone through.

Nothing.

I should be used to it now.

I am. I tell myself I am.

I'm used to it now.

But it doesn't mean it hurts any less or that I'm skipping through a field throwing flowers everywhere saying it's going to be a great day when it's not.

The guys hate me because the girls like me, and the girls only like me because they're banking on my potential fame. None of them have even heard me sing, or watched me dance, they just see my face.

And think—*him*, that guy.

There's so many secrets I have to hide.

My natural instincts to hook up.

My label made the decision that as the youngest in the group, I had to sign a contract to be the most innocent and pure idol.

Can I cuss? No.

I don't even know the words. Lies.

Can I have sex? Nah.

Sex is a word I shouldn't even know exists. That's hilarious.

To make things even shittier, I'm required to look sexy, manly and innocent all at the same time—I just have to pretend to not know I'm

accidentally exuding that energy—and these orders were given from a “good label,” one that actually wants to protect me.

Be good, but not too good.

Be bad, but not too scandalous.

Be talented, but don't boast about it.

The worst part? And, yes, it does get worse...

The number of times my mom has approached me asking if I think I should take the exam for college, or suggesting I look into becoming a plumber. She's subtle, my mom...

I don't have a problem with either of those things, but...

I was born on a piano, and I was born to be on a stage. Look, I get it. My mom is worried about her son. She's not intentionally trying to be a dream killer; she's just trying to temper my expectations and not so subtly tell me that this could all go to shit. She's always been concerned about my career choice. Even when I was little, she would tell me that I had talent, but she didn't know if I was good enough—like she needed to make sure I understood how hard this would be so I shouldn't get my hopes up.

I hated hearing it, but she's my mom, and she's supposed to worry.

So woopy-fucking-do.

I've been trying, pushing, climbing... but I'm exhausted, I'll never admit it out loud, but I'm wiped and it has nothing to do with my graduation today.

I'm in actual hell and the only thing I want... the only thing I've *ever* wanted—is to sing.

That's all.

That's my biggest dream.

So here I am on the day of my graduation among a sea of students who know exactly where they're going and what they're doing in their life. Everything is guaranteed for them, whereas I'm taking the biggest risk ever.

Damn.

I can feel my nerves make their way up my spine. Disintegrating into a coldness that pushes down my body.

I wish my parents were here, but they can't afford to take off work, so instead I have Rae attending. He's the leader of our group and he's one of my best friends.

The other guys wanted to come but were stuck in rehearsals and were threatened that they'd lose all of their stipend for food if they left. The label wants us to release our first album in the next six months, along with our first MV, the music is done, the choreography is nearly flawless and they still say it's not good enough.

I'm feeling more anxious than usual. Maybe it's because I know my own past. I know it. And I know the risk. Tears threaten. I hate them. I hate it.

I look up into the stands and find Rae all alone, holding up a sign that says GO SOOKIE. It's almost funny. Nobody recognizes him, all they know is that he's an idol trainee just like me, part of a group that may not ever even make it.

I get up out of the uncomfortable seat and start walking toward Rae. Before I take five steps a foot pops out and trips me, causing me to fall to the ground. My knees hit so hard that you can hear the bone bruising against the floor.

"Sorry." Baek-Hyun's smile is anything but sorry, he's with his bully friends, all of them are smirking down at me. He cocks a brow and tilts his head to the side and smirks. "I slipped."

I wish I could slip and punch him in the face. Just seeing the surprised look would be worth all the trouble I'd get in.

But no, I swallow the urge to beat the crap out of him and play my dutiful role.

“Yeah.” I get up and straighten my tie. I hate that it’s faded and doesn’t look expensive or flashy. I hate that I have to stick out like this too.

This tie is the only one I have with my uniform, while other students have multiples.

I’m aware my uniform looks like shit, I grew two inches last year so my socks are showing, and everything is worn to the absolute extreme. My parents have invested everything in my dream, and I still feel sick with guilt from it, considering I rejected every other suggestion they had for my future career. And now, after years of working hard, losing sleep, not eating enough, and a few mental breakdowns in between—I have nothing to show for it. I can only hope that when we debut, people take us seriously.

Truthfully?

That’s my biggest fear: being on stage and completely losing my shit—and keeping my shit together totally depends on the audience’s reaction. Yeah, I know all the gurus tell you you’re not supposed to care what people think—but my whole dream in life depends on it. If people don’t clap or if they stare at us like we’re amateurs and have no clue what we’re doing, that will crush me. Kill my soul... and I don’t know if I could ever recover from it. Maybe it’s because I’m the youngest in the group, along with being the main vocalist, but the pressure is immense.

Which brings me back to the asshole Baek-Hyun, he found me one day in a bathroom stall having a panic attack after our CEO said if we can’t take it, we need to give up. The whole band had come down with the flu, but he didn’t care.

I puked five times, crashed at midnight and had to get up at five for choreography before school at seven. It was one of those moments I’ll never forget—like the kind you reflect on when you finally make it. Baek-Hyun was such a dick to me and made sure the whole school found out that I was

having a moment.

Did I want to beat the crap out of him?

Yes.

Do I want to now?

Yes.

But... I'm not allowed. Until we make it, I have to eat the proverbial shit sandwich that I've been given.

So I just clock the asshole with my eyes and walk past everyone. I walk past the whispers and the weird stares and before I know it, I'm jogging toward the door. I push against it and pace down the hall, not paying attention to where I'm going. Everything smells like cleaner, the desks are all in perfect alignment, the chairs, the lockers, everything looks so fucking perfect and I want to ruin it all.

Because that's not my reality.

It's not any of our reality and yet we smile, we go through graduation, we pay for lessons, we fight for our dreams, but what do we ever have to show for it?

Math?

Screw math.

I pull my phone out of my pocket then put it right back. I'll text Rae later otherwise he'll worry since he's like a big brother to me. I just need a minute.

One minute for me.

Not for school.

Worrying.

The group.

Just me.

I need to breathe. I need to stop my mind from racing. And I need to do it without people watching me and making all the assumptions they do... He's

this innocent young thing. He can't cuss.

He's so *fragile*...

That kills me more than anything. It destroys my ego. My manhood. Everything that I am on the inside. I'm the furthest thing from fragile, but I could never show it—which brings me to my almost constant state of being.

Frustrated.

I'm literally, not figuratively, *always* frustrated.

Maybe it's a control thing.

Maybe it's because I know I'm helpless in my situation and I hate that feeling.

Or maybe that's just what happens when people try to follow their dreams only to find out—they don't actually exist. Not in the way you think, at least. It's a smokescreen, there is always, and I do mean always—a cost.

I turn the corner and collide hard with a girl, because of course that's how my day's going. She tumbles to the ground, one of her heels flies off of her foot and her hair goes directly into her lipstick.

"I'm sorry!" I help her to her feet and grab her heel, then her leg and try to shove her foot back into it.

"Ya!" She grabs me by the hair and pulls my head back. She has tears in her eyes, smudging her makeup, tears stream down her cheeks. She's beautiful. Maybe in college? I can't tell, but at least a few years older than me. "What are you doing?"

"Helping?" I offer in a frustrated voice that sounds weaker than I actually feel. God, can I do anything right? "I'm sorry I wasn't looking where I was going and—"

She jerks her foot away so fast I nearly fall as she puts the shoe on herself, then really looks down at me. "Get away from me."

"Sorry." This is not my day. Obviously. I get to my feet and dust off my

pants again, how many times can someone fall in ten minutes? “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Her lower lip wobbles, it’s pretty and pink, full and enticing. She looks away.

I don’t know why I do it, but I pull her away from the hall and into one of the classrooms for privacy. There’s tissue on one of the desks, I jerk it out of the box and hand it to her.

She takes it abruptly, tearing part of the edges off, and they fall to the ground. She’s still not making eye contact with me. “I wish I could tell you it gets better, it doesn’t.”

“I’m used to it being bad,” I say with a lame smile that just really confirms how bad my day’s been. “I’m having a day as well.”

She straightens her white blazer, jerking it down with her hands at least three times before finally looking up, her brown eyes focus only on me and I have to wonder, is this all I wanted? Someone to see, just to see for once. Me. Not what they assume, not what they expect.

Me.

“Can we forget for five minutes?”

I frown, surprised. “I wish but that’s not how life works.”

Sadly.

“What if it did in this classroom?” She takes a step toward me, tears stream down her cheeks harder like she’s broken and nothing will fix her, I’m not touching the tears but I imagine they’re hot, that she feels each drip down her chin in a painful way my soul recognizes. “What if we could forget?”

I reach for her hand and grip it. Cold. Shaking. Scared.

“How do you want to forget?” I whisper.

She eyes me up and down. “A hug. Just give me a hug. Lie to me. Tell me it’s all going to be okay.”

Slowly, I pull her into my arms and awkwardly rub her back with both hands. They run down her spine in slow motion over and over again. “It’s all going to be okay,” I tell her just as she commanded in a tone that almost made me feel like I needed to say yes because she needed it more than I did.

We stand there for a few minutes, she finally relaxes against me. Her body slumps against mine. She’s hot just like her tears. I have no idea what possesses me to do it, but when I start to pull away from her, I lower my head and kiss her on the mouth. It’s a light kiss, nothing intense, but totally inappropriate.

She jerks back, covering her mouth with her hand.

Shit. “I’m sorry I just—“

She doesn’t let me finish. Her mouth collides with mine again. She tastes like cinnamon, my favorite flavor. I moan deep into her mouth, testing the way her tongue feels against mine. It’s not my first kiss, but it’s almost like she’s stealing secrets I can’t tell, she’s clearly more experienced, she shoves my jacket off my shoulders and runs her hands down the length of my torso.

She takes my breath away, a different kind of beautiful person that makes you think if you just keep kissing and letting them take your sins away, you might be ok.

I back her up against one of the hard desks, it screeches against the floor. I lift her onto it. I pull down her jacket, throwing it onto the floor and run my hands up her ribs, grazing her breasts through her shirt with my thumbs.

Her whimper urges me on, deepening the kiss. Her hands move to the waistband of my pants, tugging me closer to her, deeper.

There is no logic to what is happening.

She’s just like blinking Christmas lights that I’m drawn to. She starts to unbutton the top of my pants, her hands hurried, frantic.

Shit. Yes, this is exactly what I want.

And what I need...

And just like that, Christmas is over. It disappears like a fever dream.

The phone in my pocket suddenly goes off. Her purse starts making noise.

It doesn't stop.

We can't avoid the sounds. She pulls away with a curse and hops off the desk.

I'm so disappointed I want to burn my phone. I grab my jacket from the floor and hand her hers, then tuck my shirt back in.

Reality starts to creep in.

Shit, what was I thinking? I've never just made out with a random girl before, someone who wasn't my girlfriend. A complete stranger. Am I having some sort of crisis? What's wrong with me? I ask myself this question, but I know the answer before even finishing the thought. The trauma's real, the damage is done, and sometimes when you're in that mindset, all you want, all you need is touch, human connection, something I know I won't get to have for a very long time because of my contract.

"Yeah." She looks over at me. "I'm on my way."

I nod at her, knowing I'll never see her again. Knowing we aren't about to exchange numbers. I open my mouth to apologize if I did anything she didn't like, but she grabs her jacket and leaves the classroom, slowly clicking the door shut behind her.

I can't decide if it's the best or worst graduation that ever existed. What was that? What just happened? I have to shake it off.

I make my way back down the hall, and quickly answer Rae's text and let him know I'll meet him out front. When I finally make it outside a lot of the graduates and families have already left.

It takes everything I have not to stop in my tracks.

Rae's standing on the steps talking to the girl in the white pantsuit. The

one I just kissed. There's a familiarity between them. An intimacy that I instantly detest.

He's easily her age, and she's probably attracted to him. I bet they're going to go out on a date.

This is officially my least favorite moment.

Since there's nothing else I can do, I walk up to them. "Hey, Rae."

"Sookie!" He pulls me in for a hug. "Where were you?"

I glance at the woman and then back at him. "Bathroom."

"Oh, well, I just didn't want you to leave without meeting my adopted sister."

I frown. "Where is she?"

Pantsuit woman whose mouth I'm desperately trying not to look at, gives me a horrified look and raises her hand.

Adopted sister? Since when?

"We've kind of kept it quiet." He looks sheepish as he says it, shoving his hands into the pocket of his jeans. "She's been studying in the states and there were some weird lawsuits involved and basically mom took her in and then fully adopted her. I hate keeping secrets but, we didn't want her in the public eye.

I can't say I'm not annoyed he didn't confide in me. I mean, why not? We've become a band of brothers this past year, he knows he can trust me.

And then it hits me. Hard. Kind of like what she made happen below my waist.

I just made out with Rae's sister.

And he has no idea.

"She's a first-year lawyer."

I do the math.

At the very least, she's four years older than me.

“Oh.” It’s all I have, just a single oh and a forced smile that doesn’t reach my eyes. “That’s great.”

Her smile falters, her eyes fall to my mouth. My body responds accordingly. I almost lunge for her. Shit. You can’t just look at a guy the way she just did in public, especially one who just graduated early and is full of testosterone, raging hormones, and stress. Sex might be the only way to let off some steam.

“Let’s go get some food.” Rae announces clapping his hands.

I stay back next to his sister.

We’re silent until the car pulls up.

Her hand grazes my lower back.

I reach behind me and squeeze her fingers. It’s a bold move. People could see.

We stay like this for maybe two seconds.

My heart cracks, why do I want to touch her longer?

Also, I’ve changed my mind. This is the best graduation, but Rae can never find out, because if he did...

Everything I’ve worked for, would be gone.

Chapter One

Sookie

Present Day

Fame, as they say, is a double-edged sword.

It's thrilling in so many ways, but in others... it sucks.

I can't go anywhere. It's like I'm in jail, but I'm not. Instead, I'm in this bubble of celebrity that most people only dream of. But emotionally, mentally and physically I'm trapped. And the feeling sucks, especially because there's no way out. At least, not for a while. And right now, I'm trapped in the SWT dorm with all my thoughts racing uncontrollably. I have to get out of here fast otherwise I'm going to lose it.

I always try to keep calm on the outside, easy going—but the more famous our group gets, the harder it is to maintain the illusion. The carefully crafted persona the world sees. And with our success comes more work, more comebacks we have to do, which basically means if our album sales skyrocket—which they have been, then we have to release a song in between comebacks. And I just learned, thanks to our label, we have to work on another comeback for the winter.

It's only been two months since our last comeback and all the drama that

came with it—also known as our intern falling in love with Lucas, one of our main rappers. Lucas made the scandal even crazier by going to the press and letting them know that him and our lead singer, Rae, were actually half-brothers.

And he didn't stop there. He also committed the cardinal K-pop sin—he not only got into a relationship with someone who worked for him—but he kissed her on live TV. Neither of them planned it and though it was a bold move and could have cost us a lot, I was happy for both of them and literally thought to myself, well that's it, we're done here, people are going to burn our albums and cancel us in the process.

Our international fans for the most part were thrilled, but the netizens or keyboard warriors in Korea had mixed feelings about how it might take him away from SWT.

In the end, it all worked out, album sales skyrocketed past six million in less than three weeks and airports were filled with rabid fans all thinking, hey if she can land someone from SWT, we all can. Must be so easy.

So, it backfired in an epic, no longer can even walk down the street, sort of way.

I was a guy that liked at least a little bit of freedom, even if it meant going for Ramen or just taking a walk in the park.

But now? The only way to express myself is through tattoos and music. And truthfully, being forced to be creative takes the fun out of actually being creative.

I keep this sentiment to myself.

I smile for the cameras, I play the “innocent” role that the company gave me. It's my job as the Maknae or youngest of the group to be as pure as the driven snow.

What a joke that is.

So far, I've avoided scandal, but I guess that's been easy because there's only one girl that haunts me every hour of the day. I can't stop thinking about her. God knows I've tried, but she's my kryptonite—the only girl capable of drowning me—willingly.

I put on a hat, sunglasses, a black face mask, pull my grey hoody over my hat, and look at myself in the mirror. Good enough. I'm wearing ripped jeans, nothing designer, and an old pair of black Converse.

The worst idea would be to just sprint out of the dorms in Celine, Dolce, Supreme—anything that looks expensive.

I walk over and knock on Rae's studio door. "Yeah?" He looks over his shoulder, his hair is dyed a bright platinum again, he has bags under his eyes though, he's already writing, planning, producing for us like he tirelessly does. "You going somewhere?"

"Yeah, I'll be careful and make it back by curfew I just"—I shrug. —"never mind. Just need some time to think about some songs I can write later."

I know he can see through my lies but he lets it go. He's too perceptive, but luckily right now since he's so focused on our Winter album and he's only got the emotional bandwidth for writing and getting our tracks ready. We all pitch in, but he's the mastermind when it comes to the sound we should go with for each comeback.

He looks back at the computer, then his phone, nods his head, and I know I'm good.

I leave, because I know he's the type to think it through and then be like, what? Where are you going? Do you have your find a friend on? And right now, I don't want it.

Do I even have a friend outside of this world other than her?

Do I?

And if I even did—would they ever find me, outside of my band, outside of those close people I'm allowed to spend my days with?

I take the stairs two at a time and get on the elevator and go to the basement level, then slowly walk up the street.

It's weird when you're an idol. It's lonely. Everything is so normal around you, the universe just keeps going, the world keeps spinning, things just happen, and yet you're stuck in this world that nobody but those in it can understand. And the stress, the unbelievable stress that you're not allowed to talk about.

And it's not just that, it's not that you can't say you're sad or anxious, it's that if you show anyone that things are hard you jeopardize your company, or maybe even yourself for being weak.

On top of that, you have to deal with haters who have never liked you in the first place and finally have an in.

And in, being, they see your weakness and pounce because literally their only job in life is to make sure that you feel bad so they feel good.

It's fleeting, I'm sure, and I've seen it first hand, how powerful keyboard warriors feel when they put you down because there is no way they feel like they can be up. It's sad, it's hurtful, but at the end of the day, it still stings, like several tiny little cuts that never heal, and each time they stab you, you must nod your head and smile and say thank you.

I think the worst part is that people say I asked for this, I asked for fame, so deal with it, know it comes at a cost, being loved. And being hated. And I get that point of view, but also, why? Why can't people just be humane? Why can't they just say, hey, not my favorite person, but you do you, instead they throw hate.

Last year a person was arrested for attempting to throw acid at my face because my nose looked too foreign. I don't even know what that means, and

yet I had to smile, bow, and say, thank you.

For what?

Why do I have to thank someone for their cruelty? Because that's what it is. It's the only thing you can call it. Some people get off on hurting those they think are invincible.

I realize I'm too deep in my emotions as I get to the parking garage, and then I immediately scour the area and wonder...

Will she be here?

My blood heats up at the thought of seeing her. Of smelling her sweet, intoxicating scent and just being close enough that I can touch her skin. I've seen her twice in the past month. And the memory of her face is burned in my brain. I know she's trying to keep her distance. It's better for both of us, maybe not for my sanity, but my career. Shit. I really need her right now.

I need Rae's sister.

I need to touch her.

I need her energy.

I feel like I'm a dead man walking and she's the only thing that will bring me back to life. I wish I could be free of this need and desire for her. I wish she didn't matter. But damn, she does. I try to shrug it off as I walk toward the street when I see the familiar red Maserati pull in.

My blood rushes as the window lowers. "Get in."

No hesitation. I'm inside with my seatbelt on in seconds. Instead of acting cool and unaffected, I'm suddenly overwhelmed by my whole fucking life. And to my utter horror tears burn my eyes and I'm forced to look away from her.

She says nothing. She just gets us out of the building and drives to a small store I don't recognize. She leaves me with my emotions raging and comes back with chips—my favorite—and Sprite, the one thing I'm not supposed to

drink.

Soda. Oh but Soju? Totally fine, we're brand ambassadors. Bullshit.

With shaky hands I take the stupid chips, candy bar, the sprite, and look down at my worn shoes. What is wrong with me? Could I be any more useless?

Her hand slowly slides across the consul. I stare at her fingertips. I want to touch them so desperately it makes me sick.

Ari's careful to keep her hand in sight of any waiting cameras. Thankfully, her car has extremely tinted windows, one of the reasons I like it. She says nothing, just grips my fingers and stares straight ahead. "It's going to be okay."

"I should feel lucky." I say back in Korean. "I should be thankful."

"No." She shakes her head. "You should feel whatever you need to feel and allow yourself that luxury."

I grip her hand and a tear escapes. I'm mortified that I'm so weak in front of her.

But she does this to me. She crawls inside my body, my heart, my goddamn soul, and surrounds me with that effervescent energy of hers, that light, that light that makes me believe everything is going to be okay. Because she will make sure it is.

I don't know what I would do without her in my life.

"It's really hard." It feels good to say it out loud, it feels good to be vulnerable sometimes. It feels good to bare my soul.

To her.

Only her.

"I know." And she does, she sees what Rae goes through. I know she's aware, but nobody truly knows your own pain, depression or stress in this business. All they see is the fame, the money, the screaming. The fans acting

as though you're a god.

And they think you should just feel lucky and blessed, hiding all the ugly.

They don't know the darkness—and sometimes I don't think they want to. It's easier to believe your idols are perfect, that they live and breathe for you, that they never have a bad day. Love me and I'll make you think I love you back and that you're special. It's easier to believe in an illusion instead of a real human with real feelings, real insecurities, and the very real darkness in us all that we try to keep at bay.

It's too easy to believe in a fantasy.

We are, after all, called idols for a reason.

I wonder if people even realize that the reason we're curated this way is to project an image for people to look up to. I use the word curated, because that's what we are—methodically chosen, dissected, reconstructed to fit a mold. All the dark parts of us carefully concealed to the world, and made this way for the younger kids that purchase every single fucking thing from light sticks, to new merchandise, mini albums, full albums, who stream until they can't see straight, just to get our votes up on YouTube. The same people buy extra albums and toss them just to get our numbers up—was it always this way? I can't remember and maybe it's because I'm too young, but there's a big part of me that doesn't want to believe it. But... sometimes it feels like it's not about the music anymore. Sometimes it feels like we're just a machine, a formula put together that works for sales. Sometimes it feels like it's not about the art.

And all it takes is one small misstep for that love to get shattered into oblivion.

And you're done.

Fuck, when I was in California I literally walked by two weed stores and wondered if it was worth it just for the scandal—reckless is what it was, but it

was tempting—then again if you’re caught it even in a foreign country it could be legit jail time.

“Sookie?” She pushes when I’m still quiet.

I sigh before answering.

“I love it and hate it.” I admit ruefully. “I stay in it for my fans, for the very pure reason that I’m hoping I matter enough to make sure they know they matter. But where does it stop? When do I get to live my own life?”

I can’t even have a girlfriend. Oh, they’ll let me, as per my contract in about four years when it’s time to renew, and when I’m old enough to know what sex is so I don’t break hearts all over the world for having feelings “too young.”

She squeezes my hand tighter then drops it. I feel that drop like a bomb in my stomach. I hate losing her touch. I feel a void inside and I know it’s wrong to ask someone else to fill it, but wouldn’t it be nice for just a minute to escape like we did a few years ago? To just, feel? To touch her like that again?

“I know.” The empathy I hear in her voice soothes something inside.

“I’ve missed you.” I finally confess in a whisper, still not looking at her but sinking down in the seat with my face mask, watching cars go by, happy couples holding hands in their matching outfits, eating tteokbokki.

Her smile is sad, I feel the heaviness in the car as she answers. “I know, because I miss you too.”

We drive around for a while then park. I frown when I see where we are.

“I didn’t make an appointment.”

“Let me worry about that.”

She tucks her dark hair into her hat and pulls a ponytail through the back.

I shake my head and frown at the logo. “Yankees? Really?”

“Oh, look who stopped being sad and got all pissed instead.” She starts

giggling and I feel lighter from the sound. I've always loved the way she laughed, she never covers her face, she just lets it all go, it's freeing to watch. I'm so used to girls acting cute and rehearsed in front of me, it always feels so fake.

Not Ari.

She's the most real it gets.

If anything, she'd probably beat me with the hat and then chase me down if I did anything wrong. I picture that fantasy for a moment. No, I wouldn't mind it at all.

"I hate the Yankees." I cross my arms. "And now I have to walk into the tattoo parlor with you and that giant black and white hat?"

She tosses me a ball cap. "Put this on, think of it as a gift."

"Nope." I shake my head and try to hand it back to her. "I am not wearing a matching Yankees hat with you."

"You are. People know you hate the Yankees, it's part of your super cool K-pop profile, remember? Like one line down from your blood type?"

I lean in and stare at her lips. "Did you memorize it?"

"I'm a lawyer for your label, I have no choice but to know every single thing about you." She shoves the hat against my chest, but I can tell she's flustered. I like that. "Now put it on, it's the perfect disguise, better than whatever the hell you have on right now," She flips the black cap off my head. "I mean really? You just scream K-pop idol with your black mask and black hat. Well either that or serial killer."

"I kind of want to kill you right now if I have to wear this."

"See! I cheered you up already." She laughs at me and playfully punches me on the arm before touching the hat in my lap.

I accidentally graze her hand when I reach down to pick it up and get caught staring down at our fingers. My blood rushes.

Touching her does things to me. It makes me lose all sense of logic. It makes me want to throw away everything I've worked for.

And just...

Be.

With.

Her.

I let out a breath. Damn. I have to get it under control. I focus on her hands instead. Not her lips. Just her beautiful hands.

Her nails are a perfect white. Her fingers, long and slender. Delicate and fragile, but I know she's anything but. I just want to reach out and grab them and pull her into my embrace. But I can't. She's so close and so far at the same time.

Like she can feel my energy, the raging emotions percolating inside, she jerks her hands back and folds them demurely in her lap. Prim and proper like it should be. "Ready?"

I aggressively shove the hat over my head. "I swear if someone recognizes me in this I'm going to tell them you kidnapped me and forced your favorite baseball team on me when we all know the Red Sox are better."

"Oh come on!" She slams the steering wheel. "This again?"

"Yes, this again, and you know it!"

Her smile is all I need.

It's like an infusion to my soul.

But I don't touch her.

I can't touch her.

She's not mine to touch.

Instead, I clear my throat and reach for the door. "What am I getting today?"

It's a game we play.

She's the one to tell me what's important to me—what small object to put on my new sleeve—making it a crazy mixture of tons of different tattoos that make no sense to anyone.

Anyone but us.

It's our secret.

And it's as far as anything outside our friendship goes.

How depressing.

I open the car door and get out.

She follows and we walk to Underground Ink.

The door is open, but the sign says closed.

I wait while Ari switches to English with the owner. "He just wants something small."

Tyler peers around her. "I actually already planned for something, want a surprise? I knew you'd be back after a few months."

I nod and speak in English. "Yes, let's do it."

He gives me a thumbs up, and I just trust him as I walk further into the shop and sit down while Ari pulls out a chair next to us.

He puts the stencil on my skin while Ari checks her phone. Everything is normal, the pain isn't bad, and he's done in like, fifteen minutes.

I haven't even looked yet, it's on my wrist so I'm bleeding a bit because of the shallow veins, he covers it with saran wrap and tape after rubbing Vaseline all over it. "Don't get it wet until tomorrow night."

"Yup." I get up and freeze when I look down at my wrist.

Ari grabs my shoulder. "Are you okay? Did you need more food?"

I tuck my sweatshirt over my wrist. "I'm fine."

"Okay," She perks up, "Let me start the car, wait here."

I tug my sleeve while he runs my card and whisper to him. "Why?"

"You know." He says under his breath. "You should at least have one part

of her imprinted on you that's physical."

Was that supposed to be uplifting? I take my card and leave as it starts to rain.

"So, what did you get?" She asks once I'm back in the car buckling up my seatbelt and sinking as per usual down into the seat.

I shake my head and tug the stupid Yankees hat down over my eyes. "It's a secret."

She's used to that.

But I'm not used to what's permanently inked on my wrist.

It's a beautiful A over a small heart, with a star on the side that represents profit, gain, and wishing.

Tyler gave me what I'll never have.

He gave me Ari.

Chapter Two

Ari

I don't tell him how much I do actually miss him.

How often I think of him. And what he does to my insides. Or how I can feel him. How connected I am to his energy. How I know he's struggling. I told myself I was going to the dorm to check on my brother, but something told me Sookie needed me more. And the thought of him suffering in any way did something to my heart. It hurts if I think he's struggling or sad. He's young for an idol, and he's popular beyond belief. Fans are obsessed with him to the point that he gets death threats if he doesn't respond to them in the way they want. I haven't told him that I've been hired on with the bands management for the past two months, or about the things I've seen.

I can't even really describe how crazy people get.

From breaking into the dorms or attempting to.

Hacking.

Grabbing their schedules, seducing, fake AI shit and editing that makes me want to seriously bring down the law on them. And then there are the ones that are angry if they even look at a girl besides them, because, how dare you think you could possibly be an idol and have a relationship that's not with me?

So in retaliation, they fight, they throw eggs at them, they protest, they yell—they set up trucks in front of the agencies trying to cancel them; they make a big fuss.

And why? Because they truly, deeply in their soul, believe they're going to end up with this superstar? I mean, I thought I was going to marry a Backstreet Boy, but I never stalked and threatened them for not seeing my true beauty at age fifteen with braces and frizzy hair. It's complete bullshit. It makes zero sense, and it annoys me so much that it's almost hard to do my job in a professional manner.

And there's nothing I can really do to stop the madness. This is the life of a K-pop superstar. And like my brother, Rae, Sookie chose it.

But I can try to protect them as much as I can.

And I can get mad for them when they're not allowed to show any emotion.

It's quiet on the way back to the dorm and I'm more than curious about his new ink. I don't understand why he's being so secretive. He usually shows me right away.

Not this time.

He's holding his wrist, covering it from my eyes like it's precious. He rubs his thumb over the sensitive skin before quickly pulling out his phone, the minute he catches me watching.

Now, I'm more than curious about what he got on that beautiful skin—on that skin that will never be mine to truly touch.

He starts to type away.

"Lyrics?" I ask without needing to actually ask. I know he's always in his head.

He nods. "Mmm."

I smile at him reassuringly, then focus back on the road. "Work, you

deserve it, watch this new song get like a hundred million views in one month.”

His easy laugh has me exhaling in a way that feels like instant relief. Good, he’s at least happy now, and relaxed. I did my job. I don’t have to worry. “Mine never reach that many views even though it’s for the group. I guess they hurt too much.”

“The group?” I ask.

“The words,” he finally says, putting his phone away and tucking it back into his pocket. He still has the Yankees hat on and so do I for that matter. “Hey, should we go get dinner—“

He stops himself mid sentence like he knows it’s not possible.

And sadly, we both know it never will be. He’s not allowed to date per his contract, and I’m his best friend’s sister. I’m also technically an employee, so I keep driving and try to sound happy when I offer. “Ramen?”

We could at least stop at a convenience store and bulk him up. He’s been losing more weight but I can’t tell if it’s the stress or the lack of eating while practicing seven hours a day.

“No.” He looks down at his hands again. “I’m on a diet. I already had chips and a candy bar and they’ll probably start weighing us again since we have the comeback, and I’ll have no excuses except I was breathing air.”

“It does contain calories, air.” I point out.

He doesn’t laugh at my joke as I pull up to the dorms again and then down into the basement of the parking garage. The tension is thick in the car while I park next to the elevators.

He starts to open the door but I grab him by the hand, loving how warm it is and how his skin feels against mine. It’s hard to ignore the rush I get from touching him. “Wait. Let me look around first. I switched cars again, but you never know.”

I get out and pretend to be on my phone while walking toward the elevators. Nobody is in there like last time, waiting for a chance to see a member of SWT. The dorms are for the most part on lockdown.

I'm lucky that I even get access, most of the staff have to ask permission to go in and out. I think it's because I'm Rae's sister and the label trusts me. They believe that because I'm a lawyer, I would never break the rules.

They don't know I take their youngest group member for snacks and tattoos, or that we had one stolen moment where I discovered how he tasted and felt against my body. One stolen moment that has haunted me for years. But it's our secret. Forever.

It wouldn't just destroy his entire career—but mine too. God, it's hard to imagine that going to a convenience store followed by a fifteen minute tattoo appointment can end a person's career.

I take one more look around, pretend to fix my chin length black hair and nod toward the car, where I know he's watching, only to immediately see another start to come down into the garage. It's a white van and looks suspicious. Anytime I see a van I am immediately on high alert because I assume it's paparazzi.

Without thinking, I dart back to the car, am there in two steps, jump into the back seat and give Sookie's arm a tug.

"OW!" He's taller than the others, he'll get seen, he scrambles to the back seat just in time for me to cover him with my body.

Chest heaving, I slap a hand across his mouth. He doesn't move.

The van stops by the elevator, right next to us.

I'm suddenly thankful that I paid extra to have my windows more tinted as two guys with cameras start joking and flicking their cigarettes onto the ground.

A third guy gets out of the van with some camera equipment.

I rack my brain. I know another group—a warring one that’s forced to play nice—lives in the other penthouse, represented by FS as well, they’re newer and known for not really caring about the ‘idol’ rules which means I’m pretty sure they’re about to be the biggest headache of my career. I have a meeting with their manager later this afternoon.

Maybe we’ll be lucky and it’s one of them. I can only hope they aren’t leaving the dorms with prostitutes or something else that will get them in trouble.

One of the guys comes from a really wealthy family known for a notorious hosting scandal at one of their bars, but they have enough money to quietly cover things up—for now. I only know about it because of client attorney privilege and now I wish I didn’t.

Sookie grips my wrist when the guys start walking toward my car. I keep my head down.

“Nice model.” One takes a picture of it with his camera, and I hate the intrusion, but if I get out and rip it out of his hands, they’ll see Sookie.

This is my fault.

We should have gone faster.

“Trust me?” He says under my hand while they continue to circle my car.

“Always.”

He jerks my hand away and kisses me. Hard.

It’s like my body’s been in a catatonic state and it surges back to life.

I try to pull away because of all the reasons why, but he jerks me back and slams his hand against the window. They can’t see us, and they know an idol wouldn’t dare do this in daylight. I know this... I know this; I keep telling myself. But then, reason, logic, all thoughts that are not lust related fly out of my mind, because only one thing matters.

Sookie is kissing me for the second time.

He pulls me harder against him, the car moves.

One of the photographers jumps back. “Wow, nice lunch break.”

The other laughs. “That’s my kind of meal.”

They continue to cackle but I can’t hear what they’re saying. Nor do I care. My brain has stopped functioning because Sookie slides his tongue into my mouth and every feeling I’ve suppressed. Every single second of our first encounter that I’ve tried to forget, all of it moves through me and I remember how much he turns me on.

I hate him in this moment.

I hate him, but...

I don’t hate him.

I want to pull away—not because I don’t want him to be doing exactly what he is doing at this moment, but because I forced myself to forget what it was like in his arms. I forced myself to forget the way he makes me feel inside and out.

He’s warm, lean, but strong. You would never know he was the youngest, he certainly doesn’t act or feel like it right now. I realize I have no business touching him, but I let myself go for this one moment and revel in the feeling of being in his strong arms. Yes, they’re strong. They are so goddamn strong. He might play a part on stage, the shy innocent youngest member, but in the privacy of the car he’s different—the hot kind of alpha male aggressive different, the raw masculinity kind of different.

The kind of different that every girl wants to experience.

He’s in total control.

And it’s the hottest thing I’ve ever encountered.

I don’t want it to ever end.

His lips on mine, tongue in my mouth, his total domination... I don’t want it to ever end.

Ever.

One of the photographers yells out, startling us both, and we break apart.

Sure enough, I look over my shoulder and TestME, the new group walk out in sunglasses and random colors of street wear. They wave to the cameras, but they all have black face masks on as their management team escorts them to the other side of the garage toward a waiting black van.

The paparazzi continue to flash photos, then quickly get in their own van and follow them. “They’re gone.” It comes out like a breathy whisper.

“No.” Sookie still hasn’t let go. “I think they’re still around the corner.”

He pulls my head back down.

I cling to his shirt and give myself an extra ten seconds.

I even count them in my head.

One. His teeth tug at my bottom lip.

Two. His hands move to my hair digging in, slightly pulling.

Three. One of his hands slides behind my neck and cups it, his fingers burn where he touches my skin.

Four. His kiss deepens before he pulls away and starts slow nibbles down my neck that send shivers down my spine.

Five. He makes his way back up to my chin, then pulls away, his brown eyes take a complete choke hold, making it impossible for me to look anywhere else.

Six. It’s almost over.

Seven. He’s sad. And so am I.

Eight. Slowly, I pull away and adjust my clothes.

Nine. His hands drop to his sides.

Ten. We put the chasm of space between us again.

His mask is back on both figuratively and physically, he straightens his shirt, and folds his hands as I sit next to him.

And then, like a professional who has no business being in that back seat, I open the car door, look around again, and walk to the elevators and press the up button.

He dashes out of the car and nearly face dives into the elevator, and as the doors close, I could swear I see a tear slip past his mask, dropping to the floor.

My heart burns in my chest.

He doesn't know the worst part of all of this—I feel like a cheater, and I don't even know if I'm cheating on someone else or myself?

But, Sookie has to know soon.

I have to let him go.

I have to.

Otherwise I never will, and it's not fair to him.

To either of us.

I slowly walk back to my car and get in. I try not to look at the bag of leftover food he just ate. The one I gave him. I take a deep breath as my phone rings, and hit answer on my steering wheel.

“Yes?”

“Meeting in an hour with TestME.”

“I'll be there, Siu, thanks.”

“Everything okay? You sound out of breath? Are you sick?”

The owner of the label put his idols and employees before everything, of course he'd ask if I was sick having no clue I was just in the back seat of my car with one of his most famous idols. “No. I'm completely fine. I'll be there in fifteen.”

“Sounds good, and remember this group is—we're going to need the contracts to be ironclad, especially with the show coming up.”

“Understood.”

“See you soon.” He’s off the phone, and I’m still staring at the trash on the floor of my car, kind of feeling like I want to crawl inside it and cry.

I look in the mirror, fix my lipstick, take off my hat, put on my sunglasses, and I pull my car out as if nothing happened.

When my heart pounds against my chest, I know I can’t fight it.

“...But it did.”

Chapter Three

Sookie

I keep my head down as I walk down the small hall and type in the passcode to our dorm.

When I walk in I suddenly panic realizing I still have the Yankees hat on and quickly toss it in one of the hall closets before kicking off my shoes and putting on my slippers.

Nobody seems to be in the main part of the living room so I take off my mask, shove it in my pocket and walk into the kitchen for some water.

I'm definitely thirsty after that interaction.

My adrenaline is at an all-time high while my heart feels at an all-time low. It's a weird feeling, like someone drugged me and I'm craving more. Maybe that's why people get addicted, the thrill of it all, the confusion, the demons, the lingering.

The wanting.

The need.

The fucking need.

I nearly run into Lucas, as he's coming out of the piano room, when he tilts his head at me and narrows his eyes. "What?"

He lets out a sigh, grabs me by the wrist before I can grab a bottle of water

from the fridge and pulls me into the bathroom by the studio and slams the door.

“Can I help you?” I cross my arms.

He crosses his.

What the hell is going on?

With a curse, he turns me toward the mirror.

Stunned, I say nothing. My lips are smudged with pink lipstick and I can't hide my expression of guilt any more than I can hide the lipstick on my face.

“Who is it?” He demands. “And you know if Rae see's this he's going to flip his shit so at least confide in me so you're smarter about it and not just parading around in Chanel.”

“It wasn't Chanel.”

His glare through the mirror says it all. His red hair's a tousled mess, and he's wearing blue contacts. Maybe he had a shoot earlier? I wouldn't know. Sometimes we just stay in costume if we have them for a few days, makes it easier.

“Why are you in your contacts?”

“Because I lost my glasses, can't see, and have to write an entire rap section, and that's not the point, stop trying to distract me. Who the hell were you with?”

I shrug him away. “Get off, like you should talk.”

He crosses his arms again and stares me down.

“Ah, so the youngest of the team has officially lost his mind.”

“If you say so,” I return curtly.

Lucas eyes me up and down, eyes narrowed, like he's seeing me for the first time. Maybe he is.

“Look at you, suddenly all grown up.”

“And what do you want to do about it?”

I'm surprised to see Lucas smiling at me like he's pleased.

"I like this Sookie," he says confirming my suspicion. "And listen, I am in no position to judge. But you need to be careful with whatever it is you have going on. And you know you can confide in me, but you just need to be smarter because if Rae—"

And then I just fucking go for it, because why not?

"It's his sister."

"...Finds out then—" he stops talking.

We lock eyes. The surprise in Lucas' is almost laughable. Almost.

"I'm sorry, do you mean you were with Ari for a meeting?" Lucas tries to clarify.

I stare down at the sink then back up at my reflection in the mirror, and grab some tissue to wipe my mouth, then get it wet and continue wiping. My lips are stained with her color. It won't rub off, like it's trying to stay on my face the way I tried to keep her kissing me forever.

Ironic.

"Bro? Talk to me."

I feel the sudden wave of emotion sweep over me again and it's consuming. It makes me feel weak. What is it with these feelings? It must be all the pressure I'm under. I realize I'm going to have to figure out a way to control myself. I can't lose it every five minutes.

Get it together Sookie.

"Never mind." My voice is unintentionally sharp as I turn to move past him.

"Nope." He blocks the door to the bathroom and I try shoving him away but he doesn't budge. Has he been lifting more?

I sidestep him.

He matches me move for move.

I throw up my hands in his face. “Seriously?”

“Talk.”

“If you weren’t my Senior...” I grumble.

“I’m more than that. I’m your friend.” His voice is solemn. “Now just tell me, and I’ll see how I can help.”

Not at all what I expected, but the fact that he’s willing to hear me out isn’t a bad thing. Maybe I finally do need to talk about it.

I lean against the wall on the opposite side of him and cross my arms defensively again, ready for whatever pushback he’s going to give.

“It wasn’t a meeting.”

“Kind of figured. So, her mouth just... fell on yours?”

“Not exactly.”

Lucas takes a second before responding.

“You know you can sue for any sort of sexual advances,” he tells me as he jumps to all sorts of conclusions. “Are you okay? Seriously, that’s not cool of her to come on to you—“

I burst out laughing.

He looks concerned. “Are you going crazy or something? You have felt off for a while now. I mean, more off than usual. You’re always morose and in your head, but always just took that for the whole brooding persona you’re supposed to give off.”

“Yeah, I am going crazy.” I exhale. “I am completely fucking crazy.”

His eyes widen.

“Tell me why? Did she hurt you? Explain to me what she did—“

“She didn’t do anything,” I reply quickly.

“Then what—“

“I’m in love with her.” I don’t know why I blurt it out like that, but it does feel good to kind of release it into the air. Come what may.

“I’m sorry, you’re what?” Lucas is shocked.

“I’ve been in love with her for two years.”

“Two years? How?”

“When I met her, I didn’t know who she was, it was at my graduation, we were both having a bad day, I walked into an empty classroom, she was crying, one thing led to another.”

I’ve never seen Lucas’s jaw drop the way it’s dropping right now. I imagine if it could reach the floor, it would be down there, with drool coming out, tongue rolled out, followed by him, passing out.

“Another... as in sex?”

“In a classroom?” I roll my eyes, even though that’s exactly where we were heading that day. “No and I’m not giving you details. It was just...”

I search for the words.

“Just?” Lucas prods.

Fucking incredible? Unbelievable. Addicting? I can’t tell him this.

“We had chemistry,” is all I say. “Within minutes I found out it was Rae’s sister which... I mean technically you’re related a bit too.”

I wait for the backlash.

“We might be related, but I barely know her. I do know she grew up in the states, went to Harvard, and my dad cheated on my mom to be with her mom, so that’s as far as that goes, anyway...” He shakes his head. “So today? What happened today?”

“We meet sometimes when I’m having a tough day,” I try to shrug it off and make it sound like less of a deal than it is. “I’ll text her, she gets me some food, and we chill. And before you ask, no I’m not seen ever, we’re careful, and it’s not like we’re dating or sleeping together.”

“But her lipstick...” Lucas points out.

Today was a surprise event since that time two years ago.”

“Today was a surprise event?” He’s at least taking this relatively well and isn’t yelling. “So what made today so special to where you ended up getting her lipstick all over your face?”

“Keep your voice down!” My eyes look past his shoulder for any signs of someone listening.

“I’m sorry! This is a lot to take in. I wasn’t expecting my Tuesday afternoon to turn into a made for TV movie!”

Yeah, that’s fair.

“There were paparazzi, and she was worried and so she shoved me into the back seat.” I can still feel her lips on mine, still taste the way she exhaled into my mouth, like she was trying to take in my air and keep it with her.

“And made out with you to avoid scandal?” Lucas looks at me in disbelief.

The amount of cursing that flies past his lips in the next five seconds while I wait to explain is extraordinary, even by his standards. “Sorry. I’m done. Continue.”

“She was trying to hide me from them, and so she crawled on top of me.”

The look on his face is almost comical. Almost.

“They were checking out her car!” I defend.

“So she kissed you?”

“I kissed her.”

Silence.

“I assumed if they thought we were having a tryst of sorts in the back seat, they’d give us privacy because you know an idol would never be that bold—“

“But *you* were,” Lucas states.

“Well, it worked, but-”

“But?” He leans forward in anticipation, his right eye twitches. “But what?”

“We ended up making out, even when they left I kept her there because I needed more time. It was a bad idea.” Or the best idea I’ve ever had.

“So you’re saying the moving car with all the sex you weren’t having made them leave?”

I wince when he says it like that. “No, TestME were leaving the dorms, they followed them.”

“I need a drink.” Lucas does a small circle and puts his hands against the wall. “Did any of them see you? You know they hate us, they’re under our label but would set our dorm on fire if they could.”

“You’re not wrong,” I agree.

This sets Lucas off. He doesn’t like the group at all.

“Up and coming rookie group my ass,” he mutters. “Don’t tell anyone, but Ji-Woo smelled like weed when I saw him.”

He looks over at me pointedly. There’s a lot he could do with that information.

“Yes, let’s play dirty like them and just throw them under the bus the way they would to any of us if we were guilty of that.”

Lucas is silent.

“Woojin is probably the nicest out of all of them.” And he was also the Maknae at eighteen so I feel like it’s my job to protect him even if he wants to set our dorms on fire. I know the pressure he’s under all too well.

“Probably because of the weed. I’d be relaxed too.” Lucas grumbles. “Okay back to the reason we’re even having this conversation. They didn’t see you, right?”

“Nobody saw us. I swear.” I assure him.

“And you won’t go keep doing this before the comeback?”

“Wow, how’s the kettle? A little smudgy?”

He rolls his eyes. “I deserved that.”

“I know.”

A knock sounds at the door. “Guys, we gotta go in a half hour, schedule change, the label needs us down there now.” It’s Jay’s voice.

I jerk open the door and pull him into the bathroom, then slam it behind me nearly getting my thumb caught in the process.

“Where is everyone?” Kai, our other bandmate calls out.

We all peek our heads out of the bathroom door only for him to stop walking down the hall, a frown on his face. “Is this another bear conversation again?”

Last year Rae walked in on Jay and Kai explaining sex to Lucas, using one of our merchandise bears. Clothes were thrown from the bear—not us—I mean, technically by Jay, but the point is the last time we were all in a room looking suspicious, it was because of sex.

Perfect.

Jay starts coughing into his hand and waves him over. He bolts and get’s right into the bathroom and stares all of us down.

“Is this one of those things I need to know, but probably don’t want to?” He stares pointedly at my mouth. “Sookie why are your lips pink?”

“They’re still pink?” I rub at them more aggressively even though I don’t mind having her mark on my body. No, I don’t mind at all.

“Look. It’s simple. You guys do you and I won’t ask any questions,” Kai holds up his hands. “Just, make sure you don’t get caught and I’ll look the other—“

Jay punches him in the shoulder. “I just got in here and they both looked suspicious as hell!”

I glance down.

Lucas looks at the wall and rubs away a small speck of what looks like dirt.

Kai leans against the door and sighs. “Just tell me this. does it have to do with the lipstick on Sookie’s face and any of you?”

“Partial correct answer.” I mutter under my breath.

“And will it happen again?”

“No.” I say quickly wanting to add on an, *I wish*.

“All right,” Kai nods in appreciation, he’s the second oldest. “Then it’s your business, and we don’t have to talk about it. Now we need to go before Rae finds us all in here staring at Sookie’s red mouth.”

“It is his color.” Jay nods in appreciation gaining a smack in the arm from Lucas.

We all shove out of the bathroom in time for Rae to walk down the hall. “We have to go now and what the hell were you all doing in the bathroom?”

“Birthday plans.” Jay didn’t have to yell it. “So you can’t know. Let’s go!”

The van ride to management is pretty tame.

When we pull up, Assistant Solia is already waiting for us outside the doors, her eyes flicker to Kai briefly before looking away. He refuses to tell us what happened between them, but they’re downright hostile toward each other now. Even the van rides feel chilly with the two of them in the same car. It’s been like this for months.

Fans are waiting outside with signs. It blows my mind. I don’t even know how they figured out our schedules when we weren’t even supposed to be at the label today. Their dedication to stalking and knowing our every move is pretty insane. Which also makes me wonder what shifted but Solia looks too angry to ask so I leave it alone and I know the rest of the guys are tired with our already packed schedule so again, I say nothing.

Security steps out of the large all black glass skyscraper and hold the fans back creating a nice path for us while we walk in our sunglasses and face

marks through the double doors. People are holding up proposal signs, tossing stuffed bears at us.

One girl to the left is crying my name, like she's tormented or something. I give her a little head nod and she cries even harder. "*He saw me!*"

Look, I'm flattered by the attention but these are the kind of moments that I don't understand. I'm so covered up she doesn't even know if I really saw her or not. But she's still taken by the idea that maybe I did. Maybe I noticed her out of the sea of fans. It's amazing to me—this level of obsession. My mouth was on someone else's only an hour before we arrived here. And that woman is the only one that matters to me. If only people knew our hidden lives, our secrets, we let them see what they want, which is why the fall from grace is so fucking far.

Why it's so important to never make a mistake.

We're instantly escorted to the top floor where all the conference rooms are. Huh, this is interesting. I thought they were bringing us in for an extra practice or a meeting about the album again?

"What, the hell is going on?" Lucas whispers next to me, I can barely hear him under his mask, but it's Kai who grabs my elbow and guides me into the room.

Rae's stoic in front of us as we walk into the huge conference room and take in the scene. TestME, the five group members who live in the other penthouse and who've only released one album so far are sitting with smug, yet innocent grins across the conference table.

My surprise doesn't stop there.

Ari is also in the room, and she's standing next to a man I've never seen before. He looks like he's in his late twenties. He's dressed in an expensive looking black suit and is standing really close to her. Too close, if you ask me.

I hate it.

Something he says makes her laugh—which in turn, makes my skin crawl. He's pointing at papers in a black leather portfolio and smiling like an idiot. What's so funny about papers? But Ari seems to think something's funny about what he's showing her. Huh. Right then and there, I decide I hate him. I especially hate that he made her laugh.

And what really pisses me off even more are the smug guys sitting across from where we're standing like they are the best thing that's ever happened to the label.

Bull shit.

We're the ones that made it possible for them to even have a group.

They were trainees under FS for two years tops—the fact that any of them debuted that fast would be alarming except they have a similar concept and look. So the minute we started becoming the biggest cash show—that basically carried the label early on—management wanted a junior group that we could help promote and that would feed into our brand.

Smart business for management—but for us, they've been a thorn in our sides.

When we were helping them produce songs for their debut, we had no clue they'd turn on us the minute they felt a slight taste of fame.

Last year they even snubbed us at an awards show by not paying respect and it was so blatant it made the news. We of course had to smile through it and be gracious and act like it wasn't a big deal. We did such a good job that the press believed it was an accident—they were just too stunned they won best new artist.

Talk about loyalty.

I take my time and look at each member of the group. I swear if Suho doesn't stop staring at Rae in that condescending way or copying what Rae

wears, he's going to have to deal with me. I envision myself jumping across the table and punching him in the throat. The fantasy appeases my anger for only a second—what's happening inside is the exact opposite of what I'm projecting out. I'm supposed to be calm and innocent—the guy who'd never get in a fight.

And here I am, imagining how good it would feel to smack this kid in the face.

I keep my mask firmly in place and am grateful they can't see my clenched jaw.

As if we're in sync, we all do slight bows and pull out our chairs.

I know I'm not the only one angry about this group's disrespect. We are so in tune with each other that I can feel the fury emanating from each of the guys.

Rae is the most explosive. He's sitting next to me and is so tense, I'm afraid he might be pushed to react. Lucas can feel it too, and actually reaches out and grips Rae's thigh as if to say pick your battles.

I keep my face firmly glued in front of me, blindly staring out the window behind the group, trying to focus on something that doesn't make me want to commit a crime.

"How have you been?" Suho asks Rae in Korean. His voice even rubs me the wrong way.

Rae answers coolly in English. "Good, you?"

Suho answers back in English. "Perfect."

And his English is in fact, perfect.

I detest him even more since I still get nervous with mine.

I can understand it nearly perfectly now, speaking is another story. I get jittery and I feel like I'm stuttering and my thoughts get jumbled, so it's just easier to pretend I have no clue what people are talking about, that way in

interviews they don't target me. I get to keep my image of innocence and youth. I just nod my head and smile when the rest of the guys answer. That's not so hard to do. Everyone, except Kai and me, are completely fluent, though Kai's really close, he just speaks a bit slower.

The mystery guy pulls out a chair next to Ari and Solia sits on the other side of him, while the owner of our label, Siu, walks in. He's wearing black sunglasses, a black suit, and smiling from ear to ear. He's in his early fifties and his hair is graying in places—I'm sure some of it can be attributed to the stress of the business all the idol scandals.

Siu, looks around the room and addresses us. "Sorry about the changes in schedules but we had a marketing meeting and TestME were already here for another meeting with producers."

Yeah because they can't self-produce to save their asses.

I keep my mouth shut and smile.

"No problem." Rae's smile is so forced I'm surprised his face doesn't break in half from the pressure of holding it together. "What's this about? Is everything okay?"

"More than okay." Siu leans forward. "I know both of you are on strict production schedules, but we think you're going to love this idea. And the more we think about it, the more we believe it's going to be great for the brand. It'll be a good promotion for both groups—we decided to have ZL taken off the project for various reasons."

Jay actually has the nerve to cough while Kai elbows him.

ZL was, past tense, a new girl group that got caught in a shit ton of school bullying scandals. There's no way are they doing any group activities right now, the press would lose it.

"We've decided to shift gears and try something new." He nods before telling us. "Filming will start in two days. We'll use the footage for

promotions and we know this will really resonate with the fans. We'll film every day and upload twice a week to the labels YouTube channel."

Lucas leans forward and asks the question we're all thinking. "What exactly are we filming?"

We've done our own reality show and variety show leading up to a comeback, so while stressful, this kind of marketing angle is normal. Still, it's just another thing I have to worry about.

"A dating show." He grins wide.

Horrible idea.

I immediately start sweating, while Kai curses under his breath and gives Solia a look out from under his beanie.

She's staring straight ahead but her face is so pale it's like she saw a ghost.

"A dating show?" Jay repeats.

"Yes."

Jay presses.

"So we're guests on the show? Judging it? What exactly are we doing?"

Rae takes that moment to pour a glass of water and take a large sip. All eyes flicker to him, momentarily distracting us before Siu speaks again.

"Your producer will fill you in with more details and the needs of the Network and label. But, in transparency and to save time, I'll give you some explanation..."

Rae's already on his second glass of water. I'm pretty sure he wishes it was alcohol. Hell, so do I.

"You're not guests. And you're not judging anything. You're the main attraction. You'll be dating eligible single fans from your most popular fan clubs for two straight weeks."

Rae starts choking.

Lucas pats him hard on the back while Rae tries to get a grip. I'm surprised, really. This is the first time he's shown such emotion in front of executives, let alone the president of the label. His melt down is definitely helping me prevent one of my own.

"We think it's going to be unprecedented for the brand," Siu begins and his eyes take on an almost fanatical look. I can see how excited he is. "This has never been done before. Fans dating their idols? For the first time, they'll be able to live their dream and get up close and personal to you all. They'll learn your taste and who you are in the privacy of your home."

Ummm... this sounds awful.

More than awful, it sounds terrifying. Rae's face says exactly what I'm thinking inside, and Siu takes note. He lifts his hand and nods at Rae as if he's trying to reassure him. He has to know how crazy this sounds.

"Of course it will be in a controlled environment, and the show will have dignity."

Dignity? Dignity? Is he serious?

How he can use that word when he's trying to make us fall in love with one of our fanatical fans? Or just find "feelings" for some poor person on television in front of the whole world? Where is the dignity in that?

"Trust me, this will take the brand to a new level of popularity," his voice is slick, and he's back to sounding like a salesman.

Of course, no one dares speak or argue against this decision of his. No one dares tell him all the ways this sucks or how it could go wrong. We just listen and follow his orders, because that's what we're paid to do. That's what is required of us.

And... we signed our rights away for fame years ago.

"This is a dream come true for a fan," Siu's voice raises a few octaves and I know he's trying to pump us all up. He can tell the mood in the room has

really shifted. “Look at it like this. Just as your dreams came true being in this band, you’re giving a chance to these men and women who adore you to fulfill their own—you’re giving them their dream come true.”

Huh.

For a moment he has me feeling like this is just another aspirational show, but then he dashes that sentiment away with his next words...

“Imagine what this will do for sales?”

Kai smirks. I know he’s thinking the same thing as me. Lucky for us, Siu doesn’t notice.

“Obviously we’ll have complete authority of the subject matter. And a lot of it will be scripted.”

Idiot producer who smiles entirely too much at Ari pipes in at that moment.

“Not only that, after looking at the data, the fans will get a chance to be able to be a part of your world and understand your process. It humanizes you more, and the numbers don’t lie.”

“The fans will never understand our process.” The words come out before I can stop them.

The room goes silent and I know all my bandmates are staring at me in complete shock. Even Siu can’t contain his surprise. I don’t even dare glance at Ari, but I can feel her eyes glued to me.

“Yes, well,” the idiot replies slowly. “This will open their eyes a little more.”

“Of course it will,” Kai chimes in at that moment. I can hear the warning in his voice and I back down.

I go back to being the meek Sookie they know me as.

“It will help both comebacks,” he says.

I watch Ari smile at him and I can’t tell if it’s a real smile or not, but

whatever it is, I hate it. I dig my fingers into the conference table and I try to control my raging emotions.

I'm sorry," Kai asks in confusion. "Did you say *both*?"

"Yes, I did."

Kai stares at him in confusion.

We moved their next comeback to October, same as you. We thought it best that both coincide with the show." Siu grins, and I tell myself he's a good guy, he discovered us, he's like family so why is he betraying us right now? That's immediate competition from both fan groups and no matter how many times we do a dance challenge on Tik-Tok and say hi, we've known each other for five years—fandoms still go crazy thinking we're competing.

It's going to be an absolute shit show.

Which might be what they're going for, all press is good press, but this sounds like a nightmare.

Producer guy nods at Siu. "Exactly. Marketing wise, it makes sense, you'll have enough time during filming to still work on your songs, and we won't leak them. In fact, we encourage you to allow these fans to get into your process, they won't have access to you all the time, only the allotted filming time."

"So," Rae clears his throat. "We'll go back to the dorms?"

"No, the space doesn't make sense." Siu says. "We're filming at a beautiful mansion right outside the city.

"We?" I repeat.

"Both groups." Siu nods. "Will be living together for two weeks."

I don't know where it comes from, maybe deep down inside my soul, but my actual response out loud is. "Oh fuck no."

Every single member from TestME's jaw drops.

Lucas elbows me.

I briefly bow my head toward Siu, the group, every person in the room.
“Sorry, so sorry, I’m sorry.”

I’m not sorry.

Kai gives me a thumbs up under the table while Jay covers his mouth with his hands like he can barely keep his laugh in.

Rae pours another glass of water.

Lucas raises his hand. “Yeah, I’m gonna have to pass, I have a girlfriend.”

“Oh, don’t worry.” Siu nods his head in understanding. “We kept that into account, so we decided that you’ll be hosting with her.”

And the hits just keep coming, or so I think until Siu checks his watch and looks over to annoying producer guy. “Apologies I have another meeting. Producer Sung-Bin will go over all the specifics, he also has a background in law and we’re lucky enough that his fiancé was able to convince him to come on board, though it took a lot of work.”

Whatever.

Ari makes brief eye contact with me, and though it’s quick that familiar heat moves between us. She distracts herself by grabbing a glass of water. Good. I’m glad she’s as ruffled by me as I am by her. That’s the moment Jay notices—I mean, really notices. Kai gasps next to me as Ari slowly sets her glass down, revealing pink lipstick on the glass.

It faces us like indisputable proof.

Well, great. Things just got a lot worse.

“We’re also lucky to have an attorney, Ari, on set the entire time to make sure everything goes smoothly.”

She’ll be on set?

I wonder how long it would take me to hit rock bottom if I jumped from the building?

She avoids all eye contact with me as she stands and thanks Siu. She

begins walking around the table in complete boss mode. “Here’s everything you need to know legally. As I know you’re all aware, contractually you don’t have a choice but to participate unless it’s a health crisis.”

Does ‘hey attorney Ari, you’re the only fucking thing I want to have,’ count as an excuse?

I wish I could ask her that. If only to see the reactions on everyone’s face.

But I keep my mouth shut.

She places a paper in front of me.

I stare down at it.

I don’t look at her again.

Once the meeting is over and everyone signs, management piles both groups into the large elevator.

The music is jarring to my ears because it’s my own voice coming over the speaker.

TestME just stand in front of us. Normally they’d allow us out first, but I’m not surprised they just push past us and walk off the elevator.

“I can’t go to prison for murder.” Rae whispers.

“You’re too pretty.” Jay agrees.

Kai curses and grimaces after the young, arrogant group. “This is going to be a bloodbath.”

“I’m already tired from all the drama that hasn’t even commenced yet.” Lucas yawns. “This is going to be a nightmare.”

Yes. It already is. It’s my worst nightmare.

Loving someone who I can’t have. Loving someone who’s about to watch me date a bunch of women I don’t want.

Loving someone who’s forbidden in every way.

Chapter Four

Ari

I try not to watch him leave in the elevator, but I can't help it when his eyes lift and lock onto mine.

My heart sinks in dread at the thought of what I am about to be forced to endure.

I'm going to have to watch the guy I'm forbidden to love—date other girls.

I'm going to have to watch the guy I obsess about smile and flirt with other girls. What kind of nightmare is this?

What if he falls for one?

What if he realizes I'm nothing special?

I know that at the end of the day it doesn't matter, we can't ever be anything no matter how much either of us may want it...

And... he's still young. God. What am I saying? He certainly doesn't feel young—at least, not his experience level, which is shocking.

Yes, my mind immediately goes there. To his experience level.

The way he touches me. The caress of his fingertips, of his lips. The power in his grip... the way he just takes charge and owns me. I'm not kissing the youngest K-pop idol in SWT.

I'm kissing a grown ass man.

I shiver.

I need to stop thinking about it.

I walk back into the conference room and quickly start to collect all of the contracts and tuck them in the leather portfolios. My feet ache from being in heels all day and my heart hurts where it shouldn't all because I fell for the wrong person.

Don't they say the best way to get over someone is to get under someone else? Yuck. The idea is physically repulsive to me. I can't imagine anyone else touching me, let alone putting their hands on my body. I shake my head and try to steer my thoughts back to business. Of course, I stare right down at Sookie's contract. He's always done a bigger S in the beginning and a heart over his I when signing anything.

Today, it looks like he's lost all his joy and simply decided to sign like a normal human—not an idol. I know he's been having it rough lately, I just wish I knew what else was bothering him other than the stress from all the pressure this job of his brings.

I can't blame him for feeling the way he does.

He's not a child. He's a grown man with needs and wants—playing the cutesy innocent guy that he's forced to project would get old for anyone—no matter how much money and fame is being thrown at you. I'm pretty sure he physically gags when he has to do a little heart in front of his face and talk in a cutesy voice.

It's the furthest thing from what he is.

He's too deep for the persona he plays. He's too masculine. There's so much going on underneath all the layers he's forced to project to the world.

Now that's the guy I think the fans would go even crazier for.

The real Sookie.

The real Sookie that feels deeply.

But revealing that side of him is not part of the plan—at least not for now. And at the end of the day, what’s more important? Being real? Or making money? I love Siu, I think he’s a great manager but when things take off like they have been it’s easy to lose focus, it’s easy to stop asking the questions, “Is this okay? Are you good?”

I don’t blame him.

I just wish he would notice how much the group is suffering emotionally.

To cheer myself up, I think about Sookie’s unusual outbursts today and have to cover my mouth with a laugh.

It was hilarious.

I think the guys from TestME were so shocked they didn’t even know how to respond. I mean, none of us really did. And to be fair, for all the toughness they throw out, those boys from TestME are the most innocent I’ve ever met. One time someone said shit and their leader paled and asked if they were going to get fired. They put up a front because it’s SWT but on the inside I know they’re just terrified of not living up to expectations. Everyone’s playing a part in this crazy, K-pop world we live in.

Everyone. With a sigh, I grab the rest of the papers and stack them inside for filing. Once I’m done, I turn to leave the conference room and nearly bump into Producer Sung-Bin.

He grabs me by the shoulders, his hands linger longer than necessary. “I’m so sorry, I was just coming back for my jacket.”

I tilt my head at him and smile as wide as I can, masking all the feelings percolating inside of me. I can’t show the world how I feel. I can’t show how much I’m hurting inside, or how I’m thinking about someone I shouldn’t be thinking about.

“That’s okay, I’m sure it’s over by the chair.”

He grabs my elbow lightly, touching me again, before dropping his hand. “Have you thought about it?”

I quickly look down at my tan heels, eye contact reveals too much, or at least mine does. I’ve been told even though I’m a lawyer, I’m great in the courtroom, great for contracts, but when it comes to things like this, I can’t lie.

I’m just not capable of it when it comes to personal emotion. “I did think about it.”

“Why won’t you look at me?”

I sigh and slowly look up. He has jet black hair, light brown eyes, a small freckle near his bottom lip and a strong chin. He’s also muscular enough not to be too loud about it. He wears his three-piece suit—it doesn’t wear him. He also towers over me at nearly six foot three.

His stance is casual but I can see it in his eyes, he’s searching for an in, he’s waiting to see me crumble so he can get what he wants—he’s a producer straight out of Hollywood who came here because his Chaebol parents made him leave an affair he was having with an American actress.

He confided in me two years ago when I arrived.

And now he wants even more.

He wants a relationship.

He asked me out so many times I lost count until I finally gave in. We had fun, but it felt like friends. He doesn’t know how much I wish it was more so I could forget my brother’s best friend.

I shake my head. “I’m sorry, I’m just too busy and you know I don’t want to ruin our friendship.”

“Oh, that’s what this is.” He nods. I can’t tell if he’s disappointed or just more determined, his jaw flexes like he’s clenching his teeth but trying not to. “Briefly forgot, just like I forgot my jacket.” He winks and goes to pick up

the black peacoat and walks past me, giving me a whiff of Armani cologne.

He stops next to me when he returns, staring straight at the door.

“I hope he’s worth it.”

“Who?” I feign ignorance but I’m secretly freaking out. Does he know? Could he tell that my eyes kept darting to Sookie every single time I thought he wasn’t looking?

He smiles away from me and lowers his chin. “The one you’re waiting on. You know, the world doesn’t wait for all of us, Ari. Have a good night.”

He strolls out of the room and I catch a few co-workers in marketing who are loitering in the hall, stop and watch him. When he’s out of sight one covers her mouth with her hand, while the other giggles. They are definitely into him.

He’s beautiful, I’ll give him that. He’s my age, and he’s seemingly the perfect catch. If I was taking an exam and had all the right answers for what to do when trying to find your perfect partner, this guy would check every box.

But I don’t want perfection.

I don’t want someone who seems perfect for me, someone who never has a hair out of place and is always manicured. Someone who won’t show me their damaged parts I want to see the dark. I want to see that part because everyone it is wounded in some way. Everyone has those parts of themselves that they hide from the world but reveal to the one they trust. That’s real. That’s love. And I can’t trust someone who won’t show me that side. Someone who won’t let you truly see.

And as far as the perfect producer goes... how can I possibly go there with him? How can I be vulnerable with someone I know I’ll never fully be able to commit to, even if it’s just dinner, because it would never just be dinner. It would turn into more, or he’d want more, and I would maybe go

there because it's the right thing to do. It's the proper way and then I'd be stuck in a relationship where I was unfulfilled All while thinking of someone else.

It's not fair to him.

Or to me.

And as far as Sookie goes...

I know I need to somehow move past this; I need to move past us—but it's hard. I just wish there was some manual to tell you what to do when you're so lost.

And.

I.

Am.

Lost.

I'm lost in my desire and love for a man I can never have.

I close my eyes for a second and just let that seep into my brain. I tell myself he's about to go on a dating spree and he can very well meet someone that will take his attention away from me. My heart cries out over that possibility. It hurts to think I could be so easily replaced.

Chill, Ari, I tell myself. Just take it one minute at a time.

I straighten my spine and leave the conference room and start walking toward my office. My phone goes off in my t hand.

I stop and look down.

SK

WTF

Yeah. My heart gets really happy when I see his text. I can't help it.

But he's definitely pissed. I knew he would be.

I quickly text back.

ME

I had no control over this, all I did was look

over the contracts.

SK

No control? You couldn't at least warn me of what was coming? Even after we kissed?

I can feel my cheeks burn at the reminder.

ME

You know I'm not allowed to do that.

SK

No? I thought I meant a little more to you, but I guess I was wrong. I'll see you on set while I'm dating random girls for press. You know this sounds like an actual nightmare come to life, but then again, I could always find a girl my age who actually acknowledges me and who I matter to.

I almost throw my phone. The thought of him finding another girl...

No.

No. I can't go there right now. It's too much to contemplate.

ME

That's not fair, you know what would happen, besides...

I almost don't type it.

And then I can't help myself.

He hurt me, I want to hurt him back. As I look around and hear the laughter of my co-workers and really think about the situation, I realize the only person that can end this is me.

SK

?

ME

Besides, it was just a fling, right?

I want him to say no so bad.

Instead.

He says nothing.

I would prefer yelling, but all Sookie gives me is absolute silence. Horrible silence that makes your brain go to all the dark places... thinking all the worse thoughts.

And I only have myself to blame.

I hate myself.

The rest of the day goes by in a blur. I force a smile and try to stay busy but the amount of times I stare at a text gone unanswered, is obscene. I wonder if I just ruined the best thing that ever happened to me all because I was afraid.

All because I told myself I was protecting his career.

When really, I wonder if I was really trying to protect my heart.

Chapter Five

Sookie

I've never wanted to throw my phone so much in my entire life.

Instead, I stare at the screen and wonder how many cracks I'll take to demolish the words I just read.

Fury washes over me. Fury and anger. And goddamn outrage over her words.

A fling?

I have ink on my body from this "fling" I have scars on my soul from this "fling" I have wounds still bleeding from this "fling."

Fling?

My breathing becomes erratic and I quickly realize that I'm in a bad place, worse than before. I can't stop it. I can't breathe... I can't.

I drop my phone and stumble toward my bed and narrowly miss my dresser.

The door opens.

Jay walks in, takes one look at me and lunges for me, pulling me into his arms. "Hey, just breathe, breathe, in and out, there you go, count to three."

I start to count in my head.

One. She's gone. She was never here.

Two. I need to let go.

Three. I'm lost.

I exhale and lean against Jay. He's always wearing this heavy cologne I can't place, but right now it smells familiar and safe, so I cling to him while he holds me. I can't believe how broken I feel from her words. Pieces of my soul are getting ripped from me in real time, to the point I think if I looked in an actual mirror, I would see my entire body and soul getting torn apart.

A fling?

"Hey." She held my hand. "It's going to be okay."

"It's hard." I confess and look up at her with sweat pouring down my face. "I want this but it's so fucking hard!"

I break.

And she holds the pieces.

She grabs me by the shoulders and shoves me into the corner of the practice room. "You won't break."

"Why?"

"Because." She reaches for my hand. "I'm holding you."

I collapse against her shoulder and sob, and then I do the stupidest thing in existence when facing my hero.

I fall in love. "

"Hey." His warm arms wrap around me. "I don't fully know what's going on, but what I do know is this: you're going to be okay. And if anyone, any human in existence, doesn't realize how incredible you are, then they aren't worth it. They should sacrifice the world for you, or at least offer it before breaking your heart by trying to push you away. So allow the sacrifice, and know you're okay."

I grip his forearms and try to let his words in. I try to hear the logic, the truth in them, but when your heart hurts bad, when someone shatters it's hard to let the light in. The darkness somehow feels more comforting.

"You know," I lower my head and try to lighten the mood. "Even you hugging me is a scandal or thirst trap, in our own dorm."

He hugs me tighter. "Yeah, well you're not really my type, you're too messy and I swear if you leave one more wet towel on the floor again I will murder you in your sleep and ask for forgiveness later, then bury you with said towel."

It makes me laugh, then again Jay always makes me laugh. "You and wet towels, so much damage there."

"We all have our things."

I cling to him tighter, then turn in his arms and hug him. "You're the best big brother I could ask for."

"Damn right I am." He pats me on the back. "You don't have to talk about it, but I'm here."

I pull back and frown down at the floor. "Do you ever just think it's not enough? It's exhausting, living this life? I can't help but feel like the joy keeps getting sucked dry. We go from these incredible highs, to the lowest of the low, and then we're expected to say fucking thank you."

"Grace did a number on you teaching you so many curse words in English." Jay runs his hands through his hair and sits down on his bed. "And I have no answer for that, you know I have my own... background, damage, whatever you want to call it, but I do know this, at the end of the day if you only helped one person would it still be worth it?"

I sigh and collapse next to him on the bed. "Stop making sense."

"Would it?"

I take a deep breath. "Yes."

“So what you do has worth, but that doesn’t mean people are allowed to define your worth, if that makes sense. Just continue to be who you are and if people can’t accept that, then that’s on them. I know it’s hard for you. Being the youngest and the Maknae—there’s a lot of pressure in that role you have to play. I get it. But the role will change because that’s just what happens. That’s just what time brings. All this... all of this reality will be so different in six months from now—that’s the only thing that’s guaranteed in our world. It’s always moving. Always shifting. Always changing. You just have to learn how to flow with it. And you’re young, you’ll find your way.

I look over at him.

“With or without her.”

The way he says that makes me feel like someone’s squeezing my chest again. I can’t imagine without...

But... he’s not wrong.

I’m quiet, probably too quiet, I can feel the words on my tongue. I can see her in my mind’s eye, her smile, her beauty, the way she would take me out when I needed support and now—now I’m going to be forced into a dating scene that’s not even real while she watches.

And doesn’t give a shit about it.

She calls whatever we had a fling, a bucking fling—when it was the most important moment of my life, defining even. A fling... while I’ve been waiting for my contract to end so I can ask her to go on a date. While I’ve been counting down the days for the contract to end.

I’m just a fling.

And if that’s how she sees me, then I’ve been delusional for a long time now. I’m mad at myself for suffering this entire time, only to be told that she’s never seen me as anything more than a fun hook up.

I get that the stakes are high, I’m not stupid. I get all the reasons why we

can't be together—but I was always under the delusional assumption that *those* reasons were why we couldn't be... I thought I meant more to her. But now I know I didn't.

Maybe it's better this way. Maybe this will make me hate her instead...

My mind rebels against even the thought of that.

I rest my head against Jay's shoulder and let out a frustrated sigh. "I think I need to get laid."

He bursts out laughing.

"Wow, not where I saw you going with this conversation."

"Well, I did."

"Look, the idea definitely has merit, but I know you—"

"What's that supposed to mean?" I cock a brow at him.

"You're a feelings guy. It won't help. Broken hearts don't heal from P or V."

I have to laugh.

"We should make shirts." I say. "It's a great slogan."

"I think so. And then we can compose a song and shock the entire industry. It would be a hit like no other. We have a solid marketing plan now., I'll just be right back after I pitch that to management."

"I love you, man."

"We might be a group, but you're my family." He says it so simply. "Even if I want to fight you over towels, at the end of the day, I will always have your back. Now go eat some food, you're losing weight and not in a good way."

I sigh. "I just want a Dorito."

"Say that out loud and they'll just give you a carrot."

"I hate carrots."

He ruffles my hair.

“Go eat something. Then go rest for a bit, and after you get rid of some of that exhaustion go write your feelings down on paper. Who knows, maybe you’ll create our next hit because of this heartbreak Also, that new tattoo? What’s it about?”

I look down at my arm. I’m branded by her forever.

It’s her.

It’s always been her.

I shake my head. “It’s nothing. It’s just a picture. I should never have gotten it.”

It breaks me to say it. But right now I wish I had never met her. I wish...

There are a lot of things I wish for.

Like I wished for us.

But there is no us, not anymore.

“You regret a tattoo?” Jay looks even more curious.

I bite my lip. They feel sore from the amount of times I bit them to keep my mouth shut in front of the boss—and yeah, they’re still swollen from her.

From our kiss.

“Happens, right?” I tell him.

“Well, you branded yourself with it for a reason,” Jay says. “And you know that shit is permanent. It ain’t going anywhere.”

I can only wish.

Chapter Six

Ari

Silence.

I used to love it, now I think I'd prefer Sookie to scream at me, to throw a chair, to do anything but stay silent.

It's been nearly two weeks and the minute I sent that text, however hurtful I know it was, I think I expected him to fight back.

I drove a knife inside him, twisted it and expected him to push against the blade while bleeding and hurting.

I adjust my black tuxedo jacket and stare down at my casual grey jeans. I'm wearing taupe heels. My hair's pulled back into a tight ponytail and I even put on my diamond studs.

I don't have one hair out of place. I wanted to look professional but classy and... Yeah, I wanted to look really good for when Sookie sees me and I have to suffer through women pining after him and trolling into the mansion.

They're all beautiful, young, hip, most of them are wearing designer brands and the ones that aren't are dressed so skillfully that I would never know in the first place.

We haven't started filming yet but everything's been signed. I'm just standing there like an idiot waiting for the film crew to start filming B-roll,

basically background that's not even background since they'll use it and edit it however they want to.

I've come to learn that reality is never truly reality.

It's procured, which is where I come in—to make sure that legally we're okay in using what the directors want to use. Fame after all, comes at a cost and sometimes that means you become the villain even if you're Snow White.

The girls are escorted to the living room while I watch. There are five in total since Lucas and Grace are already together and hosting which just adds to the competition part of it. They get to pick and choose from both groups, like an idol buffet.

“This,” comes Lucas's voice, “is the seventh circle of actual hell.”

He looks down at his cue cards then back up at me. His hair's red and pulled back into a ponytail and he's wearing more jewelry than me, plus they put eyeliner on him to bring out his eyes. He looks like he's ready to go onstage with his ripped jeans, leather jacket, and low white V-neck shirt.

He looks hot. I know why the fans go crazy for him.

“How many rings do you have on your fingers?” I point down and try to offer him a smile. “Are we sure they aren't going to blind everyone watching?”

Grace, his girlfriend walks up with her hair in a similar ponytail. She's wearing a red crop top and baggy jeans, she's a beautiful woman. “This is actual hell.”

Lucas smirks when he hears the words. “Ah, you read my mind, but just imagine if I was out there actually—”

“--getting murdered in your sleep?” She says it so sweetly I do a double take. She shrugs. “What? I don't share.”

“Not even food.” He whispers under this breath.

“It was my fry and you know it.”

“Technically, it was on a shared plate of fries and on my side after you drew a line with the ketchup.”

I snort out a laugh. “You drew a ketchup line?”

She nods seriously. “Like a straight up crime scene.”

“And you?” I poke at Lucas. “You stole her fry?”

“Ah and you...” Lucas cocks his head to the side and narrows his eyes at me before telling me in the most real voice I’ve ever heard from him. “Well, you stole Sookie. So, I guess we’re even.”

I freeze.

Grace’s eyes widen as she looks between us. Lucas shouldn’t have said that out loud. He shouldn’t have even confirmed what’s been going on between Sookie and I. The fact that he did means he’s angry on Sookie’s behalf. How much does Grace even know? What am I thinking? They’re in love, he probably tells her everything. He looks away from me like he didn’t just drop a bomb.

“Ummm,” Grace grips his arm and singsongs, “Cameras, Lucas, remember.”

He leans into her, then pulls her in for a hug and glares at me. “I remember.”

Wow. Things got hostile really quick.

Can I blame him though? I know he’s being protective of Sookie. And they all have enough pressure, it’s only natural for them to snap at people that are closest to them, and apparently that’s me.

I’m ready to clap a hand over his mouth or at least somehow defend myself, explain, though I don’t even know what I’d say, but I’m saved when the rest of the guys walk out. The girls immediately start whispering and hugging each other like they’re actually going to be friends once this show

starts.

Laughable.

“It’s going to be war and there will be blood.” I accidentally say it out loud.

Meet your idol.

Date them.

Get on TV.

More like, give us all the drama so we can promote the album in the sickest way possible—legally.

Lucas clears his throat and whispers under his breath. “Remember, we’re all on mics.”

Leave it to the one younger than me to remind me to be a professional. “Right.”

He leans in while the crew mic’s up the other guys and whispers. “His eyes had tears in them.”

I can’t believe he just told me that and I can’t believe that he knows so much. How much does Sookie even talk and how has Lucas not said anything yet to my brother?

Because if Rae knew, he’d be on my ass immediately.

“Just saying.” Lucas turns on his mic so I can’t respond back and I know he does it on purpose. He’s angry for his friend, for his band mate but he doesn’t get it, he’s too young to understand the ramifications. Even in a perfect world, this wouldn’t work.

I did the right thing.

I repeat this to myself over and over again until I see Sookie walk out and glance over at me. His energy takes up the whole space. He’s all that I see. All that matters to me. But he doesn’t look too thrilled to see me. No, he looks downright hostile. He shakes his head and looks down at his shoes.

Completely ignoring me.

I hate the sick feeling I get.

I try to push all the emotions away and instead concentrate on business. But of course, his business is the one that matters the most. I notice how his shirt is pulled up and I'm shocked. They're actually allowing him to have his full sleeve exposed on camera. Strange, normally they make him cover up some of them so people don't speculate if he's dating even though he can't. Or think of him as older.

The other guys are showing off their tattoos too and most of them look like they're ready to go have a party not film a television show.

SWT look like bad boys.

Hot, bad boys.

The other group walks in and I almost laugh.

Somebody missed the memo or maybe this is on purpose?

They're literally dressed in matching school uniforms, khaki pants, blue shirts, black and blue ties—who the hell dressed them? They look virginal and pure and to me definitely not as appealing as SWT.

I look around at the crew in surprise. Was this approved by wardrobe? Did someone actually choose this? But then, I start to study them some more. Both groups. It looks like the good guys versus the bad guys? TestME look ready to go enroll in University. The leader Suho even has black-rimmed glasses on and I know for a fact he doesn't need them.

Rae stands on the other side of me looking like he's going to ride a Harley and get in some serious trouble tonight. The polar opposite of Suho.

Huh.

I glance over at the girls who are taking selfies before handing over their phones for confiscation during the first six-hour filming schedule.

"This blows." Rae mutters in annoyance.

I elbow him. “You’re on a mic and the minute we start filming we’re allowed to use anything you say for you or against you.”

“Put on your lawyer pants today, did you?” He lets out a heavy sigh.

I shove him a bit again and say under my breath. “Nice earring, it’s longer than mine.”

And it really is, it dangles at least a half inch from his ear and is in the shape of a cross.

“Nice jacket, you going to a job interview?” He retorts back.

I almost stick out my tongue.

He grins.

“All right,” The director, Simon, walks out in front of everyone. “Welcome everyone. We are so excited to be here and get this show going. I know this might be awkward at first, but I promise you’ll get used to the cameras. After a day or two you won’t even know they’re there.”

“Yeah right,” Rae mutters under his breath. “You never get used to being invaded.”

Director Simon keeps talking. “So here’s how it’s going to go, we’re going to introduce all of the fans and give a bit of backstory—pre-taped packages we’ve already filmed and edited. Once that’s finished, we’ll have you go outside where you’ll be able to get to know each other better. The fans will get to vote on their first choice—the idol you’ve been wanting to date.”

I can see how excited the fans are by this idea. They can barely contain themselves.

“Please remember, we’re here in a respectful way. Violence and vulgar language won’t be tolerated and you will be asked to leave if the rules are broken. Now, let’s film a good show!”

Everyone claps in excitement.

I notice that Sookie keeps his hands at his sides and stares straight ahead like he's seen a ghost or like he's about to be taken to his execution. I'm sure it doesn't help that I'm here to witness this farce as well, and I'm sure he has strong feelings for me that aren't the pleasant kind. The cameras start rolling, and the first girl steps forward.

"Introduce yourself, please." The director says.

She doesn't even look at him. She exudes a crazy confidence that a lot of the fans have that I find astounding. It doesn't look like anyone is going to get in the way of what she wants. She's wearing a black dress and killer black heels with spikes on them. Her face is the perfect v shape and her hair's cut to her chin. Her makeup is so light I can't tell if she even has any on and her lips are pink without looking too overdone.

"Hi," she says in Korean. "I'm Iseul, and I was Sookie's girlfriend in high school. I'm currently enrolled at University but haven't ever forgotten about him, so even though we haven't made our picks yet, I choose him and I hope you vote for me to be with him on this first challenge. I want Sookie. I have always wanted him from the moment he kissed me for the first time—he was—was my first kiss." She smiles and then looks over at the camera. "So as long as everyone is okay with me being this bold." She smiles behind her hand like she's shy and laughs, oh give me a break. "I'll claim him again. Any objections?"

Yes. I have an objection.

I object to you in general.

And stop looking at him like that... I look away from the annoying fan and right over to Sookie.

He's staring at her but says nothing. It's like he's frozen in time and I can't tell what he's thinking.

Director Simon steps forward. "We'll take that into consideration for your

first date remember voting is live so that also calculates into your ability to be with him. As I'm sure you know, many ladies will be interested in multiple group members, it's only fair each of you get a chance for at least one group date before making your final choice. ”

She nods and giggles again behind her hand, in an annoying way that makes me want to take her by the hair and throw her out on the street. *Get a grip, Ari, I keep telling myself. You need to control these raging emotions!*

I look back over at Sookie to judge his reaction to the annoying girl. But still he just stands there, giving nothing away. I hate that I can't tell what's going on inside him. I hate that he seems to be hiding that part of himself from me.

But he is.

And he's just standing there as perfect as ever, just as he's been trained to be. An innocent star ripe for plucking.

The rest of the girls introduce themselves, and it's barely tolerable for me so I can't imagine how it must be for the bands. I swear two of the girls look ready to either pass out or eat both groups alive buffet style. One of them is in a cute white headband and overalls with a long sleeve blue shirt underneath. I can't tell if she's adorable or just too innocent looking. Her eyes zero in on Lucas while he asks her questions, all while Grace stands next to him.

She must hate this even more than I do.

Grace gets to ask her own question, and it's a good one. She asks her what her goals are and we all wait with bated breath.

The girl tilts her head and smiles slyly. She twirls a long strand of her hair around her finger and acts like an innocent before she declares war.

“To steal your boyfriend.”

Grace's jaw drops. Her face turns red and I know it's probably taking everything she has to keep her mouth shut and not launch herself like a

missile at the insipid girl.

The two females lock eyes and Lucas looks from Grace to the contestant in horror before masking his feelings and smiling at the fan.

Lucas laughs. “You’re funny.”

She grins wide, and I swear to God I wouldn’t be surprised if she had fangs for teeth.

“But I wasn’t joking,” and then she laughs again, throwing everyone off. “I knew you’d get my sense of humor, Lucas.”

If it’s possible, Grace turns even redder.

Uh oh.

Stalker party of one.

I make a mental note to look more into her past or at least put a little red flag warning on her as a contestant. I ran background checks on all of them, but you never know—a crazy can always slip through the cracks. It’s part of my job if they start to say problematic things, I literally give them a red or green check mark next to their picture, for the safety of the guys and for their own safety.

“All right.” Director Simon claps his hands together, he already looks tired as he runs his hands through his dark hair and adjusts his black-rimmed glasses. We haven’t even really begun. “Let’s cut for a quick break. There are snacks in the green room, you’ll find it just next to the stairs. Remember, you must keep your mics off if you aren’t actively filming or interviewing and we’ve already texted you your daily schedule of when the cameras will be on in your rooms and around the house. Thanks for all your work and let’s reset and move things around for the girls and then we’ll send the guys back to their house next door first!”

All the girls are escorted out while the guys just stay there and look ready to eat paint chips and slam their heads against the wall.

I walk up to Rae and squeeze his shoulder. “You good?”

He jerks away and shoves his hands in his pockets while Grace gives him a sad look. I’m glad he has her as a friend even though I’m pretty sure the slight crush still remains.

Lucas whispers in a low voice. “Do they expect us to actually go in there and eat snacks with them? No way in hell I’m subjecting myself to that. They aren’t filming any of that.”

I sigh and cross my arms. “Legally, they can’t.”

“Sure...” Sookie snorts, surprising everyone.

Especially me. I can’t believe how bad I needed to hear his voice.

Grace reaches out, “Sookie—“

He brushes her hand aside and gets up.

“—I’m going to take a walk.”

Chapter Seven

Ari

Sookie's words are heard by the Director Simon. He looks up from the papers he's examining.

"Go get some fresh air but just remember you only have a fifteen minute break."

"From hell." Jay whispers under his breath.

The way he says it sends actual chills down my spine, despite me wanting to kind of laugh over it.

So far, the other idol group seems to have been stunned into actual traumatized silence. I'm shocked, really, considering the last encounter with them and how arrogant they were. But things have definitely shifted.

Lucas walks over and slams a hand down on Suho's shoulder. "Yes, baby bird, you're about to get thrown to the wolves. How does it feel to be objectified sexually but have like no real experience? Terrifying? Kind of make you want to run away with your little feathers floating around your head? Get used to it and buckle up, that was just the beginning."

I want to chime in and tell them to strap in because from experience I know just how bad it's going to get. And it's going to get bad. They'll be exploited to the extreme for their album releases and legally there is nothing I

can do about it other than just make sure everyone stays safe.

The Maknae of the group actually leans down on his haunches and covers his face with his hands like he doesn't know what else to do. He looks so young in his school uniform I actually feel bad for him. He didn't ask for this... well, he did ask for the fame and money part—but this is entirely different.

But we all know that you never truly get it until you're in it.

“Bro,” Lucas shakes his head and laughs. He has no mercy for them. “You gonna cry?”

Suho shoves Lucas in the chest. “No, asshole, he just has a girlfriend.”

I freeze.

Everyone goes silent.

Ji-Woo slowly looks up, part of his dark hair covering his face. “Great timing. Thanks for that, shitface.”

Jay elbows Kai. “He cussed.”

Kai sighs and runs both hands through his hair nearly messing up his dark man bun. “Yeah, we heard. Everyone heard.”

“Whatever.” Ji-Woo gets up and stomps off.

All Lucas has to say is. “That sucks.”

“Eat. Shit.” Ji-Woo shoves against Lucas chest and goes in the opposite direction.

Rae crosses his arms. “I give you guys like maybe two years tops before you disband, you can't just curse in front of staff.”

I awkwardly try to clear my throat.

Rae rolls his eyes. “Sookie's never done that before.”

Eric shares a look with Chul then shrugs. “Maybe he's just tired of shit.” He grins, knowing he said it loud enough for people to look up and give all of us side eye.

My job is going to be hard reigning these guys in. People always leak things out and the last we need is negative gossip about the groups who are supposed to be best friends and mentors to the new younger group. And the bullying...

Shit. See now I'm the one cursing.

I point at each of them individually, Grace included. "Behave, and Grace."

"Yup." She grins, then her smile falls when I glare.

She holds her hands up. "I'll reign them in too, don't worry."

"Good girl." Lucas winks at her.

I cover my eyes. "NOT what I meant!"

I walk off to some chuckles from both groups which is a bit surprising, only to see Sookie outside leaning against one of the many balconies.

He looks serious.

Much too serious for someone his age

But then, he's never really felt his age. He's always seemed so much older, wiser even, with all the feels.

I clear my throat so he knows I'm approaching and stand beside him without looking in his direction. "You good?"

He's silent, then lowers his gaze to his hands which are bracing the balcony, only to lift his head back up and jerk in my direction. He's so handsome, it's unfair. His eyes always seem shy when he's talking to fans, but when he talks to me it's like he sees not just everything, but wants me to know he sees right *through* everything.

"Yeah." He rasps out. "I'm perfect."

I nod my head solemnly. He doesn't sound perfect, but I'm not going to argue with him right now.

"I'm glad," is the best I can do.

He snickers at me and shakes his head, suddenly mad, letting me in to see

his anger.

“My ex is here,” he says with great annoyance. “And I’m a fling. Isn’t that just perfect? At least you didn’t call me a booty call, then again you wouldn’t know what that’s like with me nor will you ever. Pity, maybe when you’re old and gray and with some accountant with a stick up his ass you’ll think back on the time when I could have been the one biting it.”

My jaw drops.

He walks off as I collapse against the railing.

I am officially in hell.

Chapter Eight

Sookie

I can't believe she's here.

I remember her oh too well.

The touches.

The kisses.

The awkwardness.

"This okay?" I asked while brushing her shoulder and fumbling with her tank top, all while trying to figure out what the hell I was doing at sixteen. I tugged down the white strip across her shoulder, my hands ached as I grazed my fingertips against her skin.

She exhaled while I nearly stopped breathing.

This.

She leaned into me and I knew, I would give up everything for her, I would give up being an idol, I would give up my lessons that my parents put thousands of dollars into.

All for her exhale.

"Yes." She whispered as she fell back on the bed.

I hovered over her, pressing her arms against the mattress. "Are you sure?"

We were sixteen.

Idiots.

And yet I kept talking, kept moving, kept thinking that it would be okay.

She nodded her head. "Please."

I reached for her head and pulled her into me. I had no condom, I had no protection between us. All I had was us.

And I told myself.

I justified what we were doing.

It was okay, because we were in love.

Months later, I realized how damning love could be.

Because she miscarried, and at sixteen I covered it up. I told everyone I was innocent, and my label believed it.

Poor, innocent, Sookie.

Me.

A guy who's never even kissed a girl.

Except, I got one pregnant and almost lost everything before I even debuted.

But sure, yes, so innocent.

Sookie.

Innocent Sookie.

I'm pissed, irritated as hell as I storm back into the house, momentarily forgetting that since filming has already commenced, they've probably turned on all cameras. I hope the ones outside aren't on, because they would have heard everything between Ari and I.

I'm relieved when I see one of the PA's walk out with tech. Thank God. The film crew's still checking some equipment and setting things up for the rest of the girls interviews.

"Quiet on set!" Simon calls again while Lucas and Grace walk up and

read the lines from the prompter. Lucas goes first and asks one of the fans what her ideal type is and what she's hoping to get out of this experience.

She has a white headband pulling her dark hair back, she's wearing a yellow dress and black ballet flats.

She's officially a bumble bee.

Her dress even has polka dots.

I almost scowl at my own attitude, but doesn't she realize we're men? I've never been one of those guys that's attracted to Aegyo, or basically when girls pitch their voices to sound innocent and cute, overuse the word Oppa, pinch their own cheeks, or look at me like it's going to work.

To me it seems somewhat manipulative and in my experience girls only used it to get something they wanted—it was never about me.

I'm still frowning as she answers. "Well, before you got a girlfriend, I guess." She giggles behind her hand. "I'd say you, but I really like guys who treat a girl the way they deserve to be treated."

Grace is clearly irritated. We're three hours in and I'm already ready to start laughing under my breath. She has a temper on her and anytime anyone comments on their relationship in front of her left eye flinches.

Only me and the guys really notice it and give her crap about it all the time. Besides people assume since she knew basically no Korean last year, that she doesn't really understand it—but we've been helping her and she's picked up on it extremely fast -so safe to say she picked up on every damn word.

"That's," Grace's smile is so forced, and there goes the left eye. She looks away. "So very sweet, and how should a woman be treated?"

"Like a princess of course." The girl, her name escapes me because I don't care, points at herself and giggles again, Gold help me if she does a little curtsy before a short bow and—son of a bitch.

Note to self, stay away from polka dot headband girl, far, far away.

I endure another hour of torture from the girls, we're supposed to be observing to see which ones we'd be interested in partnering with for the first competition but I'm pretty sure I'm not going to be lucky enough to get a choice since my ex is here and they'll want drama.

“Cut.”

I snap out of it while Rae walks over to me and whispers under his breath. “Her left eye almost popped out of it's socket.”

I smirk. “I was almost scared for Lucas for no reason other than she needed something to hit and the closest object was his hand which was dangerously close to his—“

“—Dick.” Jay comes up and shoves his hands into his pockets while both me and Rae look over at him. “What? It was, it's not like I was looking, I'm just saying, I saw a very real terror in his eyes.” He nods like he has experience with having a girl or guy smack him in that area.

Jay, always a semi mystery.

Kai comes up behind him and suddenly ducks. Gripping him by the shoulders. “Is she still here?”

I frown. “Gonna have to be more specific there are a lot of girls in this haunted mansion.”

“Solia.” He ducks again, “Shit, sorry I thought I saw her dark hair.”

“Half the girls have dark hair.” Rae points out. “You good man?”

Kai stands to his full height and tuck his hair behind his ears. “Yeah, totally, fine, everything is fine.”

I cough and then smile above his head. “Oh hey Solia, we were just looking for you.”

Kai completely pales, squeezing his eyes shut.

Rae's laughter is music to my ears. “He's dicking around, Kai, relax.”

“Dick,” Jay sighs. “Word of the day.”

“Why?” Lucas yawns behind his jeweled hand, they really went all out to make him look the bad boy roll, meanwhile, I’m pretty sure production would rather put a bow on my head or give me polka dots headband.

I shudder again.

Grace joins us with her arms crossed.

I smile at her.

Her eyes narrow.

“And on that note.” Rae holds up his hands in mock surrender. “We should go get some rest and food with the hostage enemy camp forced to stay in the same house.”

We all slowly peer over at TestME.

They’re fraternizing with the girls a bit, not getting too close so they at least know to be careful while the girls all laugh behind their hands, or giggle is more like it. I think I’m going to be sick.

“So many hormones.” Lucas says.

“So little time, apparently.” Rae adds. “I’m out. I’m starving, oh and Grace, do us all a huge favor and if you do manage to sneak in or out of the house and into Lucas’s room can you do us a huge solid and draw a detailed map of how to do it so we don’t get caught on camera.”

Grace hold ups her hand to Rae.

Frowning, he slaps it while they do their weird handshake. I’m so happy they’ve put the past behind them, now they act like angry siblings, hilarious if you ask me. “Please, I’m no amateur, I already emailed you guys not just a detailed version of how to avoid most of the camera, but I drew a treasure map to a hidden stash of soju hidden in the field out back by the swings.”

“So many small blessings in such a loud package.” Kai winks at her.

Lucas gives Kai a look that says back the hell off even though I know it’s

all in good fun.

“Let’s go.” Rae sounds as tired as I feel. Slowly and surely we all walk past TestME and out the doors, they follow us like little angry puppies who grew up with nothing but privilege.

Chul shoves past me, elbowing me and then smiling down at the concrete. “Sorry, bro, it was an accident.”

I just keep walking until we get into the actual house we’re supposed to be staying in and get bumped by the rest of the members as I look up at our new prison.

It’s super modern with a huge stairway that explodes down the right and left, only to lead into an entry way that has a full view of the living room, outdoor kitchen, and infinity pool. The doors leading out are envelope doors that are already folded back. Torches are lit around the pool and a spread of alcohol and food is out front.

“It’s like we stepped onto Love Island,” Rae says next to me under his breath while the younger group runs forward and starts eating and pouring drinks.

“Yeah.” I’m not feeling it. “I think if it was Love Island there’d be more love.”

“Filming.” Kai says under his breath. “Everything you do and say can be used against you.”

“So no yelling, oh hey dip shit...” Lucas says not so helpfully. Damn, I need to get my attitude under control.

I shoot him a glare for good measure and notice he’s clearly baiting me with the knowing smile on his face. He probably, really does know the most, which is all Grace’s fault considering our friendship. “I would never.”

I force a smile I don’t feel. “I’m the innocent one, remember?”

Yeah, because that didn’t come across like a total lie.

His raised eyebrows say it all as he follows Jay toward the food and drinks outside, while I'm still waiting near the doorframe, ready to bolt in the opposite direction.

At least they're giving us alcohol to numb the pain of what's about to happen, I'm not sure I like it, but I don't really have a choice as I follow the rest of the guys.

Everyone's playing nice, but I know that it's going to be horrible living with the other group.

They hate us, we hate them.

And now we have to play like we actually enjoy each other for two straight weeks. We have to do this in case we lose both fandoms to an all-out war, because that's what happens when fandoms fight, not just hate posts, but all out fake or fabricated photos and text messages.

If we don't play nice, we could end up becoming serial killers. Not that I wouldn't put it past at least Suho to stage some fake blood drop a knife and say I stabbed him.

He glances over at me, his dark long hair covering one eye while the other stares me down like he knows exactly what I'm thinking while he plots ways to do things behind cameras to make us all suffer.

He's one of the oldest at twenty-one and has the maturity of a small pebble that gets stuck in your shoe as you walk across concrete. At least that's how he's always been perceived, then again, I appear to be pure as the driven snow, so we all have our parts to play.

Sometimes, I think mine sucks the worst.

Eric clears his throat. "How about we play a drinking game?"

Might not be the worst idea. "Sure." I bite. "Let's."

"Aw." Kwan, the main rapper starts to chuckle.

"What?" I ask. "What's funny?"

“Oh, you.” Kwan responds, taking a shot of tequila. “Feeling yourself suddenly? Didn’t they put you in a pink bow last year... like on purpose?”

“I like pink.” My only response. So lame.

He jerks his head toward me. “You gay man? You ever even touched a girl? No judgement, it’s just good to know where you’re at.”

Okay now he’s being homophobic, I dart toward him only to have Jay of all people pull me back with his hand. “Let’s go for it, but don’t be pissed when your game sucks.”

Suho rolls his eyes while Eric looks between all of us like he was just trying to make friends, when we all know that we will never be friends. None of us will ever be brothers, friends, we’re just label mates and that’s even a stretch. Every label in Korea builds off of successful groups and tries to mimic them to become the next big thing, using the same formula, I wonder how exhausting that must be when you’re the one doing it, because it’s already exhausting being the one experiencing it.

Kai clears his throat. “Let’s play never have I ever... each person gets a shot in front of them, we play only one round so we don’t die from alcohol poisoning, fill the shots halfway, if you haven’t done it you don’t drink, if you have you do, simple, right? Each person gets to say one statement or question.”

Chul’s the first to say something. “Well, that means I get to go first since nobody else has said anything during this extremely comfortable five second silence.”

Kwan speaks up first. “I hate everyone here including my own bandmates.”

“Aw, I feel warm now, in my soul,” Lucas says under his breath. “All right so apparently you are first now, have at it, hater who’s gonna hate.”

Kwan shrugs. “Never have I ever lied to management.”

Lucas looks at me, I look at him, then at Kai and Rae, finally Jay just looks down at his feet while we all silently take a shot.

The other guys just smirk at us.

Okay, perfect, we're liars.

I hate this game already.

"To be fair," Rae pipes up. "We didn't lie to be deceitful but to protect someone."

"Yes," Chul nods. "Sex, always use protection."

I know he's referencing Lucas and Grace and I want to punch him in the face so bad that my knuckles burn with the need for it, instead I just clench my jaw while Chul goes next. "Never have I ever kissed a guy."

Everyone looks around while Jay casually like the boss he is just tosses back his shot and shrugs. "What?"

"Was he hot?" Kai just has to ask.

I chuckle under my breath while Jay nods.

Rae just shakes his head like what am I even going to do with these guys and Lucas says nothing, because unlike others there, we know the details more than anyone.

My heart sinks a bit.

This industry is tough.

Peoples insecurity are almost as dangerous as their ego. Insecurity makes people fight, ego makes them win, and in the end, you're left on one of each side trying to remember why you're so hell bent on being the one on top when you're supposed to be partners in an unforgivable world that doesn't even allow you to cry.

Jay goes next. "Never have I ever skipped practice even while sick."

Every member of TestME takes a shot, the rest of us basically stand there and peacock a bit.

“Never have I ever,” Eric looks between all of us. “Hooked up with a trainee.”

Jay takes a shot, Rae grumbles something under his breath, takes his shot, followed by Kai, Suho, Ji-Woo, and Kwan.

I nod. “Hey at least you’re in good company.”

“Never,” Kwan interrupts quickly, “Have I ever, kissed a friend’s family member.”

“What sort of kiss are we talking about?” Rae asks. “Because I kiss Kai’s aunt on the cheek all the time, if I don’t she slaps me.”

Ji-Woo actually laughs. “Okay that fits.”

All of us take our shot.

People seem to be relaxing.

Until Kai speaks up. “Never have I ever sang someone else’s song that wasn’t written by at least one group member.”

All the members of TestME freeze and take a shot, but it’s slow, and the eye contact is a bit menacing if you ask me.

I snort out a laugh behind my hand as each and everyone of SWT just watches them. Biggest flex I’ve ever heard Kai use.

Rae sighs. “I guess bonding time is over then?”

Suho snorts out a curse. “When did it ever start?”

He storms off, the rest of the group follow, still in their uniforms, and I just collapse back onto the grass and look up at the sky. “Think they’re going to try to kill us in our sleep?”

“Nah, too much evidence.” Rae sits down next to me with a bottle of whiskey, then hands it over. “Are you doing okay?”

Oh no, we’re about to have the leader and Maknae talk. He rarely has to have it with me, so he’s noticing something is off, maybe it was my outburst in the conference room, maybe it’s just my overall energy in general but now,

he's seeing things now that he isn't in the studio distracted over the album.

"Why wouldn't I be?" I sound defensive.

"Well, you just seem a bit... off," Rae admits. "And that's more off than usual. You're the quiet, brooding type, sensitive even—though I know you hate that word. But this is unusual even for you."

"I don't know if I should take that as a compliment or not," I reply quietly.

"Take it however you want to take it," Rae returns quietly. "I'm just worried about you." I try to think of an excuse and then some honesty comes out.

"I started younger than you guys, all I know are trainee days since I was thirteen, so it's a bit different now that the world is watching. Groups pretend to like us but hate us at the same time, those that support us are only the ones that either look up to us, or are on the same level, we can't make one misstep. It just feels fake, and sometimes, I wish we weren't giants with everyone wishing we'd fall off their own beanstalk."

"Nice reference, I approve."

"Thank you." I pound his fist.

"And that's all?" He pushes as his eyes search mine.

"That's all." I smile and try to reassure him.

He keeps my gaze for a minute and I just can't take it anymore. "I'm gonna go write for a bit."

I start to get up when he grabs my wrist. "What?"

His brown eyes search mine like he's seeing something else. "You know you can tell me anything right?"

I clench my teeth. "Yeah, I know."

He's still holding onto me. "Anything, there's no boundary you could cross that I wouldn't listen and be on your side."

"Wow, even murder?"

“I’m sure you’d have reasons.” He jokes. “Just stay away from my sister, because that might be too much.” A wink follows.

I feel my entire body go weak. I might actually pass out at this point of stress.

“There are some rules you know? I just, I noticed her watching you a lot today, I think she’s concerned but sometimes that concern can turn into something else and she’s always been the type of person to run to the rescue, she looks tough, talks tough, but she’s weak. She’s fragile.”

I want to defend her so bad, and tell him that he’s wrong. She’s not weak. She’s the opposite of weak. She’s so much more than he knows, but instead I just nod. “Nothing to worry about, I’m innocent pure Sookie remember? Girls have germs, plus how do you kiss again?”

“Swear if you bring out that bear one more time.” Rae collapses back against the grass with his bottle of booze.

I let out a laugh I don’t feel and walk numbly into the house. I immediately think about the sister he doesn’t want me obsessing about.

I’m bombarded with images of touching her face, tugging her lip, running my hands down her breasts, feeling her small hands tug at my pants, unbuttoning them and almost sliding them in.

I’m instantly uncomfortable and bypass the kitchen where I hear laughter and charge right into the only room I can find that’s quiet.

It’s a home gym.

I take off my shirt and I start doing pull-ups.

Followed by push-ups.

I’m in the gym for at least two hours until my body’s spent, until I’m not thinking about her cruelty, or about sex with her, kissing her—or about Rae’s words.

By the time I shower and crash in my shared room with Jay, I’m

exhausted both mentally and physically.

Jay's on his phone. I can see the screen light up with a text.

"Who you talking to?"

"Oh you know," He texts back then quickly turns off the screen. "One of my many lovers."

I laugh and turn on my side. "It was your mom wasn't it?"

He throws a pillow over onto my side of the room. "Shut up, she said she'd send snacks!"

"I would do a lot for snacks." I mutter. "I mean not to your mom, no not like—" He's on top of me before I can shove him away, slamming a pillow across my face.

I laugh so hard despite the fact he's beating the shit out of me that I forget momentarily about the sadness. "Get off!"

I finally shove him onto the ground.

He looks up at me.

My stomach growls.

His follows.

All it takes is one head nod. "You think they have Turtle Chips?"

"Or at the very least Ramen."

I stumble out of bed, help him to his feet, and we run into the kitchen only to see all of TestME cooking food.

Jay points at the Ramen cooking. "If you guys share, I promise I'll turn a blind eye to the chocolate on the counter."

Ji-Woo grabs the chocolate bar, damn is he going to pet it?

Eric gulps down a can of soda, which technically before a comeback is completely off limits.

"They don't start filming again until five am," I say helpfully. "So what about a truce?" I don't wait for them to say anything, I just go to the pantry,

grab whatever bags of chips I can find and toss them onto the counter.

The guys' eyes all widen.

“My man.” Jay does a little fist bump. “Imagine if we had cheese dip.”

We all eat in silence. You'd think we hadn't eaten a day in our lives, and when Chul busted out some cookies, it was like this weird moment of everyone just satisfying their hunger and swearing each other to silence.

When Jay and I finally got to bed later full of junk food, I realize I enjoyed myself. It wasn't so bad—they weren't so bad, they were pleasant.

I have no clue how much trauma we would all experience or how needed this bonding would be. On every level.

Chapter Nine

Ari

It's four am and I still can't sleep.

Instead, I'm watching YouTube videos... well, Sookie to be more specific. I'm watching Sookie on YouTube. And I can't stop. I'm officially a stalker. I wonder if it's creepier that I'm living next door to him and watching fan made videos and Tik-Toks rather than texting him?

I can't stop though.

It's this impulsive need.

And it makes me smile.

He makes me smile.

What the hell am I even doing? I'm a grown ass woman sitting on YouTube lusting after a guy I can never have. I'm analyzing every move. Every smile. Every goddamn detail because I just...

I just...

And more than that... I *miss* his hugs.

It sounds dumb, even in my own head, but it's what I remember the most about Sookie. It's what I obsess about the most. It wasn't that he kissed me, or the way he kissed me, it's not the way he makes my body heat up. It's not the lust or desire... it's that he gives a damn about me. He sees me.

Me.

And I know this because of the way he touches me.

The way he holds me.

It was the way he held me.

An embrace verses his mouth on mine.

He *held* me. He held me like I mattered. Like I was the most precious thing in the world to him. Like he would always keep me safe.

And...

I held him back with the same veracity and need. I held him back like he mattered too... Because he does. More than anything. He does.

And those few seconds of us touching each other was everything to me. They meant something—like our touch transcended all the blocks around us. It feels like a lifetime ago... touching him.

I would trade the world for a taste of those few seconds again.

I would give anything to experience that love he embraced me with—without even trying. And I know watching him on YouTube is truly not helping anything right now. It's just making me resent everything about my life. My job. Why he has to be an idol—like why? And why I had to fall for him. I wish I could hate him. It's so much easier to find reasons to hate a person than accept the fact that you love them.

It's so much safer.

Let them love you more so you're never truly invested in that all-consuming, gut wrenching way that is both a curse and a blessing.

It's like deciding to break someone first before they break you—because you know that's coming, whether you're manifesting it or willing it—but you know. And then you somehow convince yourself that it's easier to hurt them before they have a chance to hurt you, and so you destroy something that maybe could have been special. That's the Ari school of thought, which I am

very aware is one hundred percent self-sabotage. I know I'm not the only one walking around the world with this view. I know there are other jaded people out there willing to do anything to protect their heart. I can't let myself break. I can't let myself go down a rabbit hole that there's no way out of with Sookie. There is only one outcome for us—and it's not one where we end up together. So, if I can't have him in the way that I want, I have no problem just stalking him. Clearly. I am more than willing to spend hours just stalking...

I don't even know what that says about my mental state.

I groan and check my phone.

Crap. It's so late.

I really need to sleep and I still have missed text messages. Wait, missed text messages from S-

My heart speeds up and for one beautiful second I think it's a missed message from Sookie. I can't believe how happy that makes me feel. I can't believe what the thought does to my heart... to my insides and then like a deflated balloon I actually read it correctly and see that it's from Simon.

Simon?

What's he doing texting?

I shove my laptop aside and start looking through the texts.

Director Simon

"Filming time changed, be on set by six a.m."

Director Simon

"Scratch that, be there at five thirty, lot's of hype on social media about this so we're going to add in a few challenges."

Challenges?

Isn't this already challenging?

It's rare to change any sort of filming last minute with these things, especially for unscripted Everything has to be planned out in advance, we

have to get permission from places and brands, we have a limited time, and a more limited budget.

If he's really changing things up that also means that this could affect legal. I groan silently. Everything was clearly mapped out, does that mean we're completely shifting gears from a few hours ago? It sure sounds like it.

I can only imagine what Simon has in store. He's all about ratings... just like everyone, I guess. So the louder and more dramatic, the better. Ugh. Why do I have such a bad feeling about this?

I let out a sigh, set my alarm, tell myself it's okay that I won't get more than a few hours of sleep and pray for the best.

I find myself looking through the pictures in my phone, my mind still racing with all the thoughts I have going on about Sookie.

And then I come across one of my favorite pictures of the band.

I have a moment of weakness and I change my screen to the picture of SWT—of course it's the one where Sookie takes center stage and is all I can see.

He's all I want to see.

That Maknae who owns every picture he's in.

(scene break)

I look like hell and I feel like death.

I walk to set with a cup of coffee and an attitude that even the devil would be jealous of. I'm in a navy blue jacket with a white shirt and jeans that somehow don't feel as loose as they used to, and heels—because what better way to add to the suffering than wear high heels? Yes, I'm a glutton for punishment, but I felt fat, and I wanted to look tall and slim.

I've also decided most bad decisions begin with the seed of insecurity—which is me right now. Fully, one hundred percent, insecure. And I'm embracing the feeling... all of it. I am aware of how rock bottom my

emotions are—like, I don't think they could get anymore dark or unsure. I'm still frustrated with myself, but what can you do in situations like this? I think the only way through is walking in and just embracing the overall insecure vibe that has taken over me—which by the way, is highly unusual—but then, the situation I find myself in is highly unusual. So I guess it's a day for that.

After I brushed my teeth and took a good look at myself in the mirror and tried to talk some sense into the Ari that once was sensible and secure and not a pathetic stalker mess, I feel like I give that Ari a good pep talk. After I'm done lecturing her on life in general, I promptly changed my lock screen to a cat.

I don't own a cat, but I thought the picture of this one was cute, but then the dark hole of my mind opened up and sucked me in, and I realized that me choosing a picture of a cat to put on my lockscreen was potentially a bad omen. There is a good chance that I will more than likely turn into that person: the cat lady. The very single cat lady who sits at home and vacillates from cat video to K-pop group videos... eating ice-cream and ramen.

All alone.

The thought is indeed chilling. More than chilling, it's frightening because it kind of feels like I'm not far from that place considering I spent over three hours stalking.

I'm officially the groupie I used to judge—just put me in all the merchandise, grab me one of the cute SWT bears, I'll paint a poster, add glitter, and change all of my sheets to SWT colors. I might as well own it. That's officially who I've become.

I'm sure my brother would be proud.

I'm so lost in my thoughts that I walk into Simon. My flailing hands are clutching an open coffee mug, and it spills onto my white shirt.

I'm officially winning.

I close my eyes for a minute and take a deep breath and try to get a grip. “Sorry, I wasn’t paying attention.”

He taps my shoulder with what I’m assuming is part of the script.

“No problem, if you need to go back and change, we can delay a bit. I just need legal to go over an addition to filming. I’m sure we’re within our boundaries of what’s written in the contract but because we might be putting them in danger—”

“I’m sorry, what?”

He laughs. I’m instantly annoyed that he thinks that’s funny and not a huge headache for not only me but also the crew and the rest of the cast. “We made two additions for filming locations and challenges based off the guys’ biggest fears. I think they’ll be fine.”

I almost say what again.

Their biggest fears? Danger? Has he lost his mind?

He grins. “Anyway, today we’re headed to the haunted school.”

I can’t say that I’m surprised. This is typical. What K-pop group or show hasn’t attempted to give their talent a heart attack at the haunted school? I mean, you’d think it would get old, but then no one can really ever resist watching ghosts—or hoping for a sight of one. I mean, I’m even a sucker for it. Whenever the Kevin Hart in a haunted house with Jimmy Fallon pops up on social, I still take time to watch it, and I’ve seen it four hundred times, so I get the draw and why they want to scare everyone, but I also wonder how that’s going to work with the girls.

I shake my head. “So we’re just shifting locations or are you worried about their mental and physical health?”

Simon rocks back on his heels. “We’re just wanting to make sure that if anything happens, a force majeure’s clearly already included and we don’t see any issues with that, but we need to make sure that the contract everyone

signed covers us from any medical issues brought on by severe fear, shock, or trauma.”

Severe fear, shock, or trauma? This sounds more than just the guys visiting a haunted school.

What? “Okay.” I need to process. “Well, what they signed basically says you aren’t liable for anything that happens on set as long as you have the proper safety in place so—”

“Perfect!” He looks ready to jump up and down. “Knew I could trust you to have that contract memorized. You seem like the type.”

“The type?” I feel like I should be offended right now.

“Yes,” he says with a fake laugh that I think I’m going to hate by the end of this nightmare shoot. “You know what I mean.”

“No,” I shake my head. “I don’t.”

“You carry that look of responsibility... you know, not very creative, but type A, always dotting your I’s and crossing your t’s. I’m pretty sure you take your job way too seriously. I’d bet you don’t get out enough and let your hair down and just have fun. You probably live for your job.”

Wow.

I mean... just wow.

I wish I could tell him that one of the reasons my job is so appealing is because the guy I’m secretly obsessed with happens to be the Maknae of the band... now, I think that would surprise the heck out of him.

Not so type A anymore, am I, Simon?

When I don’t answer, he continues on.

“All right, the girls are already eating breakfast and I have the guys getting dressed in their costumes.” He starts walking away. “So we’ll be ready to go soon.”

“Costumes?”

My head is spinning with all this new information. I look down at my shirt and wish I didn't spill most of my coffee because I need caffeine now more than anything.

"What costumes?" I ask him.

"Oh, we're dressing them up and putting masks on them so the girls have to pick one to go through the haunted school with, but they won't know who it is and have to pick based on their number one fear."

"So," I take a deep breath. "You're dressing them up as—"

"—Their own worst fear., And then we'll send them into the haunted school, whatever team gets out first and the fastest gets their first pick of a date night. And on top of that, their pick of where they want to donate the prize money they win for making it through. Easy. Makes them look generous and on the bonus side it mixes up the couples a bit before the end.

"So," I nod my head slowly. "We're not doing the brunch today or the rapid fire dating questions one minute speed date?"

"We might later this week, but for our first episode—since it's live—this just made more sense. It's loud. It's going to be great."

My head already hurts. My anxiety just kicked into overdrive.

And this is going to be a goddamn nightmare.

The fact that it's live is painful.

I don't miss a beat though. I put my coffee down and march over to the guys' house and open the door.

Both groups look miserable.

Immediately Rae hides some cheese behind his back while Eric chokes on a cookie and spits part of it into the sink. Yeah, live will be great with these guys.

"Listen," I don't know why I suddenly point my finger in their general direction as if they're in trouble, it could be stress? "No cussing today,

whatever management has sold you as, whether you're the cute one, the sexy one, the innocent one." I don't look at Sookie. "That's the only role you play today, we changed filming a bit, costume and makeup will be in here soon but I need your word because if any one of you step out of place today during this live filming—" More choking takes place from some random band member. "—You're going to have a problem and album sales could easily tank or even more fun you can be canceled for not fitting the stereotype you've been given. Any questions?"

Sookie raises one hand then reaches with his other for a bag of chips. I'm ready to slap them out of his fingers because, salt, live filming, and he needs to not look puffy on tv. He crunches down on a Dorito. But then, my evil twin sister rears her ugly head and I think... so what if he looks puffy, less adoring women for him to have to sift through...

I hate myself for that thought.

Kind of... but not really.

"Nutritious breakfast." I cross my arms and try to act stern.

He grins and grabs another. "What can I say? It was the closest hag, I mean bag, next to me."

My nostrils flare, my temper does the same. "Bag, it's a bag, Sookie and what's your question?"

"What," Crunch. "If." Another crunch. "We slip up?"

I cannot handle his crunching nor can I handle the fact that he's goading me on purpose in front of everyone. He is. He's flirting and enticing me with those chips he keeps eating like they're the best thing he's ever had. He's doing it intentionally too. I just know it. I stomp over, ready to grab the chip from his mouth when he swallows and grins at me, then very slowly licks his thumb. My mouth goes dry.

I hate him.

I definitely hate him today.

“Sorry, had some extra cheese there.”

The entire room is silent. I’m sure they’re watching this strange exchange of ours with extremely curious eyes, but I can’t seem to help myself and at least pretend like I’m professional. My nerves are wound up. I spent an entire evening stalking him on YouTube. I dreamt about him.

I woke up thinking about him.

Simon told me I’m a “type”...

My screen saver is a cat.

There’s only so much a girl can take.

I walk up to him nice and close and poke his chest. If he’s surprised by my boldness, he doesn’t let on. If anything, he just stands taller, stares harder.

“Behave yourself. You should be the least of our worries—you’re the easy one without any drama. Remember, you’re an innocent virgin who’s afraid of flying or doing anything, and you!” I point at Rae, suddenly feeling the urge to go on a rampage. “Are heartbroken over Lucas and Grace,” I turn to Lucas. “You’re the bad boy with emotional trauma who jokes around too much,” Kai’s next. “You’re the sporty one, fun, talented at everything, you love the gym and you hate sugar.”

Kai pipes up. “I actually like sugar—”

“—Not the time.” Rae elbows him and shakes his head. His eyes are wide and I know he’s taken aback by my attitude. “So not the time.”

Jay’s next, he knows it because he holds up his hands like he’s getting arrested. “I’m mysterious, I get it, I get it!”

“Good.” I nod at him and then I turn my attention to the others. “As for TestME—”

Their jaws have all dropped like they’ve been caught doing something horribly wrong, well all but Suho.

“I got it.” He nods. “We know our place.” He looks over at Rae. “It’s been made painfully aware we’re the innocent junior group just riding on some unbelievably cheap coattails, so as far as acting, won’t be hard, we’ve been doing it since our debut.”

He reaches for Sookie’s bag of chips, takes a bite of Dorito and finishes it up with. “Is that it?”

Wow. What an asshole. Did he just say that to me?

I take a step toward him, ready to fight when Rae blocks me.

“Low blood sugar, he’s just hungry,” Rae warns me and shakes his head. “Let everyone know we’re ready to head to costume and makeup.”

I open my mouth then close it, finding I can only nod and then I walk away. That kid is in need of a serious ass kicking. I wish I could do it. He’s definitely gotten under my skin because I’m bothered by the comment and wish I could just lay into him, which is totally unlike me but then, I’m not doing anything in my normal way lately.

And I blame Sookie.

When I finally make it to the restroom, hours later and just ready for the day to be over, I’m forced to really look at myself in the mirror. I groan at the sight that greets me. My shirt is completely see through where the coffee stain hit my right boob and I’m not wearing a bra. Hello nipples.

It could not get worse.

And I really need to stop saying and thinking things like that, because when you think it can’t... it can.

Oh, the joys of life.

Chapter Ten

Sookie

It's a painful process.

It's brutal and painful and it sucks.

All of it.

They've put me in a clown costume, like I'm ready to go on *The Masked Singer*. Literally a clown costume. My clown face is huge—grotesquely huge. It's hot as hell and I'm sweating profusely, and I'm in a black glitter tuxedo... but wait, there's more.

They put a pink bow on the clown costume. Because pink bows just scream innocence. I literally don't even know what to do when I stare at myself in the mirror. Do I laugh? Do I cry? Is this a joke? A prank at the very least?

How could they do this to me?

I reach for the bow to rip the goddamn thing off when Lucas walks in, takes one look at me and starts choking on his water. "The hell?

I want to tell him to fuck off, but it's not his fault that I look like a joke.

"It's a bow." I tell him. I can only imagine what I must look like to him.

"I see that." he looks like he's trying his hardest not to laugh.

"For a clown mask." I continue to explain, like he can't see what is

blatantly staring back at him.

“The mask looks scary at least? I mean cancel the bow and I might shit myself if I see you in a dark corner.” He tilts his head like he’s sizing me up and thinking about his words. “But without the glitter on the tux.”

Asshole.

“Helpful.”

“I thought so.”

I hate my life

Someone else comes into the trailer and slams the door then stumbles toward me. I don’t know who because of the mask but he immediately starts laughing. He’s dressed like he fell off the set of Toy Story. I take in his whole look and silently chuckle. But at least he’s not wearing a pink bow.

He’s winning in one department.

“You’re afraid of horses?”

His costume is a full-on Chronicles of Narnia nightmare. I’m convinced if it was possible for CS Lewis to crawl out of his grave, this would be the minute he would do it and haunt everyone involved. He wouldn’t be very happy about any of this.

“I’m half horse.” He sighs. “I’m a—”

“Shit, bro...” Lucas starts laughing again. He falls over to his side and slaps his leg as he shouts out in mirth. “You’re Mr. Tumnas!”

“Am not!”

“Are too,” we say at the same time.

“I’m sorry to be the one to break the news to you,” I tell him with a sad, Bozo the Clown shrug. Not that I’m doing any better than him.

My look is just as nightmare inducing.

He walks toward me, accidentally trips then looks in the mirror. He stares at himself for a long time. I can only imagine the thoughts racing through his

mind.

“I have never been sadder in any moment.” His voice isn’t familiar.

Wait, it’s not one of ours. “Eric?”

“Hi.” He lowers his head, all arrogance gone like they just Mr. Tumnased it out of him. “I think I walked in the wrong trailer, well actually I know I walked in the wrong trailer.”

He can’t stop staring at himself. I can only imagine the kind of face he’s making behind the mask. It can’t be good. If his voice is any indication, I know the look must be one filled with horror. Same. Just. Same.

”I’m going to stay here for a second, if you don’t mind.” He exhales heavily.

“Why is that?” Lucas goads him on, even though we both know why he doesn’t want to leave the room.

“Look at me,” his voice chokes in horror. “Have you ever seen anything so ridiculous?”

Lucas cocks his head to the side like he’s really thinking about it, then shakes his head a firm no.

It’s a no for me too.

“I thought Sookie’s bow was bad…” he finally admits.

“I’m too embarrassed to walk outside and see actual humans,” Eric whispers as he lowers his head. “I’m going to sit here for a while.”

“I would suggest not looking in the mirror,” Lucas responds enthusiastically.

“I think you’re right,” Eric agrees.

Lucas nods. “Good choice. Try and look at the bright side of things. At least they didn’t wrap you up like a last minute Christmas present and slap a bow on your face.”

I point at the bow. “It could quite literally be worse, Tumnas.”

“It’s Eric.”

“He knows.” Lucas takes another sip of water and shakes his head. “I must say that after looking at the two of you, I have never been more thankful for having had a scandal and a girlfriend, and being unable to be on live tv in my entire life. God blessed me.”

“You’re definitely winning,” I nod my head in agreement.

”I can’t wait to see the other costumes,” he shakes his head then saunters over to one of the chairs and sits down. He stares at us evenly.

“As if this couldn’t get any worse, I have some bad news for you guys.” Lucas admits.

My blood runs cold.

“How could this get any worse?”

“That’s not a question you should ever ask out loud,” Lucas warns me. “It’s like you’re testing the universe to just show you...”

“Fair,” I agree.

“So wait,” Eric shakes his Tumnas head rather dramatically. “How’s it getting worse?”

“Just got the script and looked it over, I don’t think you’re going to like it.”

“Why?” We say in unison. I can feel the sweat beginning to drip down my face.

Lucas sighs and leans against the back of the chair and crosses his arms.

“Are you going to tell us or are you going to continue to torture us?” Eric practically screams out.

“Well, here it is. Since our first episode is live, they’re throwing you under the bus and putting you in a haunted house.”

“Haunted house?” I ask.

“Yes, the girls pick who they want to date based on your costumes, which

are also, drum roll, based off your own personal worst fears,” He looks over at Eric and shakes his head. “Might need to explain that one later.”

Clowns. Fuck. I hate clowns.

Eric hangs his horse head and starts to mumble incoherently. “It was the candy. She fed him candy and kidnapped the kid and he tried to save him and then the whole fire thing happened when he was luring him in like an actual sex trafficker with his flute—“

“—flutes can be quite,” I start talking only to see him jerk his body toward me. “Calming?”

“I played the flute and had to stop,” he admits in a small horse-like voice. I only say horse-like because his whole costume is definitely making him exude the vibe.

“Why did you stop?” Lucas asks curiously.

“I couldn’t play ever again because it always felt like I was somehow conjuring the fire, the white witch and hypnotizing people.” Eric admits.

Talk about childhood trauma manifesting itself into some real life shit. Who know Narnia could do this to kids at home?

“So you chose singing?” Lucas asks as he tries to hide his smile.

Eric just stares at him with his full on horse face costume. “I was recruited because of my face, you jackass.”

“And what a very long face you have.” I try and joke, make the kid feel better. But his story is pretty interesting? I don’t know if that’s the word I’d use... but something close.

He jerks his head back in my direction. “I wouldn’t get too excited there. You have a bow on.”

Facts.

“Fair.” Lucas nods in agreement then looks over at me and admits. “Yeah that’s fair statement.”

“You’re an asshole,” I tell him.

“And you’re a clown.”

“Just wait until I take this clown suit off,” I warn him.

He holds his hands up like he’s afraid. “Will you keep the bow on?”

Tumnas aka Eric finds this comment hilarious. I hate him too. Absolutely feel no sympathy for him or that shit costume he’s wearing.

Tumnas, my ass...

Lucas rubs his hands together and stands up, “All right, it’s been fun. Honestly, so amusing and fulfilling in multiple ways. Like I’m happy with all of my life decisions now more than ever.”

I’m sure he is.

“Make sure not to cuss,” Lucas tells us. “And just a gentle reminder, try and be happy, enjoy the haunted house and the psychopath fans... I mean, who knows, you could find love with one?”

God, I want to kill him. I will kill him. Damn it, I also know he’s freakishly fast and I’m in full costume.

He catches himself and looks around like the cameras are already on us. “Don’t get me wrong, I love our fans. But this is next level and I don’t mean that in a bad way, I mean that in a run of the mill observing your fans and the level of the crazy in a way.”

“Is this talk supposed to make us feel better?” I ask him.

Lucas goes on like he didn’t hear me.

“I just feel like they could have grabbed some less aggressive ones for you guys, I just saw Rae in his tiger costume and one of the girls jumped on his back begging for a ride then started like, gyrating against him and she wasn’t even sure which member it was.”

I nod and try not to laugh as the picture comes to mind.

“She wanted tail.”

“She wanted something,” Lucas agrees.

Eric tries to lift his hoof and fails since he forgets he can't see shit, then lowers his foot or hoof or whatever we're calling it again and hangs his head in dejection. I can feel the sadness and disgrace emanating from him.

“Why did we agree to this?”

The trailer goes silent.

Finally I say it. “Contractually, you don't have a choice. When you have a comeback they own your ass. You just have to nod your head, smile, hope your label promotes you, and then when you finally make them a ton of money they tell you they knew it was going to go great—and then they find the next shiny toy to play these games.”

“But it's not a game,” Eric says. “It's my life.”

“It is a game,” I tell him. “And you willingly signed up to play it... as a horse with man parts.”

“Hilarious.” Eric grumbles.

“I'm out.” Lucas opens the door.

Standing right there in the frame like something right out of a horror movie come to life, is a giant Spider. Well, it's someone in a spider costume which I'm not even sure how they got the legs attached around the waist, but they're dangling to the ground.

It could always be worse, I think to myself.

This poor guy is also in glitter, everywhere, shimmering so that there's no way you could ever miss him. We apparently have a theme. I wonder what we ever did to deserve such an injustice as the eight eyed figure stares at us.

Eric screams.

Lucas jumps behind him.

And whoever it is just goes. “They want us on set, in five.”

His voice sounds like another TestME member.

A cowboy walks by him and pauses. “Nice legs.”

Yeah that’s definitely Kai’s voice but cowboys? He’s afraid of cowboys?

This is definitely a deep dive into the psyche of all the guys... I don’t really know if I ever wanted to delve so deeply, but I guess now we have no other choice.

“Bite me!” Spiderman yells making all of his legs bounce around him, yeah nobody is happy today.

Shit.

I’m just so sick of it all and I’m sick of following rules that on most days just make no sense. I understand that money makes the world go around and there’s a formula to all of this, but come on?

I understand the success I have is all due to my fans first, my label next, but I would just like one damn choice for myself. I’d like the option, the fucking human right to just be me. To tell the world that I’m not in high school anymore, that I like sex. That I think about sex with one particular woman all the fucking time. That I curse. That I want to eat ramen and carbs. And chips. I love Doritos. I want to tell the world that I express myself through my tattoos. That my music moves me. That the lyrics mean something. That I’m just as fucked up as the rest of them. That I have all the hang ups that any other twenty-year-old man has. That I fucking make mistakes. That my life isn’t perfect and I do go to bed at night with anxiety, even though I’m an idol.

And yeah, that I want to burn this fucking bow off my costume!

Right. The Hell. Now.

“Whoa.” Eric says under his breath.

“What?” I snap.

Lucas sighs. “Yeah, you said all of that out loud.”

My mouth drops open.

“All of it?” I wonder as I think over the rant in my head.

Eric nods his head.

“Shit, I do not belong on live tv today.” I whisper in horror. “I don’t know what my issue I sorry, um, sorry, let’s just follow the fucking spider.”

Follow the spider, that’s where I’m at right now. I’m officially living in the upside down.

Lucas is quiet as Eric walks by and prances toward set. “I know why.”

“It’s not sexual frustration.” I snap out exactly what it is.

He smiles over at me. “Nah, it’s worse, it’s love.”

That’s all he says, leaving me in my stupid costume staring after him, knowing I’ll have to face an ex girlfriend, aggressive fans, and the girl I love the most, the girl I want to stand by, the girl that hurts me over and over again whether intentionally or not.

The girl that I keep telling myself isn’t worth it, yet I know the truth—she is and will always be everything to me. I wish it was a crush. I wish it was infatuation. It would be so much easier if I just wanted something physical.

But I want her heart.

And I want it next to mine. I want her on top of me. Underneath me. Sideways. In front of me. I want to take showers with her. I want to run my hands over her body. I want to watch her lips part from pleasure.

I want to taste her.

Every fucking part of her.

Because she does that to me. She’s in my soul. Like a goddamn inferno she lights me up. And in this crazy world I live in, she’s the only thing that turns the dark into light.

I can’t see my tattoo on my wrist but knowing that she’s there, and that I have her but won’t ever have her is the most painful thing I can think of. Like a dream that isn’t real and you know will never actually be real, but have

hope for.

Hope is the worst.

Because even as I walk to set... I hope.

Even for a glimpse.

A second of her. just a knowing that she's there. And that I matter to her too. That this isn't some make-believe thing like this clown costume I'm wearing right now—that this is real. We are real.

We.

God, what I'd do to be a "we"... an "us"... an "ours".

How pathetic.

How sad.

That hope is the most depressing word you can think of when you're trying to film and write a bestselling song that outdoes every other one you've worked on. I hang my head and keep walking.

And then the lyrics come to me.

"Hope is death when love is alive. Hope is dead because of lies. Hope is dead because of me and yet... it's all I have—one day, maybe I'll be free, one day, maybe I'll be me. Finally me."

I type it into my notes on my phone and I keep walking right into the sun, seems fitting with the words that just came to me. She is my sun. She is my hope.

I stare straight ahead at the set, at the girls all sitting in their chairs around them and I have to shake my head. Our fans. I am grateful for them. I am grateful for their love and support and unwavering loyalty... but here they are, on a reality competition show that is not real in any way, vying for love. For affection from a guy they don't even know.

They don't know the real Sookie. Or the real Rae. They know what is projected. What they've imagined in their minds at night or when they were

at one of our concerts. That's all they know.

The fake.

The make believe that our industry is so good at creating. The make believe is easy to adore, it's easy to love. But the real... the real is work. It's diving deep into the dark chasms of the soul. It's seeing someone for who they are.

For who they *really* are.

Not the fake, projected image a label creates.

No, it's so different from that.

It's the fucked up dark, tortured soul—that piece that makes us the talent we are. That piece that dangles dangerously close to destruction—the place we all play with. But it's the piece that holds the art. It's the piece of us that turns out the hits. That is magnetic—like a drug you can't get enough of.

That's the piece only the lucky will ever see.

I try to shake the feelings of annoyance and the pity party I've been having for myself and just tell myself this is a part I have to play for a short time—and that it will be over and the next show will come on, and I'll have to do something crazy for that...

I take a deep breath and let it go.

First thing I notice is that apparently brunch is still happening even in our costumes—we just don't get to eat it. Just watch.,

And the day just gets better.

We have forty extra minutes before they start taping and Lucas is the only one who isn't in costume and the only one that doesn't look like an idiot.

And the only one who gets to eat.

I take my time to observe my surroundings... aka, my bandmates costumes.

We have a bear, a horse, a clown, a menu—not sure why we have a menu

and that's the biggest fear some random person has—but okay, who am I to judge?

We have a rabbit, a frog... I do a double take.

The frog head just shakes in my direction while I laugh beneath my creepy mask. I think one day we'll look back on this moment and have ourselves a good laugh, until then, we can all live in hope.

We sit in silence while Lucas goes over the rules.

“Welcome everyone we are so excited to be here,” Lucas begins in a dramatic voice like he's the host of the Bachelor. I wish he could see me rolling my eyes. Excited? More like, annoyed... angry... furious.... Annoyed again.

Lucas continues.

“As you can see, both groups are completely masked and unidentifiable. Per the rules, you aren't allowed to ask any questions. This challenge is based off of your knowledge of each member, which I know you all have a lot of information stored away. In random order, you're each going to get a chance to pick one member to go to the haunted school with. Listen up. Once you get to the challenge, you'll win a bonus if you actually know who it is behind the mask. You'll get extra points and we all know that means you get more money to donate to a charity of choice, which is why we're all here... right?”

I try my best not to laugh out loud.

He's making it sound like the best moment of our lives.

And I'm a clown with a bow.

Lucas is in his element and keeps talking away.

“So here we go! You're going to kick the fear aka the idol behind the fear and set off on your adventurous journey.” He makes it sound so easy.

Lucas shoots me a grim look and I'm immediately on high alert.

“All right, so first up we have Ha-yoon,” She's the pretty one that had the

polka dotted dress on. I wait for her to look around the brunch table. Her eyes focus on me, I'm not sure if I'm thankful or not, but she quickly turns toward the frog and tilts her head to the side like she's sizing him up in his costume. We all wait with bated breath.

"I like frogs, I'm going with the frog." She finally says.

He's not allowed to take off his mask, but he nods slowly, painfully.

Next is Beth, she has dyed red hair and from her accent I think she's Korean-Australian but I haven't heard her speak English, it's just the way she says her words. She looks at me too then chooses the spider.

She seems friendly enough.

"Oh," Lucas adds in. "I forgot an important part!"

Crap. He sounds too excited for it to be good news.

"Since I know everyone here can do the math, I'll just confirm again that there are only five girls here and ten of you."

Cue the dramatic pause. I can almost hear the music sting.

"So whoever doesn't get chosen..." He smiles at the camera but it doesn't reach his eyes. I wonder what kind of news this is.

"Will get to go back to the house and relax for the night. There's always tomorrow, but if you aren't picked, you're free to go work on your incredible upcoming albums and take time off."

Unfair.

UNFAIR.

Don't pick me, don't pick me, please God don't pick me.

I volunteer!

The girls gasp in dismay, while I pray I am exactly that person. I wonder if there's a way I can scare the girls or creep them out, so they don't choose me.

"You'll still need to live in the house and who knows you might get

thrown back in the game, because this is a long roller coaster ride and we don't know where we'll end up. Or what could happen." Lucas smiles again at the camera. I'm definitely going to let him know that if his career as an Idol fails, he'd be great as a host. "But for now, the main players are the fears or costumes. So, make your choices wisely." He pauses for a minute. "Let's continue, shall we?"

No, we shan't.

Hell, is that even a word?

Then again who would actually pick a clown? A masochist?

Grace nods her head to the girls. "All right, we're down to Dueri. Who do you pick?"

She looks at the guy dressed as a menu which I'm still confused about. I need to know about this fear. Like, was he chased at night by a giant menu full of bad food? Did he get sick from eating the food? And who the hell is scared of words describing food? For a long second I think I might be home free. I can taste my freedom from this hell.

I can actually see the celebration in my head tonight knowing that I don't have to take part in this god-awful reality show from hell, but then...

She shakes her head and looks right over at me and points with absolute certainty.

"Him. I want the clown."

And just like that...

My dreams are crushed.

Stolen.

I almost curse out loud and it's not because she doesn't seem very kind and sweet, in fact she's probably the only girl I would want to go on a challenge with since she seems like she wouldn't eat me alive if given the chance. She seems like she's the most normal out of all of them—and I

know, I know, that's not saying much.

Since she seems nice and hell, since I'm supposed to act a part, I play right into my role and rip off my bow and hand it to her like I just joined The Bachelor or Love Island.

How's that for drama? Bet no one saw that coming.

She laughs and takes it happily. I know she likes the gesture. She's wearing a simple black crop top and matching black jeans. Not gonna lie, she seems the safest choice because she doesn't know her own beauty. She's bigger than the other girls and not in a bad way but in a way that says she's not afraid of men like whoever's dressed that way.

I like girls who aren't afraid of fries, so I smile behind my mask and immediately think of all the food Ari would bring me. Ari's not afraid of food either.

And just like that Ari appears out of thin air and is suddenly behind me. I can feel her energy before I see her. It's like I willed her to appear.

Shit.

Don't think about her, Sookie. Just stop somehow. Stop the madness in your head. She's not for you. She's only going to get you in trouble. She's a distraction. That's all. A goddamn distraction that has somehow made her way under your skin and into your heart.

I sigh and just nod my head toward the girl and away from Ari who I know is now standing behind me with Director Simon. I wonder what she's thinking. Does she even give a damn?

It hurts to think she doesn't.

But I push the thoughts aside and just make myself go to the place where I can have no thoughts about love. About a forbidden love with a woman I just need to stay the hell away from.

We keep filming.

People are paired up and I still don't really know who is with who other than Eric and Kai. I haven't given anyone much thought since I zoned in on Ari's presence and all the feelings she invokes in me. She definitely throws my game off.

I'll give her that.

"Get this! Camera A, over here!" Director Simon orders one of the producers who's asking questions to one of the contestants while we're waiting for the final order to run into hell. The producer immediately rushes over to the director, with the cameraman in tow.

I'm confused why, then look down at the guys hand—he's clutching his fist so tight it looks painful. He's dressed in a ghost costume with scars he kind of looks like the Scream character with scars pulled through the face, in all black and white. It's definitely scary and not at all like the weird menu.

"Mishel," Director Simon says one more time. "Could you let us know why you picked this character? Is it because you know who it could be? Any guesses?"

This feels intentionally scripted. And suddenly, the mood goes from being something light-hearted and actually comical to dark.

They're playing on some real fears here.

Yes, it might be funny on the outside, and I'm definitely laughing at myself, but these are real emotions that invoke a state of being that is not pleasant.

I can tell that the person behind that mask is ready to have a nervous breakdown, I can see it. Feel the energy exuding from his costume and I don't know why I do it... I don't know, maybe I'll look back on this moment and realize I made a horrible mistake, but I see the shaking in his fingertips. I see the anger in his fists. I see the manipulation, whether purposefully or accidentally, somehow through that mask. I see all the emotions I've felt at

some point or another.

I see it all in him in this moment and I'm enraged for him.

For myself, maybe.

Or for all of us.

So I do something I never thought would be possible. I self sabotage. Live on camera, I do the one thing every idol knows not to do when the cameras are rolling. People look up to us, people want my perfect image, they want the illusion we've fed them. But my bow is off of my stupid clown face, and I think even at my age, I'm just done. This isn't right. This is crossing all sorts of lines—and one that is especially personal to me.

The worst that can happen is I get canceled.

The best?

This guy, whoever he is, could be from my group or TestME, either way, he's not okay and I've known that feeling for so long, that I'd do anything to help someone not have it. The pressure of knowing you have to look and be perfect, the fact that you can't curse on TV, the fact that I have to live up to an image that even a saint couldn't emulate—even watching fandoms go against each other during shows. The toxicity is overwhelming., Every day I have to push through the hell, and my only strength is my members.

They are all I have.

We are all we have.

Each other.

And nobody is noticing his fingertip's.

But I do.

“Son of a bitch!” I roar.

Everyone gasps.

Guy in the mask freezes, his hands immediately stop shaking. I shrug, knowing I'm still in my clown costume but that people will most likely

recognize my voice. I speak in English, clear English probably because I'm feeling brave.

"Sorry, thought I saw a bee." Mishel quickly recovers and grabs the masked guy's hand. "Him, I pick him as my partner because he's so mysterious and hot, so I guess we all get to go on this trip to the haunted school, huh? Hope we win!" She looks over at me and nods her head a bit. She's protecting him, just like I did because the producer set up was so real it was painful.

I respond back with a gentle nod of my chin.

Lucas and Grace both smile—they seem forced—but I'm sure it's just their fear of me having to take a hiatus once everyone finds out I cursed on live TV.

Why does a hiatus sound like the best thing that can ever happen to me?

Lucas clasps his hands together. "All right, let's go! We are live, after all." The look he gives me is a complete reminder that I have to be careful, but at this point, what's even happening. This is all for... what?

Grace's smile doesn't reach her eyes, but I don't feel bad about it, I feel bad that we're getting subjected to what feels like emotional torture.

Scratch that.

It is emotional torture.

And you know it's not good when you potentially feel bad for your enemy. And that's where I'm at.

Producer Lee makes a signal with his hand, Ari's standing behind him, just watching us as we all walk out of the room, apparently it's time to get into the vans and go experience more fear.

Sounds great.

But when I start walking next to Dueri, she whispers under her breath. "I don't know which one you are, I'll have a guess later, but thank you for doing

that.”

“Doing what?” I play dumb.

She actually reaches for my hand and holds it briefly. “For being brave when he couldn’t.”

I know I saved him in a tough spot.

“He has a girlfriend. He’s in love with her and being picked... and then having it filmed on live TV.” She shakes her head. “I would bet money that it’s him.”

“How do you know?” I whisper under my breath.

She shakes her head then leans on my shoulder. She knows she’s not supposed to get close to me or try to seduce me. She knows she’s supposed to play with the cameras, flirt with them instead of us. And she does just that. She laughs and touches my mask then puts the bow back on my clown head. “Because I’ve been a fan of both groups since both debut, and I protect my idols at all costs. So thank you.”

I’m in shock.

I’ve never heard anyone outside our circle speak this way. And to know that a fan feels so protective is humbling.

Stunned I almost stop walking, then whisper my own truth, suddenly comfortable in front of a complete stranger, knowing somehow I can implicitly trust her. “If I wasn’t already in love with someone I think you’d make me fall.”

She stumbles.

I catch her.

And when she looks up at me she nods. “I’ll protect you too, Sookie,” She loops her arm in mine. “And the girl you love.”

“I think,” I smile down at her. “We just became best friends.”

“You know,” She shrugs as she gets into the van, the cameras are

following us all but not closely. “You may be my new bias.”

I burst out laughing and hold up my hand for a high five. She jumps into my arms instead and leans into my neck. “Give them something to watch, then go back to her, take the focus off of your cursing.”

I spin her around and set her down, all before she turns toward the cameras and says. “I already know who my idol is for the day, does that mean I win prize money and we get to go first?”

Producer Lee is looking down at his phone eyes wide, he elbows Director Simon, who then elbows Ari, who won't even look my way. Her face is tense, and I can't tell what she's thinking, but I do know that she's been watching my interaction with Dueri. I know if the tables were turned I wouldn't be too happy.

I turn my attention back to Simon and the producers who are staring at their phones like a miracle just happened.

Lucas joins them, stares at the phone then shows Grace, her eyes widen, but I can tell she's sad as she steps up in front of the camera. “It looks like we have our first contenders for the challenge, and yes if you've guessed the correct identity of your idol you'll be the first ones to get prize money.”

Dueri looks up at me, her eyes soft. “It's Sookie.”

“And how do you know?” Lucas steps forward in full on protective mode, then again we both know at this point everyone's going to know I cussed and that my image will be tarnished, but Dueri surprises me again when she slowly pulls off my clown mask lowering it from my face and answers.

“Because of his heart.”

Gasps are heard on set.

The rest of the guys paired up with girls are just standing there staring at us so I play into it the way I've always been told and the way I'm hoping this number one fan understands and say. “Being an idol is hard sometimes, but

what makes it the best is when your fans know your heart the way she knows mine.”

I swear one of the makeup artists looks ready to pass out.

Director Simon grins so big you’d think his face was about to crack, but when I look back at Ari all I see is pain.

And fuck. It hurts me to know that I just did this to her. but...

There is such a long list of buts that I could interject here, I’m just too tired to do it. I’m sorry I hurt her—she’s the last woman... the last person in the world I want to hurt, but... this is my life. This is the life—the contract—she approved me to sign.

And when I lock eyes with Lucas, it’s like he knows I may have just ended my own career.

I should have probably, stayed silent and kept on the bow, at least that’s what I tell myself until I get into the van and sit next to the guy in the mask and feel a tap on my thigh before he grips my hand.

So she was right in the end, it was him, and he was possibly going to get asked about the girlfriend nobody knows about.

Even if I hate TestME I’ll protect them at all costs now, because we’re in it together, and I know what it’s like to lose and to love and to know you’ll never have it, so if he does, I’ll cover for him. maybe I went through my hell to help him through his.

Maybe that’s all Ari is. A lesson. A lesson or a test or a fucking albatross to help me help others.

Maybe I’m on this show for a reason.

Maybe I’ve been falling for so long I forgot what it was like to fly.

I smile.

Maybe I go bad after being so good.

Sounds nice.

Chapter Eleven

Ari

Well, that was the worst experience of my life.

Scratch that.

Not experience, because I was in no way participating in any of that crap I was forced to watch... no, I was just a voyeur like the rest of them, peeking in... creeping in and having my heart broken when I saw the genuine connection Sookie had with that fan of his. No, she wasn't crazy.

She seemed sweet.

God.

She seems sweet.

Like the kind of girl I'd want my brother to end up with, even though she's a super fan. But not Sookie.

Never Sookie.

Watching them is painful to the point of no return. I don't even know what to do. He looks genuinely happy getting in that black van, like that was a real smile on his face... something I rarely ever get to see. I think I'm going to be sick. What's worse? She'd be perfect for him... this girl who has this sweet smile and is probably a sweetheart to match, and now he also has his ex in the van. God. Talk about torture. I don't know what I ever did to deserve this

crap situation. I don't know how things could actually get better at this point.

Emotionally I'm dying inside.

On the outside I'm prim and proper, doing my job, all business. I'm the type A Ari that Simon oh so pointed out earlier in the day. But on the inside...

I'm dying. I'm crumbling. All I want is to get to my apartment, close the door, get in a bath and cry my eyes out. Why can't I be there right now?

And then, as my emotions get the best of me I walk up to the van, my heels digging into the grass nearly making me fall as I think about the Maknae of the group. Who wouldn't fall for Sookie?

Who?

"You doing all right?" Producer Sung-Bin walks up to me and grabs ahold of my arm just as the doors start to close to the van. He pulls me against his body right before my left heel gets caught and I trip into him. I look back to see Sookie's usual pale face replaced by a smirk—an angry one that says he came to play and will absolutely wreck the world.

It's sexy.

Oh my god, is it sexy. Like he's all grown up even more kind of sexy. My cheeks flush, my body tingles and I'm suddenly thinking about kissing him.

Crap.

I feel guilty.

And I'm without a shoe. I'm officially a mess.

I shove Sung-Bin away and collect myself as much as I can. I lean down to grab my shoe from the ground only to trip and fall face first into the grass. Sung-Bin grabs my arm and spins me around. "Are you okay?"

"Save it for the cameras." Director Simon laughs and walks by us.

I shrug away from Sung-Bin. "Thanks for the save."

He grabs my shoe and puts it back on my left foot, leaning down on his

haunches, dressed in his impeccable pinstriped black and white pants and white shirt. He looks up, his eyes lock onto mine.

“Isn’t this part of some fairytale?” He asks me.

“It is,” I have to admit.

“Cinderella?”

“Yes,” I return except he’s not my Prince Charming. The guy in the back of the van wearing the clown costume is.

“I could be your savior.” He continues on having no clue the mental insanity that is taking place inside my brain.

If I wasn’t so emotional, I’d probably laugh at his obvious line, instead it brings tears to my eyes. Oh my god. I’m going to cry!

“It would be nice if it could be you. But it’s not.”

He shoves the heel onto my foot and stands to his full height then casually puts his hands into his pockets. “We’ll see about that.”

He walks off and I can’t tell if I’ve pissed him off but I stumble toward the van looking like a mess with dirt attached to both my hands and my heels. By the time I get in we’re already late for the next location according to schedule.

My mind instantly rushes back to the problem at hand.

My problem.

Sookie.

Who wouldn’t fall for Sookie? I fell for him the minute I laid eyes on him and it wasn’t because he was gorgeous---it was because he was kind...

Fine. The gorgeous part didn’t hurt. But I’ve been around gorgeous all my life. Looks get old real fast if you don’t have someone you genuinely love and adore.

And I do adore him.

God.

And I love him too.

Does he hate me now? For doing my job? Do I hate myself? I don't even know, best but then a small part of myself says yes... I do hate you.

I hate you because you just pushed the man you love into another woman's arms. You just pushed the best thing that's ever happened to you away. All on your own.

All on your own volition.

How about that?

I grimace some more then try and cloud my mind with work. I do know that I have a few hours to clock in and it's about to be a grim long night at a haunted school watching women fight over him. How exciting for me? I mean, what the hell? I should get an award for being subjected to this torture. And I don't know, maybe it's just me, but he seems to be the one everyone wants.

Is it his innocence?

Kindness?

Ability to appear like a bad boy?

And then my stupid brain goes right to the place.

“You wanted him—you still want him, you still look up his videos, you watch the variety shows, you watch him like a hawk and deny him the one thing he wants. Freedom to be with you. All in a desperate attempt to protect him—but at the end of the day is it really him or your own heart?”

And now I'm talking to myself.

Sung-Bin pats my knee. “Are you good?”

I lie and stare down at my muddy heels. “Never been better.”

Chapter Twelve

Sookie

“All right!” Lucas claps his hands together once we get to the “haunted” school. The only fear that’s been revealed is Sookie, can you please take a minute and tell us why you’re afraid of clowns and apparently small, tiny, little pink bows?”

I can’t glare because my mask is finally off so I force a small smile that I’m sure gives him the idea I’m going to be punching him later.

I hate clowns because they’re always smiling and I find that to be terrifying, nobody is that happy all the time,” I tell him deadpan.

“And that’s the only reason why you fear them so much?” Lucas asks curiously.

”No, that’s not all. Once, when I was at a theme park, a clown came up to me and accidentally popped a balloon in my face. It looked like a bow, I was on Weverse live when I said something about it so apparently people remembered. I’m also scared of spiders and...” I play it up for the camera. “Snails set me back a bit too, they’re too slow.” I have a sudden vision of watching Monsters University where the snail never makes it to class and actually feel stressed, like I haven’t made it to dance practice in time. I mean, they can literally nap for up to three years. It’s a fact.

Grace grins, folding her arms across her black leather jacket. “And you’re fast?”

“Says the girl who taught me English.” I smirk when I realize it was only the bad words or things I shouldn’t say then realize I should probably thank her for all of that sometime. She helped me a lot. But first I need to build up enough nerve to tell her the story she asked about a year ago when I was texting at the kitchen counter, trying to make sure I looked fine when everything wasn’t, trying to keep my screen hidden when we both were going through the trauma of our lives. I’m sure she remembers that moment well.

Lucas clears his throat while Grace laughs. It’s endearing and I like watching them together. I like seeing them so happy. It reminds me that I have friends outside of the group, which then reminds me that at some point, if all went to hell, beyond them, I would have her. The girl I held hands with while taking her to the airport, while her heart was breaking over Lucas. Grace will always be my friend.

Maybe there can be a good ending after all even if it isn’t necessarily the one that I want, maybe it can be good., But Grace and Lucas are living proof of happily ever after—or at least on its way to being that. And right now I need to believe in those kind of miracles. I need proof that they do happen. That they’re fucking real, especially since I’m about to go inside the haunted school with a girl I don’t know, with my ex watching, and the girl I love most likely looking at the film while I go.

I couldn’t make this shit up if I tried.

I stop and look up at the giant clown face we have to walk through just to get into the school.

She pauses. “It’s just a face.”

I have to laugh, it escapes too hard through my teeth. “It’s just a lot of things.”

She reaches for my hand and grips hard, putting her fingers between mine in a reassuring way. And I appreciate the gesture. “Let’s win more money for charity, and then you can figure... things out.”

“Life.” I nod and grip her hand. “Right?”

She grips it back, “Well, Director Simon, I think we’re going in the clowns mouth.”

“And down the dark tunnel.” I add. I mean, no worries, no stress, just a dark tunnel full of who knows what while in a matching clown costume that I may be buried in.

Everyone around us laughs and cheers good luck to us, and as we cling to each other, I realize that for the first time in a really long time I feel like I have one other person on my side. It’s a nice feeling to know that my tribe just expanded even more., Somehow, I know she’s got my back... that is until we pass through the terrifying clown mouth and end up next to teeth that start chomping.

“Aghhhhhhhhhh!” She screams and lets go of my hand as she takes off for her life. “Run, run!”

She doesn’t have to tell me twice. Running sounds like the best option ever. Run away from all of it, but mainly the clowns.

We both run toward the throat, yeah that sounds safe, and then fall down a slide and go right into a murky swamp of mud full of weird looking demons that look real but I’m hoping aren’t. They’re dressed in all white with red faces, fangs dripping with blood, and horns protruding out of their foreheads. The horns are black, and their hands are folded in front of them like they’re about to either pray or attack us. This is like my worst nightmare come to life.

“Trainee days didn’t prepare us for this.” I wrap an arm around her back and pull her close not realizing what I’m doing.

She grabs my arm with her fingers, digging in with fear and relief that I’m

touching her. She's shaking so I at least know I'm not the only one a bit freaked out. "Let's just move really, really, slow."

"Or we make noise and scare the monsters before they scare us?"

She laughs and I'm reminded again what it's like to have someone by your side—even if she came into my life by way of fandom—I know she cares.

"Hey..." I stop walking and pull her into a dark corner away from the creepy stalker looking guy walking down the hall with an ax who is wearing a clown mask and combat boots—Yeah, think we'll just skip that one.

"Thanks." I tell her.

Everything around us is terrifying, I can't see a thing, but I can see her face as she leans up and in and cups my cheeks. Her heart-shaped face is adorable, especially when she bites her lower lip. In another world, she's someone I would be interested in. Someone I would go for. But shit. Life sucks, why couldn't I fall for someone like her? Why does it have to be the impossible? Ari. The one girl who can never truly be mine?

"I'm going to try something."

"What?" I'm suddenly confused.

She stands up on her tiptoes and presses a soft kiss to my cheek then my mouth and I part my lips and let her in because why not at this point... I'm so lost. I'm so done. I let her in because she feels safe and I need safe, and I'm angry and sad, and everything in my life is out of control—but this. not this moment. no one can tell me who I can kiss right now. No one. I realize I have no feelings for her other than this moment. Do I feel guilty? No. She wanted this. she instigated this kiss, I'm just reciprocating—she knows I'm in love with another woman. She guessed it. so I feel no remorse—maybe we both need this. It's one small moment that I'm not allowed to get in my daily life, granted it's one that could ruin me, but I'm already there... how did it get this

far? How am I kissing a woman in front of cameras and the world?

Where did the sensible Sookie go?

I'd been so careful this entire time and then it just hits, I've lost my censor, my measure of everything, my mind.

Who the hell am I?

She pulls back after my tongue slides against hers, after I tug her top lip and remember how she didn't ask for more. With a laugh she pulls further away and crosses her arms over her black trench coat.

"So we getting out of here or what?"

"Do we need to discuss?" What just happened? We just kissed? We just broke every rule to break, and she knows I'm in love with someone else, and what? How is she acting so cool and unaffected? Why am I the one who needs to discuss our feelings?

"Meh, sexual repression happens to everyone, just like fear, I was present, you were present," She lowers her voice and waves her hand in the air like it's no big deal. "I know you don't care about me, but also thanks for making my last few months worth it."

I stop her and try to pull her away from any cameras in the hallway. "What? You can't kill yourself, no, don't—"

She starts laughing and looks at me like I'm crazy.

"I'm not killing myself! Don't be so dramatic... myself is killing itself." She pulls me out into the hallway where all the hidden cameras can see us. "Thank you, genuinely, thank you. I've been following you for years and you've always been my favorite idol, I've always wanted just one weird fan moment with you before I die and you gave that to me, so thank you."

"Die?" I repeat shaking my head in disbelief, I'm immediately overcome with emotion and can feel the tears in my eyes as I grab her forearms trying not to shake them, because I don't know how fragile she is now. But she

can't just die.

“What are you saying?”

Hell is going on around us, hauntedness, darkness, the clown's probably coming back, but all I see is her as she steps up on her tiptoes and kisses my nose, like it's something she's done a thousand times before. It's a well-known rule, you don't let fans touch you like that and you must always remain pure in front of the public—as far as they know, you don't touch a soul.

Her touch is soft, safe, it feels nice. I like it a lot. I like her, but she's not mine and I'm not hers. And my heart... my damn heart belongs to someone else—the woman who plagues my every waking moment. I realize you can want someone in different ways—but the connection you feel with the one who has your heart is unlike anything else.

“I wanted one moment with someone like you,” she tells me giving me that adorable smile of hers. “And you know what's so freaking great Sookie, you proved me right.”

“How did I prove you right?” I wonder.

“You are everything you say you are, everything you pretend not to be, everything they want you to be.”

I shake my head at her in confusion.

“I don't understand... you don't even know me.”

“But I do. You're a good man. A gentle man. And you sure know how to kiss for being so innocent.”

I can feel myself blush when she says that last part and she's smiling at me in a mischievous way so I know she said it for a reaction.

“So thank you,” she says. “I might even try to kiss you some more.”

I'm trying not to freak out, as I process everything she's just said to me. We're literally in front of cameras, they can use any of this and she's talking

about death one minute and how I'm a great kisser the next. I can't even keep up with this conversation without knowing that I'm going to have to write an apology letter on top of telling Rae and he doesn't even know the worst of it. But death, she's dying so focusing on myself isn't my point, it's nothing. It's her.

"I don't know how to respond to this?"

"You don't have to respond in any way," she says it like it's simple. "I'm just telling you how wonderful I think you are."

"I don't deserve those sort of words right now," I say to her then look over her shoulder out into the dark haunted house. "I also think it might be a good idea for us to get moving because we're probably about to get murdered by about a billion zombies if we don't keep moving, but what are you—"

She presses a finger to my lips.

"You talk more than I thought you would. You're a lot of things I didn't expect and almost everything I did," she says, then drops the bomb on me like she's discussing something as trivial as the weather. "I have leukemia and while the doctors are hopeful, I have a few more months, I kind of wanted to face my fears, and also see my idol."

The world around is chaos.

Madness.

Mayhem.

But suddenly, it's like we are the only two people in the world and I do what comes naturally to me. I don't hesitate. I lean down and I cup her face in my hands and kiss her. I kiss her with the conviction that there are such things as miracles. I kiss her hard and soft, with passion—all of my passion—and in that kiss I hope she takes some of my strength—that she never loses hers or forgets this moment.

Because I know I never will.

When I finally pull away and look down at her, her eyes are still closed and she has that dreamy look on her face. Good. I want to see that there. I want to be her dream. I don't want her to ever close her eyes but if and when she does, I hope to God it's a memory like this.

She kissed her idol—I hope it was all she wanted it to be.

And maybe more.

And then I remember all the cameras and my role as the young innocent, Maknae and I almost laugh. God, how your life can really change in the course of a day... even hours. Going from one way to another.

But I don't give a shit.

I'm done giving a shit. At least for now.

I kiss her again, just because I can, then pull back from her parted lips and whisper. "I'm rooting for you. And I will always be rooting for you."

"That's not allowed." A tear runs down her cheek. "Kissing a fan."

"I'm in my demon era." I nod and give her a smile. "But also, despite the fact that we're getting filmed and knowing that we aren't in a relationship can't a kiss just be a kiss because you deserve it? Because you need it? Because the world is a sad, dark place, and if you can offer one small thing, why not give it up?"

More tears stream down her cheeks. "The idol of idols."

"What?"

She pats me on the shoulder. "Promise I won't fall in love with you any more, but you are my idol of idols."

"Because I kissed you?" I ask playfully trying to tone down the seriousness.

She shakes her head and grips my hand. "Because of hope. Because even though I'm dying, you gave me hope, and kindness..." And then she stops walking and faces me. "Fuck them all, Sookie. You belong to nobody but

yourself and I hope whoever you're in love with understands how precious and sacred you are. Because you are. You're more than this idol. You are. Never forget that. Now let's go fight some zombies."

I smile despite tears burning in my eyes. This girl has touched me in a way I haven't experienced in a long while and I don't understand it at all, but then I guess I don't have to. "I told you earlier, had I not already given my heart away, it would be yours," I smile at her. "Maybe, friendship wise, it already is."

She turns and smiles at me. "Of course it is."

And then she breaks apart from me and spins toward what I'm assuming is more darkness and horror. She twirls actually, twice, and then turns with a smile. "Ready to win?"

I offer out my hand. "I think I already did."

Chapter Thirteen

Ari

I can't believe what I'm seeing.

What I'm being forced to see.

What I'm being tortured with—like this is a moment of what the actual fuck? What did I ever do to be subjected to this?

And then, all the emotions started to wash over me. I immediately started crying when she confessed her tragic story to him—it was/is heartbreaking to hear. And then, all the other emotions began to wash over me. okay. The one that is glaring and ugly and I can't avoid.

Jealousy.

Insane, hot, visceral jealousy... and anger. Okay, she's dying, I get it... but does she really need to kiss him like that? Or touch him the way she keeps touching him? And then... he grabbed her and kissed her? With his tongue clearly in her mouth?

On television?

What. The. Actual. Hell.

“Oh shit.” Rae says it under his breath but the camera catches it. At this point I'm already expecting a call from legal or at least from management. But that's the last thing I'm thinking about despite the fact that it should be

the first. Like, who cares about legal problems when the man you love just put his tongue in another woman's mouth? Right? And it can't be that bad if Director Simon doesn't stop the tape, he just keeps going. Doesn't he realize this could completely wreck everything? If he uses this footage, there is no future for Sookie.

But again... I can't really focus on that right now.

I think I see the tongue again, but I can't tell and then she's complimenting him on how incredible he is, and he's confessing friendship and he's talking about a woman he loves. It's me. I know it's me... and if I didn't love him as much as I do, I'd probably be bawling watching this on TV, instead I'm, numb.

I'm completely numb, even my fingers have no feeling, because regardless of the words coming out of his mouth, he just kissed someone on television. In front of the world. And he kissed her like he felt something and like it mattered. God, that hurts. All of this hurts. My heart cracks in my chest. I don't even understand who this person is right now. It's like the real Sookie was just let out of jail and free from years of oppression and can't contain himself, but he's going to have to.

Someone needs to put him in his place before he *doesn't* just cancel the entire group and himself from the K-pop industry. And I swear to God, he needs to stop touching her or I'm going to lose my shi—

I take a step forward, hands curled in balls by my side ready to throw down.

Rae looks over at me.

And I pause and try to get a grip. I hope to hell my emotions are hidden. I hope he can't tell the crazy thoughts that are going on inside my head. I'm not reacting like their lawyer, but as someone who wants him for myself and is about to claim her territory..

Rae's eyes narrow while Lucas looks over.

The cameras in the field pan to Grace while the cameras inside the haunted school continue to film.

“Wow!” She wipes at her eyes. “That was extremely emotional, I hope nobody gets upset that an idol would treat a dying fan with such care, like a last wish.”

Lucas clues right in. “I can't even imagine what she's going through, Sookie, you may be the youngest in the group but you showed your fan true care. We love our fans so much, we wouldn't be here without you, know that it isn't just Sookie who holds your hearts, it's all of us.”

Thank God.

It's still going to be a scandal, but they both smoothed it over a bit, and maybe we'll get lucky and this won't be a big deal.

In my gut though, I know the netizens are going to lose their minds.

A headache starts to press against my temples as I watch the camera feeds and see them laughing and solving clues as they run through the building.

Around twenty zombies come at them.

Sookie falls to the ground, she grabs his hand and they run, it's cute—they're cute. They look good together. I grimace at her. Ugh, and how do you hate someone who's dying?

I clench my hands into fists again and try my best to get a grip and watch while he nearly runs into a wall. You can hear the screams coming from inside the school—mainly Sookie's. The rest of the cast is dying with laughter. I'm trying my best here to remain unaffected. I'm trying but my damn brother is too observant.

And Rae's still watching me through his mask.

The other group is deathly silent as they watch the events unfold before them., They're probably scared of having to go through the haunted school,

then again, I can't remember who's who anymore. Only that about half of the guys chosen are from SWT, and the other half from TestME.

The rest went back to the houses to work on final tracks for their albums. I'm hoping that I don't get back after filming to an absolute bloodbath from them all fighting. At this point it's up in the air and I don't really know what to expect.

Day two isn't turning out to be easy, not that I thought it would, but I sure as hell didn't expect Sookie to kiss someone.

I bite down on my lip and keep watching. Cameras continue to roll as Sookie and Dueri make it back out. Rae—or I think it's Rae gives them a high five for surviving, the rest of the group is kind of awkward until, Iseul pipes up. "Good kisser, huh?"

Dueri steps right in front of Sookie and crosses her arms. "I was more focused on the fact that he was screaming most the time from fake zombies," She turns to Sookie. "You realize I can barely hear out of my left ear now right?"

Sookie ruffles her hair a bit. I hope my mouth isn't hanging open but they are so familiar with one another and I'm so jealous again. "That's right, you're my savior, I'm pretty sure that really tall one dressed in red blood and that weird skeleton scar would have taken me out."

"It was weird he whispered your name." She nods.

"I didn't like it." He agrees, they semi break apart.

Lucas goes right into the next two people. "All right terrifying spider and Iseul, you're up next, you'll be able to use this entire scary experience to get to know your spider better, discover his identity, and make it out. The money for charity will be decided on how fast your time is—obviously, you need to win, and if you guess your spider's identity correctly, we'll add to that!"

Grace faces them, her hands clasped. "Any questions?"

Iseul raises her hand. "I already know it's Kai."

"Wow!" Grace gives her a thumbs up. "What gave him away?"

Iseul shrugs. "I studied all of their profiles, but mainly the fact that he kept tripping over his eight legs, and he trips the most on stage."

Lucas nods once. "And is she correct?"

The spider mask comes off, and it's Kai, but he doesn't look happy. His dark hair's pulled back into a low ponytail. "Yup."

He's having a hard time even smiling it looks like, maybe he's getting sick? He glances toward our tent then back at Lucas when Iseul grabs his hand. "We're ready to go! Let's beat their time!"

They're gone in mere seconds, I'm so focused on the cameras I barely miss Solia storm off from set.

Drama all around. Lovely.

My headache worsens to the point that I need to take some pain medication and hydrate.

"Here." Producer Sung-Bin hands me a water. "That's either going to be great tv or we're going to immediately need to release a statement."

I snort and start chugging water. "Yeah."

He touches my arm. "Are you okay? You look pale."

I lock eyes with Sookie over Sung-Bin's shoulder and glare. "Never been better."

Sookie stares down at the hand placement, but I don't shrug away, it's petty, and I'm delusional, but I stay that way for a few seconds until he smirks and walks over to Iseul and rests his head on her shoulder briefly before grabbing her water and stealing it.

That. Little. Shit.

It's like he's purposefully making my job hard, jeopardizing the band, his own career, and why? For what?

A small voice whispers: “Fling.” While another follows: “Desperation.”
And I know the third would most likely be: “Love.”

I stick around through filming and Sung-Bin doesn't leave my side., For the most part, all scandals are avoided with the rest of the members and we have our couples who will move forward—Kai and Iseul, who did end up beating Sookie and Dueri by ten seconds. Kind of like the ten second kiss that Sookie shared with the girl who's dying. *Dying, Ari! Where is your empathy? Where is your compassion?!* I scream these things in my head and am pretty sure that I'm losing my mind.

Get a grip...

Get a grip...

And then...

That kiss actually felt like a lot longer than ten seconds. More like twenty, maybe thirty... and was tongue absolutely necessary? He could have made his point with just a peck?

I realize I need a long shower and sleep—clarity and sanity will surely come after a good night's rest?

I busy myself and watch the other three couples get congratulated. Everyone figured out who was wearing what disguise. The running joke is that the screaming from the idols and the talking to the zombies in order to convince them to let them pass gave everything away., It wasn't just the voice recognition but their mannerisms—down to Eric in his half horse weird Narnia thing he has going on. Despite my feelings right now, I'm still dying to know why that's his fear. I'm also convinced he will never in his life live this down, it's almost enough for me to smile, but I know even if I did, it wouldn't reach my eyes.

Eric was paired with Ha-Yoon, which is sweet since she seems like a genuinely nice fan, she even helped him after he tripped on his hoof and

nearly face planted against a female zombie holding her own head.

Beth and Rae were picked together and while their interaction was painfully awkward on her end, I think Rae was able to shatter the whole idol leader reputation when he jumped into her arms at one point—how she caught him, I have no idea.

Mishel and Suho were last, and the slowest, but I think it's because she wouldn't stop arguing with him until he finally abandoned her and just walked through the zombies yelling. "Move." While she ran after him saying "I'm scared" at least a dozen times.

I know Rae would say the guy got a taste of his own medicine but, I still felt slightly bad for her that she was abandoned by her idol, then again, he was all smiles and kindness the minute they got out and told the cameras he was just freaked out and forgot about her by accident.

I snort just thinking about it as the costumes are taken off all the guys.

Sookie's in black tight leggings and a loose black long-sleeved shirt. I'm ready to approach him when I get a sudden tap on my shoulder.

"Good." Director Simon nods while staring at his phone. "I like the drama, specifically over Sookie, kid needs to be careful not to end his career but the ratings are going to soar, get legal on it just in case management gets angry, and let him know to play it out between the girls, that's our angle."

"But—"

He pats me on the back. "Good work today," He turns. "Everyone, that's a wrap for day two."

I try to speak again, "Listen, Director Simon, you're playing with his career."

Director Simon frowns and looks over his shoulder. "He chose this, and he made those decisions in that haunted school. That was his doing. That's not my fault, I was told to get ratings and promote the album, if he gets

canceled that's on him. Look, I know you've worked with the group for a few years, you're close to all of them, and you work for the label, just let him know to play it up, say it like the friend you are." He winks like the dirty bastard he is and continues to walk away and shake hands with people and bow like he has his new gold mine.

My heart falls to my feet.

Because I know he does. He's not wrong. This will be a ratings juggernaut.

Sookie starts walking toward the last van, I jog after him and try to look as nonchalant as physically and painfully possible. "Good job."

He snorts out a laugh and shakes his head at, not even sparing me a glance.

"Sure, thanks, okay."

Somehow, in the course of a few hours, Sookie's grown up some more. He's more masculine. More adult... even more... hot? I clear my throat and squeeze my eyes shut while the cast piles into the other van, leaving us all alone. How is it that we're the only ones going to this one? I try to remain as professional as possible.

"Director Simon wants you to stay close to both girls." I'm walking next to him but it feels like he's billions of miles away. His eyes have only been for Dueri the entire show. I've never seen an ex-girlfriend be so bold as to shame someone who's dying on tv, which I know is the angle they're going for, but it would be a new low for sure. The numbers will skyrocket, no doubt. And after seeing how many live streamers there were the day before when it passed ten million, why wouldn't the director go for all the drama he could, at the cost of the idols career?

When I think of the legalities of everything I immediately feel a pulsing in my temples for the third time tonight which isn't helping my stress level. Nor

is walking next to Sookie whose body language screams out how unimportant I am. I climb into the van.

“Yeah.” He finally speaks. “I don’t know if I’m going to play into it, it feels wrong. More than wrong. It feels gross, I mean she’s dying, you get that right? This girl is dying, so why not give her something she wants and needs?” Sookie’s eyes search mine and I hate that I’m so jealous of a dying girl. I hate that I hate how protective he is of her. I should love his compassion, instead, it makes me want to breathe fire.

“And Iseul is a completely different story I won’t talk about. She’s toxic and being next to her makes me want to—” I wait for him to say something else but he just shakes his head and walks into the van and takes a seat in the back.

I follow him and put my seatbelt on. The doors to the van start to close while we sit in back, both looking straight ahead. He closes his eyes like he can’t bear to look at me, but I tell myself it’s because he’s tired. That fighting zombies was difficult. It’s not me. I’m just reading into the situation.

“Well, you need to talk about it.” I say it fast and forceful. I immediately regret it when his body freezes. I can tell he doesn’t like my words so I fumble to explain. “I mean, it’s good for ratings, it takes attention away from you cursing on live tv and it helps everyone, you do realize your career is in jeopardy, right? I mean if we can spin it in the right way, it’ll be fine.”

“Does it help you?” He tilts his head toward me, his eyes are glassy like he’s about to yell.

“I don’t understand,” I’m suddenly nervous as hell. His energy is as volatile as a volcano on the verge... and this volcano is about to breathe hell and fire on me.

“What don’t you understand, Ari? It’s simple. Answer the question. Does it help you? Am I doing this to help your job?” he enunciates every word and

his eyes are glazed over in anger.

“No, no,” my response is nervous and I hate that my voice quivers. But I’ve never experienced this side of Sookie before. I’ve never seen this kind of anger.

“So am I doing it to help the band?”

His eyes pin mine with fury and I’m incapable of words or movement. He stares into me before he shakes his head, his emotions somehow even more volatile than before.

“You know, at one point you were everything I needed. You had my back, you helped me survive, you offered me—” his voice cracks. “—you offered me hope! Do you have any fucking idea what that feels like? When someone offers their hand and then takes it back? I get it. I get it. You think you’re protecting me.” He gets right in my face lowering his voice so the driver can’t hear. “You. Are. Killing. Me.”

Tears sting my eyes then slowly stream down my cheeks. But he’s not affected.

“This is business.” He smirks coldly. “Not personal. Got it, loud and clear.”

He jerks away from me like I’m contagious and I’m left in a state of shock, willing him to talk more. I want to hear more because this is the Sookie I love more than anything. This is the Sookie that’s real, that lets me in... that makes me realize that I’m not alone.

“That’s not what I meant,” I keep my voice as calm as possible. “I have orders too you know. I have a job that I have to do and I want to protect you, I do. That’s all I want. But it seems like this is the direction they’re headed in for the series, you just need to be careful not to go too far. And everything’s going to be okay.”

“Too far?” He tilts his head toward me, then leans in again. Coming

closer. So close that I can feel his sweet breath against my skin. Something's different about him. Something changed in that haunted school of horror.

The scales... the scales that I always thought tipped in my favor in terms of experience and control, seem to have shifted ever so slightly. I know it.

And he knows it.

"Don't you think," His hand goes to my thigh and squeezes. "That I've already gone too far?"

My breath hitches in my chest. "I, no, I mean tonight was, I get it, I do, it was just," His hand slides up my thigh resting on my hip, then slowly slides up my stomach, just touching me like it's the most natural thing in the world. Like he's done it a million times even though I can count the number of times it's happened.

He's touching me like he owns me.

And I don't want him to stop.

"Do you still want me to play by your rules?" His thumb grazes one of my breasts. "Play the women against each other and go on another random date?"

My body is officially on fire. And this moment is torture in so many ways. Tears fill my eyes, stupid tears because I'm so turned on by this guy who's kind of acting like a jerk, but then, he's not lying and he's not wrong. It's my job. It's his career. Everything he's worked for. So I lie because I think it's the best thing to do, even though I hate the words as I speak them.

"Yes. I need you to play by the rules of the show and right now your career and ratings trump everything."

His hand drops away from my body and I want to grab it and put it back right where it was. He leans back in his chair then looks out the window. He doesn't know I see the single tear that falls from his right cheek or that I see the way his hands are clenched.

I keep breaking him.

I keep breaking myself.

And I know one more break might crack the entire thing, but what other choice do I have? He has to survive this not just for himself but for the band, and I have my job too—not that even matters to me if I had to compare the two. But the band matters a lot. And then there's Rae, who I know now especially is watching every move.

And the world is a fickle place and spinning this is going to be difficult enough, he did sign the damn contract though. But maybe he's right, maybe I should have stopped them all, everyone in both groups but all I kept getting told from execs was to do my job and that this would be fun for fans.

It isn't feeling so fun.

I reach across and put a hand on his knee. He shoves it away.

“Don't.” His head shakes, his voice aloof.

I realize he's never rejected my touch before and it hurts.

Bad.

And then he drives the knife even deeper.

“I need hope to be dead.”

Chapter Fourteen

Sookie

I wake up feeling sore and exhausted and nearly roll out of my bed onto Jay's face. "Bro, why are you on the floor?"

He looks up at me, his eyes are bloodshot, and his blinking is really slow. I wave in front of his face, he tries to open his eyes wider, then rubs them with both fists. He's shirtless, wearing nothing but grey sweatpants, one black slipper, and his hair's a mess, shit is that a hickey?

I poke his neck. "What the hell did you do while we were filming last night?"

He slowly rolls onto his stomach then his back again, then stomach. "I got really, really, really, hammered."

I groan and plop next to him, feeling horrible because I didn't wash my face—huge infraction—brush my teeth—I was pissed and fell asleep and have to be on camera today—and in my tight leggings all after sweating and not eating dinner. "Were you alone?"

He freezes. "Well, uh, Grace knows how to sneak us out remember? I mean not, out, out, but to that part of the property where they have no cameras and you can sneak someone in."

My jaw drops. "Hyung!"

“What?” He answers back in Korean. “I didn’t sneak anyone that doesn’t know how to, um, sneak.”

“Is that hickey from them?” I point at his neck, he slaps my hand away. I point again, he slaps again, and then Kai walks in.

He sits down on the ground. “Are we playing a slap game or—oh wow, you have a very large hickey on the side of your neck,” He also tries to touch it.

Jay slaps with both hands while Lucas barges in with Rae.

Both just accept we’re all exhausted and sitting on the floor when Lucas’s eyes bulge, he elbows Rae who collapses onto his back and stares up at the ceiling. “My young heart can’t handle this.”

“Hickeys?” Kai offers. “Because you can always cover them with makeup like they do our tattoos, just a couple little dab, dab, dab—ooff.” Rae throws a pillow at his face then sits up and stares at all of us.

Oh no. The tension is thick, and I know I’m one of the reasons why.

He looks for at least three creepy seconds at each member, making intense eye contact and refusing to show any sort of emotion other than coldness. I almost don’t breathe when he opens his mouth. “Do we stall our release?”

Lucas is the first to speak up. “Not what I expected, especially after last night.” All eyes briefly go to me. “But, we can’t do it, we have Idol Countdown in less than two months, followed by Countdown K-pop, followed by a very strict fan meeting in front of the label where we sign autographs, followed by two special edition releases of the album, and our title track is out at the end of next month. I know I don’t need to add on the fact that social media has been blowing up, all of our concept pictures are out except for the last set right before the teaser for Devil so, no, I don’t think we can just stall our release without dying a very slow and painful death in the K-pop industry disappointing fans and our label and making it even harder

than it already is, fuck I'm tired!"

Kai nods. "And you only pointed out half of our release month schedule."

Jay continues to groan while Rae puts his hands over his face. "I messed up the final special edition song for our mini album."

"What?" We all say in unison.

He shakes his head. "It won't come, I've tried it's like I'm blocked and I keep ruining it more and more and it was for the special edition albums, the more expensive ones, they have added photocards, and what should be an extra track and all I have is, humming."

"You hum?" I ask.

He nods. "It started well, ended with a hum then I banged my head against the table and fell asleep with a paper stuck to my face until Eric walked in and asked if I was alive."

Kai, "That was nice."

Rae glares. "He needed the studio."

"Damn." Lucas sighs. "Well, what if the reason you're blocked is because of this show?"

Rae leaned against the wall. "It's not just that, Ari's been acting really weird, and just, cold lately, last night she looked at me like she got caught doing something wrong and when I asked her she just laughed and said it was a past I didn't need to worry about."

Crack. Break. Splinter. Fall. I try to swallow and can't remember how. I try to think but no thoughts come. I just sit there like an idiot while everyone pipes up with reasons why she would be acting that way.

First fling.

Now past.

Wow. Just. Wow.

Maybe I just go for Dueri, no, no horrible idea, that would be settling—for

her, not me. She'd feel like a charity case and I'd feel like shit for trying to love someone when my heart's currently in the grips of Satan who happens to be ripping it apart bit by bit.

Lucas elbows me as if to say get it together, he clears his throat. I sit up straight and try to pay attention to the conversation, but I can feel the soul gripping emotion coming over me, which is so weak on my part but it hurts.

She was everything I relied on for years once we debuted.

Was I really used?

Was I really all the things she said about me? Am I?

I lean my head on Jay's shoulder. I know I don't need to say anything, he just lets me and keeps talking while Lucas pats me on the back.

Kai looks over and shares a knowing look with me then jumps to his feet. "You know what? Fuck this bullshit. Me, Rae, and Sookie are the last men standing in that challenge. The other two can work on the song, loathe as I am to admit it." He leans his head back and swallows. "Loathe, I mean absolute hate, no change that, I mean this in a way that makes me think quitting would be better—go to Ji-Woo and Kwan, they write really well and they might be collab writers on this project, we're from the same label, have the same release month, fandoms will go crazy."

The room gets silent.

A knock sounds on the very open door. It's Ji-Woo, he's wearing no shirt and eating yogurt with his fingers. "Heard my name."

"How old are you? Again?" I ask.

He chokes out. "Seventeen and the spoons were dirty." He slurps more yogurt off his finger. "What?"

"We need help!" Jay blurts, then murmurs. "I need help, because that was... crazy. I'm going crazy." He looks up at me like he's trying to communicate with his exhausted face and hickey but I have nothing.

I narrow my eyes. He mouths. “Later.”

“Falling from that pedestal so soon?” Ji-Woon asks taking another bite.

“We want to collaborate on a song.” Lucas announces casually.

Ji-Woo starts choking on his yogurt. Rae jumps up and pats him roughly on the back. “You good?”

“What?” He looks around the room. “Is this a prank?”

“No,” we say in unison.

“Sadly...” Kai starts. “You’re our only hope, we’ll just call you Luke Skywalker.” He sighs. “Well, you and Eric—you think you and Kwan could help us re-write something and make it a banger all within the next week and a half?”

He grins. “Do I get song credit and do I get producing credit?”

I knew he would ask this.

Rae stands slowly. “You’ll get both if you help. We’re under a deadline.”

He nods. “And I also get to hold it over your head.” He holds out his hand. “I’m in.”

Rae shakes his head. “Yeah, I’m not touching that.”

It’s the yogurt hand.

“Oh.” He quickly licks his fingers, then holds it out again. Rae shakes the one finger without yogurt and walks away.

Ji-Woo chases after him. “Hey what are we writing about? When do we start?”

“The maknae line sure is... chaotic sometimes.” Lucas says looking over at me.

I roll my eyes. “Me? I’m completely normal.”

“Don’t tell him. Ever.” Lucas says quickly.

“Ever, ever, never, ever.” Kai joins in.

Jay suddenly sits fully up. “I’m sorry are we talking about Sookie and sex

again?”

“There was no sex.” I blurt. “Only, light, um, petting?”

Lucas’s laugh fills the room. “Sure, light petting is how lipstick gets in all the places and moves cars, all right.”

“YOU MOVED A CAR?” Jay shouts.

We all rush over to tackle him to the ground. He tries talking against our hands. All I hear is muffled screaming when Rae walks back in and sighs. “Why is it always you guys?”

“What?” Kai jerks back. “It’s because you have no choice but to be responsible, oh also that reminds me, they’re swapping the girls for more drama, you have Beth for the mystery date tonight, they’ll stage it that you got her.” He turns to me. “And you got your ex, congrats.”

I put my hands over my face and groan. “I’ll be on my best behavior.”

“What, um,” Rae leans down. “Really happened with her?”

Everything. “Nothing.” I lie. “Nothing worth mentioning.” Without truly ruining my career and life. “But, Rae, hold up for a minute.”

The rest of the guys slowly get up and walk out of the room leaving me and Rae alone. He shoves his hands into his white joggers, he always puts his hands in his pockets when he’s nervous.

“Nothing major.” I mean not for this subject. “Treat her well, she’s dying, as you know and this is like her final moment, I know I shouldn’t have kissed her and I’m sorry, I’ll write an apology if things get heated but she’s a really nice girl, honestly, I think you would really like her.”

Rae’s expression flickers a bit, his eyes go to the left. “She seems nice, probably not my type though.”

“You’d be surprised how she sneaks in.” On a rough exhale I pat him on the shoulder. “Promise?”

“Of course, just do me one favor on top of my promise.” He looks

uncommittable. “Check in on Ari, make sure she’s okay? Something’s wrong and I know she’ll refuse to tell her brother.”

But sure, she’ll tell the guy she made out with last week. “Yeah, I’ll ask.”

“Thanks, Sookie. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

My throat nearly closes completely. “Same goes for you.”

Chapter Fifteen

Ari

It's going to be a horrible day.

I already know this after Director Simon tried to get two of the filming locations changed and approved after Sookie's stunt last night, follow that up with Sookie's text, and production scrambling and me trying to get permits for the places he wants to film and I already want to pass out at noon. We have two hours until shooting the dates, in their respective locations and I'm already sweating.

But the reason the day is going to be really, really bad is because of my last interaction with Sookie. Because honestly, that's all that matters. I don't know how I'm going to survive the day and the drama that it will no doubt bring.

My phone goes off.

Awesome.

Speaking of drama. And life sucking feelings. And the reason why I couldn't sleep at all last night.

SK

Hey can we chat real quick?

My heart thuds against my chest.

Me

Yeah, sure, where?

SK

I'll come to you, where you at?

My heart stops thudding and drops, he doesn't care if people see which means it's business, not personal. I remind myself I did this to us and I did it for him. He's just acting accordingly. I wanted this.

Me

Sure, I'm just in front of the girls house by the pool. Rae has a date with Beth at home, all relaxation and a giant outdoor screen for movie night.

SK

She'll love that.

I'm immediately jealous of a girl I should be happy for and feel sorry for. I feel like a horrible person and properly convince myself I am one. Thankfully I only have to wait five minutes for Sookie to show up. He's wearing loose jeans, Jordans, and a loose fitting black Supreme white T-shirt. Has he been working out? Why are his biceps bulging and why does his hair look longer right now?

God. I just want to stare at his mouth. And those hands. Those hands he had on my body just yesterday.

Mouth dry I put on the best professional face I can and smile at him. "What's up?"

His eyebrows shoot up, his smile is bitter. "I promised Rae I'd check on you because according to him you're acting weird and since I know nothing and mean nothing, I need to report back to him something that sounds like a believable lie." He takes a step forward. "Should I just say it's that time of the month or should I say you're dating the producer and don't want him to

find out? Both are believable.”

I feel my entire body go cold. “You turned mean.”

“And you turned heartless.” He snaps back. “So I guess we’re even. Unless you have a better story to tell him?”

“Fine.” I snap. “Sure, then tell him I’ve been asked to go out with Producer Sung-Bin, it’s not like it’s a lie, I’ve just turned him down every time, but maybe I should change and go with my heartless ways.”

Sookie leans in, his smile cruel. “Good job, research how big his dick is before you decide to stay with him and if it checks out you won’t break him, I mean he pretty much checks every other box you have for your life.”

“You don’t even know.” I snap under my breath. “What I want.”

“And neither do you.” He says softly. “All right, I’ll let him know you have a secret boyfriend you’re not ready to reveal but that he’s very high up in the industry so you’re feeling nervous.” He turns around. “See you on the date.”

I want to yell at him it should be our date. That this shouldn’t be the sort of fate we get instead I watch him walk confidently back to the house and I can’t wonder where it all went wrong.

It started with a forbidden kiss.

And ended in a love sick nightmare.

Producer Sung-Bin chooses that moment to walk up next to me, watching Sookie walk away. “Poor kid may have thrown away his career.”

Kid. Not a kid. “Yeah, well, he understands his own mind, all we can do is guide him, by the way, I’ll take you up on that dinner date sometime.”

His shocked expression makes me feel sick to my stomach, but I have no choice. We both move on, or Sookie’s the one that truly loses. I just wish he saw it that way, I wish he understood that I’m not just breaking his heart, I’m breaking mine too.

“Great!” Producer Sung-Bin pulls out his phone. “Looks like we wrap early Friday night, let’s go out then.”

“It’s a date.” I sound excited but the words are bitter, and when I swallow even my mouth feels the sadness of them, the deepness of that sadness goes into my very soul. He walks away from me and I stare at the grass. One journey leads to destruction but happiness, the other leads to freedom and fame for Sookie but devastation and heart ache for me... and maybe for him too. What a fate we have.

Lucky us.

Hours later I’m on set again, and being forced to watch the final date while the other crew is with the other couples, I get the joy of watching Sookie with his ex. These days have not been great.

He’s also touching Iseul again, he’s almost gentle with her, and when he looks over at me, his eyes don’t lie. Innocent Sookie isn’t looking at me, no he’s proving something to me as if to say, you told me to do this. Enjoy.

I clench my hands, my fingers digging into my palms when he leans in and flirts with her. Why is his face so close? Is that really necessary?

Viewership has soared for the show, to the point it’s number one on the network for the last three days and climbing. Pre-orders for both groups’ albums have skyrocketed past three million—no small feat for either of them.

I should be proud.

I should ignore the fact that he looks ready to kiss her while they’re on a date, he’d at one point suggested we do in secret. One I turned him down on. One I told him I couldn’t do.

It sounds stupid, that I’d be upset he took her hiking and for a picnic. And the little shit keeps tripping and clinging to his arm. If she asks him about working out one more time, I’m going to scream.

“So,” His ex Iseul stumbles next to him. “Would you ever date a fan in

real life?”

He smiles down at her looking every part sexy, his hairs just the right amount of length near his shoulders, messy with added red highlights in it, his eyes search hers like he's the hesitant lead on this own K Drama, then smiles slowly. “I think anything's possible.”

“Just like it's possible for your heart to swoon?” She jokes.

“Does that mean yours is?” He says so smooth and fast I'm sputtering in my head and malfunctioning.

And that, folks is what has every fan screaming, the other guys are killing it too, don't get me wrong, but nobody's seen Sookie in this light before, he's not just a flirt, he's downright dangerous to someone's health even with being on the brink of cancelation. I would know. And when I told him to play into it, this was not really what I had in mind.

She keeps walking without looking where she's going and trips again, this time stumbling onto a rock. He catches her... was that in slow motion? It felt like it was slow motion.

The makeup artist next to me grabs a random leaf and starts fanning herself with it.

She literally plucked it from the tree next to her like she's in some sort of romantic scene and needed something to remember this moment by.

Production is completely engrossed, including Director Simon, they don't cut, shouldn't they be cutting? Shouldn't we get medics in there? What if she's bleeding? Did she hit her head?

Sookie sets her down on the same rock and takes off his baggy black sweatshirt revealing nothing but a black tank top that leaves no muscle without any screen time, and since he was wearing a sweatshirt, his sleeve is now completely on display, including the tattoos I took him to get.

My tattoos.

Mine!

She sucks in a sharp breath.

So does the makeup artist next to me—we were under strict instructions to keep his image innocent! Nothing about this screams innocence.

The makeup artist next to me grabs hold to the tree trunk, a few other women on set have their phones strategically out.

I stomp over to grab them when Sookie cups her face with his hands. “Are you okay?”

IT WAS A ROCK!

How does a person flex while cupping someone’s face?

She nods, her lips part.

He wouldn’t dare.

He wouldn’t go that far.

I can’t breathe.

I think everyone around me is too stunned to move, it’s like we’re in a parallel universe, my life is going to be complete hell now, I’m going to have to deal with all of this shit! Because he just wants to piss me off and make me jealous.

Why am I always making it about me?

All he’d said yesterday was, “Oh you want me to fully commit? Do my job?” He gave me a slight shove. “As per my contract? Really participate and bring in ratings...” He lowered his voice and whispered next to me. “Fucking watch me.”

This isn’t what I meant.

His lips press a small kiss to her forehead.

Oh this is bad.

This is really bad.

We aren’t live, so we can edit it out at least, but she’s going to talk, and if

people leak this. I mean he's touching her.

I'm ready to run into the scene when she stares up at him. "I don't think you were supposed to do that."

He winks. "But does it feel better?"

Oh for the love of God.

She nods.

"Then who cares? I want to take care of my fans the way they take care of me."

Someone makes a noise, I look behind me, oh give me a break, is someone on set crying?

This would be the time the jealous girlfriend runs out and screams that they have a sex tape, okay maybe not really, that's too far, way too far, what am I thinking?

"So," She's quite honestly handling his gorgeousness like a champ, most girls would be comatose by now. "What do these tattoos mean?"

Oh no.

They're the ones I've helped him with. Her fingers trace a few of them, of the ones I was there watching get inked on his precious skin.

"Nothing." His jaw flexes as he looks over his shoulder, glancing at me before saying again. "They mean absolutely nothing."

My heart drops to my stomach, then my feet, and then all I have is emptiness and pure rage.

He knows my reasons! He knows why I pushed him away. I was protecting him! I am protecting him! His image is what matters, haven't I proven that? And then he does this?

I sway on my feet a bit, then I'm the one leaning against the tree, as if I've stood for hours.

"I like them." She rubs her thumb over his wrist one more time.

He stands to his full height and holds out his hand. “Good, think we can make it to the top of the trail now?”

She grabs his hand. “Well my idol gave me energy I didn’t know I needed.”

“Ah, the power of a break?”

“The power of an innocent kiss.”

He interlaces his hand with hers. “Don’t believe everything you see.”

She stumbles again and off they go, up the trail.

The camera’s follow them while they overlook the hill and drink wine, he pours her a glass and clinks it with hers. “To a new friendship.”

“Sookie, I don’t think you’re capable of having friends that are girls.” She laughs.

The crew laughs behind me.

It wasn’t cute, what she said.

She’s not cute.

She just wants in his pants.

She couldn’t handle him.

I can’t handle him.

I’m a jealous witch and I hate myself, but what I hate the most is how hurt I feel, and how I’d only have to look in the mirror to know all the reasons why I feel that way.

And the only person to blame would be staring with hollow eyes right back at me.

Chapter Sixteen

Sookie

I know she watched the entire thing, I could feel her anger, and I honestly thrived off of it—if that makes me sick, whatever... she said to participate, to get more ratings, to stick to my stupid contract.

I toss my sweatshirt onto the ground. The crew is wrapping up with Iseul down the mountain, she's doing her confessional and I asked to stay back for a bit to take in the view. They said I had fifteen minutes since it's already dark but I'm not worried.

“Head back in a few,” One of the PA's calls back at me. I don't know which one it is since I can't really see that well, but I'm assuming it's Ro, what I call him for short.

“Yup.” I clench my fists and stare up at the stars and take a second before I start to follow him down the trail when a hand reaches out and grabs my arm jerking me into the tree line.

“What the hell do you think you were doing?” Ari's in my face, with my back against the tree.

Nope.

I flip her around and slam her against the bark. “My job—isn't that what you wanted me to do?”

“By flirting with her and forcing us to edit all the shit out so you don’t get canceled with your fans! You know you can’t just touch and do what you did, you kissed her forehead!”

I smirk. “It’s great TV.”

She smacks me on the arm. “And you’re a pain in my ass!”

I lean forward nearly touching her mouth. “Are we done here?”

“No!” Ari’s nostrils flare. “We aren’t done! Some of the crew filmed what you did! It’s going to leak, and I have to be the one to gain control of the situation if this goes horribly wrong. You showed your tattoos. You’re not allowed to date. You touched her, you—“

“—jealous?” I snort out a laugh. “Wow, good thing I’ve never taken any of those roles for dramas, you’d probably run me over with your car.”

“I don’t care!” She hisses in my face. “I don’t.”

My eyebrows raise.

“I don’t!” She repeats a third time. “It’s just a headache for me and you did it on purpose, fuck whoever you want! Just do yourself a favor and actually get away with it, I can’t believe I ever—“

“--wanted to be the one who was getting fucked?” I tease. “Feel free, I’m sure producer Sung-Bin would be more than happy to fill that role, who knows, maybe he already has, you’ve been around him constantly and I know he’s flirting with you.

Her slap comes down so hard on my cheek that it can be heard echoing through the quiet forest. My jaw hurts from the impact.

She lets out a gasp and covers her mouth with her hands.

I rub my sore jaw with my hand. “Are you done now? Or do you need to get some more hits in?” I almost ask for it, maybe the pain is better than her pleasure.

Tears spill from her eyes. “I hate you.”

“You? Hate. Me?” I repeat, my heart’s already gone, what’s one more hit to it. “All right, thanks for the heads up.” God, I just need a break, a break from all of this drama from all of the constant back and forth, from trying to pretend to be something I’m not, for years just pretending to be this innocent, perfect kid when I’m not a kid anymore, when I want more, when I want things I’m not allowed to want because God forbid I act on my feelings.

I start to walk off when she reaches for my hand, but when I jerk away from her the force of my impact causes her to collide onto my back. We both tumble onto the dirt and roll on the ground until I’m on top of her. Thank God we weren’t near the cliff.

I pin her arms above her head and watch as her chest heaves in indignation.

“You hate me.” I repeat it for her;

Ari’s eyes dart to my mouth, but she says nothing as I lean down and say it against her mouth. “You. Hate. Me?”

She bucks her hips against me like she’s trying to fight but her eyes say something completely different. I’ve never been more turned on in my life.

I groan against her mouth. “Yeah, that feels so much like hate it’s damn near painful.”

Her lips part and I take full advantage of the space between them.

I slam my mouth against hers, it doesn’t feel like revenge though, or jealousy, it feels like possession. I own this woman. I move my right hand, she lifts her own like she’s going to slap me, instead she pulls my hair, then tugs me against her harder.

The amount of sexual tension is so thick it’s hard to think or breathe, her other hand reaches for my biceps and then my ass sliding beneath my loose jeans, underneath my briefs.

My laugh is dark against her mouth as I use a hand to slide under her thin

flimsy shirt, cupping a breast. Neither of us is backing down, nor are either of us complaining as I deepen the kiss pressing her further into the ground. She leans up and wraps her arms around me and I pull us to a sitting position feeling her thighs around me as she wraps around my lap while we lean back against the rough tree.

I let out a faint gasp while her hips push against me, no thoughts exist in my head as the friction of her thighs and heat consume me. My dick hardens so painfully that I could probably chop down the tree behind me into pieces.

Her fingers brush against the front of my jeans before tugging at the button, our mouths collide harder as she starts to work them down. I let her set her own aggressive pace, my jeans slid down while my erection slaps against my stomach.

She grips me in her hand while I fumble with the front buttons of her shirt, shoving it down her shoulders and pressing kisses against her chest.

“Guys! Where are you!” A familiar voice sounds. “They’re ready to send out a holy shit, damn shit.” Lucas’s flashlight hits us then quickly falls out of his hand. “So this is trauma. Hello darkness my old friend.” He keeps cursing then more voices sound.

He’s quick to run at us, then jumps back down the trail. “Oh hey, I think they already walked down on the other trail fork, nobody’s up here. Head back and I’ll double check real quick.”

Mumbled voices agreed and more flashlights leave.

Lucas is too close for comfort. He stares away from us. “Get your shit together.” He sighs. “Ari, you go down first, I’ll stay with Sookie for a minute while he cools down, tuck your shirt in, tell them you fell in the dark.”

Ari’s frozen on my lap, she’s still gripping me like she’s in complete shock.

Slowly I push her hand away.

She's acting like her life is over.

But it's Lucas, and I know he won't say anything, not to mention nothing really happened, at least that's what I say to myself as she slowly stands on wobbly feet, tucks her shirt back in, adjusts her hair, tucking it behind her ears and calmly walks past Lucas without a word.

I stay seated against the tree.

"So." He still isn't looking at me. "I'm not sure if I should apologize for interrupting what seemed to be a Twilight themed porno in the woods, or if I should smack you for being careless."

I groan and bang my head back against the tree a few times. "It was an accident."

Lucas bursts out laughing. "Your dick was literally in her hand, what? You just whipped it out to show her you had one? Yeah—no."

I tuck myself back in, attempt to look presentable then try to stand. I'm so horny I'm ready to, well there's a lot of things I'm ready to do, instead I try to take my last shreds of dignity with me and go stand by Lucas. "Don't say anything."

"Bro," He hangs his head. "You're playing with fire."

"I know."

"Yeah, I don't think you do." He curses under his breath. "Let's get back to the bottom of the trail, try to think of anything but tits on the way down."

"Bringing it up again doesn't help, man."

"Sorry."

"You know for being so young."

"Please stop talking."

"Yup."

Chapter Seventeen

Sookie

I don't know what I did to deserve this painful hell I'm in now.

Like what the actual fuck did I ever do to anyone to be in this state? I'm in need. In goddamn need and I'm so wound up now, I don't know how I'm going to make it through the night. How much longer of this torture am I to endure?

People are talking to me.

They're asking me questions.

I'm answering. But I'm not here. Or not really here for it, I should say.

Lucas asked me about a sandwich from some famous shop they brought in for kraft services, but I couldn't tell you what the nature of his question was about. I just nodded and agreed with whatever he was saying—all because my thoughts were completely zeroed in on something else.

Or someone else to be clear.

I stand in the corner of the make-shift video village the team put together and try to get my thoughts in some kind of order. I need to come down from the high... the fucking exhilarating high she took me on, just touching her took me to. And I definitely need to stop thinking about her body.

Her nipples.

Fuck.

Her legs wrapped around my waist in the perfect position for me to just slip right...

Shit, I need to do something about this boner is what I need to do.

“Are you even on this planet, man?” Lucas asks me and stares at me with a great deal of pity. He shakes his head as if I’ve just been diagnosed with some incurable disease.

Come to think of it, Ari is kind of like that. I’ve been plagued by her for years and no matter what I do I can’t shake her.

“Where else would I be?” I ask him.

“Back up on that grassy knoll with your naked ass against the tree about to take the plunge with Ari and potentially get your ass kicked by her brother and ruin your whole life—everything you’ve ever worked for and possibly ruin ours too.”

Leave it to Lucas to sum it up nicely.

Before I can answer or at least try and defend myself, Rae shows up with some of the other guys for some shot the director thought he wanted, but then changed his mind about. I am convinced Director Simon thinks he’s making *Gone with the Wind*, or some Emmy award-winning television series—I don’t know who wants to break the news to him that this is the furthest thing from award-winning television—maybe the Razzies—but it’s not going to be me.

“How’d your date go?” Rae nods at me and brushes his hair from his face.

“Fine.” I shrug and try to act cool, like I wasn’t just making out with his sister or that my hands weren’t all over her body on places he probably wouldn’t approve of. No, he definitely wouldn’t approve.

“Just fine?” Rae asks.

“I kissed her,” I say pointedly.

Rae curses and shakes his head at me. I can only imagine what his response would be to finding out that I was just worshipping his sister's naked body and imagining doing all sorts of other things to it and with her—and all the places I've imagined us being...

God, I need to stop thinking.

“Are you determined to go down in a ball of flames?”

“Maybe,” I shrug.

“Did you hit your head on something and not tell anyone?” Rae demands to know. “Like, do we need to take you to a doctor to get whatever is going on in there straight again?”

“I'm fine,” I wave his concern off. “I'm just giving them the show they want.”

“No, Sookie,” Rae shakes his head. “You're giving them the show *you* want. This is not what the band needs or the label... but then, what the fuck do I know? Life is just an unbelievable fucked up game of roulette.”

He says that last part like he's in pain or something and my eyes narrow. That comment doesn't sound like the Rae I know.

Not at all.

“How was your date with Dueri?” I wonder out loud.

“Fine,” he mumbles almost uncomfortably and his cheeks actually turn a different shade. Hmmm.

I stare at him and notice something very unusual and unlike Rae—he's not giving anything away. Like, at all. For the most part we can all tell what the other is thinking, we've been together for so long, we know when something is up. But not now—now Rae has a protective shield that's giving nothing away—actually more than that, it's hiding him and his thoughts from the world.

“Just fine?” I prod.

He shrugs.

“You were good to her, right?”

I can tell Rae doesn't like my question because his eyes narrow and he looks like he wants to punch me in the face.

“I had to ask,” I tell him and lift my hands up in defense. “Even though I just met her, I feel very protective of her.”

Rae closes his eyes for a second and when he opens them I begin to wonder.

“She's incredible.”

The way he says it. The way the sentence just lingers between us with such gravitas speaks volumes.

“She is,” I agree and decide to leave it alone. I know what it's like not to want to talk about feelings—especially ones you want or need to hide from the world.

Speaking of feelings... Ari. God. Why did I even just go there again? How is it possible for someone to just cloud your mind so fast without you even asking for it? Now all I can picture is her naked body in front of me.

And all the things I want to do to it.

“Did you hear my question?” Rae's voice comes through the Ari fog that's enveloped me.

Crap. I hadn't realized he even asked me something.

No, Rae, no, I'm not hearing what you're saying. I'm not even on this planet right now, bro. I'm off in a fantasy world undressing your sister again, except this time I plan on being inside her—that's how my fantasy ends. And it's fucking unbelievable, by the way. Perfect.

Just like her.

“He's got a headache.”

Lucas for the win. I nod in gratitude at my friend, who looks at me with

wide, disapproving eyes. He's shaking his head at me in acute displeasure. I know he's pissed. I know he thinks I'm an idiot.

But...

Fine.

I am an idiot. Currently, a hard idiot who just needs to release this pent-up energy.

"You guys coming?" Kwan walks over and whispers to us in a low voice.

"Coming where?" Rae asks with narrowed eyes.

"We found a place not far from here that's deserted. It's a spot in the field that's secluded. Figured we'd take some drinks and music and have a bit of fun. No cameras. No fucking weird director who feels like gets off to our blatantly apparent misery—just saying... It's just us getting to be ourselves."

I grab the Soju that Kwan's holding and take a long sip.

"I'm in," I say without hesitation. "Where do we go?"

A short while later, we're off the beaten path, as they say. The group has broken up in pairs and everyone is making their way as quietly as possible—which is not so quiet, considering the amount of Soju we've consumed and the general rowdy feeling we all have going for us. I'm sure production can hear us and knows exactly where we're going and what's going on, but maybe they'll just leave us alone this one time. Here's to hoping.

I break away from everyone, their conversation becoming more of a distant chatter and fall back, wanting some privacy and just a moment of quiet with my own thoughts. Who am I kidding? I just want a moment to fantasize again about Ari—

I feel a tap on my shoulder and because it's dark and we're walking through a forest, I immediately freak out. Before I can scream out for help, thinking it might be one of the monsters from the haunted school who's decided to follow me home and murder me when I'm least suspecting it, Ari

puts her soft hand over my mouth and pulls me deep into the forest, the darkness covering us from the rest of the world.

I let her guide me through the foliage and there are no words between us, only the sounds of the night. The sky is dimly lit by the stars and a barely visible moon, but there is something in the air that feels raw and charged.

Kind of like us.

Or the state of us for years.

She stops when we reach the end of a knoll that leads out to a lake that looks like glass. The stars even shimmer against the reflection of the water, casting even a bigger spell around us.

This moment seems significant somehow.

She takes a step away from me, her lips still puffy and raw from my mouth, her hair in a wild disarray around her... she's never looked more beautiful, more sexy... or more alive. Her eyes glisten when they meet mine, her head tilts back so that our gazes are melded together.

"Ari—" I begin in a soft voice, stepping forward because I can't help myself.

I want to touch her again.

I need to touch her again.

She takes a step back from me and shakes her head.

"No words," she whispers to me.

I watch her closely, wondering where this will lead.

"For once, let's just *feel* our way through this," she says in a voice I've never heard her use—it's raw and husky with emotion... and desire. "Just touching each other, really feeling each other... the way we always have with just our eyes... The way..."

I wait for her to continue.

"We've always wanted to."

If those are the last words I hear, I'll die a happy man.

She reaches out and takes my hand when she sees the desire beaming out of my eyes. I can't even hide it. Or disguise the way I feel.

I don't care if she knows how much I want her.

How much she means to me.

Because I just need her now.

I need her to be mine.

Instead of letting her lead me to the water, I let go of my tightly wound control and pull her into my arms and unleash the force of my passion. My fucking need.

This is not about sex.

This is about something more. Something deeper. It's about that thing that rattles your soul, penetrates your blood, until you're just one with the emotion—with the need and there's no way out... but together.

She's the reason I feel.

She's the reason why my lyrics hurt.

She's the fire in my blood.

My lips crash into hers, and I don't hesitate. I let it all out. I let her feel me... really feel me, uncensored, unleashed... raw.

Just like the night sky.

My hands reach up and cup her cheeks, run through her soft, silky hair before moving down her back to grab that delectable ass of hers. I pull her into me; I want her to feel how hard I am for her. I want her to know what she does to me. How crazy she makes me with need.

And desire.

This fucking desire that won't stop no matter how hard I've tried to make it.

She moans into my mouth and my tongue sweeps in and I claim her.

I really claim her, tasting every part of her.

Owning her soul.

I never want her to forget this kiss.

I never want her to forget this moment.

I pull down her shirt, her pants and she fumbles with my clothes until we're both standing naked, bodies illuminated by the shimmer of the water, just kissing each other with a passion that's built up for years.

I place a trail of kisses down her neck as her head falls back, and she gives me more access, my tongue, my lips moving over that silky skin of hers until I find her nipple and pull, lick, tug, lavishing her the way she deserves. Her hands move to my hair, gripping my head hard as she moans in pleasure and I just want to give her more.

My mouth trails down her stomach until I'm right where I've always wanted to be. On my knees before her, licking and tasting her sweetness until she's begging me for more and she's coming in my mouth.

I have never felt so high or so aroused.

"Please..." she whimpers against the night.

I stand up again and lift her up into my arms as she wraps her legs around my waist, my hands firmly holding her ass.

"Please, what?" I whisper against her mouth. "Tell me what you want."

"You," she can barely manage the word.

"What do you want from me?" I demand to know.

Her eyes open and meet mine.

"I want..." her voice trails off.

"What do you want, Ari?" my voice is husky and filled with longing.

"I want you inside me."

Chapter Eighteen

Ari

I want you inside me, I scream over and over in my mind.

I want you inside me now, Sookie! I want to yell this at him as I try to push down on his hard cock. I whimper in frustration and longing.

In freaking need.

But he shakes his head and smiles in such a way that I know I'm in trouble.

He's going to make me wait. Or beg.

I'll do both. I'll do anything he wants if he'll just.

Oh, God...

Yes. If he'll just do that. Like that, right there. Exactly that.

His fingers find me then and slip inside. I'm crazy wet with need and I don't care that he can tell how much I need him.

"Fuck," he whispers against my lips. "You're so goddamn wet for me."

"I know," I sigh into his mouth, his tongue does things to my mouth that should be a sin.

He slowly lowers me to the ground and I don't care that I'm naked on dirt and grass, or that it's soggy, or any of it... this is exactly what I need.

This is the raw and uncensored that I've been craving.

This is exactly how I want to have Sookie.

He leans up over me and cradles my face in his hands, his eyes tender as he stares down at me.

“You’re so beautiful,” he says.

“You are,” I whisper back to him and cup his face in mine.

We hold each other like this for a long while, staring deeply into each other’s soul. This is right. This moment.

Everything about it is exactly how it should be. It’s the moment I’ve dreamt about my whole life, or what feels like my whole life.

Him.

Us.

Together.

“I own you, Ari,” he says in such a possessive way that it’s almost my undoing. But before I can think about how I want to be owned by him, he pushes in and I’m suddenly filled with every inch of him.

My hips lift up off and take more of him inside me as his lips crash into mine. Our tongues, our lips, our hands, are all entangled as he pushes in and out, moving slowly at first so that I can get used to the feeling before he unleashes the force of his passion.

And I want every bit of it.

He rolls on his back and I sit on top of him, riding him the way I’ve always dreamed I would, letting him fill me, satiate me, in the way that only Sookie can and I scream out for more. He rolls me back so that he’s on top of me and pushes inside, covering my screams and moans with his lips, silencing me from anyone who might be out there, but at this moment I just don’t care.

And then I’m fucking done.

And I scream into his mouth as I explode around him, quivering, shaking,

coming hard from it all.

He's fucking everything.

He pulls away from me, both of us panting and places a soft kiss on my lips before he takes my hand and pulls me up, making me run with him naked into the water.

He pulls me into his arms and I wrap my legs around his waist and we kiss and kiss, the aftermath of our love casting a glow over us that I know is just electric. I pull away from him and cup his cheek with my hand, staring into his eyes.

"Wow... that was..." I whisper.

"Incredible." He finishes.

He kisses me again, tenderly this time, like he's worshipping every part of me and then he pulls away again and brushes my hair away from my face.

"Ari..." he begins to whisper and then we hear noises that make us both freeze for a minute before looking at one another and rushing out of the water.

We grab our clothes and hide in the trees, putting ourselves together as quietly as possible.

Grace and Lucas pop out of the trees, naked as the day they were born and run into the water. They immediately move into each other's arms and start making out. Sookie looks over at me and cocks a knowing brow, his smile wicked as he nods toward them. I try not to giggle or make any noise but then Kai shows up with his own partner.

She has a hood over head so I can't make out who it is.

"Is everyone having sex in the lake tonight?" Kai grumbles out in annoyance.

My shoulders shake in mirth when I catch the look of indignation that Lucas gives him.

“We were here first!” He says as Grace hides in his naked chest.

“Lake’s big enough for four,” Kai shrugs his shoulders and begins to take his hoodie off.

“Bro, I swear to God if you get naked and get in this water it’s going to get ugly. Romance will be the last thing that happens here.”

Sookie grabs a hold of my hand and pulls me away from the scene as soon as I’m dressed. I’m sad to go because I wouldn’t mind listening to more of their banter and finding out who’s going to win ownership of the lake.

I look over at him as we walk in silence and wonder what he was going to say to me, but the look on his face is different now, and I know he’s in deep thought.

“I think I should walk into camp from that direction,” I tell him and point to an alternate route.

He looks over at me and nods his head, he’s still quiet.

“Sounds good,” he says.

I start to walk away but he pulls me back in his arms for another earth shattering kiss and I think I might die from longing again. I wish we were at the lake and we hadn’t been interrupted.

“I’ll text you later?” Sookie says.

I nod at him and smile.

“Okay.”

I make it back unscathed and mingle amongst the film crew like I had never been gone. I grab a tea from kraft services and warm my hands up.

“Why’s your hair wet?” Iseul surprises me from behind.

I lift my hand to touch the strands and shrug.

“I…”

“You went for a swim in the lake?” Iseul looks surprised.

“No,” I shake my head and my gaze crashes right into Sookie’s who’s

watching me from the opposite corner of the camp now.

I say the first lie that comes to mind.

“Sookie pushed me in,” I shrug my shoulders.

“He must really hate you,” Iseul returns almost wickedly.

“He must,” I return... or maybe he loves me.

Later in the night, I’m in my bed and I’ve showered. I’m just reliving every single incredible moment with Sookie.

It was a dream come true.

Literally everything I had ever imagined it could or would be between us. If I dared to dream, I don’t think I’d even go that far...

My phone pings next to me and I pick it up.

SK

I can't stop thinking about you.

My smile is as big as Seoul.

Me

I can't stop thinking about you.

SK

Everything about tonight was perfect... everything about us.

Me

It was everything, Sookie.

SK

I wish you were here right now.

Me

Me too.

SK

Grace can sneak you in... just kidding.

I sigh.

Me

I wish.

SK

Well, maybe it will come true one day.

Could it? I wonder... could it really come true? I can't even allow myself to dream that... or dare to dream that because the thought of it not happening hurts too much.

Me

Maybe.

SK

Good night, beautiful Ari. Dream of me.

I always do.

Chapter Nineteen

Sookie

I wake up feeling on top of the world.

I don't know when the last time was that I felt so good. But then, I had sex with Ari last night.

I had sex with Ari.

I let that sink in for a second.

Okay. For longer than a second.

And goddamn, it feels good. No one is taking my smile away tonight. Not one goddamn person.

"Oh man, I think I'm going to puke!" Jay's groaned words cut into my moment of happiness.

I roll over to find him on the floor again, clutching his stomach like he's in some serious pain.

"I think I drank too much," he admits.

"You think?" I cock a brow at him.

Rae and Lucas barge in and stare down at Jay. To be fair, they don't look much better. In fact, they look pretty sick too. Especially Rae. His skin color is almost a greenish tint.

"Seems like you all overindulged," I'm amused because I'm not in their

shoes.

“Seems like you’re a genius,” Lucas lifts his finger up in the air like he’s just figured it out. “Maybe even Mensa.”

“Who’s the one who’s skin color is a light yellow, maybe greenish tint?” I challenge.

“We can argue about this later,” Rae says as he holds his head in horror. “We have to shoot soon.”

“Shoot what? I thought we had the morning off?” Jay moans.

Two hours later, we are shooting the variety show from hell.

We’re on a set of a game show that resembles one of the old reality dating series where contestants could ask as many questions as they wanted before they picked the guy or girl of their dream.

Except we’re the guinea pigs and are the ones who are going to be asked all the questions. And the best part? If we give the wrong answer, our chairs open up and we get a cold plunge into a pool that has a temperature set for a polar bear.

If you win this competition, you get to go on a date.

I don’t know what sounds worse, the cold plunge for another date with a fan that I have no interest in. The competition begins and even though everyone is hung over, people start having fun and get into it. Rae is the first one who’s dunked, then Jay, then a few of the girls and before you know it, me and Kai are the last two men standing... well, sitting to be exact and Iseul is the only girl left.

Which means the date will be with her.

I’d rather not.

When Lucas asks me a question, I lie intentionally, making a mistake with my answer and before I know it I’m dunked into the pool that is yes... fucking freezing cold and for a half a second I think it might have been worth

it to just go out again with Iseul but then I catch a glimpse of Ari at video village and shit...

I'm hard again.

For her.

I get out of the pool and dry up, ignoring the laugh... just grateful that the torturous day is over. I make my way over to where Ari is standing. She's next to the kraft services table and picking at a carrot. I look around to make sure we are alone and then I come up and stand right next to her, invading her space and smiling when I hear her breath hitch.

"I'll be in green room 13." Is all I say to her before I turn and take off in that direction.

I don't have to wait long.

As soon as I close the door and turn around to await her arrival, the door opens, and she walks in looking flushed and shy, but so fucking beautiful it makes my heart hurt.

I don't say a word. I just open my arms and she moves right in to them.

Our lips come together and what starts out soft and sweet, quickly turns into something fiery and consuming. I tug at her lips with my teeth, lick the bottom one then slip my tongue inside her mouth for more. She moans against me and pushes her hips up to mine, grinding into me like she can't get enough.

I sure as hell can't.

My hands cup her ass and I pull her up tightly into me and take ownership of her.

"I want you," I whisper against her mouth.

"I always want you."

Talk about hard.

Talk about me staring at the table and thinking about how we can really be

quiet if I just keep my mouth on hers and try not to...

The door opens, and Ari and I bolt away from each other. But not before Kai sees. And he sees good.

Fuck.

Shit.

Damn.

I meet his gaze head on and watch him curiously. I wonder what he's going to say?

"Excuse me," Ari mumbles incoherently as she brushes past Kai, her face the color of a tomato and leaves me to face the music alone.

I can't say that I blame her.

I cross my arms and stare evenly at Kai.

"You know you're fucked if someone finds out," he says sternly.

"I know," I nod.

"Like you're *FUCKED*" he enunciates the word for good measure.

"I get it," I return.

"And this is like the worst idea I've ever seen," he continues. "Like the worst because it's not just about the band and your career, but Rae..."

I hold my hand up.

"I know."

"But do you?" he wonders. "Because I don't think you really do. I think you're not thinking with your brain at all... just your dick and getting it wet."

"Hey now," I shake my head. "It's more than that."

"Whatever it is, you need to stop it, Sookie," he warns me again. "You need to stop before it's too late—"

"Stop what?" Rae takes that moment to poke his head in.

I give a silent thanks to whoever is looking out for me from above and made Kai come in before Rae... I can't even imagine how that would have

gone down.

“Stop being mean to Iseul,” Kai says smoothly. “We can all tell you can’t stand her.”

“I’ll do my best.” I shrug.

“He’s right,” Rae chimes in. “Don’t be mean. She can’t help but love and long for you... the innocent Maknae... the sweet little Maknae with the long eyelashes...”

Rae bats his eyes for good measure, and I throw the box of tissue—the only thing I could find—at his head.

Rae holds up his hands and laughs.

“By the way,” he says to me. “Whatever you said to my sister worked like magic. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her glow like this.”

Kai starts coughing, and I have to hide my smile.

“I’m glad I could help.”

“Well, it might be the talk she had with you or the date she has with that weird producer guy tonight.” Rae’s words stop me cold. “Either way, she’s beaming, and I couldn’t be happier.”

Date with the producer guy?

What.

The.

Actual.

Fuck.

Chapter Twenty

Ari

“Everything good?” Producer Sung-Bin asks once I’m back at the house. He’s still up and sipping a short glass of what looks like expensive whiskey. The black bottle sits on the table in front of him and he’s still in his suit like the first thing he did was grab a bottle and sit.

We decided to do a date on set.

So romantic.

And yet he doesn’t know the things I’ve been doing, or with who, and I almost feel like I have to do this date now in order to cover for myself. He seems pleased, but he also seems suspicious, which isn’t good, and I’m a horrible liar.

“Yup.” I wave and anxiously pat my hair down. “Everything’s great. Totally fine.” I pull out a chair with shaking hands and grab one of the glasses. “Can I have some of this?”

He frowns. “I thought you hated whiskey.”

“Nope.” I pour two shots and toss them back, so this date, are we ordering in or just hanging out?

His frown deepens. “Are you sure everything is okay? I was going to order in since we’re technically on gag order and leaving set would be bad

but.” His eyebrows raise. “Are you sure you’re good?”

The other black van pulls up and Sookie jumps out. I’m not one for daydreaming but the guy looks stacked as he stalks toward us. I start choking on the whiskey when he makes his way over, his expression completely pissed or maybe it’s just the expression of someone that needs to get off and can’t.

His fists are clenched at his sides and I’ve never seen him look so sexy in my entire life. His black hoody covers part of his face, his hair kisses the cheeks I just touched and his thighs look huge through the black leggings he’d been wearing from his costume.

The film crew is nowhere in sight but Lucas is walking behind him slowly. I wonder if he’s afraid Sookie’s going to mess up again.

Sookie walks right up to me and snatches the glass from my hand then downs it in one gulp and slams it down onto the table then walks off.

Lucas curses behind him. “Sorry, he’s had a long day.”

I know that look well. Lucas is covering for him as much as he can but Sookie’s ready to murder me for being on a “date” with Producer Sung-Bin. I never actually told him I was still going to go.

And less than twenty-four hours ago, I was with Sookie.

I’m a horrible person and neither of us can express any sort of emotion, just long dark stares.

He’s frustrated.

I’m frustrated.

There isn’t enough whiskey in the world to cure the way I burn for this guy I’m supposed to be working for and not touching. Everything in my body is a live wire and my only choice is to watch him walk past me when I want to follow him, shadow him, grab him by the wrist and pull him against me, eating his words with my mouth before they spill from his lips.

Producer Sung-Bin lets out a low whistle. “That kid’s self-destructing in typical idol fashion, but faster than I thought.”

“He’s not a kid.” I snap without thinking. “Imagine being a trainee at the age of eleven and only knowing this life and being told you can’t become an adult because every fucking person on the planet wants you to be innocent.”

The words are out before I can apologize.

I gasp and cover my face with my hands. “Sorry.” I mumble through my fingers as tears sting the back of my eyes. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to say all of that.”

Sung-Bin slowly puts his glass down on the table and stands. “I think you actually did. Wonder what you’d be like if you actually let go?”

It’s not for him to know. “I let go.”

He shakes his head. “No, you really don’t, maybe...” He sighs and looks up at the sky. “Tonight’s a good night to try that—with me.”

He’s good looking.

He’s not Sookie.

Tears fill my eyes. “I’m not ready to do that.” With you, with anyone but the one that holds my heart, the one who’s heart I keep breaking.

He nods. “Right, because there’s someone else.”

He looks behind him as if he knows it’s Sookie.

“Sorry.” It’s all I have.

He shakes his head. “You might be, one day, if you go down a road you can’t come back from.”

My frown follows immediately. “What are you talking about?”

Sung-Bin leans in and whispers in my ear. “He’s not a kid, he’s a man looking at a woman he wants to devour. I know the feeling.” He slams his glass onto the table. “In fact, tonight’s not a good night. I need to go get some rest. You should too.”

He says nothing more, just walks away, leaving me with the words I said and all the hurt. I swipe the bottle of whiskey and start walking into the dark house. Some of the band members from both SWT and TestME are in the kitchen again cooking, I lamely walk past them in an effort to find Sookie and at least try to apologize and let him know I overstepped despite my feelings.

When I walk by the theatre room, a hand suddenly grips onto my wrist and pulls me in. I almost drop the bottle of whiskey as hot lips press against mine, inhaling my gasp. It's Sookie.

I wrap my free arm around him while he grabs the bottle from my left hand, our mouths tear apart, he gently pushes me away and then opens the cap, downing at least two gulps before wiping his face. "Sorry, I just wanted our tastes to match."

I have no words when he drops the bottle onto the nearby red theatre chair and lifts me into his arms.

This is happening.

I'm not just giving in, I'm giving over as our mouths fuse, our tongues collide while our hands slide down each other's bodies in such eagerness I'm sure we look like a greedy hot mess.

Sookie doesn't say anything, it's like he's taking what he's owed, what he wants and I have no words to stop, nor do I want to. I'll be his sacrifice any day, the man's mouth is an instrument as he works mine, no wonder he's the main singer, the way he uses his tongue and hands, I'm overwhelmed, I don't know what to do when he suddenly lifts me into his arms and slams me back against the wall by the wet bar near the chairs and then we're falling, sliding to the floor as he lays be down on my back.

Again, this is happening.

His hands move to my breasts as an old movie plays on the screen; it's

black and white, I don't know what he was watching but the pictures flicker in the background while his thumb grazes my nipple.

I make the choice.

My choice to do this again.

I grip his hoody and pull it from his head.

He growls against my mouth next, and I'm so lost I don't even know what I'm doing as he jerks down my pants past my ankles and tosses them followed by my blouse, he rips his mouth away from me and tugs open my shirt wide. "Mmmm."

"We're doing this." I don't ask, I just make a blanket statement.

He reaches for my head; his hands feel massive as he cups me. "We should have done this years ago, over and over again."

I can't disagree. "We can't come back from this, Sookie."

"I don't want to." He confesses. "I need to kiss you, I need to be inside you, I need you, don't you get it? You break me over and over again and I still find reasons to pick up the pieces and glue them all back together, because you're mine and you've been mine from the minute we met. Life is hollow, Ari. Don't you get it? Life is hollow when you don't have this."

Tears stream down my cheeks. "And what about the band? What about Rae?"

"There's a reason secrets exist. Let's just get past this point first."

Of us sleeping together.

Hiding.

Continuing in secret.

"What point is that?" I ask. Almost naked beneath him.

His smirk isn't flirty; it's dangerous and lethal to my health, he leans down his lips grazing my ear as I hear the sound of him shrugging out of his pants. I might be the most erotic thing I've ever heard in my life. The tip of

his erection slides against me and I'm gone. He claps a hand over my mouth while I squirm beneath him, he guides himself into my entrance and I know this is our ending, eventually people will find out because you can't keep greatness a secret.

No matter how much you try.

And this, this isn't just greatness, it's perfection.

Our eyes lock briefly, his hair touches his forehead in such a perfect way, his brown eyes don't look away from me, instead he makes sure to stare as he slides into me.

He captures my gasp with a kiss while I cling to his body like a lifeline, while my hips move with his in something so much better than music.

I'm so full of him I can't speak.

It almost feels like choreography, how smooth his body is as he goes deeper and deeper.

I highly doubt they teach trainees how to do this, but you'd have to question considering how good his body moves with mine, over and over again.

"Sookie,;" I can't think straight. "This is—"

"—How it's supposed to be,;" he answers. "How it should have been years ago." He kisses me again and swipes away the tear running down my right cheek.

"You"—I rasp—"are everything to me. Even when I said you weren't."

"Just don't keep breaking me. It takes a really long time to find the pieces."

"I never wanted to break you, I just wanted to have you." I cling to him harder as he pumps his hips.

"The things you want the most, you end up breaking." He clenches his teeth. "But I love you. I love you. I love you." He grips me by the hair and

twists it in his fist, pulling my mouth against his again. “Don’t walk away, not again.” His panting against my mouth as he thrusts into me is probably the sexiest thing I’ve ever experienced in my life. “If you do, I’m gone, I’m broken, I’ll risk it, you have to let me.”

“But...;” I can’t think straight. “But—”

“No.” He digs his hand behind my head and holds it there. “Just be with me, right here, right now. Please.” He clenches his teeth, “Please.”

Hot tears burn down my cheeks. “I love you. I always have. I—I...” More tears fall. “I’m scared.”

“Be afraid with me.”

“Okay.” I whisper as he pushes me down on the carpet, mouth fused, bodies slick with sweat. “Okay.”

Every single nerve ending pulses as he moves faster, my hands can’t grip enough of his body as I pull him close and find my release.

He shudders above me.

We can’t go back.

I know it.

He knows it.

He presses his forehead to mine, and we stay there for maybe ten seconds before the door to the room opens.

Lucas doesn’t look at us, but I know he knows. He simply clears his throat. “Rae’s asking where Sookie is at, he wants to go over some lyrics he wrote with Eric.”

“Okay.” He says clearly. “Give me a few minutes, I’ll send her out first.”

“Yeah.” Lucas pinches the bridge of his nose. “Guys, just, if this is happening which clearly it already happened multiple times, be careful, all right?”

“Sorry.” My voice cracks. “I—I—”

“You can’t control who you love,” Lucas interrupts, still staring at the wall. “But that doesn’t make this what could be disaster any easier.”

“We know.” Sookie answers before I can. “But I love her.”

Lucas let out a curse. “And that, my friend, is the hardest part.”

The door shuts behind him with a click, blanketing us back into darkness. I lean up on my elbows. “What if you regret this?”

His lips meet mine before pulling away. “How can you regret the other half of your heart?”

“You have to stop saying things like that to me.”

“Why?”

“Because it makes me fall harder and I’m already gone, I’ve been gone, I’m a mess.” I finally feel like I can tell him, confess, do what needs to be done, pull the Band-Aid off.

Still slick with sweat, smelling of sex, he pulls me into his arms and kisses my nose. “Then we’re both a mess, all right?”

“It’s your job.”

“No.” He shakes his head. “It’s my life, and in order to survive, I need you in it.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Sookie

“Hey!” I knock on the door to the studio. Eric’s sitting next to Rae with a pencil in his hand and tapping it against the paper. He’s frowning until he suddenly jumps to his feet.

“THIS!” He pumps the air with his fist and throws the pencil down onto the table. “I’m a genius!”

“Apparently I no longer need Sookie, because this guy’s”—Rae sighs—“a certified genius.”

“Look!” Eric completely ignores us and shoves a piece of paper in front of Rae. “I changed the lyrics at the end and added a bridge, plus altered the rap section for Lucas a bit since he can rap so fast. Damn.”

He’s proud of himself but is it actually good?

I swipe the paper from his hands before Rae can read it and start going over the lyrics. They’re good, like really good, he took some of the bridge out but it works better, it seems like it will flow more.

I hand the paper to Rae. “It’s stunningly good.” I turn to Eric. “Why don’t you write your own music?”

Eric blinks and then looks down at the ground. “I just never thought it was good enough, not compared to what you guys produce.”

“Listen.” Rae drops the paper onto the table and grips Eric by the shoulders. “Everyone has to start somewhere, you can’t just walk through life afraid.” He turns to me. “I mean look at Sookie, he’s been in this business since he was a kid and he’s started to grow with his writing and even his rapping, you can’t just fear failure.”

Eric is quiet for a while, he adjusts the black beanie on his head while Rae’s hands drop from his shoulders. “Right, but, I have to get approval.”

“From the label, well of course.” Rae says.

Eric shakes his head. “No, um, from Suho, and he says none of the songs are strong enough yet so I just, stockpile them.”

“Bro,” I butt in. “How many songs have you written?”

He gulps. “Two hundred.”

Rae flops into his chair and groans. “Seriously?”

Eric shrugs. “I mean, I can play one for you, at least you’ll be honest about your hatred right?”

He reaches for one of the guitars hanging in the studio and sits down, it’s an acoustic Gibson and starts to strum, his fingers going into complete default mode as if he’s done this a thousand times rather than sing and dance in front of everyone.

The tune’s sad, it’s slow in a way that makes you think someone died while writing. When he starts singing my jaw drops.

“Wanna be known, wanna be seen, wanna be crowned King, they tell us all we have to do is everything, give up for nothing, fight for the wrong reasons, but we all know that K-pop comes in seasons, fourth gen, fifth, sixth, one day we’ll be forgotten, lost and, struck from records, no matter how hard we fight, we know in the end, you actually die.”

Rae coughs into his hand. “Got dark fast.”

“Yeah.” I agree. “But it’s really good.”

“Hop in.” Rae motions for Eric to go to the booth. “Let’s record the guitar first and then we’ll add in the drums, I’ll play around with it a bit, then you can sing the first verse. Who do you want as the main rapper on it?”

“Seriously?” He jumps to his feet. “I mean are you serious?”

“No, I’m trying to break your soul.” Rae jokes. “Yeah, I’m serious, we still have time to lay down some track, but you’ll need a main rapper should I go get—”

“I’ll do it.” I pipe up.

Both of them stare at me like I’ve just managed to cure the common cold and world hunger, I mean I know I don’t rap often but this would be fun plus I really need to get into Rae’s good graces before I break the news to him.

Because I have to tell him.

I can’t just sleep with his sister, be in love with her, and not say something. I know I need to come clean, but I need courage and right now, spending time with him, might help me gain that courage, plus, I’ve always wanted to be the main rapper on an album, the only problem is the image I have isn’t main rapper, they don’t want that out of me, they want me to sing and make girls blush because I’m so cute.

It’s time for a change.

And it’s not even because I was just naked on the ground only a few doors away from him, with his sister, with the love of my life—I’m just feeling like it’s time.

“Okay.” Eric nods. “I mean I’ve never heard you rap but let’s try it.”

He grabs his phone. “What’s your number and I’ll send you both the full file.”

The door to the studio opens, Kai and Jay walk in and stare at us all grabbing our phones and exchanging numbers, probably in shock, all before Eric walks into the booth with his guitar.

What happens next is complete magic. Eric lays down the guitar tracks, when he's done, Kai, Jay, and Rae sit with Eric and go over the other tracks to add lay down and mix while I go over the rap.

By the time I have the cadence of it memorized, they're ready.

Of course that also happens to be right when Lucas, Kwan, Ji-Woo, Chul, and Suho walk in.

My palms are sweating when I open the door to the booth, the other guys haven't even noticed that the rest of our bands are in the recording studio.

And I faintly remember that there are cameras in the studio too.

Rae's voice comes out in the booth. "All right, Sookie just take it slow for now, you only need to lay down the rap part."

I can see Lucas mouth rap.

Suho's shocked expression isn't helping.

The beat drops and I start rapping at the wrong timing. "Again, sorry, I didn't realize it was that fast."

"It's fast." Rae says back almost at the exact same time. "But just take it slow for now and get used to the rhythm."

I nod and wait for the music again, this time I start at the perfect part and let loose not even realizing I'm done until the music stops.

I look up at the glass, waiting for Rae to tell me to do it again, but it's like he's frozen, the rest of the groups are staring at me in shock and Eric is fist bumping the air again.

"What?" I ask. "I should do it again, right?"

"No, no, no!" All the guys start talking at once.

"Who wrote this?" Suho asks.

I grin and walk out of the booth. "Eric wrote it, we helped for the last hour or two with some changes."

Chul grumbles. "I could have rapped that."

“You probably would have done better than me.” And it’s probably true.

Suho looks directly into my eyes. “You nailed that, and I haven’t even heard the entire song.”

“It’s solid,” Rae says from his chair. “Listen.”

He plays the entire song, and it’s like everyone is stunned into silence, when it finally ends he holds up his finger. “And as for our final track, Eric helped us a bit with the lyrics so we’ll need to record for a bit guys, but then we should be done.”

Chul raises his hand. “I actually was struggling with one of ours that I have to rap can I hang out a bit?”

Rae’s fingers fly over the computer and then he saves the file and opens a new one. “Send what you have so far and hop in.”

The next five hours were wild.

We end up ordering pizza and never would I have thought that at some point we’d be helping each other out on our albums and making suggestions without starting the next world war.

“One more take,” Rae says after eating a piece of pizza, “You hit the notes really well, Eric, but you lose confidence in the low one, make sure you really dig in, take a deep breath from your diaphragm, all right?”

Eric nods, he’s back in the booth and half the guys have dispersed. I yawn and look at the time “Oh shit, we have to be up in five hours. Does anyone have the call sheet on their phones?”

Chul tosses me his. “Was just looking at it. We’re screwed.”

The call time for both of us is indeed, five a.m.

I groan and toss his phone back. “I need to go take a shower.”

After all, I didn’t do it on purpose, but I still smell her on my skin and the last thing I need is for Rae to finally ask me why I smell like Ari.

I shoot her a quick text to see how she’s doing and then say goodbye to

everyone and start walking out of the studio, nearly running right into her.

She holds out a piece of paper and smiles. “Hi Sookie, I just have some paperwork for you to go over really quick after our discussion yesterday.”

Her eyes are bright, she’s wearing white sweats and has her hair in a ponytail. Her eyes roam up to the camera in the corner.

“Sure,” I say slowly. “Let’s take a walk and you can let me know what it’s about, I can’t remember we’ve been recording all night.”

Perfect! She keeps the papers and starts walking out of the house, the faster she walks the faster I walk and try not to stare at her ass in the white sweats.

We dodge a corner, then another, until we’re at the mother-in-law suite next to the house where she’s staying along with a few other staff members.

The house is pretty dark, which is expected since everyone’s probably sleeping. I’m confused when we bypass the kitchen where I assumed we’d sit and go over paperwork, she leads me down the hall.

There aren’t any cameras in the staff lodging, but I’m still paranoid as she opens up one of the three master bedrooms.

Her room.

I walk in. She shuts the door behind me.

I smirk down at her. “Is there any paperwork?”

She shakes her head. “No. There’s only you.”

I lift her into my arms and slam my mouth against hers walking her backward toward the bed.

Her mouth breaks away. “I’m not greedy, I’d be okay with just getting held for a bit, I just wanted to see you and then I overthought it then I wanted to overanalyze and discuss things and how this would work and then I just made up fake paperwork.”

“Wait,” I start laughing. “Did you literally forge documents for me tonight

that don't even exist all because you wanted to be held?"

Her eyes narrow then drop. "Maybe."

"That's the cutest thing I've ever heard." I laugh harder while she punches me in the shoulder, her forehead touches mine. "You're adorable."

"I was afraid to text."

"Don't be, I have you saved as Fling in my phone, nobody would know it's actually you."

"Seriously?"

"No, but now I will." I cup her face. "Plus, I think I can handle more than cuddling." I devour her mouth and pull back. "Right?"

She sighs. "I forgot the question."

"Don't worry, my mouth holds all the answers." I wink and kiss her again.

She shuts the lights off while the papers go flying to the floor and we're on her bed, I'm peeling my shirt over my head while she's shrugging out of her sweatshirt.

Before I know it, We're both completely naked and she's all mine.

I cup her chin and steal another kiss, her skin's so soft against my palm I almost feel like I can't be rough with her, aggressive the way I want to be, she loops her ankles around my legs and flips me onto my back and I'm given the best view of her breasts while I grip her hips in my hands.

"Hold on." She laughs.

"Where?" I tease. "Here?" I touch her hips again. "Here?" My hands move up to her breasts and squeeze. "Here?" I capture her face. "Too many options and I'm not good at making decisions when given a buffet so you'll have to help me. Oh shit----"

She impales herself on me sinking all the way down.

I almost choke on my tongue while she starts moving. It feels so different, so good, I like giving her some control and she clearly likes taking it. Ari

leans down and whispers. “Put your hands wherever you want, put your mouth all over me, but this,” She taps my chest. “This is mine.”

“My body?”

“Your heart,” she says quickly.

I grip her hips and move her against me. “Yes.”

We’re quieter than earlier as she rides me. It’s good, so good, the way she tightens around me, the way she moves her hips—addicting. Because we’re trying not to make noise all I hear is the sound of her soft gasps paired with mine, and our bodies slamming together while the bed mattress moves beneath us.

The headboard slams against the wall behind us, we both freeze when a knock sounds at her door. “Are you okay?” The voice is Producer Sung-Bin. “I heard a noise.”

Shit, I can’t stop moving beneath her, guiding her hips over me, her hair fans around her face as she stares down at me and answers. “Yeah, I had a really good dream, then fell out of the...” She moans through her teeth. “The bed.”

He’s quiet. “Must have been a good one.”

“Amazing,” she says breathlessly. “It’s hard to have dreams like that, anyway, I’ll go back to sleep.”

“I hope more dreams come,” he says.

Her eyes lock onto mine. “I’m sure they’re close.”

I grip her by the ass and flip her onto her back and drive into her so hard that I have to grip the headboard so it doesn’t slam into the wall again.

She bites the pillow and moans into it.

Release comes hard and fast, I can’t stop it any more than I can stop breathing. I could really get used to being able to be with her like this.

I suddenly imagine what it would be like to openly date her, to hold her

hand in public, to acknowledge that I have a person and that we fit perfectly.

I pull away from her and lay down next to her on my back, we're both staring at the ceiling, not saying anything. Her fingers grasp mine. She's shaking, her skin feels cold when I pull her against my chest and hold her tight.

"One day," she says. "I always used to think it was a hopeful statement, like when you're making goals, but right now, laying in bed with you, one day seems like a cruel promise that won't ever come true."

"What's your one day?" I ask kissing her forehead.

"One day, I'll walk out on the street with you and hold your hand without being scared of everything that could happen by simply walking next to you."

"Is this the part where I tell you I'm rich and even if everything crumbles beneath me that I can support us?"

"Mature in so many ways, but still naïve." She turns on her side and looks up at me. "That's not how the world works, money helps, but your reputation is everything."

Shame slams against my chest, because she doesn't know my past mistakes, nobody does. "What if I told you that I'd already ruined my reputation before debut and it's a miracle it hasn't gotten out?"

She sits up, still naked. "What do I need to know?"

"You're not my lawyer." I say it as kind as I can. "Conflict of interest, besides, it's a better idea for you not to know, if it does ever come out," I shrug "I'll try to deal with it. Right now I just want to be with you."

"Did you bully someone in school?" She's in clear lawyer mode. It would be cute if it wasn't post sex.

And I can't talk about it.

It physically hurts to think about having to actually let the words pass my lips in front of her after being with her.

I don't want to see the look on her face, the disappointment that I wasn't more responsible and hurt people in the process.

I slowly pull away from her and grab my clothes, jerking them on and trying to act as normal as possible without verbally telling her what I've never told a soul, I want to though, I want to confess my sins.

Shaking, I finally grab my jeans and pull on my shirt. She comes up behind me and hugs me, still naked. I can feel her breasts against my flimsy t-shirt, her hands link in front of my stomach while she rests her head against my back. "You can tell me anything."

"I don't think this specific thing will make you happy, even though I didn't know you then, I still made a really big mistake that's currently effecting me."

She freezes. "So it's not bullying."

"It's not bullying." My throat feels like it's going to close it's swelling so much with tears that I haven't shed, that I refused to release when I was in high school. "It's damning is what it is."

I slowly pry her arms away and turn and look at her. "It's the past."

"Have you dealt with it?" Her voice is soft.

The burning in my throat continues. "It could end us."

"Drugs?" She guesses again.

"No." I almost laugh. "I had no access to drugs unless someone decides they hate me and want to make up a story about me, just know there's a reason I'm trying to be nice to Iseul, she knows too much."

Ari lets out a heavy sigh. "You slept with her." She doesn't ask, she just knows. "Did something else happen?"

"Do we have to do this now?"

"You slept with her, but that's easily hidden what else—"

"She got pregnant and miscarried." I didn't mean to blurt it all out. "And I

was told to hide it, and she blamed me, we didn't end well."

Ari's mouth parts. "Wait, so, you were sleeping with her when you were a trainee?"

I almost laugh with how stupid it is. "Yeah, I was sleeping around with my girlfriend while training to be a part of the biggest K-pop group in the world, got her pregnant despite using protection and I was willing to give it all up, she lost the baby and I—I met you. I graduated, and I met you after losing everything on top of all the pressure. I met you and I just I needed—"

Ari's arms wrap around me, holding me tight. "It's okay to cry a little bit, to let it out, especially if you never mourned, did you even tell, never mind of course you didn't tell anyone." She pulls back. "I'm the only person that knows aren't I?"

I feel myself nodding; I don't trust my words or the way that if I suddenly start talking, they'll tumble out in an awkward and embarrassing amount of crying.

"I'm sorry." Ari wraps her arms around my neck. "I'm so sorry."

I'm finally able to mutter, "Thanks."

"Let me get some clothes on and walk you back."

I don't say no because I don't want to leave her for one second. By the time she's dressed and we sneak out of the house it's close to three in the morning and I know I'm only going to get a few hours of sleep.

We walk in silence across the grass toward the guys' house.

Slowly, she fits her hand into mine and clutches it.

I let her, knowing that the cameras won't pick anything up until we get closer to the pool.

Maybe ten more steps.

She squeezes it tight.

I turn to kiss her when a voice interrupts us. "Wow you guys are up late."

I drop Ari's hand and freeze. Five seconds go by before I turn around and smile. It's Iseul. "Yeah well we had a contract to go over."

Iseul has her running gear on and is dressed in all black, including her beanie. "Huh, I've never done contracts that late at night or I guess, early in the morning, then again I am up early for a run so, everyone has their hours." She flashes me a cruel smile. "Anyway, hope the negotiations were good."

She runs off.

Me and Ari just stand there next to each other.

"Will she," Ari shudders. "Say anything?"

"Say what?" I pretend not to be effected. "That she saw us walking in the dark?"

"We were holding hands."

"I don't think she saw our hands."

"And if she did?" Ari asks. "What's our story?"

"Oh, we'll come up with something like, he's sad and she was comforting him and has been his friend for years, we'll lie unless you want the truth. If I had a vote, it would be the truth, just so you know."

"Truth." She repeats. "So we tell everyone what? We've been involved for years? Kissing? Sneaking around? Sleeping together?"

I frown. "Is that all this is?" I want to punch a wall. "We aren't just sneaking around and getting off, we love each other, big difference."

"Yeah, but who would believe us?"

"Does it matter?"

"It always does, Sookie."

I kiss her quickly on the forehead after looking around. "Go to bed, I'll see you in a few hours, the call sheet has us up early and we have a lot of filming to do."

"We're good, right?" Ari asks.

I want to nod, I want to say yes, I want to do so many things, but I just confessed one of my darkest secrets and saw Israel while holding hands with Ari.

I need to be careful. We need to be careful. “We’re good.”

Ari’s smile reaches her eyes, making me smile back.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Ari

I don't hold his hand on the way back in because of the cameras and I can shake the feeling that Iseul is suspicious and already has a grudge all things considering, the last thing we need is for her to put a spotlight on Sookie.

I'm still processing the fact that he struggled with that all on his own through high school on top of the insane schedule of being a trainee.

Sookie walks into the house a few feet in front of me and looks down at his phone then curses.

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah." He slides the phone back into his jeans and gives me a smile. "Thanks for the information on the contract, a little boring but worth it."

"Boring?" My eyes narrow. "Oh, I thought I made a few good points, some might even say I made you scream out in joy."

"Some." He smiles, the dimple in his right cheek is so damn adorable, I can tell he wants to kiss me again, he wants to reach out and grab me the way I want to grab him. The tension is almost unbearable, but I look up at the small black cameras in each corner of the room and kitchen blinking down at us and know better than to get any closer to him, they'd use the footage even if it destroyed him.

“Night.” He walks down the hall while I turn around and nearly run into Rae. He looks exhausted, his blonde hair’s ruffled, and he looks like he accidentally fell asleep in his jeans and white t-shirt.

Rae rubs his eyes. “What are you doing here so early? Was that Sookie?”

Shit, shit, shit. “Yeah, I had to go over some scheduling things and remind him of his contract, plus the Director wants him to play up his relationship again with both girls.” I lie smoothly, it’s more or less a white lie since technically it’s partially true. Director Simon did instruct him to do that.

Rae yawns wide behind his hand. “Sucks for him, guy’s not even legally allowed to date yet is he? Isn’t that part of his contract?”

I swallow the lump in my throat. “Yeah, I think he has two more years on the actual contract.”

“You should make an addendum to it or something, no guy like’s being told he can’t date even if Sookie’s sometimes more afraid of girls than the rest of us.”

Yeah, real afraid. I think back on the way he maneuvered me, kissed me, and had no hesitation in getting me naked. “I’ll ask management when the show stops filming.”

Rae pats me on the shoulder and yawns again. “Go get some rest, wait our call times in two hours. You did sleep a bit, right?”

No. I was naked with one of your best friends. “Sort of.”

“Cool, see you on set.”

He walks by me and grabs a bottle of water from the fridge. I finally exhale and make it back to my room. When I check my phone, I realize sleep isn’t going to happen plus now my bed smells like Sookie, he’s always wearing Sauvage by Dior which means he it smells like a spicy bergamot and vanilla on my sheets.

Maybe I’ll just buy a bottle so I can spray it on everything, actually no,

that's a horrible idea because then people will smell him on me and it would look suspicious, stupid that I can't even spray cologne on anything.

I can't hold his hand in public.

He legally isn't even supposed to date.

I can't offer him support that seems out of line in what I do for the other guys.

And he's right it's a huge conflict of interest on top of me being older and wow the more things I list the more anxious I get.

I ignore the bad feeling in my gut and quickly change take a shower, put my hair up in a tight bun, and throw on a pair of loose fitting khaki pants, a white tucked in shirt, and grab my black Gucci belt, I figure I can get away with a more casual look and pair my green Mage loafers, by the time I grab my phone I already have three missed calls from production, and four text messages from Sookie.

SK

Jay's worried about us sneaking around and told me I smelled like sex.

I quickly tap back.

Me

You smelled incredible and I was just toying with the idea of spraying your cologne all over my bed then realized that I'd be walking around set smelling like you.

SK

Would that be so bad?

Me

Pretty sure that Rae would notice.

SK

Yet he failed to notice the smell of sex and the way that your hair was all messy when he ran into you this morning, he told me you seemed

a bit frazzled and apparently is an advocate of me not having a dating clause in my contract.

I start walking out the door while texting him.

Me

Yes, I'm sure he'll be positively thrilled to find out I took out the clause and fought with management all so I can get into your pants.

SK

I think it's a fantastic reason.

I nearly run into Sung-Bin as I text back.

"Someone's smiling a lot this morning." Someone got laid. He hands me a cup of coffee. "Figured you'd be tired."

Exhausted. "Thank you."

He starts walking side by side while I put my phone back into my purse. It's a chilly morning, and it looks like it's going to rain.

At least today's a good challenge day for both groups and for the girls, whoever answers the most questions for the trivia challenge gets to pick who they want to go on a date with, the girls of course get to pick in order of points, they'll get to once again pick from both groups, fingers crossed Sookie get's picked by someone else or not picked at all, it would be good for him to get some rest.

I keep walking alongside Producer Sung-Bin and stop at the pool where they have a giant platform with harnesses.

I wince. "That's taller than I thought."

"It's only twelve feet above the water and they won't be falling in. They'll be getting dipped with the bungee attached to their harnesses and then brought back up to the platform. He takes a sip of his coffee. He's dressed more casual today in a black cable-knit sweater and fit jeans. He points at the platform. "Plus, the girls have good reason to want to do well on the

challenge, since it gives them power to pick.” He lowers his voice. “Though between you and me some of the questions are easier than others, we made sure to send those ones to Iseul and Dueri so they can continue to fight for Sookie.”

Not the answer I wanted. “I didn’t check ratings this morning.”

“We’re at over twelve percent and climbing domestically and trending in the top five on YouTube.” He smiles at me like it’s the best thing in the world, but I’m miserable.

“That’s great.” I lie.

“Keep up the good work, the boys seem to really listen to you since you know what’s in their contracts, it’s good that they trust you.”

My coffee tastes like wood in my mouth. “Yeah, they do, we have a special relationship.”

“It shows.” It’s starting to get a bit more overcast as Lucas and Grace walk up in full makeup. Today they have Lucas wearing a navy blue beanie, white sweater, and baggy jeans with a black and white plaid shirt wrapped around his waist while Grace has her hair in a low braid and is dressed in a long sleeve black and white plaid dress with an open neck. She looks adorable, but she always does.

Lucas has his cue cards in his right hand and compares them to Grace’s while standing by the platforms. The production crew has been set up for two hours already when the girls arrive each of them are wearing a different color and variation of black pleated skirts, different colors of tall knee socks with tennis shoes.

The guys filter in from the two different makeup trailers wearing black t-shirts with their band name on the front, and white swim trunks. They all look really nervous, Sookie has his innocent act back for the cameras.

Within minutes we’re ready to roll, and Lucas looks down at his cue cards

then back up at Director Simon. “Welcome to Day Four of Date Your Idol, I’m your co-host Lucas from SWT.”

Grace grins over at him. “And I’m the person who actually gets to date their idol in real life, Grace Lee. We’re so excited to dive into the challenge for Day Four!”

The idols clap along with the girls.

“But,” Lucas holds up his cue card. “There’s a twist. While all guys are participating, only the girls will be answering the questions, you each get three questions, and each correct answer is worth ten points, if you get the question wrong, however, you get to pick which idol you want to see get dunked.”

The girls all start clapping and giggling again.

Grace points to the platform. “The idols will be attached to bungees and harnessed in, you’ll notice that the platforms twelve feet high, if you’re chosen to get dunked, the bungee will pull you backward and down into the water, dipping you in before coming back up, each of you have a ladder in front of the platform if you need it, who knows maybe the girls will get all the questions right!”

“I don’t know,” Lucas laughs. “Some of these seem really hard, gentleman please make your way to the platform.”

The guys from TestME go first and line up on the right while Jay, Kai, Rae, and Sookie line up on the left. Sookie has a nice smile on his face as if this is the best day of his life but I know he actually hates unpredictable games like this so he’s probably internally dying.

Rae looks excited and Kai keeps looking over the edge of the platform in slight panic mode. Jay just looks somewhat bored which is normal when he’s on camera, or not board but mysterious.

The safety crew steps off the platform after helping the guys get in their

harnesses all mumbling between each other.

Sookie raises his hand. “These have been tested, right? A real human went on this and didn’t die?”

“Didn’t you sign a form that said in any chance of sudden death the show isn’t liable?” Lucas jokes.

Sookie’s fake laugh comes out a bit forced while Eric pipes up from the end of the line. “I’m afraid of both heights and water.”

“Then let’s hope the girls get the questions right.” Grace says. “Shall we begin?”

The girls cheer.

“Dueri, what’s the capital of The Netherlands?”

Dueri answers quickly. “Amsterdam.”

“Correct!” Grace smiles.

Lucas speaks next. “Iseul, was Cleopatra from Greece or Egypt?”

Iseul looks at the camera. “That’s a trick question. But I believe she was actually Greek.” She makes a face. “Am I right?”

“Correct!” Lucas says. “Beth, in what country did it used to be illegal to own only one gerbil because they were afraid the animal would get lonely?”

Beth’s eyes bug out. “Um, America?”

“Incorrect.” Lucas winces. “So that means you’re picking an idol to soak. Choose wisely!”

She eyes all the guys, most are begging not to be sent over the edge into the water which is kind of cute. Sookie stands tall.

“Sookie.”

Oh the other girls aren’t going to like that.

“I see how it is.” Sookie winks at her then grabs ahold of his harness as he gets jerked back and dropped into the water. When he pops back up, he’s completely soaked through and what’s even more relevant is the fact that the

white shorts are clinging to his thighs and also leaving nothing to the imagination about if he's packing.

He adjusts his shorts a little bit, but it's no use since he's in a harness, and there's no question in my mind that Director Simon probably did it on purpose.

The girls all cover their faces but are all giggles while I'm trying hard not to fan my suddenly hot face.

Rae elbows him a bit and snickers while Kai and Jay look ready to pray they don't get dropped in so that the world has a full view of their package. I'm wondering if the Director will edit it out but by the looks of the ratings I highly doubt it. While day one was partially live he's releasing the episodes and raw footage daily along with the confessionals from the girls.

The guys haven't had to go in yet and do a confessional but will be starting them today—another add to filming since that's really what people want to see.

“Next question,” Grace says. “Beth, what animal takes the longest naps?”

The guys all groan.

She makes a face. “Sloths?”

“Good guess, but I'm sad to say it's actually a snail, they can nap up to three years.” Grace laughs. “Pick the idol you want to get wet.”

Beth laughs behind her hand. “I feel bad saying this but I don't want my bias to get wet, and the rest of the guys are dry so, I pick Sookie.”

“Wow.” Sookie whistles while the guys all snicker. “I see how it is, getting ganged up on.”

“So cute,” Beth says under her breath.

Ha-Yoon speaks up while the camera pans to her. “That's why he's known as a bias wrecker, do you see how tight his shorts are now?”

“Everyone sees.” Dueri whispers in awe.

Mishel crosses her arms but says nothing while the bungee pulls Sookie down yet again and plunges him into the water.

When he comes back up, he's dripping wet and possible shorts moved up his thigh on the right exposing a chokehold of a thick thigh.

"Good choice!" Iseul claps her hands. "How are you feeling Sookie?"

"Cold." He answers back wiping his face with his hands. "And very, very wet."

The girls giggle again.

As the game goes on, it's painfully apparent that Dueri and Iseul are getting the easiest trivia questions out of all the girls. Sookie gets wet two more times before Rae's tossed in followed by Suho who accidentally swore when he was dropped in.

Minutes pass by like the napping snail and the more I stare at Sookie the harder it is to handle the girls flirting with him. I can tell it's grating on his nerves a bit, but he still jokes back and forth with them and yet again steals the show a bit from the other guys, he's charismatic but sweet and the girls love that.

I just hope and pray that Ha-Yoon get's her last question right because so far she's tied with Dueri and Iseul.

"Final question for Ha-Yoon." Lucas begins. "Are you ready?"

"I'm ready." She gives him a thumbs up.

"What, is a fight between three people called?"

I almost smack myself in the face, who knows that! I didn't even know a word describing a fight between three people was possible! And I'm a lawyer!

"Not a duel." She sighs. "Um, a group spat?"

"Wrong." Grace sends her an apologetic look. "It's actually called a Truel,, which idol would you like to see get wet next?"

“Eric.”

Wow, and she knows he hates water and heights. I wince for him when he pales as the bungee pulls him back and drops him into the water soaking him almost worse than Sookie’s first drop.

When he’s pulled back up , his shorts aren’t sticking to him as bad as Sookie but his shirt get’s caught in the harness so he’s flashing a hefty amount of six pack.

“Whoa!” Dueri gasps loud enough to gain the camera’s attention. “I’m sorry I just had no idea, sorry, I didn’t mean to speak out loud or nearly faint on the spot.”

Everyone laughs but Dueri seems to be extremely distracted by Eric suddenly, hmmm maybe things will work out and she won’t fight over Sookie with Iseul,

A horn sounds, Lucas lifts up his hands. “You all did great, we’re down to a tie between Iseul and Dueri, whoever can answer the question first, will get their first choice of idols to date!”

Cheers erupt all around us.

I clutch my now empty coffee cup and wait.

“What’s the very first thing you should do,” Lucas starts. “When exposed to radioactive waves?”

Iseul blurts out her answer first. “Get naked of course.”

Dueri’s still processing the question when Iseul answers and starts coughing.

“Correct!” Lucas claps his card against his hands. “You get your first choice of idol to date tonight. I think we can all guess who you want.”

Iseul points at Sookie. “Him. I’ll always want him.”

I’ll kill her.

I take a step forward then remember we’re on a show, cameras are

everywhere, and I'm supposed to be the sane one not the lawyer that loses her mind on a variety show and pulls every last piece of hair from a girls skull.

Producer Sung-Bin slowly reaches out his hand and grabs my wrist and lightly pulls me back. "You okay?"

"Yes." I nod my head. "I'm fine, I just had the urge to—" Mame someone. "Get more coffee."

"Mmm, yes, I too look like I'm ready to commit murder when I need caffeine."

I ignore him and scowl while the cameras keep rolling, finally the torture ends after the rest of the girls pick the guys.

All in all Dueri picks Eric.

Ha-Yoon picks Kai.

Iseul aka the devil is with Sookie.

Mishel picks Suho.

And Beth picks Rae, which I think is a good combo.

The guys are all handed a date card behind the scenes that they have to present to the girls when they leave for their dates tonight.

More torture. Sounds fun.

The girls are dismissed for lunch and the guys are sent to a separate tent—all but Sookie who stays behind with Producer Simon. They give Sookie a towel and put him in front of the camera on one of the pool chairs.

"Let's do your confessional now, you're still wet and the audience will love it, can you take off your shirt?" Director Simon just won't stop!

Sookie looks over at me, he has an incredible body but I know this makes him feel insecure and kind of like an animal. I take another step forward only to have Sung-Bin pull me back again. "Don't make it obvious."

"Me protecting the band?"

He looks straight ahead. "You know what I mean."

“No.”

“Arguing with me doesn’t make it less true, you know you look at him the same way he looks at you...”

“Are you my confidant now? Is that it? Or are you trying to get information out of me?”

He shrugs. “Maybe both.”

My body tenses up even though I exhale. “Well, I’m a lawyer. I don’t make any missteps and we’re just friends.”

“I look at my friends like that too.” He checks his watch. “I’m going to go grab something to eat, do you still need more coffee?” He holds out his hand, then drops it. “Thought not.”

He knows.

He suspects.

I need to hide my emotions way better.

Sookie must not have complied with pulling his shirt off. One of the other film crews takes over and starts asking questions about the girls, are they pretty, who’s your favorite, do you think you could really date one of your fans?

Sookie is perfect with every answer, except the very last one, that one makes me nervous.

“Would I ever date one of my fans?” He licks his lips slowly like he’s thinking but I know he’s stalling. “I think it would just depend on the situation, but I would never discount anyone, it’s important to be open to love wherever that could be.”

“And,” The producer prods more. “Are there any girls on this set that you have interest in or is that too personal? I mean, you were clearly the favorite today.”

Sookie laughs a fake laugh. “No, I’m here merely for my fans that won

the contest to be on the show, I owe it to SWEET, our fan group, to stay dedicated to them while on the show.”

Shit. If people find out about us.

After he said that.

“Plus,” He adds. “I like my privacy when it comes to my dating life, if I’m ever allowed to have one.” It’s kind of a joke but also kind of true.

The interview ends and the production team heads over to catering while I stay and wait for Sookie. We walk side by side in silence toward the changing bathroom for the pool.

One place where camera’s can’t be because contestants are changing. “I’ll wait for you.” My smile feels sad despite how wide and bright I’m sure it looks to him.

Sookie sets down his envelope and then points to his mic. “Can you help me take this off?”

“Oh shoot, I forgot, and you’re all wet.”

‘Yes, I was used for target practice today.’

I laugh and flip off his mic then pull it. “I’ll go give this to the PA.”

He jerks me into the changing room and starts kissing me right away.

Playing with fire.

I grip the microphone in my hand careful not to turn it back on, between broken kisses he peels the shirt from his body, he looks so good, my hands are warm against his cool chest.

“Mmmmm, that feels good.” He whispers. “You’re body’s so warm, what if I got hypothermia?”

I tear my mouth away from his. “Pretty sure getting naked is a bad idea, I like the direction you’re going.” I palm the front of his shorts, feeling his throbbing heat.

He bites out a curse. “I swear I’ll make it fast.”

“I think every girl waits for those words, maybe traces them in her school notebook.” I tease.

He pinches my ass. “Maybe that can be the next tattoo you take me to get.”

“I think, you would need to explain that to more than just the guys in the group but your fandom.” I grip his arm.

“Sookie.” A male voice sounds followed by a knock.

It’s Jay.

Sookie lowers his head. “I’ll be right out.”

“Rae was looking for you, I told him you already went back to the house but he wants you to record for an hour or so while we have a break.”

“Right, okay one minute.”

He tries the handle and let’s himself in. “No, not one min---” Jay turns around. “Please tell me you two weren’t sneaking off—again.”

“His clothes were wet.” I say lamely.

Jay cackles out a very unamused laugh. “And he suddenly forgot how to use a towel?”

I nod. “Amnesia from the cold.”

“I had hypothermia.” Sookie pipes up.

“Unbelievable! You’re just as bad as he is and—”

“Yo, Sookie you in here changing?” Kai’s voice sounds, followed by Lucas’s, just open it.

The door opens again, and Kai and Lucas stumble in, it closes behind them in a final click, I’m sure they see my swollen lips followed by the fact that Sookie has no shirt on and has equally swollen lips.

Lucas shoots me a glare, then looks at Sookie. “You can’t be doing this, there are too many cameras!”

Sookie rolls his eyes. “Yeah, okay Mr. Self-Control.”

Lucas jabs a finger at him. “Why is it that the maknae is always the rebel? Why?”

Kai sighs. “I think it stems from being protected so long, almost like a pastors kid who suddenly goes to college and is allowed to watch Harry Potter.”

“Huh?” Everyone says in unison.

Kai frowns. “Wait, you guys were allowed to watch that even on a Sunday?”

“Yeah, man.” Jay pats him on the back. “And your parents aren’t pastors.”

“No,” He crosses his arms, “My mom leads a prayer group and donates, it’s all for the clout, disgusting.”

“Wow.” Sookie says. “I never knew you had such a tortured childhood.”

“Times were hard;” Kai agrees. “Anyway, we really need to stop meeting in public places.”

“Agreed.” Lucas says quickly. “Just wait until after filming and we’ll figure it out. The album needs to release without any issues and you’re both getting sloppy it’s hard enough to see the way you looked at each other today.”

“Sorry.” Sookie mumbles softly. “I’m not normally like this.”

Kai bursts out laughing. “You mean horny?”

“In love.” Sookie corrects him.

The room goes silent.

I reach for Sookie’s hand, grip it and lean on his shoulder. “I’ll leave first.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Sookie

I make it back to the house in time to change again and go to the girls' house. Thankfully for me, my date night card was a really intimate night at home,

I do have to follow instructions on cooking but it won't be hard, it actually sounds exciting despite it being Iseul because I love cooking, this is the one time too that nobody other than the main film crew get to be on set.

I grab the rose they gave me to hand to her and knock on the door of the girls house. She answers right away like some stalker that saw me coming and is literally in a similar dress she wore on our first date.

It's tight black nit dress with white lace sleeves and white lace around her throat in a turtleneck sort of fashion that comes all the way down the front.

She looks like a pretty nun.

I don't say it out loud.

I'd hated that dress the minute I saw it the first time, but loved her and remember trying to figure out how to even get it off of her—not that we made it that far on our first date, It was more like awkward making out and feeling up.

I was so stupid back then, thinking she wanted anything from me when all

she wanted was to be with an idol, she knew if I made it big, she'd have money and fame right along with me, latched on. I didn't know until after her miscarriage that she'd purposefully done everything in her power to make sure that I was hers and warned off other girls I had been interested in at the time.

“Here.” I thrust the rose in her face.

She takes it and sniffs it then does a little twirl for me. “Do you remember this dress?”

I want to burn this dress. “Yeah, from our first date.”

“I had such a crush on you in high school.” She pouts out her lower lip. “Why don't you come in? Everyone is out on their dates so it's just us, I think we get two hours together .”

Those will be the longest two hours of my life. I just know it.

Hour One: She brings out yearbooks for me to look at and actually starts to fake cry, then gossip about one of the girls in our graduating class that flunked out of University. While I'm trying to finish the pasta I made for both of us.

Ninety Minutes in: She asks if I want dessert and accidentally spills chocolate on her dress then runs upstairs to change, only to come back in short black spandex shorts and a yellow crop top that shows way too much skin.

“Sorry.” She shrugs. “I couldn't get the stain out.”

“Yeah well, the good news,” I start to stand. “Is that you're already in your pajamas.”

Her eyes narrow briefly. “Can we talk?”

“We have been talking.” I'm so confused when she grabs my hand and pulls me over to the couch. “I mean about what happened.”

My entire soul feels like it's going to leave my body.

She wouldn't, right?

"What happened again?" I ask. "And is this something we should be talking about," I feel the words hiss through my teeth.

She gets closer. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, we only have fifteen minutes left of the date, we should play a game or something."

"I already know you, every part of you," She smirks. "Why do we need to play some silly icebreaker game?"

Pretty sure I didn't say icebreaker, but whatever, if I can keep her arguing or talking then she won't bring up things she has no business keeping up.

She places a hand on mine. "You won't get canceled you know, people experiment in high school and you weren't even an idol yet."

She's going to say it, she's going to say it

"I mean, who wouldn't want to brag about losing their virginity to you?"

I'm numb. I shove her hand away from me. "Are you kidding me right now?"

Thank God the dates aren't live. "What? It was a special moment." She leans in like she's going to kiss me.

I fall off the couch onto my ass in an effort to get away. "Are you trying to ruin my career?"

Her eyes darken. "Guess there are worse things I can say, like seeing you touching someone's hand, was it days after kissing Dueri."

"You know why I kissed Dueri." I point out. "She's dying and she's precious."

"And I'm white? Alive and stupid?"

"That's not what I said." I'm suddenly reminded of how much of a bully she was to me during our relationship. I could only wear certain clothes out on dates, wanted constant anniversary gifts and always told people I was

famous.

Iseul leans over the couch then pulls her tank top off her head, she's in nothing but a black sports bra and barely there shorts. "Should I remind you how could I can be?"

Nobody is saving me on the crew, it's like they want this drama to happen, but isn't this supposed to help market our album not completely destroy us? It almost feels like a set up.

I scramble back from her and jump to my feet. "No matter what our past was filled with," I try to take the shaking out of my voice. "I don't know you anymore beyond the two dates and it's not fair of you to come back into my life and threaten my career. That is definitely not love or even like. You know what else? If I wanted to kiss you, if I had feelings for you, nothing and no one would stop me. Not even a show that could ruin me."

Fire blazes in her eyes as she jerks away and gets to her feet. "You know, all it takes is one false rumor and you're done, and this one is actually true. You slept with me. You stole my virginity, and you had just started training at the label."

"We were teenagers." I point out. "And I feel like we've already hashed this out, no need to talk about it ever again, it's in the past, if you really liked and respected me, you'd protect me rather than slander me."

Her eyes fill with tears. "I love you, how do you not know that?"

Wow nothing I say is going to get through to her. I look at the producers. "I think our time is done here, thank you." I hand him my mic and do a slight bow to Iseul then walk off and take a detour to the group hang out spot with all the Soju. Lucas and Grace are already there with Rae and Kai. They both look like they've seen ghosts. Kai is chugging his soju like his life depends on it and staring at the grass, he's covered in splotches of paint.

I grab a Soju and sit down on the wooden stump. "What happened to

you?”

“Lost at paint ball,” he grumbles.

“Hey it’s cool she’s good at it.”

He jerks his head to the side and shoots me a deathly cold glare. “She hid behind me, and producers thought it would be funny to go to war with little kids. Who gives little kids paint guns and why are they so hellishly accurate? I should have worn a cup!”

I snort out a laugh, “What about you Rae? How’d it go?”

He doesn’t answer right away.

“Rae?” I wave in front of his face.

His body jerks like he’d fallen asleep with his eyes open. “Oh date, my date, ummm she had an allergic reaction to shellfish which she’s never had before, I had to rush to the drugstore for her, and then she mauled me with her mouth full of antihistamine---and shared some of it with her tongue.”

My face scrunches up. “So basically cold medicine is her liquid courage?”

He shudders. “It was bubblegum flavor.”

“So just imagine you shared gum.”

“We!” all three guys say in unison.

“Ew!” Kai interjects.

Lucas shakes his head. “Gum catches food and mouths are disgusting.” Grace elbows him in the ribs. “All mouths but yours!”

“Better.” She leans in for a kiss.

I’ll never get over how happy Lucas is now that he has Grace, it’s like he’s lost every care he ever had in the world, she makes him more creative, in general she just makes him a better person.

“What about you?” Lucas opens another bottle of Soju. “How was your date?”

“Oh you mean going down memory lane? Or her outing me during

filming that I took her virginity?”

Lucas spits out his drink and starts coughing while Grace jumps into the air and shouts. “I KNEW IT!”

I frown. “You knew my ex would be filming?”

I talk in part English part Korean for her sake.

“No! I knew you had a past like that, and you just kept it hidden, I called it when we became friends and I was right.” She looks around to everyone this time speaking in broken Korean. “Right. I was right.”

Rae hasn’t said anything he just stares at me in shock. “What the hell man? It’s true? You took her virginity? When?”

Lucas takes another sip while I answer. “I think I was fifteen.”

Lucas spits out more Soju this time hitting Kai in the face, he seems to be too stunned to speak.

Lucas wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “Anything else we should know before I take another sip and waste the Soju?”

“There’s more, but she didn’t out me and it’s not something I’m wanting to talk about, oh and she wore the dress from our very first date as if to recreate it, not creepy at all, she also then changed into spandex and a very tiny shirt and tried to maul me. I fell off the couch.”

“I mean,” Rae frowns. “She is pretty.”

“On the outside.” I shudder. “The inside is a completely different scenario.”

Rae’s expression changes to perplexed. “So are they going to cut it out of the episode?”

I shrug. “Legally, I think they can do whatever they want, but I’ll talk to Ari.”

It’s Kai’s turn to cough and hit his chest. “Yeah I bet she’d have a lot to say, might keep you in a meeting for hours over that one.”

“Lots of yelling.” Lucas adds in. “Maybe some moaning—that is after you get punched in the dick.”

Rae’s laughter fills the air .”She wouldn’t go near his dick.”

Lucas’s eyes water as he swallows his sip and then burps. I know he was ready to start choking any minute.

“I mean now that she knows how big it is...” Kai teases. “Bro those shorts hid nothing.”

“Definitely going to turn into a meme and peoples favorite edit on TikTok.” Grace agrees.

I groan and pinch my nose, leaning back to look up at the stars. “I haven’t had very many good moments on camera.”

“Depends on how you look at it.” Rae shrugs. “Some might say they’re your best moments, there’s a reason the show’s trending.”

Kai starts cackling then falls out of his chair. “Sorry already drunk, but imagine the hashtags, little Maknae, huge dick.”

Lucas joins in. “Bias wrecker indeed!”

They keep going on and on until Rae leans in close to me. “We really need to get a handle on what happened during your date though, we can’t have that getting out, it will completely ruin the image the company has for you, especially for this comeback, do you even know how much white they have you wearing from wardrobe? To represent your pure talent and pure soul?”

Pressure hits me square in the chest, I almost feel like I can’t breathe. “Yeah, I know, I’ll talk to her.”

I grab my phone and shoot her a quick text while Rae turns around.

Me

Hey something happened during filming and she outed the part that I took her virginity, any way we can get legal aka you on it to see if they can edit it out?

Ari

ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME?

Me

Or not?

Ari

That whore!

I laugh at my phone screen briefly forgetting that Rae's next to me and I have flirty texts with his sister in that same chat.

Rae glances over. "Who you texting?"

My shrug tells him it's not a big deal but, really I'm petrified he's going to grab my phone out of my hands. "Ari, she called Iseul, a whore, and I asked her to see what she could do."

"Strong response." He doesn't laugh though, instead he nods seriously. "If anyone can take care of you, it's Ari."

"I know." I respond in earnest, because it's true. She takes care of me and she always will he just doesn't know how much.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Sookie

I don't stay up late and I know I'm already playing with fire, so I get ready for bed then text Ari again.

Me

Sorry, Rae was right next to me.

Ari

You coming over?"

My grin probably looks silly and stupid, but I love that she wants me to come over and I wish I could.

Me

I want to so bad, but I'm tired.

Ari

Well, good news, they want to edit the dates and extend into two episodes from day three and four., I found out when I contacted Director Simon so tomorrow you guys get to have free time, and when I say free cameras will get some footage of you guys all partying by the pool and recording your last tracks in the studio.

While that sounds great, those girls really, except for Dueri, aren't ones I would want to party with, but it's still time off so I take it.

Me

We'll find a way to sneak a few minutes away then, right?

Ari

I've already been plotting.

Me

I'll have something to look forward to.

Jay's snoring so I don't think he cares that I'm texting, but suddenly my phone gets ripped from my hand and he starts typing furiously on it, his dark hair sticking out in all directions, he tosses my phone back at me. "Go to sleep."

I read the text.

Me

This is Jay, if I roll over one more time and see light from his screen I'm confiscating his phone, he needs sleep and so do you. Night-night, dream of Sookie's white shorts!

"Whyyyyyy." I groan into my pillow but get a text back right away.

Ari

I took a mental picture along with everyone else present.

Me

Sorry, it's Sookie again, I'll see you in the morning and why would you need to take a mental picture when you get the real thing?

Ari

Just don't send me a dick pic, no girl is ever like ooooooooooooo a penis on my screen.

I laugh against my pillow.

Me

No dick pics, got it.

I hear slight screaming to my left, Jay's holding his pillow over his face.

Me

Gotta go before Jay kills me in my sleep...

I hesitate and then type out

Me

Love you.

Ari responds immediately.

Ari

Love you too.

I'm so pumped I accidentally drop my phone onto the floor earning another groan from Jay, yeah he might just put that pillow over my face any minute now.

"Sorry." I whisper and put my phone down gently on the nightstand and turn on my side falling into a deep sleep with a smile on my face.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Ari

I sleep like hell.

I missed having him in my bed, and now I know I have to go try to convince Director Simon.

I try to gain my courage, grab a protein bar, and at six in the morning go to the production studio on property and knock on the door. Director Simon is in a beanie, a gray sweatshirt and black sweats staring at the screens editing.

“Hey.” I come sit next to him. “Can we talk?”

“I already know,” He doesn’t even look at me, his dark hair’s pulled out from his gray beanie and he’s smiling so huge at the screen that I’m afraid to look. “You want me to cut out what Iseul said?”

“Yes.” I take a deep breath. “Legally, this could destroy not only the group but the company.”

“Interesting that you say that.” He still doesn’t look at me, he just keeps editing on his keyboard. “Since you’re so involved.”

My heart almost stops. “What?”

“You.” He keeps tapping the keyboard and finding the mouse. “We’ll see how it turns out, for now, I’m willing to take out that confession based on one

that just got sent to me a few minutes ago. Tit for tat, that sort of thing. I mean if there's more drama why would I even air this."

Okay, he's an evil asshole. "These are people's lives!"

"Mine too. And we live for the ratings so if you're not comfortable with it, I'd take it up with the label who put two of the hugest K-pop groups on the map then sold them for more money."

My stomach sinks. I have a bad feeling right now but I don't want to panic Sookie so I say nothing. I force a smile. "Well, as you know my job is to protect the boys."

"And..." He clicks on the laptop harder. "You do that well, so I think we're good for now, I keep the edit out, and wait for something juicier, imagine what that could possibly be?"

I know we haven't been caught so I just shrug. "No clue, but let me know when you do so I can make sure to do the proper legal documents for the individuals so your ass doesn't get sued."

Our entire conversation feels off when I leave his temporary office and walk toward the pool at the girls mansion. Music is blasting, drinks are flowing, and food is on every table.

Even better, the girls are all showing off their best assets in their swimsuits, while most of them went for something semi conservative, Iseul looks like she could walk for Victoria's Secret, the fact the triangles even cover her boobs is astonishing, and her bottoms aren't much better.

The suit is a nice white that looks good with her body and I kind of hate her for it as I stare down at my outfit. I look like I'm in the office and she looks fun.

What am I even doing here?

I get ready to leave when Sookie comes out with no shirt and the same white board shorts.

My mouth actually waters.

“I would shut that if I were you.” Lucas suddenly appears next to me.

I stumble back while he catches me by the arm. “Sorry.”

“I know you like him.”

“I love him.”

Lucas sighs. “Wait until after the show, counsel.”

I hang my head. “I know, I know. I at least got the whole edit taken care of, I’m exhausted, might go back to my room since it’s our day off.”

“Good idea.” He pats me on the back then starts sprinting toward the pool and jumps in, the girls laugh but they’re really respectful of the fact he has a girlfriend. Grace follows in her black one piece and jumps in makeup and all, the rest of the cast hanging out seem to genuinely like her. Iseul is nowhere to be found and the TestME guys I heard were recording with Rae, so Kai, Jay, Lucas, and Sookie are the only SWT members here along with Suho and Chul. Everyone else is hard at work which kind of helps heal old wounds I think for the bands together.

Sookie walks next to me, gives me a look then points with his hand down by his side toward the spot that Grace secured for Soju.

I nod and look away.

Lucas isn’t there to tell me to be careful.

So I follow.

I would literally follow Sookie anywhere as he walks through the grass and goes to our spot. I gasp when I see a picnic blanket, food, and wine.

“Wow it’s almost like you wanted a date?”

“I have a date.” He winks. “Too late to let me go, Ari.”

Tears well in my eyes. “I would never.”

He pulls me down to the blanket. “I know. I know.”

He captures my mouth and I’m lost all over again to his taste as we lay

down by the wine, I can't even focus on the fact that it's chilly out because I have his warmth comforting me. I wrap my arms around him while his mouth invades mine. All I can think is, this is all I needed, literally all I needed in my life, was this man. I could never forget him, I could never leave him.

His forehead kisses mine as our lips break apart. "Love you."

Tears well in my eyes. "I fixed it."

"Knew you would."

"How?"

"Because I trust you." He whispers. "More than anyone."

My only response is totally a blurt out confession. "Marry me one day."

He pauses above me, the breeze carries his hair across his forehead while he smiles down at me. "Isn't that my line?"

"No. I want to own it. Let me own it. I love you. I need you I—"

His mouth crushes mine as he pulls open my shirt, his fingers invade, touching my sensitive skin while I work on his jeans. It's probably stupid but I need him more than anything and I just, we've been through years of trauma in the industry together and we get it, we get each other so why can't we have each other?

We break apart briefly. I look up at him. "Why do you love me?"

"Because," He doesn't even hesitate. "You saw through me the minute you met me, you saved me without realizing I needed saving more than you, you're everywhere in my soul, there is no space left for someone else, you've taken control and I want it, I want you. I want to come home to you. I want to kiss you. I want to love you the way you deserve, and I want to fucking hold your hand in public."

A tear slides down my cheek. "That might be the most romantic thing I've ever heard."

"I write lyrics," he jokes.

I punch him in the shoulder then grip his neck and pull him down not knowing that the most precious moment of my life would suddenly be something very different.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Sookie

I still can't get over the moment with Ari. Or the way she just, became mine in a way I never thought. I'm gearing up for the campfire with TestME which normally would piss me off but right now I can't even be mad about it, I'm too happy.

Rae walks by me with his two chairs. "You ready to suffer?"

"Meh, it won't be so bad."

"If Suho wasn't there then maybe."

I can't disagree but Suho has his own demons. "Give them a chance, they've been actually trying really hard."

"I know, that's why I'm annoyed." Rae sighs. "Because they're legitimately talented but are being controlled just like we were and now they're stuck in this mold the company wants to make them into and you know I love Owner Siu, I do, but this just feels, wrong on so many levels. A copy cat group that has no say in their own music."

I shrug. "You know that's normal. The reason we escaped it was because our first two songs were hits and weren't a concept from the company."

Rae runs his hands through his thick hair and snatches one of the black beanies from the table. "I know, I know, it just, it kills me sometimes. We're

friends with so many groups and I thought at least our own Juniors would respect us, and while most do now, we still have the leader holding out.”

“Maybe,” I grab the marshmallows. “Theres a reason why, have you ever asked?”

“I don’t particularly like being yelled at so no, but maybe I should.”

“Maybe.” I agree, looking out at the bonfire by our own pool. “Let’s go bond.”

What takes place next, I’m so thankful never actually ends up on camera because one shot goes to two, goes to three, and the entire TestME group challenges us and I think at one point Lucas got naked, all I know is I laughed really hard.

And I fell asleep with a calm smile on my face not knowing... just not knowing, that it would be the last smile I’d have for quite a while.

Our phones won’t stop going off, I don’t know what our call time is, I’m struggling to even see straight at this point when I get a call from Siu, and then another, and another.

The hell?

“Fuck.” Eric throws his phone on the grass. “Fuck, take his phone, take his phone!”

I don’t have time to react as almost every member of both group lunge for me—all except Rae.

Rae’s staring at his phone like he’ll never look away even being held at gunpoint. I avoid everyone running at me and stumble toward him only to look over his shoulder and see the damning evidence.

Me and his sister making out.

Me and his sister.

Last night.

On the biggest gossip news outlet in Korea which means it's going to spread far and wide throughout every other news channel, blog, entertainment website.

People don't have her identity yet, but they will, the Netizens always have a way to find things out and the only reason Rae knows is because in the photo she's wearing the cross bracelet he gave her last year for her birthday. I helped him pick it out and he was so surprised I knew her well enough to pick out a gift that made he cry. It's dangling by my head, her arms are wrapped around me.

"New bad boy of K-pop?" Is the headline. The next one is. "Dirty little Maknae kissing all the girls."

I can't find my voice.

It simply no longer exists.

Who filmed us? What happened? We were careful! All the things I'm thinking in my head that I can't voice out loud. I've had panic attacks before, this is way worse, this is world ending, this is me dying from the inside out knowing Rae had to find out this way, and that I have nothing to say other than I'm sorry I didn't tell you, I'm sorry I thought I had it handled.

I stand and back away slowly only to collapse onto the grass and it's not even my own bandmates that come at me first. It's Chul, it's Eric, it's Suho, they're all surrounding me as if it's going to make it better. Ji-Woo and Kwan follow, Kwan actually steps in front of me, I'm delirious. I don't know what to say. I'm in absolute shock.

Rae jumps to his feet and turns to me. "Why?"

It's a simple question.

I have only one answer to give. "I love her."

"How long?" Tears stream down his face.

I betrayed him.

I snuck around him.

And it wasn't for days or months, it was for years.

I squeeze my eyes shut while Eric grips my wrist then holds my hand while the rest of SWT just sit there because they knew and they know they're just as screwed, that I screwed them because I wasn't careful.

We're done.

Our group is done.

We will never come back from this moment.

I feel like I'm going to throw up.

"We met before we knew you were siblings---we kissed years ago, we've been close ever since, we confessed days ago—" My stomach sinks to lead. "We tried to stay away from each other I just, I couldn't, she's my soul mate."

Rae throws his phone into the fire and walks off. "Always the last to know." He turns and looks at me, he's so furious I can barely look at him. "Did you ever think, that maybe the right choice would be to talk to me before you got caught?"

"We knew." Lucas steps forward. "We warned him. It's not just on him."

Kai sighs. "It's on us too."

Rae looks at Jay. "And you?"

Jay hangs his head. "I knew."

"I see." Rae starts walking. "Then maybe the best thing for this group is a better leader since I can't fix shit."

I start to go after him, but Suho holds me back. "I'll talk to him."

I do a double take. "You're the worst person to run after him."

"No." Eric sighs. "Tough love, that's Suho, let him go."

So I do. I let Suho go after Rae, and I crumble.

The group really is going to be done right before our third album, because

I fell in love. It's my fault.

Because I fell for someone who understood me and held my hand.

I chase after him but it does nothing but make him more angry as he turns around and yells at me. "I'm always the last to fucking know! I'm the leader of this group. My sister?" He screams. "My sister? You'd do this? You'd go this far?"

I know cameras are most likely going to be on us now that this broke out into the media and sure enough a production crew shows up and starts filming. I say nothing. I can't find words as TestME all stand by my side. Kai, Jay, and Lucas slowly come and surround me, and we just sit there on the grass, both groups suddenly together, no anger, nothing, just sadness and desperation.

Rae stops dead in his tracks right when Suho reaches him, he turns around and screams. "Who the hell do you think you are! You should have told me!

"I tried!" I yell back, "But every time I just, it didn't, I don't know what to say, do you even realize how often I've just wanted to hold her hand in public without people taking pictures? Or to tell you I kissed her when I was sad and she comforted me? That she held me when I cried? Helped me when I was lost? I was so lost and I couldn't tell you so I told her, she's been my best friend, so no I didn't tell you, how do you tell your other best friend that you did the one thing, you shouldn't do!" I'm confessing it all.

And it's all on camera.

I get up and walk away from SWT, I start packing knowing full well, this is the end.

And I was the one who wrote it.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Ari

I know something's wrong the minute my phone starts blowing up, and it's not from Sookie, it's from the press, and then from management.

And CEO Siu.

Hands shaking, I answer. "Hello?"

"You're fired." He sighs. "I don't want to, but I'm dealing with not just a legal mess right now with SWT and this show on top of Sookie, he'll be kicked out of SWT just so you're aware. I expected better from you, had you told me we could have managed this, but I don't see the band coming back from it, we'll salvage what we can for their comeback. Sookie's already packing and on his way back to the dorms to do the same. Please turn in your ID and laptop while you leave set. We'll do the finale for the show with TestME instead of SWT, I'm currently getting Grace to take them back to the dorms but I want to give Sookie ample time to pack up his belongings before they get there. Lay low. You'll get six months severance."

The phone goes dead.

Numb. I'm wondering what happened.

Then I see Sung-Bin, he walks up to me from catering and shakes his head, then hands over his phone.

It's me.

It's me and Sookie.

Making out, touching each other.

The group's lawyer.

The leader's sister with the youngest.

I accidentally drop his phone onto the grass then pick it up and hand it back. "I'm going to pack my things."

"I can make it go away," he whispers. "If you let me, I can make it go away."

I straighten my spine. "The last thing I want, is for Sookie to go away."

"The scandal."

I turn on my heel and charge him. "The damn scandal of loving someone for years? Is that it? The scandal of having to sneak around because it could break his career and mine? All because we've loved each other that long? You want to make that go away. No. Thank. You." Tears stream down my cheeks. "Do you even know how low Sookie must be right now? Yes, we got caught, it was inevitable, but what's so wrong about this? What?"

"For starters you work for his company, he's not allowed to date, he's young, you're four years older, you have to understand how this looks." He shoves his hands into his stupid trouser pockets and I want to rage.

I point my finger at him and then drop my arm. "You're not worth it. You're a nice guy but I would rather suffer alongside the man I love than have you fix it with your money. Congratulations, at least the show's gonna be a hit."

I leave and start walking to my room, pissed off and ready to find Sookie, it's out so that means no more secrets, I'm close to the house when I see him on the ground outside the house, unresponsive.

"SUNG-BIN!" I scream. "I need an ambulance!"

He comes running, phone in hand. The other group members start sprinting toward the mansion, obviously hearing the chaos, and of course cameras are catching it all.

He's lying there nearly lifeless.

I feel for a pulse and start sobbing, hands shaking to where I can't find one but I know he's alive, he has to be alive. Sung-Bin pulls me away. I stumble back into Lucas who holds on to me while we watch Sung-Bin start to do chest compressions.

I fight Lucas in an effort to get to Sookie just as Suho and Rae appear around the corner. Rae starts sprinting toward us. Suho holds him back, Rae's fighting. "Sookie! Sookie!"

"Stop!" Suho yells.

"Sookie!" Rae bursts into tears and collapses to the ground still bound by Suho's arms. He holds him tight, the other band members rush over and have to hold Rae down while he tries to literally crawl toward Sookie. His fingernails dig into the concrete like he's trying to grip it, blood starts pouring from his hands. "Sookie!"

"Stop!" Suho yells it again and again until all I hear is Sookie and stop for the next five minutes until the ambulance arrives.

When they get there Sung-Bin fills them in on what happened and they continue CPR while Sookie lays there lifeless.

I'm dying.

My heart stops beating, I can't breathe. I start to rush toward him again only to have Lucas pull me back. By now, the girls have rushed out to the chaos.

And all I see is Iseul's shocked face.

"YOU!" I roar.

She jumps back.

I shove Lucas away. “You did this!”

“I didn’t know! I didn’t know!” She immediately starts crying. “I would never want to hurt him, I was just jealous, I didn’t know sending it in to Director Simon would---”

“Director Simon?” Sung-Bin jumps to his feet while the paramedics put Sookie into the ambulance. He turns to me. “That. I will handle.”

I wait a few seconds and finally nod. “Okay. Thank you.”

He stomps off toward the production room.

And I’m left watching Sookie, with nobody, all alone, getting put into the ambulance.

“Go.” Iseul says. “I never meant, I never thought.” She starts sobbing.

Lucas grabs my hand and walks me toward the ambulance. “Can she ride with you?”

He’s already being hooked up to machines.

It’s not real.

None of this is real.

“Yeah,” the paramedic says. “But once we’re in the ER family only.”

“He’s my family,” I say. “He’s mine.”

He sighs and holds out his hand, letting me in the ambulance. The last thing I see is Rae’s broken face as we drive off.

The last thing I hear, is Sookie coding.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Sookie

I'm floating.

It's nice.

Freeing.

I hear her voice.

I want to stay for her.

What's even happening?

I keep thinking about my dancing and almost fainting on stage, only to faint again and hear voices but, am I okay? Alive?

I slowly open my eyes.

The room is blurry or maybe it's my eyes. It's white all around me. Oh shit, did I die? I blink my eyes over and over again, but the blurriness remains until I finally just keep them squeezed shut.

If I'm in Heaven it sucks.

If I'm in hell, well that's why my eyes won't work.

I hear talking.

"I didn't know." Rae's voice sounds. "Obviously. And I'm scared, I'm so scared not for the group but for you. You coded man, your heart literally stopped for over a minute an arrhythmia apparently. I thought you were dead

and all I kept thinking was that I left angry, so fucking angry, and you're laying there lifeless on the ground while my sister screams your name with me. I never want to experience that again. I know you're alive and breathing, but I really need you to wake up."

I move my fingers for him then open my eyes. "I can't see well."

All I see is blond hair and a tall body lunging for my bed. "You can talk?"

"I'm human."

"I mean, they weren't sure about brain damage or anything." Rae says, voice cracking, then he starts shaking and bawling over me. "I didn't know. I don't ever want to experience this again. Shit."

I try to reach for his hand, but he grabs mine first.

"I was wrong for not telling you." I rasp.

"Yes." He agrees, which isn't shocking, that's just Rae. "But, I get why you didn't and I'm sorry I reacted that way."

"I'm sorry I didn't say something first." I turn my head to the side. "Can you do me a favor?"

"Anything."

"Can you hand me that water right there or ice chips because I'm gonna go crazy."

He hands me the ice chips as more knocks come on the door. I'm still blurry but my eyes focus on one person.

Her.

I hold out my left hand.

Ari rushes to the bed and pulls me into her arms and starts sobbing. "You were coding or it seemed like you were, and I didn't know, I didn't know—"

I hold her as tight as I can. "I'm okay."

"No." She's shaking in my arms. "I can't lose you. I won't survive it, fuck the haters."

I want to laugh, but I feel too weak. “Yeah, I’m sure they’ll respond well to that.”

Rae stands and looks over at us. “I’ll go get the doctor, the guys have all been standing outside for hours, both groups, Suho had to be pulled back because it looked like he was seconds away from hitting a doctor for not letting me in.”

“Suho.” I laugh and it hurts my lungs. “Always Suho.”

“He talked to me,” Rae whispers. “He told me a truly good leader never abandons their teammates, which I’ve always known but he asked me how hard it’s really been compared to the success and said I’ve been weighing them against each other. I’ve been so focused on making sure you guys succeed that I’ve forgotten about my first job.”

“Your first job?”

He smile spreads across his face. “Being a big brother. Taking care of you, it’s not just my job it’s my privilege.”

I nod. “I know, Rae. And I’m sorry.”

“For loving someone so amazing?” He shrugs. “The shock was a lot, but it brought us together with our Juniors, once and for all... we have the comeback stage in a few days. I hope you can see it.”

See it.

Not participate.

My stomach drops.

That’s right. I’m no longer in the group.

So I can only nod and say. “Me too.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Ari

Five Days Later
Comeback Stage

“No. Legally, in his contract it states that—” I get interrupted immediately. Sookie’s doing great, he’s out of the hospital and the diagnosis was POTS, which is what was messing up his dancing and air during choreography. They’re still running more tests to figure out why his heart stopped and the only thing they’ve come up with is stress, along with his disease. Until recently, it hasn’t been something people really know about. But maybe, just maybe, he can use this as his purpose, to bring awareness to something so scary. He’s a fighter, and he’s someone who wants the best in everyone. My smile feels new, it feels like healing as I watch him. This can be a huge, amazing, good thing, out of something so damning to an idol.

I take another deep breath. I’m no longer working for the label but I can at least try to advocate for him. “He belongs in SWT, Sai and you know it.”

“I know it, you know it.” He agrees. “But the public is split.”

“Just, allow him to continue group activities after the comeback.”

Sai let’s out an exhausted sigh. “I can’t decide if seeing him on stage will

inspire people or cancel him.”

“Let him perform.” I beg. “Please. He can bring awareness.”

“He needs more tests done, he can barely dance—”

I interrupt him. “—He’s strong, let him perform.”

“I heard.” He pauses. “That both groups have a song together, I approved it, but I’ve only heard parts, is he on the song?”

I smile even though he can’t see me. “Wait and see.”

“Fine. But if this comes back on our label it’s on you, you will take the fall.”

“Done.” I have zero hesitation for the first time in my life as I look over at Sookie, he’s been staying with me for the past three days and it’s been incredible, we’ve had time to ourselves and what’s even better.

I have him, without cameras.

The last episode that abruptly ended had a twenty percent watch rate throughout the country is unheard of, so it’s safe to say the scandal is still running strong, but people are curious and we can use it to our benefit, hopefully.

I walk into our shared bedroom, he’s on his laptop writing music, looking just as beautiful as the day I met him. “Need to let off some steam?”

He smiles away from me. “Sure, wanna go for a run?”

“You’re performing.” I blurt. “So maybe we save the lungs until we have a final diagnosis?”

He nods his head slowly. “I can’t believe we had no idea.”

“The human body is complicated. But you know what’s not?”

“What?” He frowns and closes the laptop.

“The heart, it carries the soul you know, and it’s not complicated at all, it makes total sense that you would carry someone there, that you would allow the blood to flow, the body to work, the brain to get blood. At the end of the

day, the heart decides everything, so what an important decision to give that to someone, right? Who gives their actual heart, the main commander of the body, to another soul? Well, the answer is that the heart and soul are together and when the heart isn't sure, the soul goes, them, that person, them. My heart has always been yours, so whatever happens, whatever hits our way. Just know, you have both."

He reaches up and grabs my face, then presses a kiss to my mouth, it's soft and full of aggression at the same time. His lips are so soft as they move against mine.

I can't even imagine possibly losing him.

I crush my mouth to his harder and then he's lifting me onto the bed and pulling my shirt over my head.

Tears stream down my cheeks as I think back.

Him on the ground.

Him unresponsive.

Coding.

"Marry me," I whisper. "Marry me."

"Just stealing all my thunder." He brushes his lips against mine and leans up, grabbing my bracelet with the cross, he ties it around my left hand, my ring finger. "Yes."

"Yes?" Hot tears stream down my cheeks.

"Yes." He pushes me down on the bed, his hands find my face, my body, dig into my hair, it's like he can't decide what he wants more, and I let him.

He said yes.

Chapter Thirty

Sookie

I'm nervous as hell.

I'm rapping on a song that I haven't been practicing since being in the hospital and the rest of the guys are doing their comeback.

TestME is on the sidelines ready to come in when it's their part and nobody has any clue we collaborated on the song.

Suho has been weirdly amazing for Rae in every way, it's almost like Rae's tender ways needed Suho's strength, apparently they went golfing together, weird, but I'm glad they're friends now.

The rest of the guys hang out with us, their dorm, our dorm, doesn't matter, but it finally feels like we have juniors at the company.

The song starts.

Rae comes up next to me and hands me my mic. "You ready for your rap debut?"

"You ready to destroy the internet?" Eric asks on my other side.

Suho slaps me on the back. "Glad you're alive." Typical.

I look around at Kai, Lucas, Jay, Rae, then over at Ji-Woo, Chul, Eric, and Kwan and I smile, especially since I know how it ended.

This is our finale.

The girls we “dated” are in the crowd. Iseul apologized which helped my image, and Dueri is right next to her, head shaved. She’s powering through and we’re helping her in every way possible. I can’t look at her too much because I start crying all over again.

The girls adore her.

Siu paid for all of her medical bills after the show.

I just wanted her to live.

So did the rest of the guys. Life isn’t always about your own, but living for others. I really, really, need her to live, and I need to live for her.

She nods her head at me from the crowd and I pray in my head. I manifest. I speak to the universe.

Please, don’t take her.

This is for her. This song. This performance.

I slowly walk onto the stage and hold out my hand. She grips it. “You’re a rebellious one these days, Sookie.”

“Only for you,” I answer as tears stream down both our faces. I pick her up into my arms and set her in the chair in the middle of the stage as both groups come out to alarmingly loud screams.

“It’s been a rough few weeks, but one thing we know is that this brought us together in ways we never expected,” Rae says.

Suho pipes up. “We’re proud to be SWT’s juniors and proud to collaborate on our first song... for Dueri.”

Everyone pulls off their black jackets and shows a shirt that says. “For Dueri.”

And we start to sing.

My rap part is amazing and I know that the only reason I was able to be on stage was because of Ari.

We’ll be okay.

Everything will be okay even when it's hard. But right now, my job as an idol is to make Dueri's life worth living.

So we sing to her.

We sing, we win the showcase. The winning isn't about a trophy. It's about a life worth living, it's about looking at every single day and saying it's hard, but my choice is yes, and in this industry it's a hard one to say yes to, it's hard, so hard, but she showed us, even after filming so much.

"Why do you like the sun?" I asked three months later when we were done filming, and it was hot as hell. When both of our albums killed it on Billboard, when we set records after scandal, when all of it didn't seem to matter as much as her sitting in the sun.

She twirled in the warm wind and looked over at me with her Yankees hat on from Ari and said, "Because it shines, Sookie. It shines, just like you."

I had no clue what to say. I just stared at her and asked, "What's so great about the sun shining... about me?"

She walked up to me and grabbed my hand then put it on her face. "Because sometimes, all you need is a little warmth."

"Okay," I said, gripping her hand. "I get it."

"You don't," she said right away with a laugh, one that would stay in my soul for an eternity, weird how I felt like I was *lost in Seoul*, and this random fan found me when I needed it the most. "But you will, one day you will understand that sometimes all you need is one moment, maybe the sun shining on my face is mine." She looked up at the sky. "I like it. I feel it. Hope. What a great word, Sookie. Hope that no matter how dark things look, you have light."

I had no clue that falling for my best friend's sister would lead us to a Grammy nomination with the very group that I hated, but I do know, that when I accept that award which I know we will because I have faith, that it

was because Dueri was in heaven fighting for us, like she always did.

“Idol of idols...” she’d whispered.

“No,” I often whisper back just in my own head as if she’s still with us.
“Strength and resilience. Inspiration.”

“It was a good kiss.” She reached for my hand in the end, her grip was weak. “It was a really good kiss. It tasted like hope.”

The one word I hated so much my entire life.

Was her ending.

My salvation.

My. Hope.

A random fan who I initially was so angry at having to meet.

All of us sat by her bedside. Both groups, all the girls, and everything just seemed to be buried despite all the controversy. It wasn’t clean. It was messy.

And in the end.

They produced.

TestME took over, as true juniors.

Suho walked forward and I’ll never forget the moment. He sat on her hospital bed. “Holding on,” he started singing. “Is the bravest thing, so beautiful, what a beginning... I’ll see you in everything, even when I look in the mirror, I’ll see the girl, the bravery, the one I would have liked to hold hands with. Gift. What a gift.”

Shaking, I’d walked over and held her hand.

She smiled up at all of us and whispered. “See? It all worked out. Maybe that was my purpose.”

“What?” Eric started crying. “What?”

“To remind you why you do what you do. Life is so hard, it’s never easy, every day, taking a breath is hard, but my God you have breath.” She smiled.
“Wow, it’s pretty you know, it’s pretty the air up here.”

I reached for her and started sobbing.

And she went.

She went like the air she breathed.

I'll never forget her.

When that first song ended to crazy applause after our performance at the biggest awards show in the world, I walked off stage and found Ari the way she found me.

The end was the beginning.

The beginning the end.

“WHO WANTS FOOD!?” Eric yells, and so we ate.

And we talked.

And we ignored the gossip.

We ignored everything but our relationships.

It was beautiful.

But it's just the beginning...

Epilogue

Jay

It's a weird feeling.

When you have so much success.

When you keep secrets you know you can never tell.

And when you watch your friends finally find themselves the way I did.

I'm still not ready to say it out loud.

I'm still on the fence and I know that while at this point in the world we live in, I can probably say something, this industry doesn't really allow it.

No, cancel that. They promote the shit out of us having relationships with group members but I swear on all that's holy the minute that actually happens, all hell wouldn't just break loose it would deconstruct and come for you.

All seven circles of it.

I stare down at my texts.

I'm literally standing at the Grammy awards and more concerned about my phone, about him texting me back to let me know that he made it.

I don't realize how up in my own head I am, until I see it.

I mean the world sees it.

A proposal.

To a gorgeous pop star.

From him.

All on camera.

Live.

For the world to see.

My hands shake until she walks up to me and grabs them. I have no clue who she is. She's not a K-pop artist, she's not even famous, I know at least that much.

But the hand holding.

It does something.

I stay still.

She looks down at my thumb. "Eyes clear. Smile wide. I'll get you through whatever situation this is, but I need you to focus because in three and a half minutes you're about to perform in front of millions of people and the biggest acts in the history of acts. Can you do this for me? Can you make it work? I mean of course you can, Jay, it's what you do. So focus. One step at a time."

I swallow against the knot in my throat. "Who are you?"

"Siu needed some help here in the states. I'm backup. I'm your new manager. And I will see you succeed hell or high water." She glances over at me. "I'm his daughter."

"What?"

"Daughter. Twenty-two, very good looking so you don't even need to compliment me. I'm his daughter and I'm in charge of the label that sold it's soul, quite literally here, in LA. I'll be all over you, relatively speaking. You need anything? Also that's most likely"—she starts looking over my outfit—"a publicity stunt, okay you look good, everything's going to be great, sing your heart out, dance your ass off and I'll be here when you need a good

shoulder to cry on.”

“But why would I need a shoulder...” I stop talking.

Her hair’s a weird funky blue, she has matching eyes and she’s short. Wait is that a SpongeBob shirt? “Go. And life doesn’t choose for us when our hearts are in it. You’re going to do amazing, Jay. I believe in you.” She leans in and whispers, her hair smelling like coconut. “Fighting.”

THE END

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Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome (POTS) is a disorder of the autonomic nervous system. When the autonomic nerves don't work properly, this can cause symptoms throughout the body like tachycardia, chest pain, lightheadedness, fainting, fatigue, shortness of breath, GI problems, migraines, cognitive impairment, blood pooling in the extremities, and more.

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We're so grateful to everyone that's helped with this process. We could both probably just collapse onto the ground and cry at this point, stories like this take a lot out of you but not just that, again the pressure hits different.

We so hope you enjoy this K-pop novel and we hope you will look forward to Jays story. We promise we will do Jay justice in his novel.

Thank you so much for reading.

Blessings. CA&RVD

About The Authors

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Rachel Van Dyken is the #1 *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* bestselling author of over 100 books, ranging from new adult romance to mafia romance to paranormal & fantasy romance. With over four million copies sold, she's been featured in *Forbes*, *US Weekly*, and *USA Today*. Her books have been translated into more than 15 countries. She was one of the first romance authors to have a Kindle in Motion book through Amazon publishing and continues to strive to be on the cutting edge of the reader experience. She keeps her home in the Pacific Northwest with her husband, adorable sons, naked cat, and two dogs. For more information about her books and upcoming events, visit www.RachelVanDykenAuthor.com.

Colet Abedi

Colet Abedi is an Iranian American best-selling author, television and film producer. She was born in Virginia and currently lives in Los Angeles. When she's not writing she's either off on an adventure in a far off land or planning her next getaway. She writes contemporary romance, young adult and

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After publishing her first article in a national magazine when she was fifteen, Colet Abedi knew she wanted to tell stories. She's now an American novelist and television and film producer based in Los Angeles.

Abedi was head writer and showrunner for the FOX-owned MyNetworkTV serials, *American Heiress* and *Fashion House* where she wrote and oversaw over 100 episodes of the telenovelas. She was the creator and executive producer of *Unsealed: Alien Files* and *Unsealed: Conspiracy Files*, which originally ran in syndication for four seasons with over 100 episodes and ran on Netflix, Discovery and the Fox stations as well as internationally.

Colet is the co-author of the bestselling young adult fiction trilogy, *The FAE Series* which was optioned by Ridley Scott's, Scott Free.

Abedi's first solo contemporary romance novel was titled, *Mad Love* and was a bestseller. Since then, she has written nine contemporary romances. Abedi's solo debut young adult dystopian science fiction series, *Breed* and *Shadow*, were released in 2021 with the final book, *rEVOLUTION* to be released in December 2023.

She recently sold her first contemporary women's lit novel titled *Uncaged Summer* to Post Hill Press, which will be released in the summer of 2024.

Abedi co-produced the feature documentary, *The Medicine*, which follows one of the youngest spiritual leaders in Colombia and documents the history of Ayahuasca.

Currently, Colet has two television projects with the West Point Military Academy with Aperture Films and projects at Hulu and Reach TV with her production company, 04 Entertainment. They are set to produce *Dying to Be Me*, a New York Times Bestseller as well as a documentary on chef Marco Pierre White's, *Devil in the Kitchen*.

She sits on the board of directors for HealGrief, a national network for grieving young adults and bereaved individuals. She is also a member of the Brain Trust Committee for the John Wayne Cancer Institute.