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FLORIDA KINGSMAN
CHIEFS

Marrying THE
QUARTERBACK

ROYANNE
STEELE

MARRYING THE
QUARTERBACK
FLORIDA KINGSMAN CHIEFS



ROXANNE STEELE

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*To all those who dream of starting over again for the sake of
happiness...*

This for you.

- Roxanne Steele

A broken-hearted pop star seeks revenge in the arms of an infamous quarterback in this sexy, swoony romance.

Riley Sullivan is the latest pop star to headline the Super Bowl Halftime Show stage.

What should have been a huge milestone in her career ends in betrayal when she finds her husband in a compromising position.

In the locker room, declaring his undying love for his secret mistress.

Her husband was in the locker room, declaring his undying love for his secret mistress.

Vengeful and heartbroken, Riley is on a warpath, and she can hardly believe her luck when her star aligns with Tyler Owens, the six-foot Adonis with piercing blue eyes.

Tyler Sinclair Owens is an NFL player familiar with the glitz, glam, and gossip that comes with fame. When his path crosses with Riley's, he can't help but be drawn to the superstar's drive, determination, and grit.

And in that instance, he makes a single wish.

To make her his.

As the chemistry between Riley and Tyler heats up, new and unexpected secrets and challenges emerge.

Will the stars fight to maintain their forever, or will old and new forces tear them apart?

RILEY SULLIVAN PLAYLIST:

#RILEYSULLIVANCHALLENGE
#RILEYSULLIVANPLAYLIST

1. HEARTBROKEN ELUDE
2. SOUTHBOUND IS A FREEDOM KILLER
3. PIECES OF MY BROKEN HEART
4. BUTTERFLIES AND RAINBOWS
5. DANGEROUS TO BELIEVE IN US
6. MY SHINNING ONE
7. LET ME HERE YOU (EXPLICIT VERSION)
8. CHASING THE HIGH OF FREEDOM
9. SWEET LOVE SWEET COMPANY
10. PURRLE STARLIGHT SKIES
11. MIRACLES

PROLOGUE: BETRAYAL AT THE HANDS OF YOUR HUSBAND



“Heartbroken by the one who loved you. Heartbroken for the vows are but one-sided bounds of irony. Heartbroken by the man who said he loved me. Heartbroken is the destiny I found.”

— *Heartbroken Elude*

by Riley Maddison Sullivan

*“*You like that, Baby? Having my thick cock deep in your pussy? You love being fucked by Florida’s best, don’t you?”

“Yes, ah. Honey, yes. Like how I milk you up? You’re so good, Honey. Too good. You couldn’t wait to fuck me.”

“Damn right.”

This is worse than porn...

Cringe-worthy fake shit like those Tubi movies that barely get the CGI right but are hell of addictive to keep watching.

In my case, I have no choice but to witness this R-18 sorry excuse of a sex tape because it’s happening in the Ben Hill Griffin Stadium locker room.

Between my husband and the first female sports broadcaster to pull off the Super Bowl.

First and most definitely the last.

I knew Chase Arnold Benedict would cheat on me. All I was waiting for was the glorious ‘when.’

Every time my instincts rang their warning bells, I’d be one step behind in catching Chase in the act.

So what a grand night it is to swiftly walk down the hall with my best friend and social media manager, Cassidy Holmes, to witness my dearest *husband* enjoying the dirty doggy humping attempt on the locker room floor.

Talk about unsanitary, but let’s get back to reality.

I’m standing like a mannequin while my best friend is next to me, mouth covered with her hand while those wide emerald green eyes confirm I’m not hallucinating.

All we do is share a look.

One solid look...

My smile couldn’t be any grander on my glammed face.

“Yes, honey. There. Yes. There, please. You love fucking me on this dirty ass floor, don’t you?”

“Fuck, yes!” Chase grunts loudly, and I’m sure he’s going to climax any moment now since he never really lasts long in bed.

He’s doing pretty well this time around. I’ll give him that much. The Viagra must be kicking in.

Catching onto Cassidy’s movements, I take a solid step back as I admire the way she runs her hands through her hair to add a dose of density to her ginger curls.

“You love fucking me, yes?”

Looking at me from head to toe, she nods in approval as I sport my sparkling entrance outfit.

With what we’re about to do, I’m proud I have an even nicer outfit to sport on the Super Bowl Halftime Show stage, for this confrontation is going to ruin the surprise.

“Absolutely. Fucking addicting, baby.”

I’m fighting not to roll my eyes.

Cassidy pulls out her phone, her fingers swiftly tapping the screen as she works on setting up the chaos we’re about to ignite.

As my social media manager, she’ll make sure this broadcast goes as far as it can fly.

I give my fans five minutes, and it’ll trend on every platform ever created.

My smile couldn’t be wider.

Cassidy lifts her fingers, her phone already in her grasp as the Instagram LIVE countdown matches her fingers that are going down with each passing second.

“Tell me, I’m better than your wife, honey!”

What a perfect statement to moan out to the world.

Guess it’s show time.

BIG REPUTATION GONE SOUTH



~RILEY~

“She gave it her all. Her hopes and dreams. Nothing but shadows, despite her silent cries and pleas. She lets the world see her glimmer. Shine far, shine bright. You have a reputation to uphold. Don’t fear the pain, don’t worry about the fight. Up is the way to hope. Leave the rest, Southbound, for the Sky is your only way out, Baby Girl.

Don’t let Southbound be your Freedom Killer.”

— Southbound is a Freedom Killer

“ **T**ell me, I’m better than your wife, honey!”

“Better? A fucking understatement, baby. Look how tight you squeeze me, huh? You use that special voice of yours to praise me. Not give me the silent treatment every fucking show to reserve your voice for the fans. I’m your biggest fan, ain’t I, baby?”

“Yes! Oh God, yes.”

“Just you wait. A few more... shows and I’ll divorce my wife. She won’t see it coming, and when I do, it’ll be you and me, baby. We’ll finally be together after five long years. You’ve been so damn patient for me, babe. You deserve an award.”

“Chase... so close!”

“Come on home, baby. Scream my name so the locker walls can hear you come undone from my jackhammer.”

“AH!”

Jackhammer. Is he not embarrassed?

The ick sensation I get watching this is the same expression plastered on Cassidy’s face before she opens her mouth.

“And Here we are LIVE in the midst of the Ben Hill Griffin Stadium locker room where we’ve walked upon an eventful display of affection from one of our own previous tight end and rivaling team manager, Chase Arnold Benedict!”

The two of them are flinching in panic as their eyes lock onto Cassidy, who’s in full ‘sports reporter’ mode. This totally feels like a dose of karma since Cassidy applied for the very position of sports broadcaster and lost to this bitch.

Then she became my social media manager, but when this blows over, it may be her time to pick up her calling.

“And who is this? Your secret mistress? Who would have thought Angela Beck Davis, our first-ever female sports broadcaster to host the Super Bowl, would be here?” Cassidy’s dramatic gasp couldn’t be more eccentric. “To think an affair on such a historical event as the Super Bowl. THE SUPER BOWL! Flabbergasted isn’t even the right word to describe this situation as we continue to broadcast this LIVE!”

“Wh-Wh-What?!” the shrill that comes out of Angela’s mouth only follows with a tiny whisper that proves how screwed she is. “Y-You’re lying. Y-Y-Y-You’re live? Actually, live?”

“With about...” Cassidy pauses to look at her screen. “3.5 million viewers and counting. Wow! I think we just beat a Guinness World Record with how many viewers attended a LIVE broadcast.”

She pauses purposely to turn the camera on Chase, his eyes so wide with shock, I wonder if he’s had a stroke from realizing he’s been caught.

Would wishing that upon him be bad when you catch your husband of five years cheating on you? Would anyone hold it against me?

His eyes are solely on mine, despite the obvious camera viewing his naked body. Giving him an up-and-down sweep, I can’t help but pity this form of humiliation.

Then again, he took this opportunity, knowing well he could get caught in his infidelity actions.

Don’t feel sorry for a cheater, Riley. He never once thought about you. Thought about how this could ruin our reputation. Ruin how the world perceives us and our five-year marriage.

Ignoring the sinking feeling that grows the longer we hold our stare, I tune into Cassidy’s words as her voice dips to a tone of pure scrutiny.

“So, Mr. Benedict, manager of the Pennsylvania Jet Hawks and husband to Riley Madison Sullivan... How does it feel to be caught cheating while on the job in front of your wife and now, four million viewers?”

His eyes only break our intense eye contact when he hears the ‘four million viewers’ part — *typical*. How he’s viewed by the world has been one of his obsessions, and now he just broke it for the sake of pleasure.

His wife, on the other hand, isn't a strong enough word to trigger regret in his eyes.

“This is some sort of prank, right?” he growls as his eyes narrow. “A setup! To try to make us lose.”

“And how would this be a setup, sir?” Cassidy mockingly asks. She’s clearly fighting the urge to cuss this man off. I can see it from the twitch in her left eye.

“Please, Mr. Benedict. Enlighten us how I, Cassidy Holmes, Social Media Manager of Sullivan Music Corp., would have any desire to waltz into this specific locker room after being told you would be here grabbing one of your players’ spare jerseys, only to find you doing the dirty with Angela over there. The purpose of this LIVE was to get your prompt reaction and thrilling response in having your team, the Pennsylvania Jet Hawks that you help manage, be here at the 2025 Super Bowl, facing the iconic Florida Kingsman Chiefs for the first time in twenty-seven years and only twice ever in fifty-eight-year history. It’s rather insulting to assume otherwise,” she summarizes and lowly adds, “Unless your guilt of cheating on your wife is encouraging you to spit out lies and accusations.”

“I did not cheat!” he snaps and points in Cassidy’s direction before that accusing finger is directed my way. “Y-You did this to ruin my career! Yes. My reputation. You set this all up.”

The pressure is on as I feel Cassidy’s gaze on me with her phone in hand. I’m aware that now four million plus individuals around the world are watching to see how I’ll respond to such a humiliating scene.

“Honey.” Saying that single word feels like molasses is staining my very tongue. “Was I not a good wife to you?” My

voice is calm, almost neutral in nature, but it's my eyes that I allow to further soften as I watch his furious ones dim just a bit.

I want him to see a glimpse of it.

No. I want the world to see a glimpse of how vulnerable and humiliating all of this is.

His reactions and emotions won't matter in the long run. I've been mentally prepared for this day, but I have to play my part, so the world is on my side.

So the world can get a glimpse of who I've hidden behind closed doors for five long years.

“Don't you start, Maddy,” he sneers. I've never understood why he calls me Maddy. *Never will.* “You think you're innocent in all of this? You drove me to act this way.”

He's surprisingly up and towering over me in a few blinks, and the room gets tense in a matter of seconds. I'm sure not the only one holding my breath to see what he'll do next, but I knew those words would trigger the real him.

The only thing missing is the intense smell of booze, matched by the lingering aroma of cigarettes.

“I've been miserable since day one! You think you're some sort of saint, don't you? Always putting your career before me! We only had our honeymoon to ourselves before you had to get fucking popular and start blowing up left and right. If you're not in the studio, you're performing these low-ass concerts where people barely showed up! Saying ‘it's for your fans and they deserve all of you’. Who gives a fuck about the fans if you're not attending to YOUR husband? The man you married!”

This conversation isn't our first rodeo.

It's the centerpiece of our entire marriage.

That's always been the problem between us, but the crazy part is that my fame and popularity are the ones to be criticized whenever possible.

When Chase had games to attend, practices to monitor, news interviews, charities, social events, and even off-season trips, I never once stopped him, even when I was lonely. I supported him every step of the way, and the evidence has been portrayed for years both outside before the world and behind closed doors.

“Now here you are, performing at the Super Bowl Halftime Show. Something you've spent SIX months constantly preparing for and leaving me to fend for myself and my needs. What did you think I was supposed to do? Twiddle my thumbs and wait for you?”

I don't say a single word. All I do is stare as he roughs up his wild brown hair and points in my face.

“Whatever this fake prank is, I won't let it stop me from being more successful than you. You've always been envious of me. Of my popularity. That's why you're doing this, right? To bring me down?” He chuckles, almost manically, making me wonder if he's lost a few screws now that he realizes how fucked he is. “This negative propaganda isn't going to ruin me! In fact, men will PRAISE me for putting up with you! Just because you're loyal and obsessed with your idea of being a pop star makes you believe you can do anything without me by your side. Don't make me fucking laugh.”

He actually does laugh while correcting his posture to emphasize our obvious height difference.

“I don’t care what you do now. Nothing will bring me down, and I don’t regret my actions one bit. A man like me has needs, and Angela has been serving them from day one. Unlike you, who’s obsessed with fame and pleasing everyone but your husband!” He shakes his head and crosses his arms over his chest. His gleaming glare tries to project some happy fury in his expression, but I can read them better than anyone.

He wants me to fall for it. To react in a way that’s predictable. Cry. Breakdown. Show him what a weak woman I am. It would feed his pride, and his fan base, who enjoy emphasizing that women are nothing but worthless imbeciles who need men by their sides to be ‘someone’ in this life.

I beg to differ.

“Without me, you’re nothing but a broken popstar who would never find love if I wasn’t in your life,” he concludes and smiles proudly back at me. “Now, why don’t you apologize for setting all this up, and maybe I can find it in my heart to forgive you?”

Forgive me?

The pure audacity of those words almost gets me—the spike of warmth that rushes through my body makes me fight the urge to remain completely still.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I do what is right for my fans, company, employees, and everyone else counting on me tonight to do my job as a performer and professional.

Nothing will stop me from being the pop star I worked hard to become.

“My apologies,” I begin, and watch how the glimmering glee in his eyes spikes almost immediately.

Time to burst his bubble.

“I have less than five minutes before I perform, and I can’t possibly wear this attire now that it’s been displayed to my dear fans.”

His shock is evident as he stares at me with wide eyes.

“Like you said, my fans are very important to me. Just like my profession as a pop star. I’m sure many think of it as a joke or a time waster, but I can’t let those who supported me since my free performances in tiny bars and open parks be left disappointed with my tardiness.”

I spin around then, catching a glimpse of the fuming rage that consumes the deep lines of his face.

“Feel free to contact my lawyer from tonight onward. I’ll ensure our divorce papers are set up and ready to be signed by the morning.”

Glancing over my shoulder, I can’t help but add one more thing.

“Don’t worry about me needing anything from you. Our prenup will ensure I don’t get a single penny of your money. Just like it’ll ensure you don’t get a dime of mine.”

Looking away, I smile as wide as my lips will muster before I begin to laugh. My laughter echoes against the very hollow walls of the locker room as I leave my *soon-to-be* ex-husband in his naked glory to enjoy the pool of shame that will scrutinize him for what I hope is the rest of his existence.

It’s time to walk upon the Super Bowl Halftime Show stage as a ‘soon-to-be divorced’ pop star.

At least I’m not a broken one.

THE GLIMMERING STRENGTH
OF LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT



~TYLER~

“That first moment. Flashing lights and wild cheers. I didn’t think she’d catch my eye. One look and behold. My world was stolen, my time frozen. Never had I seen something so radiant and pure. My heart skipped, my breath stilled, and I wished to the very heavens with hope, that one day, I’d be hers.”

— *Journal Entry #555*

by Tyler Sinclair Owens.

*B*reathless.

Speechless.

There has to be a word that can put two of those words together and affirm what is resonating through me as I stare at the stage from the very front row.

Out of all the halftime shows I’ve witnessed, this was the first innovative and immersive one anyone has ever had the privilege to experience.

But that’s not what has me in but a daze.

It’s her.

The single woman struts onto the massive stage and ignites cheers that can pierce one’s eardrums. The vibrancy of the

invisible aura that oozes out of her is hypnotic, while the magnetism of her presence confirms just how easy it is for her to command any room.

Fuck, she's controlling a sold-out stadium.

From the sway of her hips to the sight of her long legs, each step she takes in those white glitter heels designed with intricate pearls embodies confidence. Her platinum blonde locks sway with her movements, and the slight curls are matched with a bountiful flow that further accentuates her look.

What has everyone talking and taking videos left and right is the pure white diamond gown she's walking onto the stage with. It has a deep slit at the side, which is exactly why the silk fabric lifts upward thanks to the flow of winds from the multiple fans stationed on the corners of the stage. The top part is a deep V cut that proves she's not wearing a bra despite her plentiful breasts, which look divine in such a white number.

I fight every urge to salivate while my cock is twitching at the mere idea of getting to caress her cheek.

Nude lipstick, minimal makeup, simplistic jewelry allows one to really take in the dress, which is clearly the attention stealer.

There's no doubt about it. That's a wedding dress.

I recognize it.

That was the one plastered on every magazine front page the day Riley Maddison Sullivan married our previous tight end, Chase Arnold Benedict.

The moment he married Riley, he got offers left and right, shooting him right into a manager's role in the sports biz. That

was a pain in our asses because he decided Florida Kingsman Chiefs weren't worthy of his presence.

He transferred to the Pennsylvania Jet Hawks instead.

A traitor we'd yet to forgive.

I'm confused as to why she'd be wearing such a special ensemble on a stage like this, but the moment she reaches the edge of the stage, she raises her hands up like she's about to offer blessings to the masses.

One movement is all she needs to silence the entire stadium.

A mute challenge no one even knew they would be a part of, but here we are, absolutely silent. It's almost frightening to admit the power this single pop star has, but here's the only example you need to confirm how far she's come.

How commanding her presence is.

Lifting the bedazzled mic to her lips, she allows herself to smile, which makes her radiant blue eyes twinkle with bliss.

"Five minutes ago, a total of five million viewers witnessed something rather shocking," she begins, leaving many to either gasp or exchange looks. Others remain quiet in anticipation.

What happened five minutes ago?

"Oh fuck, she's going to address it now?" my best friend and lad in chaos, Brock Armstrong, hisses in shock.

"What?" I say, but my eyes are glued to her as she opens her mouth to continue.

"My husband of five years, Chase Arnold Benedict, cheated on me."

The way the entire stadium goes silent in shock only encourages the wires in my brain to go wild.

He did what?

A wave of fury hits me out of nowhere, but I force it to be tamed for my own sanity.

Who would cheat on Riley Maddison Sullivan?

Clearly, the answer is Chase Arnold Benedict.

“The original arrangement was made with a set of songs that would lead up to the song I’ve cherished for the last five years. The song many of you know revolves around my love for Chase and our wedding.”

She shyly looks at her dress and even gestures to it as if we can’t see the sparkling white piece that dawns on her glorious body.

“I picked this outfit to commemorate five years of marrying who I thought would be my best friend for the rest of my life. The man I assumed was happy that I was finally thriving in this industry after I started singing and song writing at the lovely age of twelve. Tonight, right before this show, it came to my attention, and to everyone who watched the Instagram LIVE, that my dedication to my fans has made me into a bad wife.”

The immediate disapproval that ignites in waves of screams, boos, and naysayers only makes her smile widen.

“It’s thanks to you all that I stand here, on this very stage, doing something the Super Bowl has never done before with this immersive experience. If it wasn’t for those who believed in me and my creations, I wouldn’t be here. I wouldn’t have fans. My experience wouldn’t feel so grandiose.”

The emotion that swells in her eyes makes my heart quake for her. I want to sweep her into my arms and let her lean into me until my warmth blankets her like a shield.

Protecting her from the world.

“Which is why I’m changing the arrangement just a little,” she declares and raises her hands up again.

As if on cue, sparks of fireworks shoot from the sides of the stage. The heat wave that hits us makes the first five rows go wild as we watch pink paint rain like droplets.

Just like that, drop after drop, the previous white gown is now dripping in pink.

Everyone is fascinated about what she’s trying to portray, as more fireworks go off and another shade of paint rains upon her.

By the time it’s all down, she’s drenched in every color of the rainbow and more. Despite what should be a messy combination of mixed shades, it leaves many of us astonished with how beautiful she now looks in the multi-colored masterpiece.

“I’m here to tell you all that life sometimes doesn’t go as planned. No matter the rules, your morals, the lists of Do’s and Dont’s you desperately follow in hopes of reaching your destination without a hint of struggle. I’m not here to pity in my heartbreak. I’m here to celebrate my newfound freedom, which is why we’re going to start this off with my secret song that has now gone LIVE on all platforms!”

The lights go off and a single light shines on her, making her white dress a glowing masterpiece as every dot of paint projects a different shade, as though under a UV light.

“This song is called Southbound is a Freedom Killer. Let the real halftime show begin.”

The stadium ignites with magnetizing energy, but it seems to zone out as my eyes suddenly lock on hers.

For a single moment, I forget to breathe, for my life force is but a captive in the hands of this woman who proudly declared to the world that she'd been cheated on for being the pop star she is.

The music thrums to life as her mic closes in until it's a mere inch from those delicate nude lips, leaving me wishing I was that piece of equipment.

Just to get a taste of her.

I'm waiting for the eye contact to break the moment the words leave her lips, but our connection only grows as our gaze burns with intense longing.

“She knew it was over. She knew it was done. No matter how many times she planned it, she knew he was gone. Despite the letters. Despite the calls. She wasn't enough, no longer a star. She sought his attention. Sought to be loved. All the passion from the world, yet she craved his forgiveness. Until she's left in the rain, with a broken heart and pictures.”

She keeps singing while the screams of ‘We love you, Riley’ and ‘Sing, Queen’ radiate through the crowd, but as she gets to the chorus, everyone quiets to hear those special words.

I realize the big screen behind her now displays my reflection, and yet I still can't pull my eyes off my centerpiece.

She has my complete attention.

“She gave it her all. Her hopes and dreams. Nothing but shadows, despite her silent cries and pleas. She lets the world

see her glimmer. Shine far, shine bright. You have a reputation to uphold. Don't fear the pain, don't worry about the fight. Up is the way to hope. Leave the rest Southbound, for the Sky is your only way out, Baby Girl. Don't let Southbound be your Freedom Killer!"

The final line ignites the booming drumline that kindles through the crowd. Women and men dressed in various costumes, bedazzled from head to toe, carry their drums and thrum them to the repetitive arrangement.

A drummer is right behind Brock and me, and it's the first time I break eye contact to confirm their presence as they drum away to the beat of the powerful song.

As though the arrangement isn't compelling enough, more instruments join in the rocking serenade—violinists, trumpets, saxophones, and electric guitars.

To think they were perfectly blended into the crowd that no one noticed until they were ready to reveal their role in this growing masterpiece.

Every designated instrumental group wears a different jeweled ensemble, and it becomes more apparent with the song nearing its end that they match the unique glowing shades that reflect Riley's drenched wedding dress.

As she reaches the final chorus, her mic is taken by one of the plentiful ballerinas that dance upon the stage, just as the song quiets down until there's nothing but a single piano that begins to serenade the final chorus.

Everyone holds their breath as we see the pianist is not only a young child, but it's very clear she's unable to see the keys before her.

Yet she gets every note.

Riley is dancing now. Joining the flowing movements of the ballerinas as they dance and twirl, sway, and lift off the ground with their high jumps.

They're in sync with the ascending rise of the music, until Riley's in the middle, and the ballerinas lift something from their attire that makes their once-white silhouettes tainted with black paint.

The splatters only kindle the chaos and madness—the ballerinas tugging on Riley's white dress from every direction until we're left staring at what's left of the white shambles.

Before anyone can get a glimpse of her nakedness, a single cloth is placed upon her. A magic trick everyone is waiting to be revealed.

All it takes is five seconds for every light to turn off as the pianist hits those ivory keys that reach the peak of the serenade.

If the silence was heavy before, it's absolutely deafening as we all hold our breaths.

Waiting to see what happens next.

Her voice breaks the silence as she sings that chorus one last time. The emotional break in her voice hits my heartstrings as I realize my very eyes sting with tears.

Twinkles of light begin to light across the stage until lights from everyone's phones begin to be raised as though to join the symbolic finale of this grand act.

When the single stream of light returns to our girl, there she stands. Completely cleaned from all the paint and left in layers of glimmering sparkles on her peachy flesh.

There she is in a single dress—a glimmering pink lace bodice, spaghetti strap, A-line outfit. The puffy shirt twinkles like stars against the night sky, and her hair is now up in a ponytail.

If you've known Riley since her very first performance, this is the exact look she wore during that simple performance.

Only her attire tonight is upgraded to emphasize how far she's come.

She may still be the woman who wished to be a pop star on the stage five years ago, but her career has blossomed into a sparkling light that creates a glimmer of hope at the end of the tunnel for millions across the globe.

“She gave it her all. Her hopes and dreams. Nothing but shadows, despite her silent cries and pleas. She lets the world see her glimmer. Shine far, shine bright. You have a reputation to uphold. Don't fear the pain, don't worry about the fight. Up is the way to hope. Leave the rest Southbound, for the Sky is your only way out, Baby Girl.”

Her eyes somehow manage to find me, and I'm transfixed on the emotional gaze as a single tear descends from those alluring eyes and down her flushed cheeks.

It's as if she's peering into my very soul and allowing me the single key to getting a glimpse of the vulnerability she has hidden so flawlessly for all these years.

Until tonight... when the man she married broke her heart.

She struggles to get the last sentence out, and all I can do is mouth my encouragement to her.

“Sing, Songbird. It's just you and me.”

As if my words are spoken for her ears to hear alone, I watch the flicker of encouragement that sprouts in the depths of her pupils.

Pushing her to sing those final words.

“Don’t let Southbound be your Freedom Killer...”

The sound ends with the piano finishing the last verses of music, and the lights dim entirely, leaving the stadium to cheer and scream in approval.

I don’t know what possessed me, but from that moment I know what I want in this life.

No.

I’ve always known who I wanted to be with, but when I finally found her, she was taken by another, who I knew wasn’t worthy of having someone so pure and full of life in their constant orbit.

Riley Maddison Sullivan wasn’t just a star.

She was like a goddess, descending on this world and letting her lyrical words and whimsical orchestrated works come together to uplift our spirits to another dimensional plane.

Without someone who acknowledges and appreciates the beauty of her art, she’ll be left in the rain until she’s cold, withered, and washed away.

She needs a gardener to aid in her growth.

A man without the ego and need to deem her as competition.

She needs a shield that will protect her from the world’s scrutiny.

She needs a man who will love her and never forget those vows made at the altar.

The decision is set in stone as I stare at where she once stood.

“That woman right there is my wife,” I declare like an affirmation waiting to come to fruition.

“What?” Brock is questioning my sanity as he laughs. “Bro. Did you just fall madly in love?”

“I’ll make her smile again. She deserves to shine as bright as the stars above us. I’ll fight for that. Fight for her,” I solemnly vow like an oath.

Brock is laughing and shaking his head, assuming I’m truly delusional, but as I stare into the darkness in the midst of that stage, my decision is final.

Riley... my Songbird... be ready to have a real husband by your side.

LET ME VOICE EASE THE PAIN



~RILEY~

“Pick up the pieces to my heart, my heart, boy. Broken shards of memories, our love scattered when once all together. Piles and piles, scene after scene. Pick up the piece to my heart, boy, for those shards are what’s left of me.”

— *Pieces to My Broken Heart*

by Riley Maddison Sullivan.

*T*he adrenaline. The ecstasy.

This is the true feeling of being *alive*.

My body moves on its own, trapped in the hypnotic trance of my own creations, as I sing them loud and proud.

The cheers echo into the starry night sky as the shooting set of fireworks makes their deployment throughout the air.

Sweat gleams along my flesh, and my hair clings to the side of my face, but my lips round up as I prepare for the final note that will complete the thirteen-minute show.

“Pickup the pieces to my heart, boy, for those shards are what’s left of me!” The falsetto in my voice further echoes as that final note carries onward.

The burst of fireworks seals the deal, lighting up the sky with a rainbow ensemble that ends the show with a bang.

I'm breathless as I finally move the shimmering mic donned with Swarovski crystals from my lips, my strained arm lowering to confirm the completion of this set.

My first Super Bowl Halftime Show is complete.

An achievement very few artists can accomplish, yet here I stand after grinding to become an idol in the world of music since I was twelve.

To think ten years have passed, and I'm now the youngest performer to achieve such a sensational accomplishment.

How proud I am of myself.

My eyes scan the thousands of lights coming from below. The fans—of my music and of the thrilling sport of football—came together as one to cheer me on for my performance.

The drones are high in the sky, getting my expression as I give a beaming smile of triumph. It's hard to fight my true emotions—the crippling need to break down and cry with how my heart already aches—but I do so, for the message needs to be made clear.

The message to all those out there thinking I'm but a weak musician who deserves all the ill fortune and shame that comes with confronting your cheating husband.

I'm sure despite my performance and the hard work I've put into preparing for this moment in the last six months, none of it will matter.

All that will be trending is Chase's cheating scandal and our looming divorce.

A pity.

Catching my breath, I wait for the stage that was raised three levels to descend, my eyes lowering until I'm

unexpectedly looking into the greenish-brown eyes below.

The man in the midst of the front row.

I don't know why he caught my attention.

From the moment I started with my secret release song, Southbound is a Freedom Killer, our eyes were locked.

And I couldn't possibly pull myself from looking at anyone else.

A man's gaze has never consumed me the way that player's did in the front row. Not even Chase held that ability that seemed like a spell to reel me in.

Just like before, we're staring at one another as though we've shared past lives. If this was how it feels like when two star-crossed lovers meet for the first time, I wonder how electrifying the passion can be between them.

Between me and the mystery footballer.

I could write a song about this.

My Star-Crossed Lover...

"You good, Riley?" I'm surprised to hear Cassidy through my earpiece. "Or are you completely smitten by the footballer in the crowd staring at you?"

The way I smirk as I force my eyes to pull away makes my crowd of fans go wild.

I'm sure the news, matched with the idea I'll be back on the dating market, my fans will be on the hunt to play matchmaker.

Honestly, I don't mind. It's cute and considerate of them.

Their protectiveness has always been what many gossip channels and podcasts—*predominantly male*—mock and

insult, but truth be told, I love that my well-being is important to another.

That my happiness in the realms of romance matters to those who support my climb to fame.

I'm preparing to be escorted off the stage, and yet my eyes can't help but return in search of the football player.

I can only assume that's what he is because he's wearing the white, teal, and pink Florida Kingsman Chiefs gear. They were the first-ever football team to combine pink into their uniform with honor, which was first mocked about when they debuted many years ago.

Then, as they kept winning various games and making a name for themselves, people started to admire their uniqueness.

Their goal is to be different from the harsh crowd of judgment that enjoys belittling their masculinity.

I know all about them because of Chase.

After all, he was a part of the team and their best tight end before marrying me.

Catching onto the football player, I peer at his number '79,' which I have to admit are two lucky numbers combined but a jersey number I've rarely seen in football.

Intriguing.

Drawn by his looks once more, I can't help but admire his highly sculpted cheekbones, his handsome face with a small, subtle beard, blonde hair with dark brunette roots, and a sharp nose.

He's actually good-looking... hot. Bet he's married.

Even from this distance, his eyes still call to me. They're so different, green with hints of brown. I wonder if I get a closer look, I'll see even more unique shades that will emphasize the vibrancy of their captivating depths.

His lips look smooth and are light pink, compared to the usual dry, rough ones I commonly see in men who normally hang around Chase.

Seemed like a trend of sorts, but maybe they don't realize women have enough rough, calloused hands when our ass cheeks are being gripped as we're pounded into oblivion. Rough lips to the point of scratching your kitty cat is not fun at all.

Alright, Riley Maddison Sullivan. You're still 'sadly' a married woman. Hold your horny horses until you sign the dotted line, confirming that lovely divorce.

The fact this man is complaining about his needs to four million plus people is absolutely wild when I've been the one not getting any action.

A pop star with all the stamina and adrenaline has needs that vibrators and clit stimulators can't solve.

Two of my equipment people arrive to unhook me from the stage platform before they assist me down the final steps, where my team of security guards is already waiting. They don't expect me to say a thing, knowing from years of procedure that I normally don't speak before or after my shows to allow my voice to rest. It's a ritual I started after I performed my first show and decided it would be fun to go karaoke with the team afterward.

Losing my voice for a week proved that was a miscalculation in my judgment.

As the guards take the lead down the path that will give the front-row fans a chance to be an arm stretch away from touching me, I'm practically boxed in the middle with a total of six guards. It doesn't stop me from waving as the squealing fans go ballistic at the chance to get such an up-close glimpse of me.

I won't deny slowing down when we approach the middle front section, my eyes yearning to catch a glimpse of those greenish-brown eyes one last time.

To my internal disappointment, the mystery footballer with magnetizing eyes is gone.

Boo...

I think he was with another player, but I really didn't grasp what was around the charming man in question. Obviously, with him potentially being a player of Florida Kingsman Chiefs, he must have bailed to prepare for the second half of the Super Bowl.

It's a shame I didn't get his name, especially when I'm not sticking around to see the end of the Super Bowl.

Oh, well. If we're destined to meet again, I'm sure it'll happen.

"Miss Sullivan? Do you wish to speak with the interviewer there?"

I'm pulled out of my thoughts by one of my favorite guards, Ricky. He's the top two of my 'overprotective, touch-her-and-die' bodyguards.

He's absolutely adorable outside of work.

On duty, though, he's a prime example of soccer legend Messi's bodyguard, who is there at every corner or in your

face in two seconds flat.

Can't complain. He does his job like a pro. Not to forget, he has good sniper skills.

I use sign language to signal to him and the others that it's fine. They're surprised by my change of heart, but after tonight, I guess anything can happen.

Now, I have to find out how fast my lawyer can work her magical legal hands to get me out of this marriage as soon as possible.

"Miss Sullivan! Please, would you be interested in doing a quick interview with us?" The reporter anxiously announces the moment I'm three steps away with my entourage of bodyguards. "I know you don't speak after your shows, but it would be such an honor to conduct this exclusive interview!"

"Sure," I use my soft-spoken voice that everyone seems to adore. It's not too whimsical that it gives off a "child-like" expression, but it's enough to make some compare my voice to an elven princess.

If singing hadn't paid off, I should have become a book audio narrator.

"Th-Thank you, Miss Sullivan."

"You can refer to me as Riley for your interview," I assure her, which makes the poor girl blush even further. I worry she'll faint before the interview starts, but she manages to sum up the courage to queue her team as they prepare the camera to start the LIVE broadcast.

Shifting my gaze from her makes me catch onto the three men heading our way.

“I can’t believe you actually dropped your wallet out there, Brock. I know you’re clumsy and lose shit every day of the week, but your wallet?”

“I swear, it was in my pocket before I got there.”

“Should I even ask why you thought bringing your wallet on the field was ethical in the slightest?” That velvety, deep voice makes my core heat instantly, forcing me to acknowledge exactly who he is.

Mystery footballer.

“Maybe they would have ID us or some shit. I don’t know. Bite me after we find it.”

My bodyguards stiffen at their approach, going into formation in a nutshell, but when my eyes lock onto those set of eyes I’ve already missed, my heart actually skips a beat.

Shit...

Either my body is desperate to find love, or I’m actually intrigued with this man who has the power to make my body feel like it’s on fire from the inside out.

God... Riley. Don’t fuck this up for yourself.

“They’re fine,” I instruct my men.

Rickey is giving me a look—I know he is because I feel his gaze lingering on me from the corner of my eye—but I can’t stop myself from staring at the fine man in the center of his fellow players.

He seems just as transfixed as I am.

Normally, I’d be the one to make a move.

Oddly, it’s how I got Chase’s number when we first met, but with so many people around, I worry pulling off such a

dramatic move when I'm still married would give ammo to all the men and women who are ready to devour me for hitting on another man while still carrying this ring on my finger.

But I don't want to miss this chance.

The universe must be in my favor, for the interviewer gives me the information I'm desperate to hear.

“What a remarkable coincidence as we're about to get an exclusive interview from the outstanding, sensational, award-winning, multi-platinum pop star, Riley Maddison Sullivan, down here at the Super Bowl field, but here we are getting to meet three of the all-star players of Florida Kingsman Chiefs! Tyler Sinclair Owens, would you like to be a part of this interview?”

Tyler Sinclair Owens.

Tyler.

That's a nice name.

Why am I only noticing him now? Is he new to the team?

He could be a player who's ready to rip my heart apart, but damn. The attraction between us is palpable.

It's addicting... dangerously plausible.

“As long as Songbird doesn't mind me intruding,” Tyler declares with a cocky smirk that makes those irresistible eyes twinkle with mischief.

Songbird? Did he just call me that?

I hear a group of girls squealing farther down the hall as if they heard his declaration loud and clear. Then again, the man didn't hesitate to speak loudly.

He wants to be heard... Wow. That's a first.

I swallow the lump forming in my throat as my eyes are glued to him as he reaches where I'm standing. Even in my extreme platform shoes that have me up at 5'9" instead of 5'3" height, this man is still a giant in comparison.

He has to be 6'7" at least, and I feel for sure he's taller than Chase, but it's his built physique that can steal any woman's attention. This isn't the 'born big' physique. It's the 'I go to the gym and train every day of my life with mean weights and 160g of protein daily' type of physique.

I love a man who can lift some good-ass weight.

I catch myself from allowing my tongue to completely trail my bottom lip, which feels far too dry. In fact, my whole throat feels dry, as if I haven't had a droplet of water for days.

"I don't mind," I finally answer him and work on clearing my throat.

As if sensing my discomfort, Tyler raises an eyebrow at me. "We should get you some water first after that stunning performance. Is that alright, Riley?"

Riley. Wow. He said my name.

I feel like a sixteen-year-old meeting her dream idol. This sensation is only more delightful when you're so used to being the center of everyone's infatuation.

It's never been me being completely besotted by another's presence.

"Certainly," I reply, and am thankful to see Cassidy come out from the crowd of fans who are already recording as they watch this unexpected encounter.

"What's the hold-up, Riley?" Cassidy questions as she holds a chilled bottle of water. Reaching us, she doesn't

hesitate to offer it to me.

I nod in thanks before drinking enough not to make me look so depleted.

Still have to keep my appearance because everyone will dissect this footage tomorrow. Heck, maybe tonight before I can leave this place.

“My apologies, Cassidy. We’re doing an interview.”

Cassidy tilts her head at my vocal response before leaning in to whisper, “You normally rest your voice? What gives?”

We share a look that screams, ‘We’ll talk about it later,’ and she nods and moves to stand behind me but far enough that she’s not in my personal space. That’s what I love about Cassidy. She respects my decisions without asking unnecessary questions when we’re in the brunt of the moment.

“Thank you,” I direct to Cassidy and look back to the reporter, camera crew, then Tyler. “I’m ready.”

“Excellent.” The reporter fights not to squeal before she focuses on the camera once more. “We’re now LIVE at the Super Bowl, where we’re surprisingly accompanied by Riley Maddison Sullivan and Florida’s favorite and most popular quarterback, Tyler Sinclair Owens!”

She swiftly looks at Tyler’s way, admiring his obvious handsome attractiveness.

“Mr. Owens, as Florida Kingsman Chiefs’ popular quarterback, what brings you here when you should be on the field any moment now for the next half of the thrilling Super Bowl?” she questions, then quickly adds, “We’re aware from the many glimpses of the screen that you were in the front row observing Miss Sullivan’s spectacular performance.”

“Yes, I was.” I can tell a switch has been flicked because he’s all serious as he stares at the reporter and camera crew, who are doing everything to ensure they get his best angle, even at their shorter height. “I’m actually a long-time fan of Miss Sullivan.”

Huh?

That surprises me, as it does the reporter.

“R-Really? I wouldn’t think you would be into such music, Mr. Owens.”

“Well, one should never judge a book by its cover now,” he taunts with a cocky grin before his eyes meet mine. He takes three solid seconds to admire me, those green-brown spheres doing the perfect sweep of me, so that everyone notices his obvious interest.

This man is bold...

“If you’re a fan, I’m sure you’ve also heard of the recent news regarding your old tight end mate, Chase Benedict.”

Not expecting them to bring that up so abruptly in an interview like this, I fight the urge to frown in disapproval.

What’s surprising is Tyler somehow catches it.

“I believe this interview is supposed to be centered on the Queen of Pop standing there looking like a carved masterpiece after the extraordinary, one-of-a-kind performance she delivered, despite the unexpected circumstances at hand,” Tyler firmly declares as a scowl forms on his face. “If this interview is only going to be about unnecessary gossip rather than acknowledging what an astronomical accomplishment Riley has achieved as the youngest performer to stand on the halftime show stage, then please excuse me, for I have a wallet to find and a number to acquire.”

“W-Wallet... number?” The report sounds confused and is clearly panicked when Tyler begins to move.

Heading straight for me.

Ricky and the others want to interfere, but I quickly signal them with a half-raise of my hand. That keeps them right in place, which is perfect because it allows Tyler to stop in front of me. The hit of his musk cologne makes butterflies flutter in the pits of my belly while I’m forced to look up and acknowledge the way his gaze softens.

“Good evening, Miss Sullivan. Sorry to interrupt your interview and even waste your time after your memorable performance. I’m Tyler Sinclair Owens, quarterback of the Florida Kingsman Chiefs.”

He offers his hand to shake, and I don’t hesitate to grasp it. What I don’t expect is for him to raise my hand up so he can press those delicately soft lips against my flesh, the mere touch making my body sizzle like a wave of heat has whiplashed me from head to toe.

You know your marriage was shit when you’re getting hot and bothered over a kiss on your hand. Get a grip, Riley. We have five vibrators at home to choose from.

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Owens. My name is Riley Maddison Sullivan,” I introduce myself, noticing my voice is up a notch in octaves.

“Please, call me Tyler,” he says and even winks. “Would it be completely odd to ask for your number?”

My cheeks heat up, yet my smile couldn’t be more taunting as I give him an approving look.

“Not odd at all,” I sweetly declare. “We’d have to do it after the interview, though, unless you want all my fans to

know it.” It’s my turn to wink, and I make this man’s smirk widen.

We’re flirting.

100% flirting.

This is going to be seen by millions before the morning.

“Feel free to contact me, and I’ll get that exchanged for you,” Cassidy speaks up and looks to the reporter. “Is there anything you’d like to ask? Miss Sullivan has plans and will be leaving.”

“You’re not staying?” Tyler interrupts before the reporter can get a word out. He’s in his own orbit, all his attention on me. It’s an unapologetic stance I’m not used to in the slightest.

I absolutely love it.

“Didn’t want to be a distraction after I’ve done my part,” I quietly admit and shyly shrug my shoulders. “It’s not like anyone needs me to stay.”

“I’d love for you to stay behind,” he boldly states.

All eyes are on us, as any sound of white noise happening during our conversation becomes silent in retrospect.

His admiring gaze couldn’t be more charming as he earnestly waits for my comment.

“Why is that, Tyler?” I want to know the reason, just like everyone else here and witnessing this “LIVE.” My curiosity would ruin me otherwise.

“I want you to stay,” he affirms again and shows off his white teeth as his smile is full and glimmering. “You have to witness the Florida Kingsman Chiefs bring home this year’s Super Bowl trophy.”

That may be the cockiest, smooth-talking declaration a man could say in a moment like this, but it has me giggling—genuinely laughing—while my eyes never leave his.

“I guess it would be a shame if I did miss watching you guys become the champions after this unexpected confrontation,” I voice and slightly shrug. “Fine. I’ll stay. I’m sure the organizers can find a spot to put me to watch.”

“Spot?” Tyler sounds applauded. “You’ll most certainly be in the suite, Miss Sullivan,” he insists. “Go ahead and rest. I can get that set up in five minutes tops.”

“I appreciate that, Tyler.” I really do. I know those suites are a fortune to reserve. I may have the means to purchase them, but I wouldn’t want to take away those demanded spots from another. In this case, with it being offered by one of the participating teams, the stadium would accommodate easily.

“And please, call me Riley,” I encourage. “It’s best I head out of here to change, but please feel free to contact Cassidy for my number.”

“I’ll do that, Songbird.” His expression of admiration makes me smitten with him with every second that passes.

Matched with that nickname...

“What about the inter—”

“Feel free to also reach out to Cassidy. I’d gladly do another if it fits in my packed schedule,” I assure her and can’t help but take another swig at my water. “If you will excuse us.”

That’s the cue for my bodyguards to take their positions. Tyler doesn’t hesitate to step out of the way, knowing my guards are just doing their jobs.

We exchange one more look, the corner of my lips lifting before I realize it, while Tyler's smile further spreads along his handsome face.

“Cheer me on, Riley. When we win, you'll have to autograph the football for added good luck.”

That just sounds stupid, but it has me giggling again as I shake my head.

“Now, why would I autograph the football when you've already won?”

“The Super Bowl is just one of the many competitions we're going to have this year. Gotta set us up for the longest winning streak the world will witness.”

I don't know why he has so much confidence. To be honest, it's the first time I've seen a man talk with so much affirmation. As if he's speaking everything into existence long before it happens, knowing with full belief that it'll go exactly where he wants it to.

Manifesting the future he knows he deserves.

You don't meet many men like that.

“As you said, Southbound is a Freedom Killer, yes?” he brings up the moment I take a few steps to leave with my team surrounding me.

I look back to see him with his hands behind his head as he stretches those thick, muscled arms. They're distracting—*very distracting*—but not in comparison to him actually remembering the title of my new song.

Meaning it had some sort of importance.

“Footballs only go south when there's a touchdown,” he acknowledges as if it's unknown knowledge. “Other than that,

they soar through the air, like the plentiful dreams we push to the universe in hopes of gaining fulfillment and freedom to accomplish our goals in life.”

All eyes are on him, including the camera, as his words seem to linger among us with a unique lightheartedness.

“You just proved to the world that despite how many times life tries to bring us down, we’re deserving of accomplishing the dreams we’ve worked tediously to achieve. The world has watched you plant the seeds of those goals, and here you are, soaring through them all and giving us the chance to witness it all, so we can get a dose of motivation and inspiration to keep striving northbound toward our own paths and dreams,” he confesses. “So, I want you to sign our winning football so we can keep it on display and prove that we’ve achieved goals we thought were but dreams years ago.”

I’m not the only one who’s speechless by his words as he turns away. Glancing over his shoulder, his eyes are once again solely on me.

“It’s best I get going, or coach is going to drill us, but thank you for giving us your best performance yet tonight, Riley. I hope you never dim your shining star for anyone.” He looks away before his final words barely hit the surface. “Especially for a pitiful cheating husband who never acknowledged how good he had it.”

I catch Cassidy’s jaw drop while I fight to stop mine from doing the same. The two of us share side glances, completely surprised that Tyler Sinclair Owens dares say that when he’s obviously being broadcast live.

“Talk to you soon, Riley.”

He lifts his hand to wave and walks away with his two teammates in tow.

Cassidy cues us to take this opportunity to leave. The fans go crazy as they respectfully move out of the way for us while gossiping about the bold display of affection Tyler just pulled in my favor.

I'm not sure what his end game was for saying those things or protecting me, but my first interaction with him has my mind swirling with thoughts and even lyrics that were begging to be written down.

“Why do I see that ‘I need a notepad this instance’ look in your eyes?” Cassidy questions when we're almost at my trailer, where I'll be able to change into something more comfortable.

I really hadn't planned to stay behind, but I'm sure there are a few outfits I can wear while my makeup team does a different look to make me ready for a 'game' night.

“I've never felt so emotionally moved like this since I performed for the King in the royal gardens with the cute royal corgis.”

“I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing,” Cassidy admits but is smiling. “I'll get you everything you need to write it all down while you get your makeup done. Already had a change of clothes secured if you wanted to go celebrate afterward, so this fits perfectly. For the interview, do you want me to get that fixed?”

Meaning, get it adjusted before it goes live to literally everyone.

They may say the videos are 'LIVE,' but there's always a few minutes of wiggle room to edit anything out if necessary

with huge competitions like these.

Especially when politics gets thrown into LIVE banter.

“You can approve what looks good. I just don’t think I’d want to do a private one.”

“Wasn’t going to let you.” She shakes her head and huffs. “Has the audacity to bring up gossip than acknowledge your obvious accomplishment. Disrespectful.”

“I didn’t think Tyler would point it out like that.”

“Girl, that shocked even me. That man is a bold hurricane ready to tear through men’s standards and put them so far up that men will start complaining he’s too good at making the woman seek more out of the men population.”

I laugh at that because I’m pretty certain with Tyler’s performance right there, that’s what will happen if he keeps his patriotic flirting game on point.

“Rest your voice. I’ll get everything sorted and get you more water and some chai tea to ensure your throat doesn’t get sore,” she reassures me the moment we reach the entrance of my trailer. She can’t help but hug me before she cups my cheeks.

“I know what Chase did hurt you. Doesn’t matter if you’ve been preparing your heart for this for months, if not years. Nevertheless, what you did up on the stage was phenomenal. No amount of words from the dictionary, thesaurus, and encyclopedia can emphasize the pride and utmost respect I and the rest of the team carry after seeing you perform and give your all. I want to emphasize that tonight and make sure you grasp this achievement before things get hectic.”

Before I become a trending topic of misery over my looming divorce.

“Thank you, Cassidy.” I blink back tears. “You always have my back.”

“Always,” she affirms as she hugs me. “Nothing and no one will bring you down again. Not with me around. Chase was but an exception because I wasn’t on your team yet.”

That makes me laugh.

“And I was a young, stubborn child,” I note. “Guess that means you’re gatekeeping Tyler.”

“That sinful man of green flags is going to have to fight, swim, arm-wrestle, and be ready to go to war to get your number from me.” Cassidy doesn’t even try to hide the diabolical look on her face. “If he really wants you, he’ll most definitely fight to get your number.”

“You’re evil,” I sigh, but I’m glad she wants to test and see his seriousness. I obviously can’t do anything right now, but it wouldn’t hurt to have his number.

We can be friends... for now.

“That’s my purpose in your life, Riley. I’m the evil bitch of a social media manager to ensure no one gets access to you unless meeting my requirements. Besides, your emotional well-being and mental health are a priority. Not because I’m one of your managers, but because we’re friends.” She lets go and gestures for me to go into the trailer.

“Get ready. We know the cameras will be on you until we see what happens with this Super Bowl. I’ll get everything you need to relax, including the notebook.”

“Thanks, Cassidy. See you in a bit.”

“See ya.”

With a smile on my face, I look to see the moon is out, leaving me to further grin at the potential possibility of something new being reborn with the full moon.

Destroy the old and unworthy and invite renewed energy that can blossom something spectacular in my life.

ALL I THINK ABOUT IS WHAT
WE CAN BE



~TYLER~

“She’s all I can think about. Every moment, despite the pumping adrenaline rushing through my veins as I map out how we’ll get out of the Super Bowl as victors. Her music uplifts me. The sound of her whimsical voice does sinful things in sinful places. I’ve never felt so alive until her. This really is a dangerous game. That ring is still on her finger. A restraint instead of a blessing, twinkling as brightly as it can for the clock is ticking. She deserves a bigger diamond. Deserves a meaningful band with inner literature that breathes life into her gleaming soul. She needs a real husband to let her shine like the star she is. She needs me.”

— *Journal Entry #555*

by Tyler Sinclair Owens.

“*T*OUCHDOWN!!!!”

The cheers of victory couldn’t be any louder. After listening to my wildly beating heartbeat pump blood through my veins, the change confirms what we just accomplished.

We won. We fucking won!

“WE DID IT, BRO!”

Brock is the first to collide with me, followed by fellow teammates, who end up knocking me to the ground. We're laughing, some crying, all of us thrilled about what we've just achieved for Florida Kingsman Chiefs' history.

We won the fucking Super Bowl!

No accomplishment has ever felt so liberating, and here I am, celebrating it with the men who've been right at my side during this climb toward our dreams. Blue, pink, and white confetti is already raining down on us as the guys pull me to my feet. It doesn't last long before I'm up in the air as if I don't weigh a good 250lbs, my comrades carrying me while chanting with pride.

“Kingsman! Kingsman! Kingsman!”

The crowd joins in, and I can't help but raise my arms up and join in the chant with immense pride.

Our fans know our beginning.

Know how many of us entered this team with our heads down and traumatic pasts to haunt us every step of the way. Regardless of our struggles with football, we came together like a family, and now, we are reaping the rewards with an extravagant win.

“Owens! What a fierce rushing touchdown for the win!”

The cameras and reporters are in my face before I can move a step, but my eyes are searching for the balconies of the suite section. As my eyes land on the gem that steals my breath away, for a single moment, I can mute the world around me and admire her.

Arms up in liveliness, those blonde strands moving up and down with her jumping excitement. Twinkling eyes of joy as

she joins in on the cheers of triumph from Kingsman Chiefs' fans all around.

The raining confetti reminds me of one of her many concert finales, but this is my moment, and she actually remained to witness it with her own eyes.

She waited.

Despite having plans.

She kept to her word and stayed to witness our win.

That means we have something. Something I impatiently want to explore until I know every bit of Riley Maddison Sullivan.

Until I get to dive into her at a deeper level.

“Tyler Sinclair Owens! How are you going to celebrate winning the Super Bowl?!” One of the plentiful news reporters asks, grabbing my attention.

I hate looking away from my bejeweled beauty, but I feel the need to answer the question. It’s another opportunity to get what I want.

And grind another man’s gears for losing what should have been precious to him.

“I’ll be going to Disneyland,” I begin, knowing if any of us were asked the traditional question after every Super Bowl, the answer would be exactly that. “As long as my good luck charm pop star joins me.”

All the cameras are on me as I grin proudly at the camera. I want the world to see my determination when it involves Riley.

“Obviously, the rest of the team, coaches, and a few of our management and members will join me, but I’d be honored if Riley Maddison Sullivan joined us,” I reveal. “Though she first has to sign our winning football. Like I promised.”

With a wink, I move away before any of them can question me further. Brock manages to stick with me, his beaming expression contagious as he laughs and punches my arm.

“Look at you! Won the actual Super Bowl and still shooting your shot. She still married, bro!”

“Not for long,” I voice and grin even wider. “Inviting her to a friendly team date to Disney shouldn’t be against the marriage rules, now can it?”

“Nah, Bro. That’s against the code of messing with a married woman. You want Chase to run you up?”

The way I laugh at that has the cameraman desperately trying to get closer to hear our conversation.

“If Mr. Benedict cherished what he had, he wouldn’t be losing it,” I emphasize, knowing well someone may catch that on a recording. “I’m a man of my word. You know that, as does anyone who’s known me long enough. When I want something or someone, I go after them with the full intention of going down the line until it’s my chance to touch down.”

Shifting my gaze to the suite balconies once more, I manage to lock eyes with my Songbird, and the happiness in her expression makes my heart want to melt. It’s crazy how all these emotions are taunting me today, as if I hadn’t put a clasp on them for years. I probably look like a smitten fool to the world, but would it matter if it meant I got a chance to claim what I’ve wanted for years?

I'd be a golden retriever kneeling at her feet to make her mine.

“So, I’m gonna do what our ex-boy Chase didn’t.” I chuckle. “That is if he doesn’t gain some common sense after our glorious win.”

“Fuck, yeah! Bro, we were chumps,” Brock laughs and hooks his arm along my shoulder to side hug me. “Now, we’re CHAMPIONS!”

I feel the rest of the team is near because they mimic Brock’s declaration, leaving us to hoot and chant.

It’s not long before the trophy is in our possession, my hands holding the silver piece that holds so much worth. All the months, the trials, and the various tribulations came down to this trophy.

We did it. We acquired it. We made history.

“3...2...1... Kingsman!”

“KINGSMAN!”

We cheer as the round of photos goes on and on. I’ve never seen my group of mates so fucking happy, and it’s pleasing to experience. We all deserve this.

I feel the urge to look further behind the cameraman, and there I catch the parting of the masses, men from employers to camera crew moving in the other direction to create a clear path.

This unfolding moment reminds me of Moses from the Bible parting the Red Sea, but it’s a single woman walking down that path with her mini entourage that steals my breath and has my utmost attention.

Her presence demands the world's attention, and she gets it without even trying.

There she is.

My Songbird.

“Oh, shit! Riley Maddison Sullivan is coming this way!” I hear my boy, Jackson, call out, igniting the other guys to gasp, point, and hoot with excitement.

I guess I'm not the only one excited by her approach, but I'm sure the only one completely captivated by her existence.

She's changed her outfit for what has to be the fourth time today. Her attire makes my heart skip a beat because this beautiful being is not only outstandingly beautiful, but she's wearing something I'd never expect to see her in now.

My jersey number.

Whatever magic her management has must be considered voodoo of some sort because I'm completely stunned to see my celebrity idol, who I somehow managed to meet face to face tonight, is now sporting MY number on her custom-designed jersey.

79.

A blinged-out 79 jersey.

How did she even get jewels on that thing?

It's truly a mystery to be solved. It's obvious Riley's management team works overtime to make sure she pulls moves out of the damn galaxy to make her do something no one expects.

A few reporters try to stop her and get some sort of comment, but my Songbird's gaze is solely on me. She's like a

bee racing to its prime destination, and nothing will deter her from her target.

Which is me...

“Owens! Stop looking at space and focus on the camera!”
The man taking our group pictures calls out.

I don’t even give a hoot about any pictures now.

Can’t he see something more miraculous is standing next to him?

“C’mon, photo man. You’re standing next to the Queen of Pop right now. How you think our boy’s gonna react when you’re in the personal orbit of an idol,” Brock tries to reason on my behalf.

Thank God he does, for I ain’t going to say shit.

The way Riley suddenly smiles at that comment only furthers widens when the photographer leans away from his lens to turn his head and confirm Riley’s presence right next to him.

His eyes widen at her beauty before he stutters.

“M-M-Miss Sullivan!”

“Hello, Arnold.”

Her whimsical voice will be the end of me. To hear her talk so much is a true blessing for many who never hear her talk.

Like ever.

Every fan knows the drill. Riley performs, leaves, and never speaks before or after her shows. I already saw tonight’s interview trending—just like anything revolving around Riley

and the Super Bowl—but the highlight is most definitely acknowledging Riley breaking her silent ritual.

Now, how do I get her to talk to me more?

“It may be a tad troublesome or against the rules, but I was wondering if I could get a picture with the Florida Kingsman Chiefs?” she questions with her innocent expression, which makes her blue eyes glimmer.

She’s giving those doe eyes that seep into your soul and would never leave any survivors with enough force. I can only imagine her peering into my eyes like that.

Only she’d be on her knees with her mouth preoccupied...

Fuck.

I have to control myself for my own sanity.

“They are Super Bowl Champions, after all,” she comments with pride that makes the guys lose their shits in happiness.

“YES!!!” Multiple cheers of agreement come from my teammates.

“C-C-Certainly!” Arnold gasps and bows his head. “It’s such a pleasure, Miss Sullivan! It’s difficult to get photos of you like I used to.”

“I know.” She frowns. “I’ve missed your pictures. They’re some of the best out there. Do you have difficulty getting into the venues?”

“Not necessarily,” he admits and looks a bit troubled by the admission that follows. “But there’s lots of competition nowadays. I was only able to do this gig because I have a contract with the league.”

“Ah.” She looks over her shoulder at the woman in a dark green business suit. I think her social media manager.

Cassidy, was it?

“Noted. We’ll write up a contract before the end of the night, Mr. Nowoski,” Cassidy says. “Miss Sullivan adores your work, so we’d like to further those opportunities, especially when it comes to Sullivan Music Corp.”

“Th-Thank you!” Mr. Nowoski bows his head again and again as if she’s royalty. “I’d be honored to continue getting shots of you whenever you need me.”

“No need to thank me,” she sweetly declares. “We’ll talk later, yes?”

“Yes! Certainly.” Her acknowledgment, praise, and ability to offer work just like that have probably made this man’s entire year. “Please. Feel free to stand with the team wherever you like. We should get a shot with you holding the trophy, if the Kingsman doesn’t mind.”

“Don’t mind?” Charlie, our tight end, begins. “We have a queen in our midst! She can keep the trophy!”

The guys laugh while Jackson groans.

“Not sure that’s allowed, Miss Sullivan, but if it’s not against the rules, you can have it,” he says with a flirtatious wink.

And hell to the no.

I’m next to the petite queen in a heartbeat.

All she has to do is glance up to make my heart go wild, and my palms grow sweaty. She’s so fucking memorizing up close. Her heart-shaped face, those blue eyes, and the way they

make her makeup so minimal, which allows you to admire those tiny details on her flawless face.

I wonder if she knows how nice her loose, bountiful curls accent her attractiveness even further. I've seen her with straight hair and other styles, but it's those curls that are doing something to me.

What if her hair is up in a ponytail? Perfect to tug on...

"We meet again, Songbird." My voice dips a bit lower, the seductive sound doing exactly what I want it to.

Her pupils dilate, her eyes lost in mine, while we share an intense look. I'm going to struggle to get out of it if she doesn't break it first.

"Congratulations, Kingsman," she responds as those now bright red lips spread wide until I get the sight of her brilliant white teeth. "How does it feel to be a Super Bowl champion?"

"Fucking magnificent." I can't even stop myself from swearing because it's the ultimate truth. "But having you right here on the field with me is definitely a bonus, Miss Sullivan," I proudly declare.

The guys are groaning and hollering at my cheesy nonsense, to which Brock laughs and comments, "My bestie is smitten with Miss Sullivan!"

She rolls her eyes, and the motion is absolutely adorable. She's then looking at me again.

"Riley," she corrects me as if I've forgotten.

Can't let her think that.

"Haven't forgotten, Songbird," I declare with a wink before offering my hand. "Figured due to us having a bigger audience to be more formal."

She shrugs but puts her hand in mine.

“Formalities after winning the Super Bowl are overrated.” She’s giving off the perfect ‘chill’ vibe, something many of us have never witnessed. “Let’s take a photo so you guys can get back to your celebrations.”

“A photo?” Charlie questions. “We need a whole photoshoot at this point.”

“Actually, where’s the winning football?” Brock questions and is looking around. “Our smitten quarterback promised the world that our Queen of Pop was going to sign it!”

“Mission find the winning football!” Jamie, our wide receiver, declares and ignites a wave of players trying to find where the hell the football is.

“Why don’t we take an official photo together, Riley?” I offer while trying not to sound nervous. I’m not sure if she’d want a permanent official photo with me—not like we haven’t been photographed together all night long. The real difference would be this being taken by a professional and would be posted and trending in a minute flat.

Riley is clearly thinking about it before her eyes move until they’re on her social media manager. They share a look without speaking.

“Okay.” She beams again as her eyes find mine. “Let’s do it.”

“You sure?” Now, I’m hesitant. “I mean, I’d die and need Brock to resurrect my ass since he’s the only one who knows CPR that I can trust, but if taking a photo will cause drama, we don’t have—”

“I can handle drama.” She’s not even the slightest bit worried about that. *In fact, her gaze darkens with a hint of*

mischief in the depths of those pupils of hers. “A few photos with the Super Bowl champion quarterback aren’t going to ruin my career.”

She squeezes my hand, making me realize I’ve been holding her hand this whole while. Tugging me with her, she’s greeted by a few of my teammates who are holding the trophy before I move to stand next to her.

God, she’s so small next to me.

It’s hot.

I know most women love tall men, so I’m hoping our height difference won’t be too much of a problem for her.

She easily sported 5’9” with those platform heels, but now, with her jeweled boots, she’s her real height of 5’3”.

My petite, sweet, whimsical-voiced Songbird.

“Smile!” Mr. Nowoski encourages, and he goes right into it as he takes multiple photos.

Charlie and the others find the scoring football. Perfect timing. We get in formation and encourage Riley to stand right in the middle.

“I have a neon pink marker with sparkles,” Jackson announces as he jogs out of position to come over to Riley, Brock, and me. Offering the pen to Riley, he gives his best smile. “Here you go, Riley.”

She arches an eyebrow at him, which makes Brock reach over to elbow Jackson.

“It’s Miss Sullivan, stupid.”

“What? But I thought she said earlier we can call her Riley?” Jackson feigns innocence, using that damn puppy dog

face matched with his young jock looks to try to fool my Songbird.

The possessive part of me wants to remind him that she's mine.

Not yet, but she will be. Soon enough.

“She said Owens can call her Riley, Jackson.” Brock laughs and pats the man’s shoulder as he looks at Riley. “Right, Miss Sullivan?”

“Right.” She doesn’t even shy away from being direct with the truth. “You are?”

“Oh, shit. Right. Didn’t introduce myself. Brock Holmes Armstrong, tight end. It’s an honor to meet you!” He gestures to Jackson. “That’s Jackson Wilde. Don’t date him. He’s a player.”

Brock grunts the next second when Jackson socks him in the gut. It’s obviously playful, but you can tell from the side look Jackson gives Brock, he’s annoyed by my bestie supporting me and not him.

“Ignore Brock. He don’t know shit,” Jackson huffs and offers his hand. “Jackson Wilde, defensive lineman. It’s an honor to meet you, Miss Sullivan.”

She nods and shakes his hand.

“Nice to meet you.”

“Riley?” She’s looking at her social media manager, who’s now next to the cameraman, with her phone in grasp. “Shall we take a LIVE video of you signing the football? Mr. Owens did say you’d sign it.”

“Yes.” I already saw the pick-up of excitement at the idea of showing her fans that she’s doing what I’d bet on

happening. “I think after I sign it, though, the rest of the team should as well.”

“Oh, shit... really?” Jeremiah, our guard, surprisingly states.

“Why do you guys look surprised?” she counters in confusion as she looks at a good chunk of the team, who are obviously admiring her. I’m sure they’re still trying to get used to her musical, soft-spoken voice. “You all worked hard to achieve this win. Why would it be weird for you all to sign the ball? All I did was watch.”

“Actually, you gave us the best halftime Super Bowl performance in the history of halftime shows,” Alec, our center, acknowledges in a *matter-of-fact* tone. “Which, by the way, is #1 trending on all platforms and already reached 222 million views on YouTube alone.”

“Damn, man. Are you a super fan?” Zavier, our fullback, notes mockingly.

“Superfan? I’m a mega fan,” Alec corrects with enough sass to make half the team laugh.

“God. Please let us finish these photos before you ignite King of Sassy Comebacks to drill us about every single concert of Miss Sullivan’s he’s attended. Thanks,” Jamie encourages.

I notice Cassidy is closing in on us, camera in one hand as the other is already lowering fingers to confirm she’s about to record. She may even be going LIVE, which is why I end up looking at Riley, who’s admiring the winning football in her grasp.

I like seeing the hints of intrigue that reflect in her gaze. She’s so relaxed right now, yet she’s also taking our win

seriously, which is something I don't normally see in women who have been in similar situations. Not to say no women haven't shown seriousness when it comes to the sport, but our past experiences winning smaller championships usually consist of women fighting to get photos and selfies with us.

Or the not-so-occasional request to do TikTok dance challenges on the field so they can become viral sensations overnight.

“You do the honors, Riley,” I declare and offer her the neon pink glitter permanent marker. I have no fucking clue how Jackson acquired a marker of this color that will show up on this football, but it fits her brand's aesthetic perfectly.

“Most certainly,” she replies and can barely stand still as she hands me the ball so she can uncap the marker. She closes her eyes for a brief moment as if she's praying and thanking whoever she praises for guidance and protection, then she's signing the ball with her unique signature.

The neon swirls, curves, and final makeshift heart are perfectly on the mid-center of the ball. She seems satisfied with it, and I shift the angle for the cameras to see before raising it up in the air, so we all cheer at the accomplishment.

“Our boy manifested that shit!” Brock declares. “Dreams do come true!”

We're all in agreement as we cheer and howl.

It's my turn to sign next, but when Riley offers the marker to me, I shake my head.

“Oh no, Songbird. You're the only one writing in neon pink marker,” I encourage.

She gives me the most luscious look while blinking her eyes.

“Only me?” She looks at the marker, then the football, and then back at me. “But how will you sign it?”

Absolutely adorable.

“Damn, she’s so cute,” I hear Jackson whisper behind me. I want to react, but he’s next to me in a second, offering a black marker. “Don’t worry, Miss Sullivan. I got us a marker to sign. Neon pink doesn’t fit our brand.”

She looks at our jerseys, and Alec chimes in, “He means the variation of pink is quite different from neon.”

“Or the better way of saying it,” Brock begins and gestures to me in hopes I’ll work out this odd hiccup.

“We want only you to have the neon pink signature, Songbird. Just feels right,” I assure her, and we share a look. I can’t help but soften my gaze as I admire her red lips. “A queen can’t possibly be replicated of her talent and grace. You’re one of a kind, just like this signature. We have to acknowledge that.”

“Smooth fucking talker,” Zavier groans.

“Bro, go on the Bachelor with that romantic shit,” Jackson whines.

“Says the one trying to wind up our Kingsman quarterback,” Brock notes.

“Yo, shut up!” Jackson counters.

“C’mon. Start signing, then you guys can go fight to the death for Miss Sullivan when we go celebrate,” Jamie encourages.

“Can’t fight at Disneyland, fool,” Jeremiah laughs.

“I meant tonight, idiot!” Jamie argues.

“Miss Sullivan! Are you actually going to Disneyland with us?”

“Uh...” She looks for me, and I’m already awaiting her gaze.

“I kinda told the world I was going to invite you to Disneyland to celebrate with us,” I confess and can’t fight the way my cheeks burn with embarrassment. I really didn’t think that shit through. “Sorry. I acted on the spur of the moment without asking about your schedule. I’m sure you’re fully booked for months... so—”

“I can come.”

I’m not the only one flabbergasted by her response. It feels like half the team is frozen in place at her confirmation.

“I’m sure Cassidy can help me rearrange a few things with my team. I do have a few concerts here in Florida, though, so as long as it doesn’t fall on those days, I’ll gladly come along,” she elaborates. “That is, as long as I’m not overstepp—”

“No!!” We all interrupt her before she can finish.

“You’re never overstepping, Miss Sullivan!” Brock emphasizes. “We’d be honored if you came with us! Who should we contact?”

“Cassidy,” she encourages and nudges her head in the social media manager’s way. “Email her the deets, but put a specific headline, or it may get lost in the sea of emails we get each day.”

“Jackson Eats Dirt For Breakfast,” Alec says in such a nonchalant tone, we all can’t help but turn to look at him.

He just shrugs.

“What?”

“Wow,” Jackson groans in defeat. “Ya’ll work OVERTIME to make me look bad in front of the Queen of Pop! What did I do to deserve this?”

“You missed at least three times during that game. This is your punishment,” Charlie teases. “Suck it up. If you want something, you gotta earn it.”

That has the others chuckling and shaking their heads as the ball is being passed around.

Once it’s signed, we move right along to taking various photos with Riley in tow. Once it’s enough for Mr. Nowoski, Cassidy, and the various observers to take their own photos and videos, Riley steps down so we can get some professional photos taken of our win.

By the time everything is done, it feels like a good hour has passed.

“Alrighty, lads. Let’s go celebrate our win,” Coach Oshawa shouts loud and proud, to which we shout and chant in response.

I’m looking for Riley, noticing she’s hugging a few fans. She kneels down to greet a child who is wheelchair-bound, her expression softening, and her smile is as big as I’ve seen it.

I’ve noticed over the years that Riley loves children.

Children and pets. Particularly little dogs and anything with husky or Pomeranian in it.

“You gonna say bye to your girlfriend?” Brock teases as he elbows me. “You just want the world to know you’re infatuated by her, huh?”

“It’s not intentional,” I earnestly admit. “I don’t know why I’m suddenly noticing her, as if she hasn’t always shone so brightly all this while.”

“Nah, you’ve noticed her,” Brock surprisingly admits.

It’s enough for me to tug my eyes away from Riley to see him staring at her.

Unlike the way Jackson was eyeing her earlier, I can tell Brock doesn’t see himself with her in a romantic setting at all. That’s actually the one thing I like about Brock. If he sees someone close to him is interested in another, it’s an immediate ‘back down’ aura around him that gives the other some peace of mind that he isn’t going to make a move before we do.

It doesn’t mean he isn’t looking for a companion. I guess he hasn’t found someone who makes him lose his fucking mind.

At least not yet.

“What do you mean?” I’m curious.

“You’ve been a fan of hers, yeah? However, you’re a man who will respect boundaries. You’re not going to try to steal another man’s wife. Especially from someone we have bad blood with. However, we all acknowledge she’s about to be on the market, and frankly, it’s better to make bold moves now than to wait until she’s completely free legally.”

“Why is that?”

Brock smirks as he reaches out to pat my shoulder. For a moment, his eyes briefly still on someone, which gives me no choice but to follow his gaze until it lands on Cassidy.

“If you wait too long, there’s going to be a long ass line,” he says with a sort of longing that makes me feel odd, as though I’m missing something. “Then you have no choice but to wait and pray that all the men before you are useless assholes to finally get your chance to swing her off her feet.” He squeezes my shoulder and forces his eyes away, but he can’t move it fast enough before I see it.

See that glimmer of regret...

“Go say goodbye to your girlfriend,” he insists. “I’ll save ya a spot on the ride to the bar.”

“Wife.”

He pauses to look over his shoulder at me.

I stand my ground and lift my head a bit higher.

“She’s gonna be my wife.”

“You and that manifestation shit,” he sighs and shakes his head.

“Got us here, didn’t it?” I offer, and it’s my turn to spin around. “Can’t tell me I didn’t speak this moment into existence.” I take the lead to walk away.

“And I vow that Riley is going to be mine before the next Super Bowl.”

He doesn’t laugh, which means one thing.

He knows I’ll make it happen.

“Riley,” I softly interrupt as she finishes signing a child’s t-shirt.

She looks up from her crouched position before she stands up.

“Hey. You’re leaving now?”

“Yeah.” *I don’t want to.* “We have to go celebrate, but I wanted to know what your plans are?”

“We’re going to celebrate, I think,” she sounds unsure, but there doesn’t seem to be any lingering worry in her voice. “Our plans have been deterred a bit, so I have to check back with Cassidy.”

“Alright.” I know she can’t come hang out with us tonight. It wouldn’t look professional with her looming divorce. “I’ll speak with you soon, though.”

“As long as you manage to get my number, sure.”

A smug smile attempts to form on her delicate red lips.

God, I’d love to kiss them right here and now.

I hold myself back from the intrusive urge to do what I wish.

“Meaning, I’m gonna have to fight, swim, and probably run a marathon to try to get that number, huh?” I tease.

Now she’s grinning from ear to ear.

“Don’t forget going to war for me,” she says with a wink.

Yup. I love her.

“Any day and I’ll wear that uniform with pride,” I vow, making her laugh.

“Tyler.”

I can’t help but still at the way my name rolls off her tongue. It ignites goosebumps through me.

“Yes, Songbird?”

“Thank you.” Her voice is so soft-spoken, I’m sure only we can hear her words. “Despite it all, today turned out even

more spectacular with you in it.”

There are very few times anyone praises me with such a sincere expression on their face.

Riley does it so effortlessly.

As though everyone deserves to be praised without necessary exertion.

“I should be thanking you,” I whisper. “You’re my good luck charm, Songbird.” I reach out and move a few strands of her hair to rest behind her ear. It makes me notice the tattoo of a hummingbird on her neck. It has to be new because I haven’t seen it before.

“Or should I say hummingbird?”

Her smile can’t get any bigger before she gives me a sly look.

“Songbird is better.” She winks just as I move my hand away, allowing it to drop back to my side.

For a few seconds, it’s just us in our bubble of intensity, which pulses with desire and need. I’ve never had a connection with anyone else, but maybe it’s like what Brock said.

Now that she’s free, I’m ready to make a claim before I’m left at the end of the line.

“I’ll talk to you soon, Riley.”

“Talk to you soon, Tyler.”

We share one more look, and it’s clear if she doesn’t move, I certainly won’t because I don’t want to let her go.

She enjoys getting to make the first moves. I notice it from how her smile radiates to her eyes every time she’s given the

chance to take control of a lingering situation.

My Songbird loves the sense of empowerment I allow, and it leaves me wondering how her relationship was with Chase. I'm sure he's a control freak with a big ass ego, but how little do we, the public, know about his relationship with the famous mega-pop star?

It won't be long before we find out, won't we?

My eyes trail after her as she regroups with Cassidy and they head out. Her security guards are around her in seconds, but it doesn't stop her from glancing back as if to get one last glimpse of me.

I smile when our eyes lock, and I vow in my heart that this won't be the last time we see each other.

Today is just the beginning. I'll fight to be her next lover and with perseverance, I'll do everything to be hers forever.

CAN I OPEN MY HEART AGAIN?



~RILEY~

“The screaming cheers of love and admiration, one bad comment, leaves me on a path of defamation. Positivity surrounds me, and yet, sometimes, I feel like I’m sinking. The thoughts, the words, the insecurities. The fear of time going backward, everything disappearing. That little girl with the guitar, you look up, praying to fulfill a dream. It’s kinda funny how, despite butterflies and rainbows, sometimes I miss the old me.”

— *Butterflies and Rainbows*

by Riley Maddison Sullivan.

*M*y phone buzzes for the millionth time.

It could be important, Riley. C’mon... just stretch over and pick it up from the nightstand.

Every time the phone rings, I tell myself exactly that, but my body remains completely still.

Until the phone stops ringing.

“Fuck,” I swear and let out a breath, my eyes drifting further to the nightstand, wondering what can preoccupy my restless mind. The empty glass of wine is taunting me, making me crave the sweet Moscato that is chilled in the mini wine fridge, which is decorated to look like a pink storage cabinet.

I've been trying to lower my alcohol intake. The hangovers are a big pain unless we're partying hard after a crazy set of concerts, interviews, and other plentiful duties of a pop star.

Everyone thinks it's easy. Like I just wake up in a sparkly dress, perky mood, and ready to dominate the world, just like how I project myself when tackling anything in the public eye.

Very few know the real bullshit we deal with.

The monsters hidden in the shadows and how hard it is to not fall into the comforting arms of addiction.

With a grunt, I grab my non-work phone and pull the covers over my head.

Hiding beneath them, I glance at my phone screen to confirm Cassidy hasn't called or reached out to me yet.

How much time do I have before she barges in here to try to steal me from my depressive sanctuary?

I'm not depressed.

Pop stars can't be depressed.

Their feelings are invalid.

The need for perfection at any moment in our lives is what we all strive toward, but the moment something goes off course, it's time to choose between the hero and the villain.

Right now, I'm the villain for not fulfilling my husband's needs.

At least to the usual podcast and anyone who enjoys belittling a woman's worth down to a sex doll with cooking functions.

It's like we've gone back to the 1800s.

Trying to avoid social media, I check Apple News, only for the photo of Tyler and me at the Super Bowl to glare right back at me.

It's one of the many photos of us, but this one in particular has gone viral beyond control. I can't even remember what was being said at that moment, but the angle was absolutely perfect, giving millions of observers expressions they've never seen on either of our faces.

Tyler Sinclair Owens may be kind, generous, and playful with his mates, but outside of the field, I realize he's not the type to smile much.

Honestly, from all the photos I've seen of him outside the field, he looks like a completely different person when the paparazzi do their darndest to capture a glimpse of the professional football champion.

However, this captured moment has his eyes gleaming with love and confidence, an expression many are calling "love at first sight." I, on the other hand, display a look I've never seen on my own face. How do you explain to the world something you've never witnessed in your own reflection?

A loving tender expression that makes my eyes twinkle with hope. My wide smile shows my white teeth and accentuates my red lipstick lips. The vibrancy around me—around us—is so obvious, yet at that moment, I was so focused on Tyler, I didn't realize how focused we were on one another.

No one has kept my attention span for long.

Everyone knows that.

My fans, the haters, the news, and plentiful observers who enjoy watching everything I do.

That's why it's a big deal...

Tyler Owens was able to get Riley Maddison Sullivan's attention.

With a sigh, I aimlessly scroll until a photo of Tyler shirtless pops up on my feed.

My heart skips a few beats.

“Damn... he’s fit,” I mutter as my eyes take in the fine details of his sculpted physique.

I catch myself licking my bottom lip, totally turned on by the sight of him in those black shorts that hug his thick muscled thighs. I’m not sure if he was doing swimming or weight training, but whatever exercise he was doing makes him look like a damn god.

I'd gladly kneel before him and pray for an ecstatic night to remember...

“Fuck, Riley. You’re being so horny,” I grumble to myself. Looking at my nightstand again, I stare at the decorative oak wood while my body is pulsing with need. The photos of Tyler have turned me on with each image, but am I madly in love with him that I’ll masturbate to the idea of him being mine?

Him trailing his tongue along the side of my neck.

Those mysterious eyes peering at me from the side, taking me in before his fingertips caress my cheek and move a few strands behind my ear.

I shiver at the idea of his tongue moving down my neck and along my shoulder, each kiss making my body hot and quivering, which makes me squirm in hopes of getting away.

“Don’t move away from me, Songbird.”

Fuck...

If only he knew just how much I love that new nickname. How having it trend and everyone obsessing over the way he says it makes me want to squeal about the possessive nature of the name.

Songbird.

No one has given me a nickname.

Not one that makes it feel as if I've been claimed, and now a line is waiting for me to lose interest in this apparent playboy.

Playboys know how to fuck, though...

They know how to drill you into the sheets and leave you with so many bruises and hickeys, you'll need a week before you can go back into the outside world.

"Eyes on me, Riley."

I can already envision him saying that. Our gaze would be so consuming, I'd struggle to remind myself to breathe. His fingers would trail down the front of my body until they're right between my legs, taunting the lace fabric of my panties.

I breathy gasp leaves me, and all I can think about is his lips as he dares to do something no other man had the balls to do with a pop star.

Kiss a married woman...

If only Chase could walk in on the two of us together. To see him fingering me at a rhythmic pace. Having a man who believes in pleasuring his woman would drive Chase mad.

"Let's make him jealous then, Songbird."

My eyes drift to those soul-diving ones, and I'm so lost in this build of intensity, I can't tell if this is a dream or an

illusion.

It shouldn't matter anymore, for those fingers are moving, taunting my wet pussy that drips with my arousal. My moan is soft and breathless, my body arching on its own as those fingers move the lace of my panties and reveal the glistening folds of my entrance.

With no delay, those fingers dive in, leaving me no choice but to moan and wiggle while I envision how Tyler would take control effortlessly. He'd enjoy watching me as his fingers would do the moving and his lips continued their taunting affair, leaving kisses and hickeys at any surface he can claim.

Any place where I can't possibly hide in my usual attire.

"That's it, Riley. I know you like that. Love the way I please you."

"God, yes," I mumble almost sleepily.

I need this relief so bad. The tension in my body is beginning to drift away as the coiling heat spiraling within my core begins to ride and build.

"Are you going to cum all over my fingers, Songbird? You know that will make my whole night."

"Yes," I breathe, feeling him pick up the pace as my climax gets closer and closer.

It doesn't matter how many times I wiggle and squirm, those fingers pump into me faster and faster, making me reach so close to the edge, my whole body grows rigid as my back arches.

"You're gonna cum for me, my Pop Princess. Leave these fingers dripping with your cum." The deep baritone of his voice will make me cum if he speaks one more time.

I get my dreamy wish.

“Cum for me, Riley.”

That’s all I need to send me over the edge, my moan echoing in the covered space as my fingers sink so deeply into my quivering pussy, all I can do is squeeze my eyes shut and ride the waves of bliss that quake through every muscle of my body.

I catch my breath as I pull out my fingers from my sensitive cunt. Barely opening my eyes, I’m forced to confirm that I just masturbated to the dreamy vision of Tyler Sinclair Owens.

God, soon I’ll be imagining us walking down the aisle to the altar...

With a groan, I take a moment to acknowledge the juices that cloak my two fingers before deciding I should shower.

Masturbation is a blessing and a curse.

You get to relieve the nagging ache desperate for comfort, but when the high is gone, you’re back to being reminded how lonely you are.

The funny part is the loneliness I feel now is far different than usual.

It’s not the sensation I’ve endured for years, knowing I have a husband who’s been cheating on me the entire relationship and avoiding the act of fucking me with the excuse ‘I’m too busy’ to attend to his sexual needs.

This sensation I’m enduring in this very moment is a hollowness that makes me yearn for a companion. A real person next to you after a night of pleasure. Someone who will

share a shower with you or reassure you that whatever stresses you're dealing with, you're strong enough to conquer them.

I wonder what Tyler would tell me?

You can conquer anything, Songbird.

Don't let those articles and tabloids ruin your shine.

“Man, I should just stay single,” I grumble.

That has to be the alternative, right? They say just take a few months to be by yourself, then you'll love yourself enough not to need anyone.

What if that's not what I want?

What if I want a companion while also loving myself for being a strong independent woman when I need to be?

My phone begins to ring, so I decide to take a bath instead of a shower. Knowing a glimpse of the social chaos happening on the internet, Cassidy probably wants to speak about it with my few days' absence.

Turning the golden knob so the water can begin to fill the bath, I rush to grab my non-work phone, knowing well it's probably Cassidy finally ready to make her debut in “Stop Being a Depressed Pop Star and Get into the Studio.”

My emotional rollercoasters always produce amazing music.

Finally picking up the phone, I realize I'm far too breathless for my own good.

“R-Riley speaking,” I breathe and add, “Sorry Cassidy. Was masturbating my problems away. What's up?”

“If you need someone to shoo away those problems on a pleasurable level, I volunteer as tribute.”

And I drop my phone.

I curse and scramble to pick it up.

Then I accidentally hung up.

“AH!” I shriek and quickly call back the number that just rang me up, hoping it’s not private, or I may have screwed things up.

No fucking way.

No way did I just speak to Tyler Sinclair Owens.

Talked to him and admitted I was masturbating.

EMBARRASSING!

He picks up at the second ring.

“Tyler Owens, speaking,” he begins and adds, “Was wondering if my Songbird was upset with me.”

My Songbird.

Holy fucking guacamole. God, no one even says that, but I have to cut the swearing down, or I’ll screw up on stage.

“N-No! I’m not! I mean...T-Tyler. How did you get my number? This one is private.”

It’s been at least three days since the Super Bowl. *Maybe even longer.* I can’t concentrate on dates when I get into these depressive moods.

I use the excuse that I’m in a writing state, and everyone leaves me alone, but I lose track of time when my emotions get the better of me.

“If I said I had to climb Mount Everest and come back to do it, would you believe me?” He inquires with a humorous tone that easily makes me laugh.

“As much as I would love to believe you, it actually takes two months for someone to complete an expedition climbing Mount Everest,” I reveal, which may be a bit nerdy, but who hasn’t wondered how long it would take to climb Mount Everest?

“So, I should have opted Mount Fuji instead,” he concludes in defeat.

I don’t know why, but I’m actually laughing.

“Would have managed to come back before sunset if you left by dawn,” I tease.

“Good to know,” he assures me. “Good evening, Songbird. I missed you.”

Wow...

He missed me.

That nickname again.

I have to be dreaming.

“I need clarification that I’m not hallucinating because you just said you missed me, the girl you barely know,” I elaborate.

“Well, you’re only half right,” he begins. “I DO know you. At least, I know what the world wants me to know. I can also confirm you’re not hallucinating.”

“How am I half wrong then?”

“You assumed I didn’t want to know the real you,” he reveals. “The real Riley the world doesn’t get to see. The thing is, Songbird, I’m very intrigued to learn more about you. Starting with... what were you masturbating to?”

How can he boldly even ask that?!

I'm sure my face is red, but I can't help but wanting to be truthful with him.

He wouldn't even believe me.

"You," I whisper the words so low, I barely hear them with my own ears. My eyes trail around the bathroom, as the silence looms between us before I realize the bath is a mere few seconds from overflowing. "OH SHIT!"

The way I skid into the bathroom to turn the knob almost kills me if I didn't grab onto the bathtub ledge at the last second.

"Ugh. See what you do, Tyler? Almost made my tub overflow."

"If only I could join you."

My body hums with heat and makes me freeze in place. His voice went from deeply seductive to baritone wonderland where he narrates the perfect sex scenes for audiobooks that leave you horny and craving for some good cock.

"Tyler," I whisper. "Don't go tempting a married woman."

I have to remind him—and myself—because if this man was here right now, we'd be doing more sinful things than talking on the phone.

Or whatever flirtatious conversation we're instigating.

"It's hard," he dares to admit. "Usually when I want something, I get it."

Shit... he wants me? No. He said something.

"A shame I'm someone and not something. At least you managed to get my number."

“I also managed to get something delivered to your door,” he reveals.

What now?

“T-Tyler,” I begin, unable to get his name out without stuttering. “I-I hope you’re not joking because I’m not strolling to my door butt naked to see nothing there.”

He doesn’t answer right away, and I wonder what he’s doing.

What he’s envisioning.

“It’s worth it, Riley,” he reassures with that husky voice that makes my nipples grow hard. “I wouldn’t let you walk butt naked for anything of less importance.”

I’m smiling like a fool.

Grabbing a robe, I quickly don it on and head to the door. Opening it, I gasp at the massive gift basket that’s drowning in pink glitter.

Did I have a glitter obsession? Yes.

Was I going to change? Fuck no.

“I want someone,” he whispers through the phone, his words making a shiver run down my spine. “Someone who sparkles the moment she walks into any room or stage. I know our encounter was unexpected and may have caused a bit of a social ruffle of feathers online, but I didn’t want you to think I regretted our meeting in the slightest.”

I’m taken aback by his words.

No one who’s ever had romantic relations with me has done something like this.

Heck, my own husband wouldn't get me shit for any holiday, not even our anniversary.

Yet Tyler Owens got me a gift basket because of the inconvenience our meeting that fateful night may have caused me.

"I don't regret it, either," I admit. "Tyler, thank you for this."

"Anything for you, Riley."

Anything...

Lifting the gift basket that leaves a glittering spot on the carpet, I smirk and let the door close before carrying it over to the kitchen island. A longer glimpse confirms there's a lot of extravagant stuff. Not just luxury items like perfume and jewelry but more meaningful things I wouldn't believe he knew about.

Pink and brown teddies, white milk chocolate that I have an obsession with, miniature collective editions of Moscato from an Italian brand I love.

There's just a lot of trinkets that would take someone years of research to gather together.

Meaning he's known me long before we met.

"So, did Cassidy make you suffer to get my number?"

"I would have called you the very next day if she hadn't." I'm beginning to realize how refreshing his honesty is. "She also said something about you changing phones?"

"Oh, right." I forgot. "Cassidy suggested I change all my phones now that I'm divorcing Chase. He's the type who enjoys making others miserable, so now that I'm on the

chopping block, I'm sure he'll leak my number to everyone so they can harass me."

"How are you doing?" he inquires.

"With this whole divorce shit? I mean—"

"No," he interrupts and waits for me to remain silent for him to ask the prime question again. "How are YOU doing, Riley Maddison Sullivan?"

How can he say my full name like he created it?

Such possessive ownership in his tone of voice.

It's hot as fuck. This man is a god in human flesh.

"Is it weird to be depressed?" I quietly ask as I stare at the gift basket. "Not because I'm getting divorced... but because my greatest achievement in my career is tainted by my cheating husband, who didn't even consider the repercussions his actions would have on my career."

Saying it out loud hurts.

It also gives me a sense of empowerment.

"His career. His dreams. His goals and reputation. Everyone is talking about him as if he's the victim here. He's the one who cheated on me, Tyler. He's... the one who's been cheating on me our entire marriage. Not once did I cheat on him. Not once did I look at another man during our marriage and say damn, I'd love to be with that guy for a night. I was the good girl he wanted me to be, focusing on something I believed would eventually help both of us. When you marry someone, one's success becomes our success. Yet every time I took a step forward, Chase wished I took two steps back. It was competition, and he absolutely hated how successful I was becoming because that meant he was left in the shadows."

It makes sense now, especially when I'm forced to reach the finish line I thought we'd never cross in this marriage until death do us apart.

Instead, here we are, after five years.

“After seeing him with Angela... something just clicked. I don't know. The naive blanket got tugged away and burned to ashes. It's as though I'm now seeing my potential, as well as those around me who were probably better choices than Chase,” I admit and quietly mutter, “Which is basically you. Don't let it go to your head, though.”

He chuckles.

“How much have you seen online?”

“Enough to tell me the media must be working overtime to make it seem as if I had an affair to insinuate Chase to have an affair,” I summarize. I didn't like going down that rabbit hole one bit, which is why I ended up sinking into this depressive state that's lasted days on end.

“Is that why we haven't seen you in the public eye for almost five days?”

Oh, shit, it was five days?

“Honestly... I thought it was only three days,” I admit with a cringe. “Shit, it's really been five?”

“It's two in the morning, so, yes,” he reveals, which makes me further cringe.

“Fuck. Two in the morning? Wait. I swear it was ten or eleven on the clock. Was that before I masturbated though... maybe I fell asleep... but when I was looking at Tyler's photos it had to be maybe 10:30? Did I really fall down the rabbit hole for that long? Maybe I fell asleep afterward...”

“Speaking out loud still helps you process your thoughts, huh,” he calmly whispers, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“Oh God, sorry! Um... well... ah! As a first phone conversation, I’m embarrassing myself,” I complain and fan my face, so I won’t cry. “I bet you think I’m a nutcase now.”

“No.” He means it. Somehow I can be confident about that. “I think you’re an amazing, smart, talented woman who needs some time for herself after someone decided their pleasure was more important than your success.”

That’s exactly how it should be acknowledged.

“Why is it so easy for you to get it?” I wonder more to myself as I sigh and reach out to the gift basket. Running my finger along the plastic covers the top part coats my finger in glitter. “You don’t make a mockery of me. You don’t linger and wonder about all the possibilities that would make me into the villain the paparazzi want to portray to the world. You just understand without a need to elaborate. How are you able to get it but the rest of the world chooses to ignore it? Ignore my feelings as if they don’t exist or resonate with all this negativity?”

Staring at the glitter in my grasp, I close my eyes.

“Because I’ve been in similar circumstances,” he admits, but I’m not sure I’ll get more from him. “Your bath is going to be cold, Riley.”

“Oh, right.” I’d forgotten I’d drawn one. “I guess we’ll have to talk later?”

“We can still continue speaking, Riley,” he assures me as I make my way back to the bathroom.

“You sure?” I feel a bit shy now. “You’ll just have to listen to me complain about my looming divorce, anxiety, and

troubles.”

Who would want to deal with that when we haven't even gone on a first date?

“There’s nothing wrong with listening and consoling another during low tides,” he points out. “Why is it okay to share the moments where the tides are high and exciting, but the moment they dip, it becomes a hindrance? I never understood that.”

“Do you have someone to console you when you’re troubled by something or someone?” I grab my AirPods and putting them in my ears, so I don’t have to keep carrying my phone.

Checking to ensure the front door is locked, I slip my robe off.

“I did. Someone I really cared about. However...” He trails off as if he’s trying to find the right words.

“You don’t have to share with me if it’s difficult,” I assure him. I don’t want him to feel pressured to share his story with me if it’ll only dig up trauma. My issues are just current trend topics of interest, which is why the wound is so flesh and painful.

His, on the other hand, could be scabs that with one scratch can open the wound all over again.

“I want to,” he quietly admits. “Though I haven’t really told anyone else about it aside from Brock.”

“Brock... that’s your best friend, right? The one who’s normally with you?” Sinking into the warm waters, I sigh in relief as the soaking sensation envelops my body.

It’s been a long few days.

“Yeah.” He chuckles. “He thinks I don’t stand a chance with you.”

“Oh, really?” As intrigued as I am about who betrayed his trust, I’m also intrigued by his current connections and friendships. “Because I’m a star?”

“That and sentimental men don’t get to the finish line.”

“Define the finish line for you?” I encourage in wonder.

“The altar,” he admits, his words barely carrying through the phone line to reach my ears.

“Were you close?” My voice is just as quiet.

“Found out minutes before I should have said ‘I do.’”

I can tell from the vulnerability in his voice that it still hurts.

“Tyler...” I don’t know what to say to that. *I wish I was there to comfort him.* “If I was with you now, I’d give you a hug.”

He chuckles at the idea.

“Can I take a rain check for that?”

“Certainly,” I agree and wonder if he’ll share more. “Um...” I’m not sure how to ask my next question.

“Ask away, Songbird,” he encourages.

“I want to, but it feels a bit invasive.”

“I give you permission to be as invasive as you want,” he assures me. “What do you want to ask?”

“Well, when that happened to you... was it something private, like around family and friends? Or...”

Or was it a public display of humiliation that left you feeling broken...

“Public at a very expensive venue with no refund policy.” His chuckle is filled with bitterness. “I mean, if your intention was to ruin me, it would have been nice to take consideration of my pockets.”

“She wanted you to be broke and broken,” I mutter and further sink into my bath while I stare at the skylight opening that shows me the view of the stars. “That upsets me.”

“As it did Brock,” he confesses. “He was my best man. The moment it happened, I worried he’d go to jail for assault. He was ready to take out the fucker who proudly interrupted to share to everyone he was fucking my soon-to-be-wife.”

Ouch.

Alright. It was REALLY bad.

“Wow...” I upset for him. If it wasn’t for the pain from my teeth sinking into my lips, I wouldn’t realize how angry I was.

“Are you biting your lip, Riley?”

How?

“H-How do you know?”

“You bite your bottom lip only on two occasions,” he reveals. “When you’re upset and when you’re aroused.”

“H-How... when have I publicly been aroused to confirm that suspicion?” As if my voice doesn’t give me away.

“When you were engaged to Chase,” he quietly admits. “Never saw it much when you were married, though.”

“Hah.” That’s laughable. “I was dumb marrying Chase so young. It was a whole shitload of controversy back then, but I

won't lie. I was madly in love." I pause, then add, "With his cock."

We both break out in laughter.

"It had to be really good cock, huh?"

"Actually, no," I admit and sigh in dismay. "I didn't know better. I was fascinated with the idea of dating someone older than me. Maybe too many Netflix series and books that glorify age-gap romance. I thought I'd have a similar happy ending."

Staring at the pink glittering bubbles of my bath, I try not to sound so sad.

"I didn't know better back then. Despite our romance, I just wanted a chance to fulfill my dream with someone by my side. I assumed when you married someone older, they would be less childish. They would want to be there for you, just like you'd be there for them. I may have been young and naive with high expectations, but I knew a lot more than the average young adult entering adulthood. The only problem I had was being my true self."

"You believe that?"

"I do," I confirm. "If I hadn't worried about everyone's opinion of me, I never would have married or stayed with Chase as long as I have. Like I said, I knew he was cheating on me. I knew from the moment we were on our honeymoon he wouldn't commit to me wholeheartedly. You see it in their eyes. Their body language. When they admire a woman for something you obviously lack. I have small breasts and have only recently been working on my booty gains. Everyone else these days is focused on BBLs, breast implants, and cinched waists where they take your ribs out to give in to the illusion."

“Ouch.” He doesn’t seem pleased by the new standards of Hollywood. “Do you want to be those who have such procedures done to them?”

“In the beginning of my career, I did. Actually, I booked to get a breastlift before my career blew up. I only missed the appointment because I had an unexpected concert at a children’s hospital for a charity fundraiser.”

“Why didn’t you reschedule?”

I like how he’s intrigued about all of this. I couldn’t get Chase to listen to me for longer than three minutes.

“It seemed hollow,” I confess and try to elaborate. “The feeling of doing it. There was no boiling excitement for this change. You know, if you change the color of your hair or get a tattoo, there’s this brewing emotion that riddles through you before you go through with it. Some feel excited. Others nervous. I know for myself if I’m nervous about something, it means that event or action is so important to me that it makes me feel that way. I should have felt the same with getting breast implants, but I just felt empty.”

I remember the feeling like it was yesterday.

“If something makes you feel empty before doing it, why would you go through it? That means you won’t feel any better when it’s done and irreversible.”

“That’s how I felt,” he admits quietly, making me wonder what he’s doing on the other side.

Is he relaxing on the couch? Sitting on the bar stool at the kitchen island with a glass of scotch? What if he’s lying in bed and staring at the ceiling above? I really know so little about Tyler.

He's essentially a stranger, and yet, I realize how easy it is to talk to him tonight.

"When you're marrying someone, you should feel exactly how you're describing. Exhilarated. Thrilled for the future ahead. You start to envision a future with the person you're about to bind yourself to."

"And yet?" I whisper.

"And yet I felt nothing," he confesses with a sigh. "It was all for show, thinking this was the right move, but in the end, I was feeding my ego that was frightened of being broken."

"To be able to admit that is something not many men can do," I praise. "Maybe that's why I stayed so long in my marriage. Ego... a dream of being the perfect couple. It's not every day you see a pop star dating an NFL tight end."

"Why do I feel like there was something else stopping you?" he asks in wonder. "Watching you on the stage. Listening to your music. There's hidden meaning in every song you write. You were suffocating in that marriage, weren't you?"

"I was."

"Then... was it just ego and your dreams stopping you?"

"No," I confess and lift my hands up so I can stare at my palms. "I didn't want to disappoint them."

"Who?"

"My fans." There it is. The real truth of it all. "Our world is all about perfection. We're idolized and put on pedestals we never asked to stand on. They tell you when you finally make it as a star, you're submitting yourself to this new life where every move is monitored, and every mistake committed is

blown out of proportion. Your wrongs are but entertainment for global criticism, while your rights are only further looked down upon because you just want attention to hide the bad.”

I close my eyes and lower my arms to the side of the tub.

“Your life has to be Butterflies and Rainbows. Your existence becomes that. A reflection of a life you must maintain at all costs, or else it explodes and is something you’ll never be able to put back together again. It doesn’t matter what you do afterward. No one cares if you’re a saint or talented. The love and admiration turn into hate and defamation. The positivity that uplifted you is tainted with toxic negativity that clings to your very being, excited to pull you down until you’re drowning in its captivity. You start nitpicking at everything. To the point it feels like your life is going backward. All those hopes and dreams begin to disappear, then you reach a point where you remember the old you. The ‘you’ that begged and prayed for the future you’re living now.”

I can already envision myself with my pink guitar, telling my parents how desperate I was to become a star. To see the world and have the world see me in return.

“Makes you miss it, huh?” His voice is bare, revealing how my words impact him. “The younger self that didn’t know better.”

“Yeah.” I couldn’t agree more. “The old me. I miss her. The naive girl who didn’t know how crazy this career was. What’s not shown to the public... hidden in the shadows or dismissed because one got sucked into the toxic traits of alcohol and drugs.”

“I definitely dealt with that,” he admits. “It’s hard to stop when you get started.”

“And the managers and organizers all know that,” I emphasize. “Most encourage their own artist’s downfall.”

“Our organizations are similar,” he admits. “Only it becomes a problem when it becomes a public one. They hide it as a form of control, but one wrong move, and it’s out in the world with no one to protect you.”

“Then your future is ruined.”

“Essentially,” he replies. “You’re right. Our Butterflies and Rainbows.”

“Think it would be a good song title?”

“I think you could make a whole song out of what we just shared.”

Thinking about it already makes my gears spin, and I already have a minor melody humming in my head.

My silence is long enough to make Tyler chuckle.

“Why do I have a feeling you’re already creating a mastermind in that pretty mind of yours?”

“Because it’s happening thanks to you and your conversation skills,” I note and realize I need to write down the lyrics piling in my head. “I... uh... need a second. Or two... or maybe ten minutes.”

“Take your time,” he encourages.

“Do... you want me to call you back?” I ask. “I mean, it shouldn’t take long, but my process of song writing is odd and time-consuming and probably something you don’t want to listen to when I’m speaking out loud and not making much sense.”

“There’s nothing wrong with how you create perfection, Riley.” The way he emphasizes his words proves he means every bit of it. *As if he hates the mere tone I used to explain my process.* “I’ll stay on the line, and you do your thing. I’m not sleepy, anyway.”

My curiosity is killing me.

“What are you doing right now?”

“Chilling in bed, watching my fire burning in my fireplace with some scotch on the nightstand.”

“That’s it?”

“Wanted me to multitask?” he taunts back.

“Honestly, I wouldn’t be surprised if you were,” I admit. “I thought you’d be scrolling on social media or something.”

“When I’m on the phone with someone, I want them to have my full attention,” he reveals. “Besides, I don’t like social media much. Too much toxicity over positivity. The only reason I’m on there is to check scores and review the competition’s gameplay. Nothing more.”

“Gossip isn’t your thing?”

“It is if I’m hearing it from you,” he teases. “I like it when you talk.”

“Do you?”

“Your voice is very whimsical.”

“Oh, right,” I giggle. “I think it’s kinda childish.”

“Nah.” I can imagine him shaking his head. “It’s calming to listen to, but I bet it’s even more enchanting when used in other areas.”

“Other areas, huh?” I emphasize with a seductive tone of my voice. “I wonder what those areas are.”

“We’ll have to find out over time, Songbird,” he encourages, making me envision what a future would be like with a man who is willing to open up to you on your first phone call.

Able to keep a conversation without belittling your worth in some way.

“Get creating, Riley,” he encourages before it sounds like he’s taking a sip of his scotch. “I’ll be right here.”

Maybe—just maybe—I can open my heart again.

SHE WON'T BE THE ONE THAT
GOT AWAY



~TYLER~

“Taking to her is like a soothing lullaby. Not one that makes you drift out of boredom, but a serenade that steals all your troubles and worries and invites you into a bubble where you can focus solely on her. That’s the best way to describe it, really. I’ve yet to find better words to explain how our connection has flourished in a matter of minutes just exchanging words. As I write this, she’s still on the other line. Working on writing a variety of lyrics while she hums melodies that already sound so enchanting in nature. I can tell this song will be a ballad that tugs at one’s heartstrings. One that reminds you of instances we desperately fight to forget, but they’ll have a positive effect in nature. One that reminds you of the past but empowers you to dream of a future you deserve to proclaim. I’ve never told anyone so much in a short period of time, but with Riley, it seems effortless. The craziest part of it all is that I trust her. Genuinely believe she’ll protect my darkest secrets and take them to the grave. Many say love at first sight can’t possibly be real, but I have to question what this is. Between me and these lined pages... I think I’m falling hard for my Songbird. Please, future me... don’t ruin this chance of a lifetime.”

— **Journal Entry #557**

“*O*

by Tyler Sinclair Owens.

.M.G! Please tell me the number on the screen is a damn lie!”

Getting to actually see her face now as we FaceTime one another is a real highlight of my night because she’s as stunning as she is face to face.

She’s sitting on her bed, sheets of paper scattered across the light pink silk sheets, while pink bedazzled headphones sit around her neck. A pink guitar is next to her left knee, while an iPad and another device that has some sort of paper-quality screen is resting on one of her pillows next to her right knee.

Her wet locks are gathered up in a messy bun, making a few of those platinum-blond strands linger at the sides of her heart-shaped face.

I’m able to witness her process thanks to her magnetic phone stand that she places on the bed a bit away from her crossed-leg position, so I get to watch her entire process.

What a process it is.

You wouldn’t expect so much to go into song creation, especially in this time and age. Most artists now ask Chat GPT to create music for them. They no longer sit down and turn their emotions into worthy enough words that express exactly how they’re feeling.

Or at least close to it.

Riley is different, though.

I watched for the last two hours as she started from a blank page and somehow constructed an entire song from start to finish. The process starts on paper, then she records on her

work phone, which she puts on focus mode so no phone calls will interrupt her.

Then she plays it on her guitar, getting the kinks out of the melody and testing whether the song should be a pop or a ballad. After all that, she gets her laptop and engineers the whole thing with different layers of her own voice.

Until it sounds like it's officially finished.

The process is absolutely sensational to watch.

Enough that I wish she'd do 'lives' that showed the process to her fans. I'm sure they already respect her, but if they got to see this, the rise in appreciation of her work would only grow.

I know my respect for her has shot through the roof, but this level of dedication to her passion is what's lacking in our industry now.

"Two hours, fifteen minutes, and twenty-eight seconds," I announce and give her a teasing smirk. "I loved every nano-second of it."

"Shut up," she groans. "You did not."

"I was so fascinated, I stopped journaling to admire you this entire time."

Her eyes light up as she lifts her gaze from her other phone to look my way.

"You journal?"

"For a few years now," I admit rather casually. Aside from Brock and a few of the other guys on the team, no one really knows about it. Coach knows, but that's because it was he who insisted upon it during one of the "forced" therapy sessions I had to endure a few years ago.

“Do you like it?”

I love how she’s so intrigued by this new information. Like I just told her, I have the ability to fly or create any invention possible just by thought.

“Honestly, at first, I despised it,” I admit with a nervous chuckle. “It’s not something masculine one would see a man of my age and structure would do. Actually, when some of my teammates heard coach reminding me to do it after a practice session, they laughed and mocked me.” Remembering that moment makes me shake my head. “Brock got so pissed. The way he forced every guy that mocked me to do five hundred push-ups was crazy to me.”

“He got them to do that?” She gasps in surprise. “I don’t really know much about the specific positions in football, but I kinda assumed you’d have more power than Brock. He’s a tight end, yes?”

“Yeah, he is,” I confirm and shrug. “I am on a higher level if you look at football from a tiered perspective. However, back then, I hadn’t really found myself yet. The cockiness was there, sure. The confidence? Blew up after the marriage fiasco.” I reach for my scotch, surprised that I am still on my first glass. Usually, by now, I’d be on my third, if not fourth, glass.

Usually, the remedy is to put me to sleep when my mind is too rattled up with thoughts and worries.

“Brock knows my struggles from the get-go, so when our teammates were mocking me for doing something therapeutic, he lost it. Coach was right there to support him, and a few of the guys closer to me didn’t stand for that shit. Eventually, most of those members were booted out for their addictions to drugs and other shit that could get the whole team expelled

from the league if we didn't catch it in time, but that incident made it hard for me to be honest with my emotions when writing it down on paper.”

“I'm really glad Brock is in your life. He kind of reminds me of how Cassidy is in mine.”

“Cassidy is your social media manager, yes?”

“Mhmm. She's the best thing that happened for my corporation.”

“I'd assume she'd be your actual manager?” I offered in intrigue because everyone saw her with Riley everywhere.

“That was the original plan, but I feel like social media is such an intimate thing to portray online when you're a celebrity in general. You need them to get clips of situations or moments where you're not always comfortable. Sometimes, things happen, and depending on who's recording determines how you're portrayed. Cassidy can really think critically and turn something negative into a positive without even trying. She's also very observant. Notices things before anyone ever catches onto it. When she showed me all those qualities and how she handles situations, I knew without a doubt she had to be on my side whenever she could.”

The glimmer in her eyes tells me she has a lot of respect for Cassidy.

“After five years, I most definitely made the right decision. No one else would have handled the cheating scandal the way she did. She made me feel confident, despite walking in on something traumatizing. She's the best friend I didn't think I needed.”

“That's me and Brock in a nutshell. Only his critical thinking skills suck balls.”

We laugh.

“I think Brock knows Cassidy,” I confess. “I could be wrong, though.”

“Really?” She arches an eyebrow as she tilts her head to one side. “Cassidy was looking his way a lot, but I just assumed it was because he was next to you most of the time during the Super Bowl.”

“Ya, he gets that a lot,” I admit. “People try to say he’s a puppy, and I’m his loyal master because we’re always together. Hate that analogy, but usually, if I’m around, so is Brock. As for Brock knowing Cassidy, he gave off the impression she was the one who got away.”

“The one that got away, huh?” she repeats and looks deep in thought. “Who knows? Cassidy and love are kinda of a blank slate. I know she’s dated in the past, but I don’t know what happened afterward. Once I started to rise in fame, she moved from part-time to full-time, and I guess she hasn’t had much time to focus on anything else.”

“You want her to, though.” She meets my gaze as I stare at the screen. “I can see it in your expression. That hint of worry in your eyes.

“You read me well,” she mutters and closes her eyes. “I mean, time is going by. I’m young, sure, but she’s inching to her late twenties. The pressure to find someone, date, get to really know them, introductions to our families before engagements is a lot more complex these days. As we all can see, divorce rates are their highest in history.” She raises her hand up and shyly smiles.

“I’m obviously one of the recent examples.”

“Not by choice,” I remind her. “Cheaters shouldn’t get a free pass.”

“They really shouldn’t,” she quietly agrees. “If only the media got that. With all this masculine hype, I feel like Chase will drag out this divorce to make me miserable.”

“How so?” *He better fucking not.* “You had a prenup, yes?”

“Was a must,” she stresses with a mocking grin. “So I don’t become a gold digger and steal Chase’s fortune.”

“You make more than him.”

“Affirmative.”

“Fragile masculinity is a wonder I can never understand,” I comment with a slight shake of my head. “He really didn’t believe you’d succeed in the music thing.”

“Aside from my family and Cassidy, who got hired before I blew up, no one really did,” she admits with a shrug. “Let’s be real. Everyone thinks you’re a mediocre star who just had your viral moment on TikTok to get some cash, then the next month, you disappear like you never existed.”

She’s absolutely right.

“Also, take into consideration that I’m an independent artist.”

Fuck. I actually forgot about that.

“Wait, you are,” I say in surprise. “Damn. I can see why Chase is jealous. All the flow of income is going directly to you and your organization, which you funded from scratch.”

“Mhmm.” She bobs her head. “All the people on my team have been there from day one, with the exception of a few new

positions I created this summer. The only good thing about this negative attention is that everyone's expecting me to release a new album of the sort. That creates hype and encourages people to start streaming my other songs and albums. Think my streams went up 400% since the Super Bowl."

"Like how my jersey sales went up," I acknowledge with a grin that makes her look back at me curiously.

"And why are you questioning why your sales are going up, Mr. Super Bowl Champion Quarterback?"

I love how her eyes dance with mischief, knowing damn well it's more than just us winning the Super Bowl that made my specific jersey sales go up a good 600%.

"A certain popstar was spotted in a blinged-out customized jersey that night," I reveal like some sort of secret. "Turns out her fans were so obsessed by it that our entire winter and spring stock sold out in ten minutes after the Super Bowl."

"S-Shut up." Gawking, she's absolutely shocked. "You're lying."

"Scouts Honor." I put my hand over my heart while my smile grows from her astonishment. "Now, the NFL wants to make special edition rhinestone jerseys."

"You're pulling my leg!"

"I'm absolutely serious," I stress. "That's actually the reason why I managed to finally get through to Cassidy to get your number."

"Really?" She arches an eyebrow. "Why?"

"I needed your approval."

"Approval?" She's not following from her confused expression. "Why would you need my approval for anything?"

“You’re the one who started the trend,” I state the obvious. “No way would I give them the approval of making jeweled-out jerseys with my number without your permission.”

“Why not?”

The way we’re both staring at one another proves we’ve met a crossroads where we’d take different paths.

I need to paint this out differently.

“How about this? Say you wrote a book, and it’s based on something that gave you inspiration, you’d give them credit in the copyright or reach out to them directly to inform them of your plan to use XYZ in your published work, yes?”

“Yes.” She’s following.

“So, what would happen if that book came out, there’s no mention of credits, and they proceed to copy aspects of your life or even the songs you created? Even down to the very spoken words you used in a podcast reply or live interview without a single mention of where they acquired such context. Wouldn’t you be upset with their lack of originality and not giving rightful credit where it’s due?”

“Of course.” Her brows are scrunched together. “That’s like stealing. Sort of. I know that fiction especially is all about originality. I mean, we all know anything can be inspirational, but you can’t possibly base something on realistic instances like relationships and stuff. It’s only worse if you steal their lyrics or what’s spoken in interviews that are ‘in the moment’ instances and can’t be easily replicated.”

“So, why is it easy for you to agree to that, but the idea of me asking for your permission involving the production of a clothing trend that you initiated with your unique creativity

and boldness sounds completely foreign to you?” I summarize and await her answer.

She tries to answer right away, but her mouth is left open while she tries to formulate a proper argument to counter my statement that is filled with straight facts.

“But it’s the NFL,” she defers while trying to justify her lingering argument.

“It can be the White House of the United States, Sweetheart,” I counter. “Doesn’t mean they can rip off your idea, profit from it, and further benefit from your creative prompt.”

“But...” She’s trying so hard to justify the wrong, which makes me wonder if she’s basing this on her own experience.

“Give me an example, Riley,” I urge her without a hint of judgment, hoping she’ll share what’s troubling her.

“I used to give Chase ideas,” she nervously admits. “All the time, actually. In fact, I have a book full of ideas I encouraged. In a few weeks, he has a huge clothing line collab with one of the top sneaker brands.” She disappears from the screen for a moment, reaching over to get something from what I can only assume is her nightstand drawer.

I get a glimpse of her breasts, noticing how her nipples poke at the seamless, thin, baby-pink crop top of her pajama set. My cock twitches and grows harder every second I spend admiring her body. I have to mentally snap myself out of it before she leans back with a thick book that looks like a sketchbook.

Calm down, Tyler. This conversation is more important.

“See,” she begins and turns the book to face her phone screen, giving me the perfect view to see the pages that begin

to show detailed drawings of various things.

Clothing ideas, sketches, graphics, various black and white, and colored attires. The details are everything, and as she goes page by page, I even recognize some of these pieces from Brock's collection of clothes.

I'm sure if he knew they were from Chase's collab, he would have gotten rid of them, but this just proves a very important problem now.

"You created all of this," I clarify, needing to justify the rise in my blood pressure.

"Every single one," she confirms. "My music manager knows all about this since I mostly designed them while in the studio recording my stuff. I think I have a few clips that are going to be shown in my documentary that shows the exact date. Ugh. That's going to be embarrassing to watch," she admits and cringes at the reminder of the documentary. "I should see if we can get that delayed." The comment has her reaching for her work phone and tapping on the screen, but I need her to focus on me for a second.

"Riley."

She pauses in typing, her eyes locked on me in a second. It has to be the way I say her name that has her utmost attention, but I can't determine if it's a good thing or a bad thing.

"He didn't give you credit for any of this, did he?"

"No?" She frowns. "I mean, I'm his wife. He... said it's my duty as his wife to help him succeed."

This manipulative son of a bit—

"When did you start dating Chase, Riley?" I need facts.

“Sixteen,” I confess. “I know online says eighteen and that we got married in six months, but that was made up by Chase’s publicist.

“Your parents were okay with this?” I have to know. “Were you okay with this?”

She doesn’t answer.

Not as if she doesn’t want to. She’s just thinking about it. Something that proves she wants to take this as seriously as I am.

“At the time, no,” she finally answers and even shrugs. “It was complicated I guess. Honestly, I was stupid back then. Also desperate for fame. Chase agreed he could do that for me. Make me famous and stuff. I was multi-talented. My drawings were one thing, and my voice was something else. He was originally actually supposed to be my manager, but I ended up changing my mind last minute without his consent.”

She smiles at her rebellion.

“I thought he would have broken the engagement with that news, but he conned me to work on these designs instead and eventually forgave me when the launches were successful.”

“That egoist, selfish, manipulative bastard,” I grumble and don’t even hide my anger. “Riley... he took advantage of you when you were a child. Practically blackmailed you and your family into the idea of marriage at the expense of making you famous, and when it didn’t benefit him, he punished you with unpaid labor with no contract to ensure you’re given credit when due. Has no one brought this up at all?”

From her expression, this is the first time anyone is putting it all together.

Oh, hell to the fucking no is this continuing.

“How fast do you want this divorce settlement to wrap up?” I inquire, which has her questioning my intentions with a single look.

Personally, I like how easy it is for me to read her, as it seems easy for her to get me.

“Sooner the better.”

I can already see the lines of worry and doubt forming on her beautiful face. She shouldn't be stressing in the slightest. *It nags at me otherwise.*

“But he's not going to. He'll drag this out in an attempt to bankrupt me. I know I'm financially abundant, but I wouldn't want to spend millions on fighting back and forth over assets. I don't need anything of his and would honor the prenup, but I feel he won't do the same.”

“Oh, he will,” I assure her, and I'm picking up my phone and texting the guy I know can pressure Chase to be a good boy.

Well, two people.

“What are you planning, *Owens*?” she questions.

I have to pause in whatever I was typing because hearing her say my last name like that makes my entire body shiver with growling need.

To just be at her place in seconds, whip the door open, and have her pinned beneath me, naked, with a blink of an eye.

“Say my last name like that one more time, *Songbird*.”

I'm desperate to hear it. The urging need to make me so fucking hard while I enjoy the way those pupils dilate the longer we keep up this intense stare.

When she bites her bottom lip, I know she doesn't realize it in the slightest.

I turn her on...

Just like how she turns me on.

Why couldn't I meet this woman five years ago?

She feels like my damn soulmate.

Maybe she is.

"Owens," she practically sings in such a sultry voice that has a low vibrating growl drumming the inner wall of my chest.

I know she hears it.

I'm positive she sees the burning hunger in my gaze as I maintain our eye contact.

If I have to pull every damn string to get her divorce finalized in a few short weeks—*if not days*—I'll do it.

I'm too far gone to stop convincing myself otherwise.

"Let the Universe be my witness, Riley," I quietly vow. "The moment you're legally single, you *will* be mine."

That devious tongue trails along her bottom lip.

"Understood?"

She slowly nods her head, her eyes never leaving mine.

"Understood."

The spell of our intense stare-down is interrupted by the ring that comes through her work phone.

"Oh, it's Cassidy," she declares and looks at me. "One second?"

“Take your time,” I encourage her.

I have a few people to text now that my new mission is to make Chase Arnold Benedict's life utterly miserable.

“Hello? Hey, Cass. Um... yeah, I'm not sleeping. Um... yes. Three hours? Well... maybe we've been talking for that long. I got lost in song writing,” she begins and shyly grins while I pause in my typing to give her a smirk of my own. “Yes. He stayed on the line during my crazed song writing process. He's actually still on the other line. We're just talking about stuff.”

She's listening to Cassidy's reply before looking my way once more.

“Yeah. We were just talking about it and him wanting to give me credit. I'll be honest, I'm kind of confused why I would be given credit or even royalties. It was just a spontaneous idea.”

She flinches and moves the phone from her ear. The fact I can hear Cassidy's reply word for word confirms she scolding my poor Songbird on the other end.

“I-I don't know. I was explaining to Tyler about that, and he broke it down for me to understand, but like... I've been doing similar with Chase for years, and he never gave me credit for anything.”

The lingering silence makes my girl look nervously back at me.

“She's mad,” she mouths to me.

“For good reason,” I mouth back to her.

There's a quieter response before Cassidy obviously hangs up, leaving Riley to stare at the phone in her grasp.

“Did she hang up?” I end up asking when she’s silent for longer than a minute.

“She’s coming over.” She looks nervous. “I think I’m in trouble.”

“I live ten minutes from your place,” I announce. “Want me to come down?”

Her eyes widen.

“Y-You couldn’t possibly come down now, Tyler. It’s risky. I mean... I’m still married. The papz can be tracking your move. I...” She’s panicking.

I can see it from how her hand visibly shakes.

Having listened to and followed Riley for years throughout her journey, I’m well aware that she experiences panic attacks and crippling anxiety.

She’s controlled it well in the public eye, but this is different.

Before I know it, I’m up and slipping into something less noticeable.

“Ten minutes is all I need, Songbird,” I emphasize to her. “Don’t worry about the papz. I know how to maneuver around them.”

I actually do, though my bro is going to threaten me for waking him up at three in the morning.

“Do you want me to come over, Riley?” I need her permission. I’m sure I’d get there the same time Cassidy does, but I don’t want her feeling so overwhelmed it triggers a panic attack.

I want her to feel supported, despite her being clearly taken advantage of by the man who's legally still her husband.

We have to change that ASAP.

“Yes.” She barely gets the word of approval out, but it hits the air with enough volume for me to pick up her quiet plea for company.

“I’m on my way,” I assure her and head to the door. Grabbing my keys, I add, “The line will cut the moment I take the elevator to the private garage, so give me five minutes and I’ll call you back, okay?”

“Okay.” She visibly swallows the lump forming in her throat.

“Riley, baby,” I whisper to her.

Her attention is on me.

“Breathe. We’ll tackle this together, and by the end of it, the world will realize who the real villain of this story is,” I vow and mean every single word.

“Okay,” she whispers, and I can tell she’s fighting tears while taking a few breaths. The truth after the last few days she’s had must be overwhelming. “Tyler?”

“Yes, Songbird?”

“Thank you for caring.”

Oh baby, I’ll do more than care when all of this is over.

“You’re welcome, Riley.”

Hanging up, I dial Brock, who manages to pick up on the fourth ring.

“Unless you’re drunk shitless or on the verge of dying, I don’t want to hear shit,” he groans with such a husky voice, I

know he was deep asleep seconds earlier.

“I need you,” I urge with a serious voice.

There are only a few seconds of silence before he sighs and is most likely sitting up from his bed, pinching his nose.

“What?”

“I need you to distract the papz for me.”

“Where are you going?”

“Songbird.”

That has my boy choking on his own saliva.

“To fuck?”

“No.”

“Then?”

“Chase fucked up bad, man.” I don’t want to give everything away. “Manipulative bastard.”

The creak from the other side of the phone confirms Brock is up and getting himself situated.

“What did the bastard do?”

“I can’t share everything yet,” I admit. “I just need you to trust me on this one. I also need you to reach out to Charlie and Alec.”

“Charlie, cool. Alec at three in the morning? Fuck that.”

“I need his lawyer expertise.”

That cues Brock’s pause in footsteps.

“How bad is this shit?”

“Imagine someone stealing your ideas for the entirety of your marriage with the excuse that your purpose is to aid in

their success but it's only one-sided," I summarize the best way I can while I lock my door and head to my elevator.

"Say less," Brock declares. From the sound of his footsteps, he's speed walking. "I'll distract the papz. Go support your Songbird, and I'll reach out to Charlie and Alec with the premise of what you just summarized. Cool?"

"I owe you," I whisper.

"Nah. That's what best friends do, Bro," he assures me. "Now go support your *wife*."

I have to smirk.

"You're getting the hang of manifesting, my friend."

Let yesterday be the last day someone takes advantage of my Songbird.

A FOOL BLINDED BY BLACKMAIL



~RILEY~

“Is it dangerous to believe in this love? To believe in us. To dream of a future where the sky is high, and our spirits are always up. The fear of disappointment haunts me. The expectations of love buried me. Each breath I take is an interjectory in your eyes. My purpose solely to serve you, like a slave. Chained. Begging for your mercy. The scars still remain. The scabs still tender. Those lingering wounds feel as though they’ll never heal from what you left behind, but this new love. This blossoming flower. I wonder, is it really too dangerous to believe that this is true love?”

— *Dangerous to Believe in Us*

by Riley Maddison Sullivan

“*R*iley Maddison Sullivan!”

I’m doomed. So fucking doomed.

This was a bad idea.

Not in regard to having the best three-hour talk with the NFL football player I locked gazes on during my halftime performance, but admitting I’ve been spotting Chase for years with my creations wouldn’t ignite the hidden beast in Cassidy Holmes.

“I KNEW I recognized the recent campaign design that Nike did, but no! Alicia said I must have seen it elsewhere!” She’s pacing and tapping on her phone while I watch her from the couch.

Next to a sexy quarterback.

I’m absolutely surprised he actually showed up at my place. In a simple black t-shirt and grey joggers, he was now relaxing on my couch, his eyes following my best friend and social media manager as she drills for my very generous compassion to my soon-to-be ex-husband.

“Is this really such a big deal?” I quietly ask, which has Cassidy stopping mid-stride to glare at me.

“Riley! This is stealing intellectual property! Copyright infringement. This is literally ILLEGAL!” She puts her hands up in the air. “Why didn’t you inform me about this in the beginning?”

“I thought it wasn’t a big deal,” I quietly admit while trying not to fidget in place. “I mean... it’s my duty as a wife to—”

“Riley.” Cassidy pauses typing to slip her phone in the pocket of her black dress pants. Crossing her arms, she gives me her full attention. “Explain to me exactly the duties of a wife that Chase has manipulated you with.”

“Manipulated,” I mutter the word with a bit of disgust, but maybe she’s right. *He could have been manipulating me without me even acknowledging it.* “Well... you know? The standard stuff. The wife cooks, cleans, and keeps the house organized and presentable for unexpected guests. As his wife, it’s my job to assist where I can with his job, so sometimes, if his manager is too busy, I’d help with his scheduling and stuff.

I'd do it on the computer, so it's easier for his manager to just submit everything.

“The clothing designs and sketches I would draw during my studio sessions. You know, Jax helps me with the mixing with Ace when we start the initial vocals of my songs, so I have some downtime to draw and design. Sometimes, when he wants a rush launch ‘cause he’s worried someone will copy a design, I quickly make the patterns when I get home from singing sessions and such, and he comes by before his morning training to pick them up. The recent campaign was a bit strenuous, though. I won’t lie about that one. I pulled a few all-nighters to accomplish that. It’s the new campaign that launched last week.”

“The one that was modeled in Paris for the Athletic Fashion Show Entourage,” she summarizes.

“Yeah.” I try to smile, but it’s hard to do. *Feels wrong.* “The one that sold out when they say that famous daughter wore it to her soccer practice.”

“B’s child, Ivy,” Cassidy grumbles and looks so angered by all of this. “Un-fucking-believable. I’m going to murder this man. Who cares about the court? I can get a hit on him.”

“Cassidy,” I groan. Never get Cassidy pissed. My girl was Italian, and honestly, I sometimes wondered if she was the daughter of a mafia mobster because if she wanted to make someone “disappear,” she most certainly could and get away with it. “There are too many eyes on Chase with the divorce. It’s not worth it.”

“It would be worth it if I didn’t have the biggest vendetta on him,” she counters before her phone begins to ring. She points my way. “No. More. Designs. I don’t care if that man falls on his knees and begs you. He ain’t getting shit from

you.” Her finger then moves to point to Tyler. “You!” she begins, her eyes narrowing with anger.

I can’t help but side-glance and take in his calm expression while he awaits whatever Cassidy has to say. As if his very presence is pissing her off, she struggles to say anything to him that would warrant him leaving.

“Sit there and look handsome until I’m back,” she concludes. With a huff, she stomps toward the door while picking up her phone. “Oh, Alice, you’re in so much fucking trouble! I don’t care if it’s three in the morning. Get your ass up! I want to be in a meeting with our legal team in half an hour!”

The door slams shut, leaving Tyler and me in complete silence.

“Sorry,” I apologize with a shy smile. “Cassidy loses her shit when I’m taken advantage of, as you can see.”

“Having someone who’s on your side like that is a gift these days,” he replies and turns his attention to me. He takes in my expression before offering his hand. “Am I allowed to offer moral support by holding your hand, or is that against the marriage code?”

I laugh, feeling a bit of the tension leave me with Cassidy taking the lead in working things out.

“For tonight, I’ll make an exception,” I encourage as I place my hand in his. “Wouldn’t mind the moral support.”

“You really didn’t see that he was taking advantage of you,” Tyler gets to the point while he observes me carefully.

“It’s not like that…” I begin and trail off because how do you explain my behavior otherwise? On the outside, everyone assumed I was a businesswoman who knew exactly what cards

to play to get the viral outcomes I've achieved over the last five-plus years. Realistically, I'm only following my instincts, experience, and creating with the passion thrumming through my veins.

Sure, I was good in a few business departments, but my opinion of people in general has always been a bit naive in nature. It's what Cassidy always used to scold me about.

I was too trusting in a world that is now tainted by the hungry need for money, power, fame, and connections.

As of now, I have all of that and more, and there are far too many people who'd die to have such control in today's world.

Including my husband, apparently...

"Songbird."

The squeeze of my hand encourages my eyes to lift and meet Tyler's serene ones.

"I won't judge you. I just want you to talk it out instead of piling it inside of you."

"I'm just... trying to overcome the reality that I've been helping my husband build an empire that really only benefits him," I summarize and shake my head. "When people hear about this..."

They'll mock me.

Laugh in my face as to how foolish I was to let a man take advantage of me like this.

"We're not going to worry about what 'other' people think about this if it ever comes to the public light," Tyler counters with a firm voice. He reaches over with his free hand to lightly grip my chin, lifting my head enough so I can return to looking into his eyes and not my lap as if I'm accepting defeat.

“You’d be surprised how many other women may deal with exactly what you’re going through,” he acknowledges. “Plus, you married young. You were practically still a teenager when you married at eighteen. This could even be called grooming if you include the years you were dating Chase, matched with the age difference. I believe in a legal setting and reviewing the evidence, this could be a case that can be proven manipulation and intentionally grooming a minor.”

“You think the court would entertain this?”

“More than entertain. I believe with your status and obvious evidence that the world got to witness you dating Chase since sixteen and marrying him for five years will probably be more than enough to support your case if Chase wants to drag it out.”

“He’ll drag it.” I’m confident about that one. “He has to make himself look like the victim. If he finds out we’re going to sue him for not giving me credit for anything, he’ll make this divorce last forever.”

“Not on my watch,” Tyler says confidently enough to make me question him.

“Why are you so sure about that?”

“I pulled some strings,” he declares. “All I have to do is see if Chase takes the bait.”

“What possible bait would that be?”

The door opens, and we glance over to see Cassidy is back and smirking murderously.

Uh oh...

“Either you actually got someone fired or killed,” I begin as she reaches us. “Or we’re going to court in fifteen minutes.”

Her smile only spreads before she glances at my joined hands with Tyler.

He lifts our hands up with an innocent look.

“Moral Support Clause.”

She rolls her eyes, then gives me her attention.

“Guess who just called me?”

“Chase?” I mockingly state with an exaggerated huff. I know he wouldn’t call Cassidy. He hates her guts. *Just like she hates his.*

“Bingo.”

“Wait, what?” I gasp in surprise. “Why is he calling you?”

“Well, firstly, he doesn’t have your new number, or else he would have called you directly,” she announces. “As for why, he wants to speed up the divorce settlement.”

“Speed up in what way?” I ask with a dubious look. “How fast are we talking?”

“Fast as in he wants us you in court today at nine in the morning to settle everything and get the divorce approved in court,” she declares.

“Wow,” Tyler can’t help but chip in. “Are you pulling a faster divorce than Britney Spears’ marriage and divorce in Vegas?”

“It’ll probably beat the divorce record if the judge grants it as an immediate settlement,” Cassidy reveals. “Most divorce settlements take long because the couples are going back and forth fighting for assets. In this case, whoever is advising Chase is emphasizing the need to rush the divorce so he can

save his reputation and maybe reserve whatever plans he has behind the scenes.”

“Wouldn’t rushing the divorce seem fishy to the public?” I ask.

“Maybe.” Cassidy shrugs.

“Will this interfere with our plans to sue Chase for stealing intellectual property from Riley?” Tyler inquires. “I’m assuming it wouldn’t, but I’m not very knowledgeable about the court system.”

“Not in the slightest,” Cassidy begins and arches an eyebrow in Tyler’s direction. “Our?”

He shrugs and shows off our joined hand.

“Moral Support Buddy.”

I snicker.

“MSB doing his duties,” I tease back.

“Admit it. I’m doing a good job. What MSB comes over at three in the morning?” he inquires. “Especially after a three-hour convo at that.”

“You two were talking for three hours?” Cassidy questions and looks between us.

I raise my free hand innocently.

“I wrote a new song,” I sweetly declare with pride. “Butterflies and Rainbows.”

Cassidy crosses her arms over her chest. “From start to finish?”

“From start to finish,” I reassure her and smile a bit wider. “I like it.”

She pinches her nose in defeat.

“I don’t know what this quarterback has on you, Riley, but I’ll support it,” she mutters and glares at Tyler. “For now. That means you better be on your UTMOST best behavior, Mr. Owens.”

“Or you’ll find a nice hole six feet under to bury me in,” he summarizes and bobs his head. “Got it.”

“I don’t like you,” she concludes. “You’re as cocky as Brock.”

“That’s why we’re best friends,” he says with a wink and relaxes into the couch. “But back to the point. Chase is rushing shit because I kind of put him in a pickle.”

“You put him in a pickle?” Cassidy looks confused. “How so?”

“Two of my boys on our team are pretty damn good with the legal system. They use alternative names to run those businesses, but they’re popular enough for even jocks like Chase to know who they are and why they would reach out to him,” Tyler summarizes. “Needless to say, I asked my boy Alec, who’s a lawyer, to contact Chase and make it seem like if he doesn’t quicken the divorce settlement, he’ll lose all his property and assets because the prenup can fall through.”

“You’re not serious,” I whisper. “H-How did you possibly convince him of that?”

“We kind of used a recent soccer billionaire’s divorce as an example,” he reveals. “Alec and Charlie were involved in that whole mess, which stays between us, but essentially, the woman managed to get half of everything despite the man making a prenup to ensure she wouldn’t get access to his funds.”

“Why is that?” I’m extremely curious.

“Florida has always had a law revolving around couples being together for two or more years. Even if it’s not marriage, if two individuals remain with one another for two years in the same household, it means they have helped build one another during those years of partnership. Regardless if they have or not isn’t the point at hand. The argument is, without your partner, you may not have been able to reach or achieve the success you have in comparison to when you were single.”

“So... wouldn’t that go against me?” I ask. “I wasn’t super popular when I married Chase, but after I did, shortly after, I went viral.”

“That’s true, but Chase would never admit that publicly,” Tyler declares. “I’m 1000% confident in that.”

“His ego is that steep,” Cassidy shakes her head. “He probably still thinks he makes more money than Riley. He doesn’t know her earnings, nor has he ever involved himself when it comes to taxes with the estate.”

“He’s never done taxes with you?” Tyler asks for verification. I shake my head.

“Um...” When they’re both staring at me, I have no choice but to confess, “I do the taxes too.”

“What?” Cassidy gasps. “The personals AND companies?!”

“Yup,” I’m nervously giggling. “I wanted to try to bring a third party to help this year because I was on tour and not really getting much sleep, but Chase wouldn’t have it. Said a third company would fraud us and say he’s making more than he is.”

“Jesus Son of David.” Cassidy is already pulling out her phone. “The sleezebag of a fucker literally cheated on a woman who cooks, cleans, is self-sufficient, juggles her career, HIS career, gigs, AND manages personal and company taxes?”

I worry she’ll pop a vein at this point.

“Yet he’s fucking a slut of a sports broadcaster?!” she shouts in annoyance. “I swear by the time we’re finished with him, he’ll wish he never crossed paths with Riley Maddison Sullivan. NO. He’ll wish you weren’t even born to align in the same galactic alignment as him!”

She’s darting her gaze at Tyler.

“I’m going to trust that you’re not going to take advantage of this situation,” she declares.

“I won’t.”

I can tell he means it from his expression as he keeps up Cassidy’s intense gaze. Very few can hold their gaze with Cassidy. The intensity in her eyes, matched with the femininity she executes, gives me Angelina Jolie dominating-the-world vibes.

“I don’t want Riley alone right now, even if this building is one of the top and most secure for the celebrities of Florida. I scheduled a meeting with our legal team, and I want to gather as much as we can before Chase and his team catch on to what we’re planning. With that being said, I need you to stay here until I come back.”

“Done.” He doesn’t even hesitate.

“You can’t leave,” she emphasizes.

“If I gotta camp in the enchanting castle of my Songbird, so be it,” he proudly states and squeezes my hand. “As long as I’m fed.”

Cassidy rolls her eyes.

“I’ll order some early breakfast for you both. I doubt either of you will sleep anytime soon, anyway.”

“Guess not,” I confess while my mind is thinking of a combination of words. I’m piecing them together, wondering how different my life would be with someone who didn’t let me carry our relationship solely on my tired shoulders. For so long, I was naive about all that was happening right under my nose, but deep down, I knew what was going on.

I was just too afraid to confront it.

What if I was in a relationship with someone like Tyler, who has already proven to be on the opposite spectrum of masculinity in comparison to Chase? Life may have been less tedious for me. A part of my growth wouldn’t have orbited around keeping a persona that appeased the world and not my heart.

If only it didn’t feel so dangerous to believe in us. Believe the possibilities that could transpire from this very instance.

“Riley.”

Blinking out of my thoughts, Cassidy is staring at me, but I also notice Tyler, of all people, is holding my notebook in hopes of offering it to me.

“Need to write something down?” he says in an encouraging way.

As though he doesn’t want me to waste precious seconds and forget the valuable words that are flowing fruitfully.

“How...” I trail off as he offers me the notebook again.

Taking it, his gaze lowers to the piece of paper, hoping I'll act writing what's thrumming through my head first.

Without argument, I get to scribbling on the page. The lyrics, thoughts, and emotions run through my mind so quickly, I feel like the next couple of minutes move in a blur. By the time the pen stops moving in my grasp, I've written four new pages of lyrics.

“Wow.” Frighteningly enough, I just wrote an entire song without much thought.

I've never been so creatively expressed in such a short period of time. The reflection of the last three days creating at least five to six songs that can prick tears in my eyes with pride is a rarity I'm forcing myself to embrace.

“Songbird.”

I look up at Tyler, noticing his concern as I blink back tears.

“Ah. Sorry. This song...” I swallow the lump in my throat as I stare at the written work. “Feels like an interlude after a harsh betrayal.”

“Is that the heavy emotions that burden your heart right now?”

“Sort of.” I'm not even sure. “This must be burdensome for you.”

“Why?” He frowns at my words. “Why would me being here, supporting you, be deemed burdensome in your eyes?”

“Because...”

That's what Chase would say.

“Your husband made you feel as though your emotions and the idea of being supported by him was but a time-consuming burden,” he summarizes as he maintains eye contact.

A single tear leaves my left eye, and he doesn’t hesitate to reach out and wipe it away.

“Maybe... I wish we could have met when I’m not... so...”

Broken. Emotionally distraught. Unable to truly comprehend how bad this marriage was for my mind, heart, and soul.

“Everything happens for a reason, Songbird,” he whispers. “Every single thing. Including the night of the Super Bowl, where your gorgeous eyes met mine and stole my breath away.” He wipes away more tears before cupping my cheeks.

“I don’t know what will come out of this... out of us. Heck, you may decide to return to Chase for all I know,” he points out as though it’s something he’s witnessed again and again. “However, at this moment, I’m not here supporting you for some hidden motive.”

He brushes away my final tears and leans in to rub his nose against mine.

“Life brings challenges we all have to face, but confronting them with another is better than being alone in the darkness, buried with your thoughts. If coping through this whirlwind passing through your life right now means staying up and writing whatever comes to your mind, so be it.” He pulls back to pin me with a compassionate gaze. “Everyone’s way of coping is different, and I never want you to feel as though that’s a negative.”

“Tyler.”

“Now, we’re going to wait for breakfast, eat, and do whatever you want to do to pass the time until Cassidy comes back.”

From the tone of his voice, it’s non-negotiable, which is a blessing. I need some sort of structure in my schedule right now, or I’ll spiral back into the depressive hole.

“Alright.” I give him a tiny smile. “Honestly, it’s dangerous to believe what we could be.”

“Us?” He seems intrigued as a sly smirk forms on those smooth lips of his.

“Yeah.”

“Is that the inspiration for the song?”

“Dangerous To Believe in Us by Riley Maddison Sullivan,” I declare like some radio host telling all their listeners about the new hit. “A song about falling in love with the imaginative idea of being with another who just entered your life.”

His smile blossoms across his face, making his eyes soften.

“Between you and me, I think it’s a dangerous game to play.”

“A dangerous game to play?” I repeat quietly.

“Mhmm.”

He rises up from the couch and offers me his hand.

“If I press start, I have a strong feeling I’ll fall prey to the beauty of what a life could be with us.”

“Meaning you’ve envisioned it,” I accuse and smile as his cheeks blush.

“Look, our food is here.”

I laugh and shake my head as I put my hand in his. He helps me up.

“Now, how would you know our breakfast is here?”

“Instinct.”

“Crazy.” I shake my head but can’t stop myself from continuing to smile. “I hope Cassidy included blueberry pancakes.”

“Love those,” Tyler groans. “Though my mom’s pancakes are the best in the universe.”

“Tempting proposal,” I toss as he stops at the island with me in tow.

“When you wrap up your tour stops, maybe you can come by?” he offers. “Well, once the divorce settlement stuff is over.”

“I’d like that,” I admit. “And if we play our cards right, I may be officially single in twenty-four hours.”

He squeezes my hand in his grasp as we share a look.

“Let’s start playing the right cards, Songbird.”

His eyes are full of hope.

“Lead the way,” I encourage.

Within the depths of my heart, I feel as though Tyler Sinclair Owens won’t lead me astray.

A FUCKING PROMISE



~TYLER~

“She doesn’t deserve any of the pain she’s experienced in silence. A warrior who continues a battle no one wishes to acknowledge. I hate it. Despise that I’m now in the picture when she’s already dealt with far too much agony behind closed doors. She doesn’t get it. Doesn’t understand how rooted this trauma really is. Deep within, I wonder if that’s why I got to cross paths here and now. When she must feel the floor beneath her feet crumbling down and realize there’s no one to catch her. She’s wrong to believe that, though. That’s why I’m here now. Who cares if I’m a fool in love? I’ll be one if it means saving Riley from a man who will never tell the world the truth. Never admit he’s the villain in her story.”

— **Journal Entry #558**

by Tyler Sinclair Owens

*“*Whoever says bacon is a sin can meet me in hell cause crispy bacon at four in the morning is so fucking good.”

If she moans like that one more time...

Eating at the island was a smart move rather than the couch, or Miss Riley would get a full bird’s eye view of my hard-on in these grey fucking sweatpants.

I made the wrong move wearing these.

I've always told myself I have self-control and can't be turned on by a woman I've only had the privilege of physically meeting five days ago.

Yet here I am.

Erect cock tight in these grey sweat pants, watching Riley Maddison Sullivan eat maple syrup dripping bacon with those delicate pink lips of hers.

If only they were around my cock.

I'd go fucking insane.

“Are you not going to eat that?”

My Songbird is staring at my plate as though it descended from the heavens itself—her eyes on the last strips of bacon I haven't touched yet.

Reserving it for her.

“You want?” I inquire and enjoy how she nods her head far too fast.

“Yes, please.”

Those pleading eyes would make me cave every fucking day of the week.

“All yours, Songbird.” I slide the plate to her.

She squeals and thanks me before she takes her sweet time munching on the crispy goodness.

“You're nice to have breakfast with,” she admits.

Moving my attention to her confirms she's no longer focused on her bacon but on me.

“Why would you say that?”

“I normally eat by myself.”

“Why?” I already don’t like hearing that. “Is it because of the tours and schedules?”

“Not really,” she admits as she finishes her last bite of bacon and reaches over to finish her cup of coffee. “Days of shows, I actually don’t eat a lot. I have a decent breakfast, but it’s mostly fruits. I skip lunch and dinner and don’t eat until after the shows are over.”

“Isn’t that a bit tedious?” I question in worry. “I know it may prevent you from getting nauseous with all the movement, but that’s a lengthy time without any food.”

“Cassidy and Alicia say the same thing, but Chase emphasized to my team that I shouldn’t eat on show days.”

Fucking hell...

“Why is his input being taken seriously when he’s not a doctor or professional in that department?” I have to know.

“Because he’s the ‘man of the home,’” she explains and lifts her hands to quote the air. “If your wife can’t go against it, most of the time, no one else wants to.”

“It’s not about ‘wants,’ Riley,” I emphasize. “It’s about your wellbeing. You can’t possibly starve yourself the entire day and be expected to do full-body dance choreography while singing for two-plus hours. The average Zumba class with basic moves burns 900 calories on average in an hour. You’re burning what I can only assume should be your entire day’s calorie intake.”

“My diet is only 1200,” she mutters as she pouts her lips to think about. “800 when I’m on a cut.”

My stare has her looking like a nervous deer in headlights.

“That’s... not how it’s supposed to be, huh?” she ends up whispering.

“In what shape or form would you accomplish eating a standard of 1200 calories a day and 800 during a cut, Riley?” I question because I want her to understand how unrealistic that sounds coming from someone else.

“I get the logistics.”

I can see it in her gaze that she grasped this long before our conversation.

“You just didn’t want to upset Chase,” I conclude, knowing that’s most likely the answer.

When she nods, I try not to sigh because I don’t want her feeling even more shitty than she probably does after realizing her husband wasn’t the best suited for her.

“I probably seem like an idiot to you,” she tries to smile, but it just makes her look even sadder.

“You’re not an idiot,” I emphasize. “Sometimes, we do things in hopes the important person or people in our lives are respected and satisfied with us. Even if we consciously know it’s not good for our wellbeing long term, the idea of disappointing them is even stronger.” I can affirm those words from personal experience, which may be why I don’t mind admitting it.

“My last partner encouraged me to fast during one of my peak seasons,” I begin, remembering it like it was yesterday. “She’s the type who is easily influenced by social media, so she decided to change religions for the tenth time.”

“She changed religions?” Riley looks confused. “I mean, I’ve seen it happen, but I don’t think you’re supposed to jump between them like they’re positions in a job firm.”

“You know how sensitive people get with religion. It’s no different from politics, which is normally why everyone becomes a ‘yes’ sayer because defying what they wish to do or speak of makes you look like the bad guy,” I confess and take a sip of my coffee. “Needless to say, her sudden spark to change religion always affected me because I was the soon-to-be husband. I had to support her, or else how would I do so when we vowed to be there for one another through sickness and health?”

“I still feel like those are very different things,” she mutters and adds, “Like a form of manipulation.”

“You’re seeing the light, Songbird,” I encourage, feeling more confident that my story will help her understand where I’m getting at. “Forcing me too fast with her ended with me in the hospital for five days after I got knocked out during a game.”

“Shit,” she curses with wide eyes. “Y-You’re okay, right?”

“Aside from this scar right here,” I note and tilt my head back enough so she can see the tiny scar under my jaw that’s well hidden, thanks to my growing beard. “I made a full recovery. However, that miscalculation happened because I’d been fasting, which made my glucose levels drop. I got hit with dizziness and made a short turn, which landed me right in our rival team’s path at the wrong time.”

“That must have been scary,” she whispers in worry.

It’s interesting to see how much concern she displays about something that happened in the past.

“It was a blur for me, but my mom and younger brother were not pleased with seeing me connected to all those wires, machines, and having a tube up my nose to feed me because I

was dropping weight like crazy.” I shake my head at the memory. “Needless to say, when my family and the team found out why I had been fasting, let’s just say our engagement almost fell through.”

“They were super upset.”

“Beyond that.” I laugh at the memory. “Honestly, when the majority of my friends found out about the fallout at the wedding with Britney, they said it was a blessing from God. I had friends literally sending me gifts and congratulations cards in celebration of me not marrying her. I didn’t realize she was so toxic. Everything had to be laid out to me by all my friends, relatives, and family members for me to realize just how bad it was. If I’d put that ring on her finger and signed the marriage certificate, I think that would have been my end.”

“Does that make you afraid of falling in love again?”

I’m surprised by her question that’s spoken so softly.

She’s staring at her finger, where a tiny ring lies. Personally, it’s not even a nice ring for a man who makes multi-millions a year. No way would he have gotten a woman in Florida in this time and age with a rock that’s barely five grand.

“No,” I calmly answer. “It makes me realize I deserve love, but I have to stop ignoring the red flags and follow the green flags in a relationship. I have to love in a language my partner understands but also is able to return with good intentions. Relationships aren’t hard. Some of us can be friends with people for years upon years, even with hanging out once or twice a year. A relationship only gets complicated because it requires us to strip down to our most vulnerable state. To be okay with another person seeing our flaws and insecurities. Knowing about them and trusting that despite

where we lack, the good qualities we carry are enough to be acknowledged and loved to keep the person by your side.”

“What if you find someone you think can be a green flag in your life, but you fear the past being used against you?” she wonders.

“Whoever needs to use your past to hurt what is blooming now is a coward,” I whisper, experiencing such firsthand. “However, there are people like that. Past lovers who’d make a field day by bringing up everything they know about you from their past to paint a canvas that makes you villainous in nature. They don’t care about the consequences or if it makes them look shameless. As long as it hurts you, that’s their endgame.”

My gaze lowers to my left hand, remembering how I couldn’t wait to admire the golden band around the base of my ring finger.

“What hurts is getting lost in who you once loved. Being stuck at staring at the individual you envisioned the rest of your life with one day and having to remind yourself of everything they did to become someone you never imagined they could.” Looking away and back to her ocean-blue eyes, I give her a small smile. “The hardest is accepting that they were always that way. The only difference is acknowledging how we allow ourselves to change in hopes of being accepted and loved by those who will never do the same.”

“You may be right on, Tyler,” she whispers just as her phone begins to ring.

We glance over at the phones we placed at the end of the island so we could focus on one another during breakfast.

I can see the hesitation in her eyes as the phone continues to ring, but I reach over until my hand lightly brushes hers,

gaining her brief attention.

“Pick it up. Everything will work itself out.”

She swallows and nods, her hand slipping from beneath mine as she slides off the stool and walks the few steps to get her phone.

“Riley speaking.”

Her silence lingers as she listens to the person on the other hand. I have a feeling it isn't Cassidy, which has me wondering who she's speaking with.

“Nine o'clock. Got it...” she trails off as if the other person has something else to say. “He already tipped the papz. Great.” She sighs. “Understood. Thanks, Ricky. Yeah, I'll be fine... um...” She looks my way.

“I don't think Tyler will be coming with, but if we can arrange a smooth way for him to leave without gaining people's attention, I'd appreciate it. Thank you.”

When she hangs up, I can already see the dread in her now tense muscles.

“Today's the day?” I whisper and watch her sad smile grow.

“Nine o'clock,” she whispers. “I'm happy, though.”

“Riley.” I get off my stool and stand before her in seconds. “You don't have to save face for me. Don't need to lie and hope I can't see just how hard this is on you.”

“I'm angry...” she quietly whispers and looks up at me as she fights back tears.

I see it.

Those hidden threads of rage fighting desperately for a moment of acknowledgment. It makes me wonder how many times my Songbird has forced herself to remain in a cage when, in reality, all she wants to do is scream at the top of her lungs.

“You take it upon yourself to rush things because the mere idea of me getting a single penny of your money drives you insane. You ruined my reputation. Ruin my moment to shine and be celebrated, and now you’ve called the paparazzi in hopes I’m watched at every corner just to be spoken ill of by your posy of grown-ass egoistic men who will support your move without blinking an eye.”

Her hands turn into fists as she bites her bottom lip.

She’s doing everything not to break down and cry.

“Everything I did was to please him. To make him look good to the world, even though I knew deep within that he wasn’t. Out of fear of walking down this path on my own, I fell for man because he made me feel safe in a scary world, but now that I’ll no longer benefit him, he’s ready to toss me right back into the world I was desperate to run away from.” She lowers her head, looking at her bare feet.

“It’s not fair. None of it... and it makes me want to get back at him. Turn the tables and make him feel what I’m feeling now. He thinks I never wanted to be with someone else. Never looked at other couples and wondered why we weren’t like that? I accepted my life because I made my bed and was ready to lie in it, despite the unhappiness, but it’s okay for him to be scot-free. Despite cruising through life.”

I’m this close to reaching for her jaw and forcing her head up, but she lifts it the next second to look into my eyes with a fierceness I’ve rarely seen in those eyes of shimmering beauty.

I've only seen these emotions once.

During one of her concerts.

Back then, I didn't understand why her emotions screamed to me through her eyes that night, but witnessing them again leaves me to wonder what happened to ignite those emotions.

Was it as bad as this?

"You made this face two years ago." I can't help but admit and notice her surprise. "The concert in Miami. The night before you took time off. Why?"

The nagging need to know only grows.

A single droplet of tears runs down both her cheeks, but I wipe them away before they can flee from her precious face.

What did he do to light a blaze in a fierce woman who's ready to make him realize what a mistake today will be?

She searches my eyes as if to find a single trait that could be something her 'husband' has portrayed to her, but I know she won't discover what she's looking for.

I'm not here to benefit from her.

Not here to use or abuse her.

"Search as long as you wish, Songbird," I soothe her with my quiet words. "I'm not here to be your enemy."

"Then why are you here?" she whispers.

"To prove to you that you're not only worthy of love, but that if a man wanted to do something for the woman he loves, he would." I lay my hand lightly on her lips, our eye contact never breaking, even as I lean down and kiss the back of my hand.

The gesture surprises her, the obvious shock forming in her widened eyes, but my intentions are clear, even if I can't lay these very lips upon those delicate lips of hers.

Moving back enough, I leave my hand upon her lips, just so I can say the words that need to reach her ears after this heightened move.

"The first thing I'm going to do the moment you walk out of this settlement is show you how deserving you are to be loved, adored, and worshipped like the queen you are," I vow as I let my hand slip down until it's back to my side. "Then I'll kiss you the way I'm dying to do right now."

We stay like this for what feels like eons, even when her phone begins to ring again and again.

"You won't abandon me?" she finally questions.

"I think I'm too far gone to dare think of such," I whisper. "If I have to remind you every day, Riley Maddison Sullivan, that I have every intention of getting to the finish line with you, I will," I vow as my eyes lower to her lips. "And when I do, I'll enjoy kissing you until I've sucked every bit of breath out of you."

I see the hint of lust that dances in her majestic eyes.

"For now, this will suffice," I assure her. "Until it's time to make Chase beg for you back."

My phone begins to ring, and I know from the tone I can't ignore it.

"That's my coach," I mutter before I realize. "Aww, fuck."

"What?"

"I had a meeting, I think." It literally skipped my mind. "It's okay. I'll let him know I drank too much and slept in."

I turn away to grab my phone, but her words make me stop dead in my tracks.

“He made me abort it.”

My limbs lock in place while the ringing of my phone goes on and on until it stops, leaving us in silence. I struggle to look back at her because I fear she’ll see a side I haven’t shown to anyone but my mother. I’m losing the battle, though. My ears are begging to hear her solidify what she just confessed.

When our eyes lock, she looks more concerned about me, but I encourage her to say it again.

“Repeat it.”

“Tyler...”

“Repeat what you just said, Songbird,” I plead.

She swallows and holds her hands, fighting not to fidget. She keeps my gaze, though, as she decides I deserve to hear what kindled those burning eyes of revenge two years ago.

“He made me abort it,” she repeats. “Our child. He forced me to do it. He also forced me to perform that night despite... the bleeding symptoms. I didn’t have a choice. It was done before it clicked in.”

I can see a wave of numbness that takes over her face, and I know without a doubt she hasn’t forgiven this man.

She’d never forgive him now.

“I vowed on that stage that I’d never lose another innocent angel,” she whispers. “That’s why we stopped having sex. I stopped attending to his needs completely. I stopped everything but kept the relationship going in hopes he’d finally give in. That he’d confess what he did. Or even carry an ounce of guilt. Now, the day has arrived... and he’s painting me as

the villain and not acknowledging that he's a murderer. It hurts..."

She fights not to lower her head.

"It hurts that he killed what should have been a spark of ongoing joy."

No one knew.

As she danced and sang her heart on that stage.

She was probably bleeding out and dealing with the multiple effects an abortion could have on a woman.

The emotional rollercoaster she had to endure alone.

While everyone bowed down to his rules.

No food, starving, bleeding out, and emotionally broken.

Yet she performed.

She kept her promise to please her fans.

All for a man who wants to destroy it all.

I cup her cheeks without a single thought, and it takes every thread of resistance in me not to sweep down and kiss her with everything inside me.

"Mark my words, Songbird," I whisper as my mind is made up. "The moment you sign those papers, that golden cage that has kept you in captivity will finally be open. Today, before the strike of twelve, you'll be free."

I lean down and press my forehead against hers.

"And I swear, from that moment onward, Chase Arnold Benedict will wish he never messed with what I'll claim before the world."

I fucking promise.

THE CANARY THAT ESCAPED
HER GOLDEN CAGE



~RILEY~

*You were a growing light. A light so tiny yet shone so bright.
You were a secret. One I couldn't wait to share with the world.
It's sad how life is. Cruel with no remorse. I cried and cried,
but the stage awaits my return. I sang my heart out, hoping
you'd hear how much this hurts. Like a star in the sky, I pray
to be forgiven one day. Forgive me for blowing your light out.
A shimmering glow, a shining star.*

— *My Shining One*

by Riley Maddison Sullivan

“*W*hy do I feel you're hiding one more thing from me?”

I'm applying the neon pink lipstick on my lips as I stare at my reflection in the mirror Cassidy is holding for me. Pausing to look in the rearview mirror, my driver locks eyes with me and nods immediately. The automatic tinted glass rises until it seals, leaving whatever I'm about to say between Cassidy and me.

Truthfully, I don't mind my driver overhearing the truth of my past predicaments, but I'm not ready to share it to that extent.

Not yet...

In due time, I will.

“How long until we arrive?” I ask as I grab my lip gloss, which will give me the shimmering glimmer I need to complete my makeup look.

“Two minutes,” Cassidy estimates. She holds the mirror for me with one hand while she uses her left one to move a few locks of her ginger hair out of the way. “Did Tyler do something?”

“No.” I smile at that as I unscrew the cap of my lip gloss. “He just made me realize I’ve been pretty foolish these last seven years.”

“Why is that?” Poor Cassidy doesn’t quite get it.

It makes sense since I hadn’t told her about what I did two years ago.

No one knew.

When I don’t answer, she sighs.

“Riley, this isn’t like you. If you want us to postpone the divorce settlement, we—”

“Two years ago, Tyler forced me to abort our child.”

There it is.

It feels weird to say it out loud without a hint of emotion. Before, I couldn’t get the thought to process fast enough before I broke down and cried.

It was such a hindrance to many back then.

They thought I was doing drugs or going through an existence crisis. Heck, they thought I’d sink into my depressive period forever and lose my career like so many

artists who are sucked into that emotional void until they're druggies and destroying themselves.

Guess I should be grateful I didn't land up in jail for killing Chase.

“Wh-What?”

The car slows, encouraging me to quickly glide the applicator along my pink lips.

“Two years ago. The day of the Miami concert, I told Chase I was pregnant and expecting our child,” I state slowly, so she can get every word. “He, in turn, told me to abort it. When I refused, he managed to get a drug and have it put in my water. I didn't find out until I was vomiting and sick to my stomach an hour later. I went to a private doctor, who disclosed I'd lost the baby. She'd already been threatened by Chase and couldn't disclose anything to the authorities unless she wanted to lose her practice. So... that night, I had to perform as if I wasn't losing my baby with every second that passed.”

She's absolutely silent.

After the car comes to a stop, flashing lights from the outside attempt to blind us. It's a good thing the windows are tinted, so they can't see who we are, but it must be obvious from the pink Rolls-Royce that I'm making my 'grand' entrance.

This was actually the first time using this car, so I'm sure I'll be making a statement by proving I wasn't going to be dirty broke because my NFL husband was divorcing me.

“That's why you were sick for a week after,” she mutters.

I finalize my lipstick and have the confidence to turn my head to look at her. I'm expecting her to be angry, but the level

of boiling rage in her eyes is unmistakably vivid. It must feel like a slap in the face for her, especially when I know Cassidy has been warned for years she may be unable to carry kids.

When she lowers her arms to her lap with the mirror in her grasp, she boldly returns my gaze with her fierce eyes.

“Does anyone else know?”

“Tyler,” I admit. “I don’t know what it is about him, but for the first time in my life, I can tell another everything I’ve been hiding, despite how little we’ve known each other. I know it probably sounds stupid... dangerous, even. Yet I trust him, Cassidy. More than I have Chase.”

She slowly nods, as if she just gets what I’m saying.

I love how she’s not judging me or making me feel like a complete fool for telling my life problems to a stranger I just met. She knows I follow my instincts, and they’re telling me Tyler is different from anyone I’ve been with.

He’s someone I want to have a future with. I want to learn more about him and see where this ‘connection’ will take us.

Even if it doesn’t work out in the end, I don’t feel as if he wants a malicious end for me. Not compared to Chase, who is already showing his true colors at the fake idea of me wanting to claim all his fortune and assets if he doesn’t get this divorce settlement out of the way this instant.

Cassidy reaches out until her hand grabs mine. She squeezes it tightly while her beautiful green eyes are fighting tears.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes.” Seeing her be emotional hurts. She’s not the type to cry or show any sort of weakness.

Yet, for me, she lets those walls down.

“When this is done, you’re taking a month off.”

“A-A month?” I stutter in surprise. “Can we manage that?”

“I’ll make it work,” she vows.

“Cassidy... we don’t have...”

“I talked with Tyler earlier when you were finding what to wear,” she reveals. “He suggested we do a clean sweep of the team.”

“You mean...”

Get rid of everyone?

“Ace and Jax are fine. They’ve been with us from the beginning. They’re not going anywhere,” she vouches on their behalf. She’s always loved them. You could tell they wanted my success, regardless of whether it benefited them. “They’ll sign new contracts securing their rolls, but everyone else? They’re going.”

“How will we replace them?” I whisper.

“You think we’d struggle to find those who would lose their fucking shit touring and working with mega popstar sensation Riley Maddison Sullivan?” she gasps, even as she blinks back tears. “You leave that to me.”

“Then... what do I do?”

She shifts her position so she can reach out and straighten the shoulder pads of my suit jacket. Gripping my shoulders, she looks right into my eyes.

“You are going to walk out of this car looking like the most badass bitch this world has ever seen. I want that bastard

to look at you from head to toe and be like, ‘Damn, I fucked up hard.’” She mimics his voice, which makes me snicker.

“Your imitation is horrible,” I tease, but I’m trying not to cry.

“Trust me. If we weren’t crunched on time, I’d make a hilarious imitation that would make you laugh until you cry,” she teases in return, as her pooling tears have no choice but to fall down her cheeks.

“Cassidy.”

“I want him to realize the woman he’s been neglecting for seven long years,” she whispers. “I want him to be forced to acknowledge how much better you are, how you’re the BIGGER person in all of this. I want the world to get a glimpse of the strong, bold, confident Riley Maddison Sullivan, who has portrayed the innocent pop star the world loves.”

She squeezes my shoulders.

“I want them to see that you’re not broken. No, no, no. You’re a force so fucking strong, no one will ever dare mess with you,” she vows. “And then you’re going to walk out of that building, head held high, knowing you’re a multi-millionaire dollar independent artist who built her empire from the ground up and can do it all over again.”

Cassidy...

“That’s what we’re going to do in the next four weeks. At least, that’s what I’m going to accomplish. The world will have no choice but to watch it firsthand as we scout for new blood and build a new team that will never be manipulated by someone who isn’t their boss. The new team includes doctors and representatives.”

“Lawyer and driver?” I actually like our driver, and our lawyers were about to work diligently to wrap things up smoothly.

“They can stay,” she decides with a chic tone that makes me laugh. “I like them.”

“Same.” I blink my eyes and blow out air, so I won’t cry. Cassidy pulls me into a tight hug.

“I’m sorry you didn’t think you could rely on me enough to tell me this back then,” she apologizes, which makes me shake my head into her shoulder.

“No. No. That wasn’t it at all. I just...”

I wasn’t ready to face it back then.

She pulls back and bobs her head as if she understands me.

“I get it. Back then, it wasn’t the right time,” she assumes. “But we’re entering the right era where that will never happen for as long as I’m here as your social media manager.”

“What if I wanted you to actually be my manager?” I whisper and see her eyes widen.

“You... don’t want Alicia?”

“She’s good, don’t get me wrong, but I think if we’re doing an overhaul and starting fresh, I think a certain best friend needs a promotion,” I whisper. “Besides, we could always find a worthy enough social media manager to take your place, but I need you in the highest position in this company,” I emphasize. “Well, aside from taking my place.”

She laughs. “Yeah, I can’t sing for shit.”

“That’s a lie! You can sing when we go to karaoke.”

“After a few bottles of soju,” she groans.

“Be my manager and do sports broadcasting on the side,” I encourage. “Pretty please?”

“You know I can’t say no to you.” She lightly cups my face. “Fine. I’ll get all the meetings sorted. All I need from you is to live your best life and sign a bunch of papers once I have everything sorted. Sound good?”

“Sounds amazing,” I reply with a sweet smile. “Nice not to feel alone in this.”

“You never should have felt alone, Riley,” she whispers with an empathetic look. “Your team is meant to be your rock, and I hate that because of Chase, you lost that control. It won’t happen again. I promise.” She gives me one more hug.

“That includes Tyler.”

“What about him?”

“He may have suggested shit, but he has no control in the decision-making, alright?” she stresses.

“Okay.” *I get it. Don’t want to repeat our mistakes.* “Personally... do you think he’s really interested in me?”

She stares back at me and sighs.

“Honestly, he wears his heart on his sleeve,” she confesses. “He’s not hard to read. I did a whole background check on him and everything.”

“And?” I’m nervous about what she thinks about him because her opinion matters to me.

She hated Chase but supported me because I was already married to the man. Now, with a new slate, I want her opinion, especially when she could catch if he was toxic.

“Clean. Good family background. A genuine guy who is very similar to you in a bunch of aspects. You guys like the same things, and he definitely manifested his career. Speaks things into existence, knowing he can conquer any challenge that comes his way,” she explains, meeting my curious gaze. “There’s love there. Honestly, it’s a bit crazy to witness a man fall for someone almost instantly. Then again, I wouldn’t be alive if my dad hadn’t fallen in love with my mom when meeting her during a gondola ride, so I ain’t interfering with this blossoming relationship.”

“So, you think I should try?”

“I think you should follow your instincts, which are showing you this man is VERY different from Chase,” she stresses. “A man who isn’t afraid to point out the flaws of another man to save a woman’s future is one who’s deserving of a chance. Especially when he’s proven to not be in this for personal gain.”

“That’s true,” I mutter. “He doesn’t need the money.”

“Bro is a millionaire, honey,” Cassidy reveals. “In fact, he may have just hit billionaire status and hasn’t announced it. I noticed he’s on Forbes’ Top 10 Billionaire list for 2024. They only finally announced it now because there was a miscalculation.”

“Damn. Was that announced?”

“This morning. Will be trending by noon.” Cassidy grins from ear to ear. “Just in time for your settlement to be up.”

“Lord help me,” I sigh and hug her again. “Thank you, Cassidy.”

“No, thank you for keeping me by your side and concluding I deserve to know about something so heart-

wrenching,” she replies. “As your soon-to-be manager, leave everything to me. As your best friend, we will pick a day this week to drink, cry, and sing our hearts out, and you can tell me anything you need to. I’ll never judge you, Riley. Never will.”

“I know.” I pull away and give her my biggest smile.

“Now to teach Chase who’s the real boss of this divorce!”

“He’s about to meet the true CEO of Sullivan Music Corp. today!” Cassidy declares. “Then it’s time to run his career into the fucking ground.”

“I knew you’d have something diabolical under your sleeve,” I sigh with a smirk plastered on my lips.

“The Devil works hard, my friend,” she begins. “But I, Cassidy Holmes, work harder. Just you watch.” With a wink, she gives me a thumbs up. “Go flaunt your empire and get a picture of his shock face when he realizes he fucked up.”

“I’ll make sure to get it in 4K.” I take a deep breath, then letting it out, I press the button, cueing the driver that I’m done and ready to get out.

I look at the vast crowd of photographers and reporters, anxiously waiting to get the first look at the pop star, who should be a broken mess with the cheating and divorce news trending everywhere.

This Pop Queen is ready to take back her throne.

They’re going to see me now.

* * *

“MISS SULLIVAN! Is it true you’re getting divorced today?”

“Miss Sullivan! Do you have any comments about this unexpected meeting with your cheating husband?”

“Riley! Look here!”

“Riley! Please give us a statement.”

“Is it true you want to take Mr. Benedict’s assets, Miss Sullivan?”

“Riley! Is this your way of getting back at your cheating husband?”

“How does it feel to have your marriage crumble after portraying a happy relationship for seven years?”

“Do you regret marrying Chase, Riley?”

“The public deserves to have a comment about this, Miss Sullivan!”

“Your fans deserve to know!”

“Miss Sullivan!”

“Riley!”

I’m grateful for the rotating glass doors that silence the endless reporters and paparazzi asking stupid questions and making even stupider statements.

As if I owe anyone anything.

That’s the problem with being a celebrity.

Sometimes, there comes a point in your life when your life is shared so much, you no longer have control over what is exposed to the limelight. I never wanted my relationship or even marriage to be out in the world for everyone to dissect. It

was Chase who enjoyed labeling us as the perfect couple, especially when I began to make my rise to fame.

Now, it was here to bite me in the ass, despite barely contributing to the grand demise of our seven-year relationship.

It sucks, really.

Then again, I know the only thing they can use against me is showing the world how my husband enjoys doggy style on locker room floors.

I'm a bit pleased the topic is still trending.

“God, they’re annoying,” Cassidy groans and is already dialing a number into her phone. “Hey, Ricky? Yeah, we need to up security upfront. No way are we dealing with that madness when this is done. Can you manage? You’re a saint. Yes, we’re fine with Florida News being close by. They don’t ask stupid, biased questions. Got it.”

“So we won’t be bombarded when this is over?” I conclude as I see my lawyers waiting for us near the private elevator.

They wave to us in greeting as they await our arrival.

“He’ll make it possible. Also, depending on how this goes, if you don’t want any press, we can get that shutdown real quick,” Cassidy assures me.

“Good to know my options,” I admit, just as my phone buzzes in my suit jacket pocket. Taking it out, I arch an eyebrow at the message displayed on the screen.

More like the name assigned to the contact in question.

Cassidy leans over to see why I’m smirking far too wide.

“Quarterback Husband?” She sounds appalled, which makes me laugh as we reach my lawyers.

With a quick exchange of greetings, we head into the elevator.

“He’s obsessed.” Cassidy sounds disappointed.

“He’s manifesting,” I correct and watch her roll her eyes.

“Don’t you get the ick from his sheer confidence?”

“I think it’s cute,” I sweetly admit. “C’mon. You’re saying if a man declared you’d be his wife without a hint of doubt in his mind, you wouldn’t be intrigued?”

“That expression is nowhere close to intrigued, Riley Maddison Sullivan,” Cassidy accuses.

“What does it look like?” I have to know because this argument with her is amusing in a tense time like this.

“That’s what I call a pop star falling for an NFL Quarterback,” she huffs and shakes her head. “I don’t like it. I don’t like it at all!”

“You’re being dramatic,” I tease. “I should make a TikTok of you saying those exact words.”

“When this is over, I will,” she vows.

“And I’ll get a certain someone’s best friend to repost it,” I hum and watch her eyes widen.

“Which best friend?”

“You know exactly who I’m referring to.”

“Riley Maddison Sullivan,” she snarls while I giggle.

“I didn’t say his name.”

“The fact this being is a HE confirms who you’re talking about,” she scolds. “It’s a no!”

“You have to share the tea with me about him,” I hum before pressing my hands along my sparkling suit. “Anyhoo, it’s show time.”

“Oh, you’re so not getting away with this,” Cassidy huffs, which makes me and my lawyers smile as the elevator slows to a stop.

My smile drops as I take on a serious expression. The ding of the elevator arriving on the top floor confirms we are about to confront this settlement now.

I can do this.

With the elevator doors opening, my lawyers take the lead, followed by Cassidy. I’m the grand prize at the end, our formation flawless as we seem to move down the lengthy hall as one solid unit.

I can already see the nosey office workers with their phones out on record, which is a little funny because it’s very obvious they’re trying to get our entrance at any angle possible.

Without being caught by their boss, of course.

It’s not long before we reach the end of the hall, which leads to another set of doors. Soon enough, we’re checking in with the secretary, who escorts us to the main meeting room on this floor. Taking a glimpse out the window as we head down the hall confirms the mass of people—mostly fans—who are stationed far and wide on the streets, the sidewalks, the grass, and even some statues and stone walls. A sea of fans is collected down there, waving signs of support and cheering my name.

I'm certain Chase didn't expect this, especially with how last-minute this meeting was set to be.

However, he wanted the paparazzi to be front and center to paint the narrative he craved.

Someone must have tipped my fan base, and it spread like wildfire.

Peering up at the sky confirms a helicopter in the sky trailing a big banner with 'YOU GOT THIS RILEY' in big glittering letters.

My fans...

It's hard not to get emotional when thinking about them.

The levels of support they've shone over the years is what is helping me stand my ground now.

That, and Tyler's presence.

I never got to answer his text, but I'm sure he'll understand. After this settlement is over, we can do whatever we want.

Hold hands? Kiss? Fuck like crazy horndogs?

The idea of riding whatever Tyler has been 'attempting' to hide in those boxers sends shivers through me. I got a glimpse of his junk in those damn sinful grey sweatpants.

Now, I need to hold his thick, veiny girth in my grasp before seeing how much I can stuff in my mouth.

"Ready?" Cassidy whispers over her shoulder, pulling me out of my naughty thoughts.

"Mhmm." I'm more than ready.

This has to finally end.

The doors open, revealing the long table with a judge at the end, while Chase and one other individual in a casual suit—*who I assume is his lawyer*—are sitting on the right side.

We don't hesitate to move to the empty chairs on the left side. Cassidy takes the far-end chair, allowing me to be in the middle between her and the female lawyer, Kathy. Eric and Carlos take their seats next, and our court reporter, Lisa, sits at the end, ready with a tape recorder and her silent typewriter.

The judge looks impressed by my entourage of support versus Chase, who literally has only his lawyer.

“Mr. Benedict,”—the judge looks his way—“are you waiting for anyone else to join this private courtroom today?”

“The rest of my team are having difficulties getting to this location,” Chase mutters. His displeasure is well engraved in the lines of his face as he's clearly taking me in.

I haven't dolled up like this in a long time, probably before our marriage, when we were in the dating and engagement stages. I'm wearing heavier makeup and have a sophisticated business style. With my glittering suit that shifted between neon pink and silver, matched with my hair that is in the perfect set of bountiful curls, I'm sure I was reminding him of the old me.

The woman who hadn't been tainted by his gimmicks. Shadowed and ridiculed for wanting a calmer lifestyle, at least in the quietness of our home.

Lightly licking my glossed lips, I really hope I get a good photo of my overall look today since I'm serving pink flawlessness.

That and my limited, one-of-a-kind pink Christian Louboutins.

“You were the one who scheduled this meeting with very little notice on Miss Sullivan’s end,” the judge acknowledges fairly. “I’m intrigued as to why your team is struggling to arrive here in a timely manner.”

“If all those fans weren’t forcing the streets to be shut down, my team COULD be here by now,” he snaps angrily at the poor man.

It takes his lawyer clearing his throat to make him realize the judge isn’t the person he should be targeting his anger toward.

Not like he couldn’t use his common sense for that one.

“Sorry, your Honor,” Chase’s lawyer begins. “Despite the last-minute effort to get this set up thanks to your gracious courtesy, it appears there may have been a leak with the news and paparazzi being summoned. That leak of information must have reached Miss Sullivan’s fans, which is why they’ve now gathered in the midst of downtown to show their support to their celebrity idol.”

He smiles my way, but I don’t buy it one bit.

Man just wants his hefty paycheck.

“I apologize on my client’s behalf. You can understand from his perspective the disappointment and how upsetting it can be when the remainder of his supporting team has contacted us and confirmed their inability to reach this site, even by foot.”

The judge looks unimpressed.

“Therefore, Ronald, you can confirm that no one else from Mr. Benedict’s team will be showing up, despite an additional five-minute grace period,” the judge summarizes.

“I can confirm that this is the current circumstance, your Honor.”

“Very well.” He looks at both parties. “We can begin.”

* * *

“FINALLY, in regard to the designated income and assets for each party,” Katy begins but is interrupted by Chase.

“We don’t need to go through such information, or we’ll be here for another three hours,” he grumbles. “I was assured this settlement would be quick and not time-consuming. I have a flight to catch in less than an hour, and with the extensive traffic and road closures outside, it’s becoming very apparent that my plans may be meddled with due to these interferences.”

Poor Ronald looks so annoyed with his client, he doesn’t even speak up to apologize on his behalf for what has to be the tenth interruption in the last three hours.

I haven’t said much of a word aside from confirming my identity, date of birth, and a few details my lawyers and Cassidy were unable to provide. Other than that, I’ve calmly sat in this chair, one leg over the other, as I listened to the prenup we’d signed and the legal legislation regarding such an agreement. I can see why divorce settlements take a long ass time to deal with.

It’s very time-consuming.

I can also see why Chase wants to wrap this up the moment we reach the finances section.

Doesn’t want to give me any ideas.

Tyler was right about Chase being infatuated with the idea of me financially benefiting from him. Makes me wonder how much he knows about Chase to have a good intuitive impression of him.

“Are you saying, Mr. Benedict, that you do not wish to review the current assets and the financial aspects of your income, business income, as well as Riley’s income and business income?” the judge inquires, looking far too annoyed. The man is surely counting the seconds until he gets to dismiss this case and kick Chase out of there.

“It’s unnecessary,” Chase emphasizes as his impatient eyes meet my calm ones. “As you can tell from the very beginning of our marriage, if not relationship, I’ve been the main breadwinner. My income is very generous, thanks to my earned positions and promotions in my career from being a tight end for the Florida Kingsman Chiefs to upgrading to the business manager for the Pennsylvania Jet Hawks.”

He purposely smiles while attempting to fix his suit in hopes I’d acknowledge whatever brand it is. I doubt it’s one of the suits he purchased. The last two years, I noticed Chase has been renting most of his attire, including his diamond jewels and suits.

Nothing wrong with that, obviously, but it’s rather deceptive to try to act like you’re a multi-millionaire—*if not a billionaire in Chase’s eyes*—but deceptively rent and borrow clothing and valuables from others to project a false image.

Anything to feed his ego, but I guess it’s a good thing we celebrities get to cut corners with this process and skip over what other couples would be forced to review and endure.

Time is money, and we gotta get moving on in our lives.

“Just because the streets are filled with Miss Sullivan’s fans doesn’t negate that she’s even close to my tax bracket,” Chase summarizes with a sly smirk. *Ouch*. “Which is exactly why I wished to speed up this process and settle this like civilized adults. I do not wish for the public, especially the media, to give off the impression that my soon-to-be ex-wife was only married to me to benefit from my financial empire. Therefore, with much ‘respect’ to her, I wanted to get this out of the way.”

Respect? God. What a lying fucking asshole.

“You see, Judge, due to some recent falsified reports, I’m having to prove my innocence and rebuild the empire I’ve created for our family. Now that it’s very clear Miss Sullivan doesn’t have the same vision as I do, it’s only right for us to go our separate ways so we can return to our normal lives.”

The judge doesn’t appear impressed by his words. Glancing my way, I can see in his black eyes a hint of sympathy. He must be questioning how I lasted five-plus years married to this man.

“Miss Sullivan? Any comments or objections to skipping the financial portion of this settlement?”

“No, your Honor,” I reassure him. “I’m normally the one who manages the taxes and financial management for both of us and the companies, so I have a good understanding of our individual assets on the business and personal level. You can proceed and read all those essential details once we’ve both signed and confirmed the settlement.” I pause to meet Chase’s gaze. “I do not wish to continue to waste Mr. Benedict’s time. Especially when he has an important flight to catch.”

Honestly, I’m so behind with taxes in general, so I haven’t kept up with last year’s expenses. Either way, I can figure that

out or even hire an accountant to assist me with such.

With Chase out of the picture, I can actually outsource some of the things I had to carry by myself. It's going to be refreshing to be able to get the support I've craved for years.

"Now we're talking," he replies and tries to give me a smile, but it doesn't reach his eyes in the slightest.

In fact, it looks malicious in nature.

Crazy how I was married to this man for five years.

Known him for seven, yet he can't even recall the few good times we did experience together.

All the times I supported him, despite the financial downs and the struggles he experienced from mismanagement until I swooped in and helped with his finances.

He was an alcoholic with a gambling addiction who would have ruined his entire career if I hadn't stood my ground at sixteen years old.

This proves how forgetful some men can be when they're no longer able to hide their secrets in the shadows of the public eye.

Here, I thought we'd one day raise a family together. What a joke.

"Then shall we wrap this up?"

We share our agreements before we begin signing the paperwork.

Chase is ready to jet by the time I finalize my signature on the last page, my lawyers having taken the extra time to read things out so I could process it better. Obviously, I could read and comprehend the majority of what was written in these

lengthy packages, but having my three lawyers break things down in a more modernized language really made a difference.

Unlike Chase, I wanted to ensure I read the fine print and knew what he could no longer do or use against me.

“Are we done?” Chase stands up impatiently, which makes his lawyer pinch his nose in obvious frustration.

“Mr. Benedict, sit down. Your Honor needs to read the final statement,” his lawyer practically begs him with his obviously angered voice.

“Unless you all plan to chip into the hourly million I’m going to have to pay to keep my private jet parked in wait for me, I really can’t waste any more time here.”

“Everyone remains seated as I read the finalized verdict of this settlement between Chase Arnold Benedict and Riley Maddison Sullivan,” the judge begins and is specifically glaring at Chase, who has no choice but to lower back into his seat.

With a very dramatic eye roll and clearing of his throat, the judge looks at our recorder, which gives her permission to pull out her phone to make visual footage for us to both keep as evidence this divorce settlement happened and the concluded rights were spoken to both parties.

“As we have gathered today to finalize the divorce between Mister Chase Arnold Benedict and Miss Riley Maddison Sullivan, both parties have come to an agreement that neither side will financially pursue the other for any financial backing, welfare, physical assets, properties, and accounts of financial savings. This may include liabilities and personal properties such as cars, belongings, and anything of suitable value to the respective party. Both parties concluded

that they wish for this settlement to be approved and respected today, Tuesday, February 25, 2025, and no further persecutions or actions should be used against either party. Doing so may result in further legal action in protection of the accused party, in which this document and court gathering can and will be used against the combating party.”

He pauses to glance between us, waiting for any objection. When the silence lingers, he carries on.

“Due to the swift circumstance, the financial review was escalated and blind-sighted by both parties. Due to the state of law, it is my job to at least provide a summarized figure of each party’s net worth to avoid future allegations or confrontations that can be made or falsified.”

He pauses again, and I swear Chase’s foot is tapping impatiently against the tiled floor.

I’m admiring my Swarovski crystal nail design when he reads the figures.

“Mister Chase Arnold Benedict, your net worth as of today, Tuesday, February 25th, 2025, is a total of \$2,500,000.04.”

I lift my gaze slightly, and how fucking rewarding it is to watch the literal color fade from his previously red face.

Every second that follows shows the dramatic lines of anger fade away as complete shock takes over his now pale complexion. It only worsens when his jaw drops at the realization of his actual net worth.

Mind you, when he signed for his manager promotion with the Jet Hawks, he was enjoying a twenty-five million net worth that went up yearly.

“Miss Riley Maddison Sullivan, your net worth as of today, Tuesday, February 25th, 2025, is a total of \$205,500,550.55.”

The room is silent.

Pin dropping silent.

“Wait... what?” That’s not the figure I expected in the slightest. “A-Are you sure those figures are correct?”

“Yes, Miss Sullivan. These were confirmed this morning by both parties and were re-evaluated again with the inclusion of both parties’ personal and individual businesses,” the judge reveals. “Since neither of you shared a business together, it was rather easy with additional professional accountants on site to confirm these details. You both can confirm and see the entire breakdown in your folders after this is done,” he assures us and grabs his gavel.” He smirks and looks around the table, then at the recording device being aimed in his direction.

“With no further comment, we may end this session and confirm the divorce that has occurred today at 11:59 a.m., Tuesday, February 25th, 2025. Let’s allow Mr. Benedict to be swiftly on his way to catch his private flight,” he says with a smile that is rubbing the alcohol into the obvious open wound. “Court is adjourned.”

With the slam of the gavel, I realize I’m a six-figure multi-millionaire who’s officially single.

“BITCH!” Cassidy screams and shakes me. “205 MILLION? WHAT? WHEN? HOW? Wasn’t it fifty mil last year?!”

“Th-That was before the two albums that blew up,” I confess and look up at her in disbelief. “Holy fucking shit. I’m single.”

“SINGLE AND READY TO FUCKING MINGLE!” This girl has me up in a tight hug before she’s looking at the stunned man who previously couldn’t wait to get the fuck out of there.

Chase Arnold Benedict.

My new ex-husband.

“Let’s do our diligence and make our way out of here promptly, so our opposing party can swiftly make it to his private jet appointment,” Cassidy says far too loudly, knowing the phone is still recording this grand conclusion. “Don’t want you paying one million for every hour wasted, right?”

She cues our team to gather their stuff and leave, and for once in my life, I experience the euphoria of not hearing Chase say a single word.

The moment we’re in the elevator and the doors come to a close, we’re screaming like lunatics and congratulating one another.

“WE DID IT!”

“A BIG congratulations to you, Miss Sullivan. What an excellent turn of events.”

“I’m still trying to process how Mr. Benedict only has two million to his name?”

The conversation has Cassidy pulling me out of the hug to turn her attention to them.

“What was up with that? That wasn’t a ploy or something?” Cassidy ponders before she glances up, noticing the elevator camera. “Actually, hold all the thoughts. Why don’t we have this discussion maybe later this week at a private location?”

Everyone seems to clue in on what she's doing, nodding in agreement before she squeezes me once more.

"Okay, Miss Riley Maddison Sullivan," she dramatically states while straightening my glittering jacket.

"Please don't tell me you're going to address me with my full name AND title," I whine. It's honestly amusing because, knowing Cassidy for as long as I have, she has no problem using your entire birth certificate name to address you at any time or place.

"I have to accentuate your single status, Miss Riley," she declares and gives me a wink with the 'shortened' version of my lengthy name. "Now that we got rid of that cheating feign in your life, it's time to enjoy the rest of the day!"

"I don't even know what to do," I admit, realizing I hadn't planned what I would do if I won this thing.

No. I wasn't sure if this would go in my favor, which is exactly why I have nothing planned.

"Just focus on making our grand exit, and I'll have a set of events for you to do and keep busy before you reach our lunch venue."

"Lunch venue?"

"What? Did you think we wouldn't be having a lunch celebration party and end the night with a special divorce party?"

"You scheduled a lunch and evening divorce party?" I stare at her like she's a lunatic.

Actually, Cassidy sometimes does act like one.

"If you thought we weren't going to clink some fancy glassware in an extravagant restaurant, surrounded by your

dearest friends and family, then you've forgotten the power I hold in my possession."

"As long as family means just my brothers."

I watch her wink as she gives my shoulders a final tap.

"That should be a given, my newly divorced best friend and boss."

I laugh and shake my head as the elevator slows down.

"If you're this powerful as my social media manager, I'm quivering in fear for your competitors."

"Watch me play my cards right and have everyone's signed resignation letters on your home office desk by Friday."

"You're unbelievably scary," I conclude with a wide grin. "I'll be impressed if you manage that."

"It's not 'if,' Miss Manifester," she corrects and winks. "It's already done, and I'm most deserving of a pay raise."

With a spin to face the opening doors, we walk out of the elevator to see the massive crowd that somehow managed to get into the building. Thank goodness for security, who not only stand before the blocked barriers that secure a path straight to the rotating doors but also are enough to make an additional line path to ensure no one tries to jump us.

I've never seen so much support and excitement publicly like this, but all I can do is keep it professional as I maintain a calm expression without giving too much away.

"The car should be waiting for you, Miss Sullivan." Cassidy is all professional as we reach the rotating doors. It's hard to hear anything with all the screaming and squeals. Adding the multiple shutter sounds echoing from outside, I'm

sure the papz are extra excited to see me now that the settlement is finished.

“You’re not coming?” I ask, my voice much lower to maintain some sort of privacy.

“Gotta do that planning,” she assures me. Knowing Cassidy and how she gets into the roll of things, she probably is more productive without me present.

Similar to how I get into my moments where I must write down all the lyrics to a song blooming in my head.

“Meet you at the venue, then?” I’m sure if she scheduled a car that means I’m on my way there, and a new outfit, including jewelry and heels, will be awaiting me. Maybe even a whole makeup crew to do a different look to compliment whatever outfit was chosen for this celebration lunch.

“Yes,” she agrees and smiles. “Have an amazing ride, Miss Riley Maddison Sullivan.”

She just has to say it loud and firm enough for the eavesdropping fans to squeal and further catch our interaction on their recording phones.

My social media manager is an instigator who enjoys admiring the fruits of her labor.

I guess she’s the reason why I blew up on social media, anyway.

Her unique ways of causing drama by glamorizing my name in the slightest way is why my net worth is 250 million.

“I’ll see you in a bit,” I declare and look back at my lawyers before bowing my head to each of them. “We’ll be in touch.”

“Yes, Miss Sullivan,” they reply and give me half bows in return.

With a final look in Cassidy’s direction, we share a smile before I go through the glass doors. If the screams and squeals were loud inside, they’re at deafening volumes outside, and the massive lobby of this building looks like a tiny oasis of screaming fans.

My appearance makes them go wild, while I notice the Florida News camera and interview farthest to my right, awaiting my attention. I take a few steps with the intention of giving them a brief acknowledgment, but my eyes catch something twinkling at the bottom of the stairs.

Sparkling roses.

Not just ordinary roses.

Brilliant pink roses covered in sparkling glitter that twinkles enchantingly under the sun’s rays.

I’m completely transfixed by the beautiful presentation of what has to be one hundred roses in the perfect bouquet. The presentation had to be accounted for with the emphasis on detail, from the clear and sparkling white wrapping paper to the unique silk ribbon that shifts from pure white to a rosy pink.

My tunnel vision forces everyone to follow my gaze, making me acknowledge that there has to be someone behind that massive display of glittering flowers. The bouquet moves to one side, revealing the tall, chiseled man in a suit that has everyone losing their minds.

Heck, I’m completely compelled by his grand reveal.

The suit isn’t your average crisp suit. It’s glittering as brightly as mine. In all my years of fashion, I’ve never seen a

man wear a suit of glitter. I'm sure it's for obvious reasons; the majority of men feel squeamish at the idea of giving any reflection of a softened exterior, but wow.

This man in a glittering suit looks like a descending god from the heavens.

When our eyes lock, I almost forget to breathe. It's not due to his handsome or how he smiles at me the moment my attention is solely his.

It's the pride.

The palpable, radiant level of pride he carries in his wondrous eyes can bring me to tears in this instance. No man has ever looked at me this way—look so proud of whatever I've accomplished in his eyes. My own father didn't show such an expression when I got the highest GPA score in my entire University when revealed on the graduation stage or achieved sold-out stadiums.

Yet here's Tyler Sinclair Owens.

Standing in the perfect sequin suit with a bouquet of one hundred sparkling pink roses, all because I made it through a three-hour divorce settlement.

And now I can be his...

“W-We're LIVE here at Panorama Tower, where celebrity singer Riley Sullivan has just exited from what we were informed was an unexpected divorce settlement with her husband, Chase Benedict. As we all witnessed LIVE, Mr. Benedict was caught cheating on his wife with the first female broadcaster of the Super Bowl! Since then, there have been plenty of talks of a potential divorce, especially with Mrs. Sullivan's absence, but we were tipped today that there would be a divorce settlement happening this morning on Mr.

Benedict's behalf!" I overhear the news reporter quickly saying to the camera before she makes her way to me.

"However, in an amazing turn of events, which has the waiting fans losing their minds, is the sudden appearance of Super Bowl Champion Quarterback of the Florida Kingsman Chiefs, Tyler Sinclair Owens!"

Hearing her confirm I'm not hallucinating makes the corner of my lips begin to rise while I admire him from the top of the stairs.

"As you can see, ladies and gentlemen, the celebrity quarterback is standing at the bottom of the stairs in front of a Rolls Royce, holding a bouquet of pink glitter roses! I've never seen a man look SO good. I believe he can ignite a new trend from this overall execution of presentation!" the reporter emphasizes and is now next to me.

I notice security is already standing on my left side, my eyes taking in Ricky's familiar features. I'm not surprised that he's right next to me. He's especially overprotective in spaces so openly public like these.

"Mrs. Sullivan! Is Mr. Owens' presence invited?"

What a weird way of wording a question.

"I wasn't aware Mr. Owens would be here," I reply earnestly as I briefly pull my gaze away to give them my main focus. "And it's Miss Sullivan."

Of course, I'm pulling a Cassidy.

"M-My apologies, Miss Sullivan," the reporter apologizes and seems surprised by my correction. "Does this mean the divorce settlement actually happened?"

“Yes,” I reply and sweetly smile. “My now ex-husband had unexpectedly contacted my lawyers, stating he wished to end our marriage from a legal standpoint. I saw no need to delay it, which is why I’m here.”

“I’m extremely impressed by your swiftness, Miss Sullivan,” the reporter stresses in haste, knowing from my back-and-forth look between them and Tyler that I really don’t want to be here for too long. “Some speculated you’d delay the process due to financial shares and benefits.”

“Unnecessary.” I shake my head for added emphasis. “Mr. Benedict and I are mature adults with professional careers. Some may believe being a pop star is not a worthy enough job that contributes to the world’s economy, but with how tight my schedule is, this seemed like the better route. Besides, we had no shared businesses, so why delay and hold another back from achieving their goals and dreams?”

“An amazing answer,” the reporter praises. “What’s next for you, Miss Sullivan? With Tyler’s appearance, does this mean you’re taking his offer to make you his wife?”

I smirk at that one while attempting not to completely blush. I’m sure this footage will be going viral in a matter of minutes.

“I’d say, why not?” I shrug my shoulders. “I’ve learned from this marriage that I may have been very young and naive entering something that only I assumed would be long term. Time changes people, and frankly, we can no longer ‘hope’ they remain the individuals they once were at the beginning of a relationship or a deeply rooted contract like marriage.”

Glancing back to Tyler, I further smile as my eyes soften.

“However, does it mean I’m going to live my life in fear of making mistakes? No.” *That’s the real truth.* “My previous marriage has a lot of layers I’ve yet to dissect. However, meeting someone who approaches love and attraction differently is rather enlightening. Whether that makes me a fool jumping from a divorce into another relationship, so be it, but I think it’s rather bold of Mr. Owens to make a move promptly after my settlement.”

“From the tone of your voice, you approve,” she asks for confirmation.

“More than approving,” I reply and reach out for Ricky’s hand so he can assist me down the multiple flights of stairs. “One man’s trash may very well be another treasure. Now, it’s my turn to confirm whether that saying is true in Mr. Owen’s eyes. Have a pleasant afternoon, and thank you to all my fans who traveled here to give me your overflowing support.”

With a wide grin at the camera, I make my departure, igniting screams left and right. I can’t help but pause, wave, sign a few fan’s arms and posters, and take a few selfies.

By the time I finally reach Tyler, I’m impressed he hasn’t lost all his arm strength holding those flowers.

“Either your bicep curl routine is impressive, or you’re still holding those flowers with every ounce of strength in you,” I declare the moment I reach him.

He grins, making fans left and right swoon at the sight of his white teeth.

“I do have to make sure I keep these chiseled arms fit,” he reasons and lifts the bouquet up and down for added measure. “No trembling arms yet. Guess that means my bicep curl game is on point.”

I snicker and shake my head.

“So, I can safely assume those are for me?” I shyly wonder as I blink my eyes at him.

“Well, it depends,” he admits as he lifts his chin up a bit while one eyebrow raises in question. “Are you Mrs. Sullivan or Miss Riley Maddison Sullivan?”

“Hmmm. Not so hard of a question, but I’m curious as to why it’s being asked?”

“You’re still wearing your ring, Songbird,” he says with a wink. I’m still trying to get over his husky voice when it finally clicks.

He’s right. I’m still wearing my wedding ring.

“I forgot,” I admit and look at the left ring finger to confirm the miniature diamond’s presence. “Now, can’t be living my first moments as single with this on.”

Taking it off, I’m so tempted to throw it into the closest sewer, but I’m sure everyone is waiting for me to do something petty with the diamond.

We won’t fall for those games.

Offering it to Ricky, I give him a pleased look.

“Ricky? Can you get this analyzed, cleaned, and ready for auction? I’m sure Cassidy can get everything sorted, but I’d like you to let her know I want this auctioned today, with all proceeds going to charity. I’ll disclose the organization before the auction is closed. I’d like to have a bit of time to think about it.”

“Yes, Miss Sullivan,” Ricky replies and takes the ring from my grasp.

Returning my attention to Tyler, I give him a saucy grin.

“Now you can ask that question again,” I encourage, which makes him chuckle.

God, that sounds so delightful.

“No need, Miss Sullivan,” he announces and offers me the bouquet of flowers. “Or should I say, my Songbird?”

“Did your mom raise you to be so bold in anything you do?” I wonder as I accept the flowers. The aroma encourages me to take a deep inhale and let it out. “These smell so amazing.”

“I’m glad you like the scent because it’s all over the interior of the car,” he admits and offers his hand. “As for my mom and how she raised me, she always encouraged us to fight for what we want in life. Sometimes, that includes coming down and surprising the woman you’re interested in with much-deserving flowers all the way from Dubai to give her a glimpse of the stacks you’d go to see her smile.”

I’m gawking in surprise instead.

“Fr-From Dubai?” My voice goes up an octave in surprise. “No way.”

“Handpicked from the Miracle Garden, specially designed by famous florist Gregor Lersch, who’s a good friend of mine currently visiting Dubai. Carried by hand during a sixteen-hour flight and brought to me three hours ago so I could have it ready for you after your lengthy meeting.”

I’m speechless.

Literally speechless.

“I hope it’s to your liking, Riley.”

To my liking?! These are the most expensive flowers I've ever received in my entire life.

“Please tell me these can be preserved,” I whisper. “I have to keep them forever.”

Ricky leans in to whisper, “We can make arrangements.”

I beam at his words before giving Tyler my full attention.

“These are beyond my liking, Tyler. They're absolutely magnificent. Thank you for such an exquisite gift.”

“That's only the beginning,” he encourages as I lay my hand in his. “Ready for lunch? Don't want to keep your family and friends waiting.”

“Lunch?”

“You're not hungry?” Tyler inquires. “I'd be starving after three hours of grueling negotiations and signing papers.”

“I'm famished,” I admit. “But my family and friends for lunch? When did you organize such?”

“During your settlement,” he reveals and reaches over to take my bouquet and offers it to two men in white suits. “Can you please make sure these are well secured? We'll be coming late tonight.”

“Yes, Mr. Owens,” they declare and bow in reply. With the way they're acting, you'd think Tyler was the prince of America.

“Did Cassidy help?” I wonder as the driver bows to us and opens the door.

“Your best friend and social media manager is the queen of arrangements,” Tyler replies and allows me to wave to my fans one last time.

I hear a commotion from behind us and glance back to see Chase at the very top of the stairs. He seems breathless, as if instead of using the elevator, he went down all the flights of stairs to get to the lobby. Honestly, I expected him to be gone by now, especially with his apparent private jet waiting for him, but seeing him now only confirms this was the right call for my life.

No more control.

No more abuse.

No more lowering myself for a man who may have never loved me.

It must have finally clicked in his mind that he'll no longer have a woman who did everything to appease his needs until he left me broken in a pool of blood and endless tears.

“Shall we go, Riley?” Tyler prompts as his hand gently squeezes mine.

A reminder that I'm not alone.

I'm supported.

This is my time to start anew with nothing holding me back.

“Let's go,” I encourage as I force my gaze to pull away from the man I called my husband for five years.

Unlike before, I genuinely can't see a future between us any longer.

From acquaintances to lovers, from husband and wife to strangers once more.

This new love may be risky, but I'll make sure I don't make the same mistakes.

This time around, I'll get everything I deserve and more.

A BURST OF ADMIRATION



~TYLER~

“Pride can’t defy how good it felt watching Riley exit that building before the world. You could tell from far and wide that the burden her marriage carried upon her shoulders had taken off and flown into the atmosphere. Long gone and never returning to weigh her down again. I could see it. Her fans could see it. I’m most certain she could feel it. The best part of it all was being front and center in wait for her. To make a bold move to get the world’s attention that Riley is deserving of a real man in her life. Some call me the definition of ‘if a man could, he would’ movement that’s trending, like this grand moment will be. Needless to say, I’m doing what I want to acquire the woman I feel destined to be with. I’m sure there will be bumps. That things won’t go as smoothly as either of us may wish, but no one lingers on the ‘what ifs’ when it comes to love. You just go for it and fight to keep flying through the blissful high that comes with falling in love.”

— **Journal Entry #559**

“ ***J*** wonder how hard the shame campaign will go?”

Glancing over to Riley confirms those worried lines along her beautiful face as she stares at her phone in her lap.

I can tell she's been fighting every urge to text Cassidy since the moment we settled in the back of this Rolls-Royce, but she continues to resist.

Despite me encouraging her to do what she thinks is necessary.

“You're really confident that Chase is going to roam to every news broadcasting agency and run your name into the ground?” I inquire as if I don't know the answer.

He would.

It just depends on how desperate he is to ruin Riley's reputation.

Riley looks over at me, her stunning eyes having an alluring effect on me.

Those eyes are filled with uncertainty.

“Honestly, yes.” There's no doubt in her reply. “He has two million to his name, Tyler.”

Now, it's my turn to be surprised as I arch an eyebrow in her direction.

“I'm sorry, Songbird, but that's literally impossible.”

Chase is from a prestigious family of rich motherfuckers. Adding his career in management only further emphasizes that his net worth has to be much higher than mine.

And I'm at fifty-five million the last time I checked.

“The judge didn't stutter.” She puts her phone in her sparkling purse.

“You're not going to text Cassidy?” I sidetrack the conversation. “You don't have to delay it on my behalf.”

“No.” She slips her hand into mine. “I want to focus on you and me right now.”

God. I do, too, Riley.

“The judge announced his net worth was two million and change,” she confessed, sounding baffled by the idea. To others, that’s a big sum of money for one’s net worth, but with Chase’s lifestyle, that’s pennies.

“Does the judge need prescribed glasses?”

She laughs. “He probably needs a daily dose of Tylenol with how Chase was pissing him off. His Honor was going to pop a blood vessel with how many times Chase interrupted with the emphasis he needed to get going because he has travel plans.”

“Had,” I correct. “There’s no way he can afford to fly out with two million. Actually, how will he pay his lawyer?”

“Is his lawyer expensive?” she wonders and leans into me.

I lift my arm so I can press her closer against me.

I wish she understood how amazing this feels right now, making a public move like I did and being rewarded with her approval of it.

Now, she’s in my arms as we make our way to the private lunch I worked with Cassidy to create.

Having Cassidy on my side—even if she doesn’t want to admit it in words yet—has made all of this a bit easier to convey.

“Ronald Armstrong, Jr. is one of the best lawyers in the divorce category.”

“How do you know that?” she ponders with a curious look.

“Had to reach out to him when the wedding fell through,” I quietly confess. “Brock encouraged me to ask him a few questions and ensure my assets and finances were safe from Britney’s greedy hands. She actually tried to pull something, but the moment she overheard Brock mention Ronald, she backtracked real quick.”

“Brock told her?”

“Brock is the loud-as-fuck best friend who doesn’t have a filter or public awareness,” I summarize with a smile. “Also, it wasn’t like I told her. Britney is the type to stalk you until she can insert herself into a public situation that’s very tedious to get her out of.”

“Meaning you were probably at an event or club, minding your own business, talking with good people, and voilà... Madam Ex shows up, ready to clutch her pearls and demand her imaginary rights.”

“You know...” I begin and trail off because she’s right on. “How did you just predict that?”

“I’ve watched enough videos during my downtime over the years to see the 411 on ‘How to Get Your Man Back,’ TikTok edition. You’d be surprised what great lengths a woman would go to get their man back. Especially when they realize he’s a baller.”

“Wow. There’s no shame anymore, huh?”

“Can’t feel shame when you’re enjoying the extravagant life of Hermès Bags and Cartier bracelets.”

“Would you do that?”

“Nope.” She seems bored by the idea. “I enjoy making my own money. It gives me the power I was never privileged when I was younger. I mean, did I come from a rich family?”

Yes. However, those funds weren't something I was given the ability to flaunt unless it had a purpose behind it."

"Is that why you didn't want your parents invited to lunch?" I inquire while my fingers play with her curled blonde locks.

Her hair is so soft...and smells good, too.

"Did Cassidy say that?" she inquires and looks up at me.

"She said you and your parents aren't on great terms," I admit. "Though, if your life is anything as they display in articles, I knew that."

"My dad isn't too bad," she admits. "My mom... well... if it wasn't for me blowing up in the music industry, I doubt she'd even take my calls.

"Is it important for me to delve in? As in, should I know enough to play it cool at lunch just in case they show up?"

She thinks about it.

"Dad shows his love in an odd way. If he's present, it means he supports you, but you'll never get a smile out of him. He likes to drill us like a sergeant and only says he loves you once a year during Christmas time. He's emotionally unavailable since he spends all his time trying to survive my obnoxious mother, who wants nothing but perfection, but this past Christmas, he did admit he's proud of what I achieved and listened to a few of my songs. That's a first." She leans against me and glances out her window.

We're stuck in traffic, so this is the perfect time to talk a bit.

"Mother... she's a complicated shell I'm tired of attempting to crack open. My success only made her angrier,

as if I'm living the life she always wanted. Kinda made me wish for another mother, to be honest. Not be around a woman who sees me as competition. My weight and appearance were a big deal for her, so obviously, when I started dating someone almost ten years older than me, she basically wanted to disown me. Almost did, actually. I think it couldn't go through unless my father signed the dotted line." She smirks and lifts her head to peer into my eyes. "That's the first time I heard my dad yell back at her."

"He was against it?"

"Full blown 'No' and stomped out of the house. I was scared they would get a divorce. It was the first time my dad denied her what she wanted." She tries to hide the slight sadness that flickers in her eyes. "She ignored him for almost a year, but she did talk to him to pass the mashed potatoes that year at Christmas Dinner, so we assumed they would be alright."

"Wow..." Her family dynamic is so different from mine. "Glad they weren't invited, then."

"Knowing my mom, she may make an appearance."

"I don't want anyone crashing your lunch when you're supposed to be celebrating," I mutter. "That wasn't the reason for this gathering."

"You're right," she agrees. "But from what you said earlier, we have later plans, yes?"

From how she looks at me with those doe eyes of hers, I struggle not to kiss her.

Fuck... Calm yourself, Owens.

"Divorce party at a nice club venue with an open bar?" I offer and watch her eyes twinkle with interest. "Then I'll be a

good man and drop you home.”

“A good man,” she repeats, but I see how her eyes darken. “What if I’m over the ‘good man’ movement?”

I nibble on the corner of my lip because I’m used to acting on instinct.

Like slamming my lips against this woman’s mouth and sucking her dry.

Briefly glancing at the rearview mirror, my driver gets the message with one pinned gaze. The next moment, the tinted glass between the front and the back is sealed shut, cutting out any sound between the two spaces.

“That wouldn’t be good, Songbird,” I whisper as my eyes trail back to her. They descend to her lips, then down her outfit, which is similar to mine with sequin glitter.

I’m trying to figure out how to maneuver around her pants if things get a bit spicy in this heavy traffic jam.

“Tyler.” Her whimsical purr has me in her complete control. “Eyes on me.”

“Yes, Songbird.” I’ll submit to this woman any day of the week. “We shouldn’t get your outfit dirty.”

“You, of all people, know I’m going to change out of it when we get to our destination.”

I smirk.

“I know very well that it’ll be auctioned in a heartbeat,” I mutter and lean closer to her until our lips barely touch. “But I want you to keep this one.”

“Do you?” She bites her bottom lip while her eyes are lost in my intense gaze. The intense hunger is palpating between

us.

It's taking everything not to act out right now.

Patience, Tyler. This is unknown territory.

I've had my share of women, but Riley appeared like an innocent kitten who'd yet to let the freaky out.

From the look in her eyes, my baby Songbird could be the freakiest woman I've dared to date with intention.

"It's a significant piece of clothing," I emphasize as I reach out until my finger grabs hold of the top button that's holding the blazer hugged around her luscious body. "Frankly, I think it would be a good prop."

"Prop?" I love how she's always intrigued by my spontaneous ideas.

"I want you to wear this at your first concert," I whisper and tug on the sequin fabric to get a better grip on that button.

"First concert?" Now, she's even more interested in what I'm envisioning. "I performed my first concert many years ago, Tyler. Why would I be wearing this piece at a 'first' concert?"

"It'll be the first concert in the books," I stress and can't wait any longer to pop that button open. The sides of the blazer are free to move back to their place, revealing her lace bra decorated with jewels.

Swarovski jewels, at that.

"Your first concert as Riley Maddison Owens."

Fuck patience. I get what I want.

My lips are on hers in a heartbeat, the two of us kissing fervently as if we've been waiting all our lives for this pivotal

moment.

Her melodic moan gets lost in the hollows of my mouth as I dive my tongue right in as my hand roams to her neck and wraps it delicately. She groans at my possessiveness and presses against me while I unbuckle my seatbelt and shift my position so I can lay her along the seat.

In seconds, I'm hovering over her, the two of us making out hard. I've craved to kiss her for nights since our first interaction together, and I can say with confidence that the hype was worth the wait.

"Riley," I breathe her name as I break the kiss that has us fighting for oxygen. "I'm supposed to take this slow."

"You don't want that," she acknowledges, as if she knew every bit of me. "And you know that's not what I want."

I do. I understand her so easily, but I won't take advantage of that.

"I want to hear it from you," I coo while tightening my hold around her neck. The lust in her eyes is making my cock battle the tightness of my boxers in these damn tight sequin pants.

Wrong pants to wear when you're so fucking hard.

"A man who enjoys consent?" she taunts. I know it's her way to rile me up for keeping to my 'good boy' morals. "I doubt what I want turns you on."

"That's where you're wrong, Songbird," I growl and smother her with a kiss that surely makes her toes curl. She arches her back, making it too easy for me to let go of her neck and slip my hand behind her, so I get hold of the collar of her jacket.

With a bit of maneuvering on both our parts, it's somewhere on the floor of the seats, then it's my turn to sit back and slip out of my suit jacket. She admires me as I roll up my sleeves and unbutton my white dress shirt. I can see her imagination moving, and I bet she's undressing me.

Just like how I'm fighting not to physically undress her.

"Be careful, Riley." I have to warn her because I'm losing my fucking mind with that naughty look of hers. This woman wants me so damn bad. If she keeps up with her seductive tactics, I'll fall even harder for her. "We only have fifteen minutes before we reach the venue."

"You and I know we can do a lot in fifteen minutes."

She licks those delicious lips as her eyes lower to my groin, which is begging to be free.

To glide into her slick, hot pussy.

"I know what you want," I assure her. There's no point in playing games or drawing shit out.

The divorce is done.

Riley's a free woman to do whatever the fuck she wants.

Including fucking the random quarterback she met at the Super Bowl.

"But you have to use your words to get it," I assure her.

She pouts with impatience, making me give her a devilish smirk while reaching out to run my thumb along her bottom lip. Daring to inch my fingertip into her mouth rewards me as she opens her mouth and sucks my thumb right in. It's my turn to bite my lip for my own sanity as I watch and feel the way she sucks my thumb like it's my fucking erect cock.

Her tongue wraps around the tip, the warmth of her mouth making this more agonizing to me than it surely is to her. I've never had a woman take control the way Riley does so effortlessly.

I love that.

Feast on it.

Need more of this.

“What pace are we taking this, Songbird?” I need to know. *God knows I need some sort of direction when it comes to my idol.* “Is this too fast?”

“Yes,” she admits, and I like how she's being honest.

“But?”

“But I want this,” she says slowly, so I understand. “This frisky, palpable energy that makes me feel fucking alive? That's what I want. That's what I'll chase every fucking day with you if I have to, Tyler.”

She must know how refreshing it is to have a partner who communicates.

“If... it's fast for you, though,” she begins but holds her tongue at the sound of me unzipping my pants. In seconds, my thick, veiny girth is in my possession, and she's taking every second to admire my length like it's a godly weapon.

I love the fascination and excitement that bubbles in her enchanting eyes at the sight of my cock.

“Nothing's fast for me, Riley,” I admit. “Is this fast? Yes, but God knows I need this. Need the chase. Crave the high. I've been masturbating at the imaginative sight of you sucking my cock into oblivion with those sinful lips of yours.”

She's already trailing her tongue around those very lips, wetting them in hopes they'll be around my manhood any second now.

I love my impatient Songbird.

“I need to make it clear, though,” I admit, so I can grab her attention for a few more seconds. “I want you, Riley. Not as an appetizer. Or an early dessert. You're the main course of my favorite meal, and I'm going to prove to you that I never get tired of what I deem is my favorite.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” she purrs. “Let me feast.”

I'm madly in love with Miss Riley Maddison Sullivan.

RIDING THROUGH THE WAVES
OF LUST



~RILEY~

“That look in your eyes, so raw and enticing. You’re a dangerous addiction that leaves me yearning. Sizzling heat and tingling sensations. I never knew someone could make me feel so utterly crazy. You’re a disease. A chemical reaction. You make me think dirty things, the need for a holy cleansing. Can you handle my flame? Can I handle the burn? Let’s test the waters, baby. Let me hear you groan.”

— *Let Me Hear You (Explicit Version)*

by Riley Maddison Sullivan

*T*his quarterback will lead to my pitiful end.

An ending I’ll wholeheartedly experience if it means I get to suck off his thick, veiny cock and listen to him groan my name.

Keeping a conversation with him was agonizing. I desperately wanted to kiss him the moment the car began to depart from the roundabout.

No man in history has dressed up in a sequin fucking suit, boldly stood with a one hundred sparkling rose bouquet—from fucking Dubai—and boldly told the world he ain’t bringing me home until late.

Hello, Daddy Owens. Bring me home whenever you like.

Heck. Don't even bring me home.

I'll do the naughty anywhere.

If you can envision a giddy hormonal female ready to ride a dildo after eons of no sexual stimulation, that's exactly how I feel right now.

Only I had a collection of dildos and vibrators at my penthouse, and none of them compare to a good old precum-dripping cock.

I'm not sure about Tyler's kinks.

Actually, I have no clue if he's okay with me being a dominant hoe who sometimes likes to take charge in sexual instances like this. Sure, I can be a submissive queen, but that gets boring so fucking fast. From Tyler's erect cock, I have a feeling he likes a bit of both, which is a fucking blessing because I need someone who can handle my deprived needs.

Who doesn't love a man with diversity and a sexual appetite?

"Then what are we waiting for?" my words come out like a purring cat enticing its prey. "Let me feast."

This man hasn't comprehended how famished I am. My pussy, which once felt like the Sahara Desert, is dripping with pooling juice. I'd love to see cloaking those dangerous lips of his.

My quarterback knows how to kiss.

Now can he eat pussy? I'll have to find that out.

"Don't need to ask me twice, Songbird," he growls and offers his cock to me like a reward for best behavior. "Suck me off, *Baby Girl*."

Oh God, yes!

I scoot back slightly so I can sit up to face his large girth. He's almost double the size of Chase, reminding me of my purple monster dildo.

Veins and all.

I lick my lips far too fast as I admire it.

Heck, I kiss the tip and grin at the salty taste of cum on my lips.

I'm an absolute freak, and this is Tyler's warning sign to run for the hills now or forever hold his peace.

Or jump out of this moving car.

Peering up at him rewards me with a hooded gaze from the man in question. He doesn't look the slightest bit appalled by my fascination. To be honest, he looks fucking pleased.

Lord, I know this isn't the time to say a little prayer, but let this man be just as addicted to sex as I am. Amen.

Yup. I'm probably going to hell, but I feel there's a valid reason why sex was created.

Aside from baby-making.

"Not going to run away?" I ask because I want to make sure I'm reading him correctly.

That we're on the same page.

"Can't run away out of a moving car, Songbird," he taunts with the cockiest grin. "Suck me off, Riley, or I'll enjoy taunting that wet pussy of yours until you're begging to be obliterated by this cock."

Yup. Same fucking page. Stop thinking, Riley.

Switching off that mental switch, I allow my freaky side free. I need to have this man's ravenous mouth on my pussy and eat me up before lunch.

I want my juices to be on his breath when he introduces himself. Fucking hell, I'm mad.

With a few taunting strokes and licks of his precum, I don't dare waste time as I take his cock into my mouth in one solid go.

"Shit," he hisses, completely taken aback by my move. My tongue is already swirling around his length, making him groan and gasp before he wraps his fingers through my blonde locks and stills my head.

"Songbird," he grunts heavily, and I can only look up mischievously at how I almost prevailed in making him nut in three solid seconds. "I take it back. Tame that beast," he breathes. "At least for a minute or two."

Can he see my enjoyment in my eyes?

"Yes, yes. You'll get to claim your crown for making me nut far too fast."

I love him.

He forces my head back enough, so I have no choice but to release his cock, but he replaces it with his lips, kissing me senseless.

"My once-caged canary is enjoying the realms of freedom, hmm?" he mutters against my lips. "You just want me to bend on one knee and marry you today."

"Could be arranged," I whisper. "Though I'd like to make sure you don't make any wrong decisions."

“Locking eyes with you the night of the Super Bowl will never be deemed a wrong decision,” he vows. “Neither is any of this.”

Kissing me as though I’m the air he breathes, our tongues tangle in a dominant need to empower the other. I know he’s doing this to calm himself down a little more, and there’s nothing wrong with that in my books.

Anything that drives me sensually crazy is fine with me.

When we break the kiss, we’re left panting with heated gazes. He doesn’t say a word. All he needs to do is lean back into position, giving me silent permission to get back to sucking his length into oblivion.

Coming right up, Daddy.

Instead of being brutal, I purposely drag things out a little by lathering his cock with my saliva. He moans in approval, and his hands gripping my hair loosen before his hand drops to the side.

“Fuck, Riley. That mouth of yours is heaven sent.”

He hasn’t seen anything yet.

When I begin to move up and down his cock, he can’t stop himself from praising me.

“Fuck, Riley. That’s it. Use that talented mouth of yours,” he groans in appreciation as I work him up and down. “That’s it, baby. Suck me like that. Keep up that pace. You’re doing so fucking good.”

I wait for him to take charge of the pace, knowing it’s bound to happen as he continues to groan and grunt in approval.

Before I know it, his fingers are entangled in my hair once more, stilling my head so he can start fucking my mouth the way I'm sure he likes it.

“Fucking heaven.” He can't get enough. “Look up at me, Songbird.”

I humbly obey, locking eyes on my sinful escape, who doesn't hide just how good this is for him. I can see it in his eyes. See how all of this is pulling him into a vortex of euphoria.

“I want your eyes on me when I shoot my load down your fucking throat.”

Can't complain one bit.

His grunts and moans continue while I suck, lick, and swallow more of him with each vigorous thrust. He's losing it, growing louder with his panting breaths and quickened moans until I know he'll reach his climax any minute now.

We're locked in a heated gaze, even as the tip of his cock hits the very back of my throat.

I see the strings beginning to snap as he inches closer and closer to his climax. I endure it all, moaning as I snake my hand around his balls and squeeze at the right moment.

Fucking fatality.

“Fuck,” he hisses before his whole body is rigid in seconds. I watch the waves of pleasure consume him as he fills me up, shot after shot down my throat.

When his cock eases out, I can't help but show him what a mess he's made in the hollows of my mouth. Opening wide, he gets to see the remnants of his release pooling there before I

enjoy swallowing it with the encouragement of his transfixed gaze.

My quarterback is a goner.

“You’ve sold me to the devil, Songbird,” he grunts and claims my lips brutally. “Put me up for sale without me even knowing, and now I’m a slave.”

“Hope that means you get regular meals,” I tease and kiss him back while he eases me down to the leather seat. I have no clue how much time has already passed, but I don’t think we have time for more. “Don’t want you starving, Daddy.”

The way he growls against my lips encourages a smile on mine.

“Riley.”

“I’ll be good,” I reply with such an innocent tone of voice, you’d never think we’re doing naughty fucking things in the back of this car.

“Better be,” he mutters and trails his lips along my chin, down the side of my neck, and into the dip of my nape. “Or else I’m going to have to let the whole world know I needed to fuck the bad out of you.”

“Tempting.” We share another kiss before I whisper, “I don’t think we have time for more.”

“I’ll make time.” He grunts and reaches over to press a button. “Ten more minutes.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Your driver probably knows we’re doing the dirty here.”

“I could be doing drug deals back here, and he wouldn’t give a fuck,” he voices with a smug look. “I pay him well.”

“You sound like a mafia boss.”

“Admit it. That would turn you on more than you’d ever share with anyone else.”

“Facts,” I dare to confess. “Are you going to keep getting confessions out of me, Reverend Owens, or am I going to be rewarded for writing two songs, finalizing my divorce settlement, and giving you the most amazing head you’ve ever experienced?”

“You wish I was a reverend,” he grunts against my flesh while his hand is already working on the button of my pants. “How fast can you put these pants back on?”

“As fast as you want me to, but only if that means you’re going to eat me up until I’m begging for mercy.”

“Oh, baby, I’ll do more than that with no interruptions,” he vows. “Though you’ll be begging to be filled by this cock when I’m done with you.”

He slides my pants off and has me bent with my legs spread high in the sky. Admiring my glistening pussy has him salivating before he takes a generous inhale.

“Riley, you smell fucking divine.”

I whimper in reply as his tongue generously licks my wet folds and up to my sensitive clit.

When he’s done taunting me—which thankfully isn’t long as I anticipate—I’m a moaning mess as he dives right in with no fucking remorse. Tongue deep, thrusting and sucking, slurping me up like my pussy is the best thing he’d tasted all fucking day.

I’m gasping and gripping anything to keep myself from completely arching into him, but he’s moving so perfectly, my

body can't help but obey his movements.

“Fuck,” I moan and peer down at how deep he is between my legs. “Thrust deeper, Tyler,” I plead, already feeling that coiling build of heat spiking inside me from the depths of my core. I know it won't be long before I'm screaming in ecstasy, especially after being so riled up from sucking his veiny length, but damn.

Tyler knows how to eat.

“Deeper, Tyler. Fucking deeper. Like that.” My hand shoots down until I'm gripping his hair far too hard and grinding his face with the lift of my hips.

He lets me take the lead, appeasing me with the deep thrusts of his tongue and how he sucks any way he can. I'm chasing the euphoric build, moaning and repeating his name again and again until I'm seeing fucking stars.

“I'm gonna cum, Daddy,” I cry out in warning. It'll happen any second now. I feel the intense prickles of bliss preparing for my grand orgasm, the tingling starting from my toes and moving upward as I move my hips even faster.

“Tyler! Tyler! Fuck... so close. Close, close, close!” Only a few more thrusts and I'm whipped with the strongest orgasm I've experienced in months.

Heck, years.

I scream in ecstasy, my head falling back and my pussy pressed as tightly against his mouth as possible. I shudder with aftershocks, riding every single wave of bliss before my rigid body finally relaxes.

As if that wasn't intense enough, Tyler decides to suck me dry as he drinks up every droplet of my release and further taunts my sensitive bud.

I expect him to finish, but the man wants me to perform an encore performance because his fingers are now pumping deep inside me until I'm squirming and on the verge of another orgasm that builds from fucking nowhere.

"Tyler!" I cry out as my climax hits in seconds, leaving me whimpering. I arch my back and shudder as he pumps vigorously into me. I can hear the wet sounds of my juices as he keeps pumping those two fingers until I'm literally begging him for relief.

"Daddy, please."

"Please, what?" he pants, knowing he's driving me fucking mad.

"Enough. No more... I'm gonna... cum..." I don't finish because I'm coming undone, which results in my body convulsing with pleasure while I squirt all over his pumping hand.

"There we go." He's pleased with the results as he finally pulls his hand out, his fingers dripping. He proceeds to lick me up one more time, as though his tongue was a tissue that will leave me nice and fresh down there. He purposely waits for me to open my tired eyes and enjoy the sight of him licking his fingers.

"Fucking divine," he praises without breaking our lust-filled gaze. "I'm so tempted to say fuck lunch and enjoy ruining you with my cock, Songbird."

The temptation is becoming hard to pass up.

I've never experienced such euphoria with anyone. With Chase being my first for everything, I never delved into this realm of ongoing pleasure.

I've never managed to cum twice in one session. I'll be speaking tongues and thanking Lord Heavenly Father if I manage to make it to the orgasm stage.

“You made me cum three times,” I breathe in disbelief.

“Your surprise intrigues and disappoints me,” he admits with a hint of concern, which makes me smirk.

“I’ve never cum twice in one set,” I admit. “Sometimes, I’m lucky to cum at all. I normally need vibrators for that. I haven’t really cum otherwise for a long time.

“We’re gonna have to change that,” he mutters with a disapproving pout on his lips. Leaning down, he kisses me with sweet tenderness before he helps me get dressed. By the time he’s grabbing the sequin suit jacket, it’s clear we’ve reached our destination.

“Hmm?” Tyler pauses to look at the jacket he’s holding. “Wrong one, Songbird,” he acknowledges as he notices the way I have the oversized sequin jacket resting flawlessly on my shoulders.

“Oh. I know,” I announce and watch the way he arches an eyebrow at me.

“So... you’re going out like that?”

“Mhmm.” I’m already loving the look. Oversized sequin suit jacket from my sexy quarterback, paired with my glamoured Swarovski crystal bra and my sequin flared bottom pants.

Don't forget the pink Christian Louboutins.

“You want the world to see those hickeys, don’t you?” he notes as he combs out his hair, which is now wild in nature.

The 'I dove in and had a full course meal of pussy' type of hair.

“I want the world to see I’ve left a toxic relationship where I didn’t appease my husband’s needs to jump into an unexpected one, head first, with no restraints as to where we get to enjoy ourselves,” I summarize and watch as he pauses to look my way. “Plus, I look hot in this combo, don’t you think?”

His sly grin is everything, while his eyes darken.

“A shame, really,” he begins.

“What?”

“I’m most certainly gonna have to take it off at some point during lunch, or else I’ll go insane.”

“You’re not suggesting you’ll be stripping my outfit and encouraging me to walk naked at our lunch arrangement, Mr. Owens.”

“Certainly not,” he begins and flashes those perfect white teeth. “More along the lines of stripping that outfit, fucking you against the stall of the bathroom, and proceeding to enjoy watching you change into your new outfit that’s awaiting your arrival.”

“Smart,” I say in approval. “This is definitely dangerous.”

“You’re loving every minute of it.”

“Very,” I vow. “I also think I have a new song in mind.”

“And what is it called?” I love how genuinely excited he is to know the details of my brewing masterpiece.

“Let Me Hear You,” I whisper. “I’d say Let Me Hear You Groan, but maybe that’s a bit too explicit for my fan age

group.”

“Explicit version it is, then.” Cupping my face, he kisses me without hesitation, which allows me to relax further. “Need to write it down?”

“I won’t forget,” I vow, knowing I won’t. How could I forget the electrifying passion we just experienced from giving each other head? “Can we enjoy more of that, please?”

“You won’t ever have to ask, Songbird,” he whispers and presses his forehead against mine. “You’ll get everything you want and more. You’re my twinkling treasure, and I can’t wait to show you just how much I adore you.”

With a final kiss, I pray this rollercoaster of love and lust never ends.

ONLY TIME CAN PROVE SHE'S
MY DESTINY



~TYLER~

“I’m spellbound by that sweet mouth of hers. I knew having her suck me off would be immaculate, but God. I surely transcended to another dimension in those few seconds as I came down her throat. Why am I writing this? I think I need written confirmation that Riley Maddison Sullivan is my other half. She has to be the destined partner my soul has been searching for all along. That’s the only way I can explain this. We connect and vibe with one another so easily. I know so many would judge and think I’m absolutely insane. The group chat has been going off like madness since I showed obvious interest in Riley since the Super Bowl. I know they’re all mocking me, saying I’m a fool in love, setting myself up for failure, but honestly... what if? What if this is really my destiny, and I’m finally getting what I’ve spoken into existence for years? That’s what manifestation is all about, but now that I’m experiencing it, I am scared. I’m not frightened about the pace of this relationship. No, I thrive on the quickness and how it’s so easy to be in love with this woman I’ve admired from afar for years. I’m just afraid someone will ruin it for me. Someone will fight to destroy this palpable, soul-resonating connection with a woman who deserves the world. I want to make sure she knows her worth. I think I can do it. All I need now is time.”

— *Journal Entry #560*

by Tyler Sinclair Owens

“Give me maybe fifteen minutes, and I’ll be ready.”

How a single woman can command the entire room.

I’m watching Riley from the private bar, a glass of scotch in one hand while the other is relaxed on the dark oakwood counter. The lights are dimly lit, despite it being lunchtime, setting an ambiance that leaves me feeling extra calm now that we’re out of the spotlight.

I just boldly walked out of the Rolls-Royce with Riley sporting my jacket on her shoulders.

There’s no way anyone could doubt what we were up to.

My hair is a mess. Her curls loosened with a bit more frizz. Hickey marks all over her neck, while I’m sporting a very obvious hickey on the left side of my neck.

We’re smiling.

I’m holding her hand.

We enter the restaurant that’s already surrounded by fans from both spectrums of our fields, which is rather enlightening because it makes me feel as though we balance each other out.

She doesn’t need to feel as if her presence is the only thing contributing to the massive gathering happening outside.

Cassidy, being the arrangement queen, got the restaurant to open just for us and our guests, which is why we get to enjoy a bit of private time before we head upstairs to the greenhouse patio, where we’d be served a full course of unique meals to enjoy with Riley’s friends and family.

Cassidy warned me about Riley's siblings, and though I knew she had a brother or two, I wasn't worried about meeting them. In fact, I wasn't concerned about meeting anyone right now. If they had a problem with me, it would be far too premature to act on.

Don't think I'm suited for your daughter, sister, or best friend? Give me time. That's all I need to prove she's meant for me.

The sound of clicking heels getting louder my way confirms my Songbird is back. She's still proudly carrying my jacket on her shoulders, while her bra is a sparkling masterpiece with the low lights that shift in an array of cool colors.

"Makeup crew?" I ponder when she reaches me. The bartender is already back from whatever hiding place he went, delivering Riley's drink that he mixed seconds before she finished her conversation with a man and woman.

"Mhmm," she replies, looking at me first before acknowledging the bartender. "Thank you so much. Do you take a credit card for the tip?"

"You've already paid us for today, Miss Sullivan," he shyly admits.

"I did?" She pouts her lips. "Was it under Cassidy's name or Sullivan Corp?"

"Actually, it was under mine," I interrupt, drawing her attention. "I didn't want you worrying about payment after lunch and such, so I requested Cassidy put it under my name." Pulling out my wallet, I pass over my black AMEX card. "Please put the tip on here."

“Yes, Sir. Thank you, Mr. Owens and Miss Sullivan,” he expresses his gratitude as he takes the card to charge the gratuity.

“Tyler,” she whispers and pouts her sinful lips.

I really want to kiss her, but she’s already applied a new layer of pink lipstick.

They really have to make these lipsticks kiss-proof.

“You don’t need to spoil me like this.”

“True,” I admit and smirk. “But before we get on that topic, does that mean you won’t want the pink Rolls-Royce we rode in?”

She stares at me as though I spoke a completely different language.

“I just want to confirm if you like it, or should I get it in a different shade.”

“The Rolls-Royce we arrived in after eating each other out is mine?” she summarizes in shock and moves in close so I can enjoy pulling her against my front side.

She’s standing between my legs where I’m chilling on the bar stool, which makes me admire our very obvious height difference, even with me sitting. I can already envision relaxing in my bed with her sitting on my groin and pinning me as her soft hands trail the lines of my ab muscles.

My imagination really is being dangerous today.

“Yes,” I confirm, only to notice we’re not alone anymore.

And who are these two?

“Tyler. That must cost a fortune?!” she gasps, unaware that we have company. “I-I love it, though. I mean, I didn’t know

that was ours. Wait... if one has sex inside, does that depreciate the value?"

The way she asks such an intimate question has me snickering before I fight to hold back my obvious laughter.

"W-Wait, don't laugh! I'm serious!" It's her serious expression that has me losing it, my laughter carrying through the private bar before I purposely loop my arm around her waist.

Almost possessively.

"Songbird, I promise I'll answer that later."

"Why can't you answer it now?" she wonders. "I'll forget if we don't address it. Should I call Cassidy to get a private cleaning company to come in and wipe every inch of sin from the back seats?"

The clearing of one's throat catches Riley's attention, but I'm more focused on the tall man next to her, who's obviously giving me a judgmental stare. I see the familiarity in his facial expression and those vivid blue eyes. Adding the platinum blonde locks, I know without a doubt that this man right here is Riley's father.

And I can assume the scowling woman is her mother.

"If I knew you'd move on so quickly from your previous marriage to an unimpressive footballer, I would have never attended the wedding to begin with."

It's official.

I don't like this woman one bit.

My demeanor changes almost instantly, enough that Riley is staring at me for a long few seconds before acknowledging the woman's comment.

“Why hello, Mother,” she begins, her voice shifting completely like a robotic doll who must articulate every word preciously. She turns in my hold, and I bet she wants to offer her hand to her in greeting, but my arm tightens around her.

Red flags. Red flags.

If the tension with my demeanor change isn't obvious, it's crystal clear now that I'm staring this woman right in the eyes.

She's not pleased one bit with my existence.

“Riley,” her father decides to take a step forward to look at his daughter. “I know we didn't have an invitation. We heard from Rory you were having a private lunch here. Your mother insisted we come by and check on how you are.”

“Ah,” Riley begins and looks over her shoulder to meet my eyes. I can only assume she wants me to let her go, but I don't want to.

This energy is far too toxic for my liking.

As if the Universe is in my favor, an unknown ringtone begins to buzz away.

“That's for me,” Riley's mother announces and looks at her husband. “I can't ignore it. You know how busy I am running our business. I'll be back.”

She doesn't bother looking our way when she announces her brief departure, and it's only now that I hear the loud clicks of her heels that are doing their best to be heard by anyone in the radius of this floor.

The moment she's gone, I loosen my hold entirely.

“I'm not going to tiptoe around either of you, so why don't we hold off formalities until I know if you're here to cause more trauma to your daughter, who's carried the burden of a

man-child for seven years or actually here to congratulate her for being free from that selfish bastard.”

My Songbird’s jaw drops as she looks from me to her father, then back at me.

“T-Tyler,” she whispers.

“One thing my father taught me, Riley, is that a spade is a spade, and you shouldn’t act like it’s something else because of how uncomfortable another group is by acknowledging the difference,” I reveal and reach for my drink to take a sip. “I want to know exactly where I stand with your father. You’ve dealt with enough men letting you down with your last marriage.”

I know I hit a nerve by the frown that forms on his lips, but I stand my ground.

“Tyler, I never told them anything about it,” Riley argues.

“You shouldn’t have to inform your family of how bad things are. They should be able to sense it. Check in on you. Not follow what the news is sputtering, especially when it’s utter nonsense the majority of the time,” I argue. “If the news wasn’t a catalyst for their ignorance, I have a strong feeling they wouldn’t be here. Or is it because overhearing the invitation of her siblings deems it only acceptable for you both to join with no notice whatsoever?”

Riley can’t say a single thing, which leaves her to look back at her father, who breathes out rather loudly.

His attention lowers to his daughter before he mutters, “Do you want us to leave?”

“What?” My Songbird is confused.

“He’s right,” he admits. “We, or should I say your mother, assumed we could barge into this because we’re blood-related. We also assumed it meant we would be allowed and privileged to sit with you as you celebrate what I can only assume from the numerous reports, your new divorce status.”

I can see how my words bother him, but I’ll give him some points for not acting out with anger and using his wisdom to attend to the situation like a man.

“Um... well...” She hesitates but doesn’t freak out when I reach out to hold her hand. Squeezing it gently, she looks down at our joined hands—as does her father—before she seems to stand a little taller. “I don’t mind if you stay, Dad,” she confesses but frowns. “But if Mother is coming in with that attitude, it’s a no.” She shakes her head for added measure.

“My friends don’t need to be present for our family drama. Even if they all signed NDAs, as did the staff, we know there’s always someone who wouldn’t mind tapping into the cameras and monitoring our interactions.”

She’s right.

Desperation makes people act stupid if it gives them a hefty paycheck to reveal drama that’s ignited from a short clip of disagreement between an idol and a family member.

“I understand,” he confesses and looks at me. “Mr. Sullivan, I’m going to assume you’re the quarterback everyone’s talking about trying to marry my daughter?”

“Tyler Sinclair Owens,” I introduce. “Quarterback of the Florida Kingsman Chiefs. I also own a bunch of real estate, businesses, and other investments in stocks that have contributed to my newly acquired billionaire status that was

announced today.” I put it out there on purpose because I expect that’s exactly what his wife would be interested in knowing. “But I’m a pretty laid-back guy otherwise. A pleasure to meet you. I would have wished to do it more formally, but I’m sure there can be future opportunities for such.”

I let go of Riley’s hand to offer it to him.

He stares at it for a few seconds before lifting his own hand to give me a firm handshake.

“Have bigger balls than Benedict,” he grumbles.

Riley gasps while I merely smirk.

A note of approval. I’m getting somewhere.

“I’ll work on making his new single life a living hell, but until then, I’d like to make it known that I’m very interested in your daughter. You can do the background checks needed to ensure I’m not a stalker, killer, abuser, or an alcoholic.” I can’t help but reach for my drink once more and take another go at it. “Aside from scotch, whisky, and occasional beer, I drink responsibly. Have to with my type of job.”

“I bet,” he replies. “Why should I let you date my daughter?”

Riley really is speechless as she stares at us. I don’t know when she picked up her drink, but she’s sipping on the straw as if I’m asking her father for her hand in marriage.

Maybe I am, but baby steps first.

“I’ve been a fan of your daughter’s for a long time, but frankly, in the beginning, I didn’t see any romantic connection. Not because your daughter isn’t one of the most attractive women I’ve ever met, but because I respected the obvious

boundaries with her being married. However, the night we all witnessed her husband cheat on her with someone not even close to her perfection, and I locked eyes on her when she performed on that stage, I already made up my mind that she would be my wife. I vowed it to my best friend, told my teammates soon after, and knew in my heart she was someone I'd pursue, even if it took days, weeks, months, or even years," I reveal. "Why shouldn't that be the question you should ask, in my opinion? I'm sure you asked the same thing to Chase, to which he elaborated on all the amazing deeds and accomplishments he's done in his life and how he'd be the one to take care of your daughter. Am I right?"

I can see his Adam's apple move up and down before he slightly bobs his head. I decide this was my chance to carry on.

"I'll be honest. Riley doesn't need a man to take care of her." That has my Songbird's full attention. "Even when she was sixteen in her youth, she was carrying the world and crushing the haters fighting to bring her down long before her career blew up to the capacity it is now where an entire square can be filled in less than three minutes with solely her fans," I disclose. "Riley needs a man who not only lets her do what she's destined to do for this world but supports her in times when things aren't butterflies and rainbows. I'm sure you didn't marry your wife solely because of looks or because she can give you children. You wished to be a pillar in her life and be there during the times the world may not be by her side."

From the lines on his face, I can tell I'm heading in the right direction. Since he hasn't punched me yet, I decide to get to the point.

“I’m not sure what your relationship is with Riley. Despite this odd introduction we’ve experienced, it’s still not enough for me to stand here judging you. I’m not going to make assumptions and pull her into my arms in hopes of whisking her away to those who are genuinely happy with her bold decision to go through with a divorce from a man who’s never had her wellbeing on the forefront.”

I’m sure by now my eyes are darkening as I prepare to emphasize my seriousness with the next set of words.

“One thing that’s at the root of me with any relationship is communication. I don’t give a shit if we have bad blood. If I need to be in one room with someone I dislike to ensure words are exchanged and everyone’s on the same page, so be it,” I stress. “My father taught me that if there’s a problem, you confront it like a real man and not like a silly coward.”

I slip off the bar stool so I can stand at my full height, confirming we’re the exact same height. I’m still pretty relaxed, which doesn’t make her father go into offensive mode.

“In seven years, Riley has been in a marriage that may have looked perfect before the media and the world but wasn’t as wondrous as you may have thought. When she’s ready to allow you a deeper insight into what she endured, she’ll do so. But with how fast things are moving and with me wanting to make my intentions crystal clear, I need you to understand that her previous husband was a toxic fucker, and I’ll never be a replica of such moralities.”

I take a breath and down the rest of my drink. Sliding the empty glass to the other end of the counter, I give Mr. Sullivan my full attention.

“So, returning to your question. Why do I want to date your daughter? Because I’ve fallen madly in love with her in less than a week, and I’ll spend whatever amount of time proving to her that I can be her forever home that shields her heart from the strenuous brutality of the outside world. If I have to convince every single person in her life, including her mother, I’ll do exactly that,” I vow. “But I won’t hide behind the media and my status of being rich or well off in my career that I’ll dismiss the foundation of communication that needs to be established.”

I’ve said everything that needed to be let out in the open, so the ball is now in his court.

The silence is loud, but I have no intention of backing down. Relaxing my arm along Riley’s shoulders, my eyes notice her mother is still on the phone but glaring our way.

What’s up with her?

I really don’t like the vibes she gives off, especially when she should be here to support her daughter versus being invested in just her relationship.

I need to do some research on her.

The unexpected slurping noise has us both looking at the culprit of the now-finished Strawberry Daiquiri. Riley’s wide eyes lower to confirm there’s nothing left of the alcoholic slush drink.

“Um…” All she can do is slowly look at me.

It’s the cutest damn thing.

My Songbird is absolutely adorable when she’s nervous.

“Want another one?” I offer.

“Yes, please,” she admits. “It’s been a tense morning.”

“Agreed. Especially since we didn’t sleep.” I take advantage of the prolonged silence to cue the bartender to get her another drink.

Returning my attention to Mr. Sullivan, I notice he’s looking at Riley.

“Riley?”

“Yes, Dad?” She’s standing taller again, reminding me of a military dad grabbing the attention of his subordinates.

“Do you like...” He pauses and briefly looks at me. “Tyler, was it?”

“Yes, Sir,” I reply.

He nods and restates his question. “Do you like Tyler? Despite knowing him for only a few days?”

She allows a moment to think about it, which proves she’s not answering in hopes of impressing her parents in some way.

“I’ve never felt more alive than I have these last few days with him, Dad,” she quietly confesses. “I’ve written a one-third of an album just meeting him. I’ve confronted things I haven’t allowed myself to delve into, even inside myself. It took last night for me to realize my worth, Dad. To finally allow myself to not act as if everything’s okay... because it’s not, Dad.”

She blinks her eyes a few times as she stares into his eyes, which are identical to hers.

“Nothing was right about that marriage... absolutely nothing,” she confesses with a trembling voice. “But I told myself I had to do it to make you and Mom proud. I had to go through it because Chase was a powerful man. I’d find happiness because he’d fuel my career. I’d fall in love with

him eventually because that's what happens when you stay with someone for so long. Excuses upon excuses, hoping that, with time, I'd get the happy ending I always dreamed for myself as a little child."

She smiles then, but God, it makes my heart ache for her.

"Time didn't do anything but make the pain worse, Dad," she reveals, like a burden no longer worth having. "Did I fall in love with the few good pieces of that man I once called my husband? Yes, I did, and I won't erase those good moments because when it was nice, it really was nice. However, the wrongs, Dad. Those didn't just override the good moments. They overcame them. Buried them. Suffocated every bit of hope and dreams I carried for our union until they took their very last breath."

She lowers her head, and I catch onto the way she brushes her hand over her stomach.

Her dad catches it, and for a single moment, I see that flicker of understanding that ignites shock.

"Riley." That firm tone tells me he's picked up on something, but Riley shakes her head.

"Will I tell you about it? Yes," she admits. "But it won't be today. I'm exhausted from a sleepless night because of being called to come in for divorce court last minute."

I can tell this may be the first time she's defending herself against her father.

"However, I do want to have the conversation. I just need to be ready... and I want my brothers there as well."

Her father gives her a firm nod as they share a look. There's a form of understanding there. It's unique, something

an outsider like me wouldn't really grasp, but between them, they understand.

"I'm sorry."

The one to apologize isn't Riley but her father, which surprises both of us.

"Wh-What?" Riley is baffled. "Dad... you never apologize for anything. What are you saying sorry for?"

"You never should have felt you didn't have an ounce of support in that marriage," he mutters. "Nor did it have to come to the point where you felt more comfort in telling a man who has the backbone to be the pillar in this time of need. If I had properly expressed my love and protection of you, I believe you never would have thought I wished for you to marry Chase."

"But... isn't that what you wanted?" She sounds so confused.

"No, that's what your mother wanted," he emphasizes. "All I've ever wanted for you, Riley, is to be happy. Nothing more, nothing less. The fact that didn't translate properly proves I didn't do my job in expressing such, which is what deserves an apology. You wouldn't have suffered in silence otherwise."

He looks at me.

"Do I like you? No." *Ouch*. "However, this ten-minute conversation is the most words I've shared with my daughter in what has to be ten years," he confesses.

"Dad..." Riley whispers.

"You wear your heart and emotions on your sleeve, Tyler," he acknowledges something that many have told me in the

past and present. “Sometimes, it’s a bad thing. In this case, it’s a blessing because I can see your intentions as clear as day.” He actually smirks a little, the corner of his lips lifting enough to confirm he’s somewhat pleased.

“If you really want to marry my daughter, you go at her pace and respect it. You also have to come back to me and get my approval before you marry her. Sound good?”

“Sounds good, Mr. Sullivan.”

He huffs and looks back at Riley. His gaze softens a bit before he reaches out and very gently brushes her cheek.

I didn’t realize Riley was crying.

“I know the world has been brutal to you these couple of years. Despite my singing warrior showing the world how strong she is, sometimes it’s good to take off that armor and allow yourself a moment to rest, mourn, and heal,” he whispers. “I’m not a saint. I know I’ve contributed to your pain in some way, and I hope somewhere in that big heart of yours, you’ll be able to forgive me when the time is right.” He moves his hand to pat her shoulder.

“In due time, when I’ve earned it and heard the full extent of what I’ve been oblivious to in the last seven years,” he stresses. “Until then, you don’t let anyone stop you from dreaming from this day forward.” He leans in further to whisper, “That includes your mother.”

She smiles. “Thanks, Dad.”

He pulls her into a hug, kissing the top of her head.

“Go relax and drink your strawberry whatever concoction.”

“Strawberry daiquiri, Dad,” Riley corrects. “I’ve been ordering this since I was sixteen.”

“You weren’t supposed to be drinking at sixteen,” he counters annoyingly, making her laugh.

“You gave it to me!”

“I was drunk,” he has no shame admitting. “Don’t take anything from drunk me. You know that.”

“Everyone knows that!”

We turn around to see a man walking into the bar, looking like Riley’s identical, only in male form. It’s a bit of a mind fuck because they’re the same height and everything.

“RORY!” Riley cheers and puts her drink back down to practically jump on the man.

“Hey, baby sis!” He spins her around. “Alright. Either you’re going to spill the tea about the dude who somehow survived Dad’s wrath, or I’ll just go beat the shit out of him first, then we’ll talk about it.”

“Ugh!” she groans and somehow climbs this man fast enough to have him in a necklock.

Damn.

Why do I crave to be in a headlock like that?

“AH! Dad! Riley’s trying to kill me!”

“You do this to yourself,” he grumbles and cues the bartender. “On the rocks. Triple shot. To go.”

“Yes, Sir.”

He’s taking a bill out, but I stop him.

“Already paid and tipped. No need.”

“Thanks,” he mutters but gives me a respectable look.
“Your parents raised you well, boy.”

“They did their best,” I agree and look back at Rory, who’s on his knees.

“Dad! I’ll suffocate at this rate.”

“What a pathetic excuse of a brother.”

I glance at the door to see three other men who look more like Mr. Sullivan.

Same fucking height, same look, everything.

They have to be triplets.

No fucking doubt about it.

However, I’m rather positive Riley isn’t a twin.

At least, it doesn’t say she is.

“Kill him off, Riley. He’s wasted too many years breathing oxygen.”

“Should start charging him air tax.”

“That’s actually a thing now.”

“You fucking assholes!”

“Holy cow, you three came?!” Riley decides to spare Rory and is up and greeting the three identical brothers.

“Looking good, little sis,” the first one on the far left declares as he hugs her. “And yeah, we came last minute.”

“Got a call from that Cassidy chick. That girl makes miracles happen,” the brother on the far right announces.

“Miracles? That woman might as well be deemed Jesus’ disciple with how she got all three of us from across the globe

to Florida in less than twenty-four hours. It's like the private jet service of the world bows to her feet."

"You guys got private jets, and here I am taking an Uber?" Rory groans. "Dad, this is your fault!"

"Because?" he questions and takes a sip of his drink.

"You invited me here for the Super Bowl! If I stayed in Korea, I could have enjoyed caviar and private jet excellence!"

"You can afford to take your own jet from Korea, Mr. K-Star Debut Artist," the middle brother teases while he's still hugging Riley. "Which, by the way, you two should collab. You know Koreans are loyal and very approving when two artists from across the globe collab."

"Even more awesome because you two are twins," brother to the far left announces.

"No one knows that," brother to the far right says.

"Well, they'll find out eventually," middle brother acknowledges and pulls Riley back to look down at her. "So, can I finally plan Chase's demise, or does Cassidy already have that all plotted?"

"Ugh, no," she grumbles and shoos him away. She walks back over to me before she's standing in front of me with her drink in hand.

"Tyler will deal with him."

"Tyler?" The way all four of them look at me at once is intimidating as fuck. I can see the mother's side of disapproval seeping out of their expressions.

Interesting because Riley doesn't really express those characteristics.

She really is like her dad's copy. Very calm but willing to lay down the foundations of fury if necessary.

“Tyler Sinclair Owens,” I introduced. “Your sister’s new boyfriend.”

“Riley? When was this?” Rory wonders.

“Um... I’ll explain over lunch, but please don’t do anything about Chase.”

“Why should we trust him to get rid of Chase?” middle brother questions with a scowl. “You’re on the Florida Kingsman Chiefs, yeah? Same team Chase originally was on before he got that big, fancy promotion after marrying our little sis.”

“If you’re here to just use her, know we’re going to fuck you up,” brother on the far left declares.

“Maybe a quarterback, but we’re black belts... all four of us,” brother on the right proudly states.

“Why do I feel like a quarterback can just tackle us all at once and be done with it?” Rory wonders. “Seriously, though. Why are you so confident in bringing Chase down? Actually, you don’t even know much about him and our sister’s relationship.”

“I probably know more than the four of you,” I state the obvious, which pisses off the three older ones, but it’s their dad who raises his hand to keep them in place. “But if you want the truth, it’s easy.”

I watch as their mom walks up at that moment.

“Chase was my best buddy since we were kids. That went downhill when he lied to me and took my original entrance

position in the Florida Kingsman Chiefs by forging my signature for another team.”

We’re all speechless while Mrs. Sullivan rolls her eyes.

“That can’t be true,” she discloses.

“Search it on Google,” I encourage. “Everything is there.”

When she can’t argue with me, I shrug and wrap my arm around Riley’s waist, catching their attention.

“I’ll gladly explain anything you want while Miss Riley gets changed.”

“Oh, right!” She only now remembers the makeup team is waiting for her. “Shit! I’ve been making them wait.”

“Good reason,” I argue, then kiss her right there and then. The silence in the bar is loud again, but I don’t give a fuck. I’ve made my stance with her dad.

I’m sure the brothers will follow.

Eventually.

“Go on. Make sure you’re extra sparkly,” I say with a wink that makes her entire face red in seconds. “Got to share those photos with your fans.”

“O-Okay.” To see the giddiness in her expression is more than enough for me. She looks at her family, though she avoids her mother’s gaze.

“I’ll see the majority of you upstairs.”

She moves and gives her dad one more quick hug.

“Thanks, Dad, for the talk.”

“You’re welcome, my dear,” he replies and hugs her back. With a quick kiss on the top of her head, he encourages her

departure, to which she's out the door and going up the stairs to where her dressing room awaits.

"We're leaving!" Mrs. Sullivan announces, to which the middle brother rolls his eyes. "Bye."

"안녕히 가세요," Rory huffs.

"Don't let the door hit you on the way out," brother on the far left declares.

"We don't care," brother on the right discloses.

Okay then... so Riley isn't the only sibling who has problems with their mother.

She huffs and glares at her husband.

"Five minutes to finish my drink," he encourages and gets to sipping it like he has all the time in the world.

"Whatever! No one gives me respect!" She stomps out of the bar, taking her tense energy with her.

"Finally," Rory groans. "Now, can we interrogate Tyler until sis is back?"

"I'd love to begin this interrogation," middle brother declares. It's obvious he's the "leader" brother.

"At least let us get a beer," left brother encourages.

"Right. After that flight, we need it," right brother agrees.

I slide back onto the bar stool, knowing this may take a while.

"They like you," Mr. Sullivan quietly mutters. I don't expect him to make a comment. "Just endure their overprotectiveness, and you'll be good."

I nod and request another drink.

If it'll bring their family together again, I'll endure whatever it takes.

LET US BURN INTO OBLIVION
TOGETHER



~RILEY~

“Emotions high, sweat dripping. Electrical currents vibing, our worlds sinking. We dance to the beat, singing in this crazy heat. Our connection. Our chemistry. There’s no denying it anymore. You’re really driving me toward insanity. I’m chasing. Feeling. Breathing. Living. The high tides crash, and tingling waves purr. We’re meant to be one. Destined to be complete. Let’s chase the high of freedom, Darling. Just you and me.”

— *Chasing The High of Freedom*

*“R*iley.”
by Riley Maddison Sullivan

The way he groans my name is dangerous.

Not a type of danger that makes your skin crawl with uncertainty and nervousness bubble in the pit of your stomach. The way he says my name is a type of danger that makes my mind go blank and my body yearn to get exactly what I want in the high of the moment.

That’s what we’re dealing with.

Sweat dripping, body moving, hips grinding, mind blurring high with music booming around us, and the darkness hiding just how hands-on we’re being with one another.

His lips tease my neck, encouraging me to arch back into him. His trailing hand continues to move down my body, taunting the upper thigh of my left leg.

Everything feels hypnotic, especially with how tipsy I am, but I don't care. I've needed something like this so bad. A moment where there's nothing to think about.

Just movement.

Lust.

Intense desire.

When I turn my head, his lips take mine, the two of us multitasking as we kiss and dance. I don't remember how long we've been dancing. I've lost track of everything after my little celebration lunch.

The evening divorce party is what led to this sizzling club.

VIP treatment, far too many shots, and bar hopping until I broke a heel, needed a replacement, and decided this was going to be the club we'd spend the rest of the night at.

Excellent decision.

"Tyler," I moan his name and kiss him deeply, and it doesn't take long before I'm turning in his hold to face him. My arms wrap around his neck, pulling us together while my lips find his without even trying.

This connection with Tyler feels unheard of. A foreign entity of power that makes me feel like we're magnets designed to connect and complete each other.

I'm addicted to its pull.

The alleviation of this sudden relationship after feeling caged and suffocated is the best answer to my prayers I could

ever ask for.

“Songbird,” he groans against my lips. “We can’t do that here,” he reminds me when I’m far too close to unbuttoning his pants.

I don’t remember moving my arms from around his neck.

Oh, well.

“You, me, and loads of fucking,” I mutter against his lips.

He chuckles as he hooks his arms around my waist to pull me against him.

“Anything you want, Riley,” he assures me. “Want to go home?”

“Mhmm.” I’m not necessarily tired. More buzzed, if anything, but I can stay up as long as he wants me to.

Cuddling with him would be nice.

“Oh, shit. Ty!” Someone calls his name, prompting me to glance over my shoulder to see Brock. “Oh, wow. Riley’s here, too.”

“Miss Sullivan,” I correct him with a smirk. Watching him nervously correct himself seems to be my new entertainment when he’s around.

“Sorry, Miss Sullivan,” he apologizes, which makes me giggle.

“She’s just teasing you,” Tyler notes and kisses my cheek. “Are you here with the boys?”

“Yup. Booth Five. Didn’t know you’d be here!” Brock reveals. “I thought I saw you, but the guys thought I was fucking hallucinating. I haven’t seen you on the dance floor in fucking years.”

I'm intrigued by the comment. I pull away so I can look to see who's around. Tyler doesn't let me get out of his hold, though. His hand snakes around my waist before he pulls me to his side, so I don't wander away.

Honestly, I don't mind. His possessiveness, in certain ways, makes me feel as though he's actually protecting me versus what I've experienced in the past with other men.

Those were control freaks.

"Decided tonight was a good night to let loose a bit," Tyler ends up saying to his best bud.

I'm not really paying attention to their conversation, my eyes already picking up on my bestie's ginger locks from afar.

"Cassidy!" I call out to her with ease, catching her attention.

She looks relieved to see I haven't gotten lost in some shape or form. She knows when I drink too much, I drift off to anywhere that can give me inspo.

Why that sometimes leads me to the graffiti bathrooms is beyond me, but I've given up trying to figure out what my thought process is like in this state of tipsy central.

When she's inches from me, Tyler lets me slip from my grasp, and I hug her giddily.

"God, I thought you were lost somewhere," she complains. "Have you been dancing this entire time?"

"Mhmm," I'm not really interested in what she's asking me. I'm focused on her rich perfume. I can wholeheartedly assume it's Maison Francis Kurkdjian Baccarat Rouge 540 because it's one of my top fragrances. That and a selection of Tom Ford are always sitting on my dresser.

“Hey, Cassandra,” Brock greets her, reminding me again that he’s usually the one calling her by her real name.

“Brock,” she mutters.

They don’t sound loving to one another as they should.

Time to change that.

Leaning back, I give Cassidy a wide grin.

“Let’s go on a double date!”

“Huh?” My poor bestie knows my ass is drunk silly, but of course, she entertains it. “To where?”

“Disneyland!” I whisper like it’s some sort of big secret.

The way Brock laughs while Tyler snickers has me pouting their way.

“Songbird, were you trying to whisper?” Tyler inquires, looking amused. He already has me back in his arms when Cassidy faces us.

“I was whispering!” I emphasize.

“More like yelled Disneyland in poor Cassidy’s face,” Brock chuckles. “Let’s blame the loud music.”

“Why are you even here?” Cassidy ponders.

“Team bar hopped here. I just followed since Jackson’s trying to get laid,” he admits with a shrug. “The girl he’s entertaining wanted to check this place out ‘cause a lot of celebs are out tonight in these parts, but of course, he went off somewhere with her, so he hasn’t joined the rest of the team yet. Maybe he’s back.”

Cassidy rolls her eyes.

“We can go say hi, but we should go home soon. We’ve been out since the early hours, and it’s already three in the morning,” she summarizes with a stern voice.

Boo. Party over.

“I want to go to Tyler’s place,” I say boldly.

The two look my way while I sense Tyler’s smirk when he kisses my cheek.

“You can come over if you want, Songbird, but gotta make sure your schedule is clear.”

“Why?” I’m a very curious Songbird.

“You won’t be leaving until I’ve heard every musical note you can make with that mouth of yours,” he whispers.

We share a look, and I grin so wide, my cheeks hurt.

Then I’m giggling like an excited schoolgirl.

“I’ve never seen Riley drunk before,” Brock concludes.

“Miss Sullivan,” Cassidy corrects him. “She’s not drunk. She’s tipsy.”

“If that’s tipsy, what’s your definition of drunk?”

“When she starts wandering across the club to find inspiration, you know she’s seriously wasted. She has a thing for graffiti halls and bathrooms,” Cassidy summarizes. “Can we move to the booth? The dance floor is a bit annoying if we’re just standing here.”

“We can dance,” Brock suggests.

Cassidy gives him a look that screams, ‘Hell, no.’

“You two should date,” I state in approval. “Cassidy and Brock. Sitting in a tree. K.I.S—”

Tyler is kissing me before I can finish my singing moment, leaving me to stare at him with obvious expectation.

“Wanna meet the guys?” he offers.

I’m still wrapping my head around how easy it is for him to be so affectionate to me.

“Gotta prove you’re mine.”

“Oh!” Now, that has my attention as I snuggle against his large frame. “Yes!”

“Problem avoider,” Brock mutters, and Tyler laughs.

“If you took a page out of my book, you wouldn’t be single, Bro,” he replies with a look that tells me he’s hinting something to his best friend.

I don’t have time to linger on it because Tyler’s leading the way, his arm wrapped around me before he ends up letting me blindly lead, so he’s right behind me.

Protecting the sight of my very short dress riding up my ass.

“Oh, shit, Tyler?” one of his boys calls out from a booth. There are about six guys and two ladies at the table. Reaching the booth, Tyler stops right in his tracks.

My brain is a bit slow, which is why I’m forcing him to walk forward with the tug of our joined hands.

“Hey, Kingsman,” I greet them, which has the table gasping in surprise at my appearance.

“Miss Riley Fucking Sullivan!”

“H-Hello, Miss Sullivan!”

“Wow. We’re really seeing the Queen of Pop!”

“Seeing? We’re breathing the same air!”

I smirk, but my eyes drift to Jackson, who’s eyeing me oddly. I lose interest far too fast, my eyes moving to the woman practically sitting on Jackson’s lap.

Or was?

She’d been flirting with him, then stopped when we arrived. My sluggish brain caught onto it, but now that I can get a glimpse of her, I’m intrigued.

“Didn’t know you had a girlfriend, Jackson,” I announce and watch how multiple eyes are on him.

Then the guys are cursing.

“Oh fucking shit,” one of them curses. “Britney? Is that you?”

“Who the fuck is Britn— OW! Fuck, man? What?!”

“Shut up! That’s Tyler’s ex!”

“Ex? Ex-girlfriend?”

“Ex fucking fiancée.”

“Oh fucking hell.”

“What’s the hold-up?” Brock questions as he’s now next to me with Cassidy in tow.

One look his way confirms how the once relaxed best friend becomes a rigid statue, looking at this woman with a dark brunette mix of hair. She must have blonde roots because they’re seeping out from her scalp, and I guess the added extensions of silver are there to give off the latest celebrity highlight trend.

Truthfully, she doesn’t look too bad. She’s taller than me and a bit slimmer. Her eyes are hazelnut, and her lips are

bright red. Overall, I approve of her overall look and see why Tyler was interested.

She's his type.

“There’s no hold-up,” I announce, squeezing Tyler’s hand happily. “We just wanted to say hi before we leave.”

“Wait, you’re leaving already?” Jackson questions in surprise. He looks as though he missed an opportunity. “I thought you’d stick around a bit, Miss Sullivan. We’ve barely seen you since the Super Bowl.”

He’s talking as if he’s yearning for me to stay. I wouldn’t say he’s flirting, but I’m not sure exactly what his end game is.

Actually, no. I just don't care right now.

“I’m going to my husband’s house,” I declare, grabbing everyone’s attention.

“Husband? I thought you were divorced?” one of the guys reminds me as if I forgot.

“Not my old husband,” I emphasize and lift my hand, which is joined with Tyler’s. “My *NEW* husband,” I emphasize and sweetly wink. “Remember, he’s going to make me his wife.”

The guys lose it because my seriousness is a bit entertaining from the expression I portray when stating the facts.

“DAMN. Ty wasn’t lying,” one of the guys calls out.

“Bro gonna marry the Pop Queen!”

“Can we come to the wedding, Miss Sullivan?!”

“Sure,” I sweetly reply, making them laugh more. “Anyway, we’re leaving.”

“W-Wait a minute! You didn’t say hello to me,” this Britney girl announces, which cuts short the wave of laughter. Maybe she’s not the type to sense the elephant in the room.

Even my tipsy, maybe drunk ass, can understand it.

Sort of.

Letting go of Tyler’s hand, I walk over to her with the biggest smile.

Then I offer my hand.

“Riley Sullivan. A pleasure to meet you... Britney?”

“Yes, Britney Eloise.”

We shake hands, and the firm shake, matched with the obvious jealousy in her eyes as she takes me in from head to toe, makes my smile grow bigger.

“What a beautiful name! It’s so nice to meet you!”

“I’m Tyler’s ex-fiancé,” she declares, as if that’s such a keynote. “It’s a shame we didn’t work out.”

“Aww, it is,” I pout my lips and even hug her, surprising her and everyone else.

“Wait? Why are you hugging me?”

“To comfort you?” I say and lean back. “If I missed the chance to marry a sexy-as-fuck quarterback who isn’t a man-child and actually knows how to treat a woman right, I’d be in the deepest cave of depression!”

Someone’s choking on their drink.

Another is laughing their head off.

I swear someone’s fighting for breath because alcohol came out of their nose.

Cassidy snickers, as if she's about to burst out in laughter.

"Don't you miss the sex?"

More guys are laughing and gasping.

"N-Not really?"

"Don't lie to me," I whisper, which may not be whispering as I lean in. "He's so fucking good in bed. You know that! Don't lie! You loved him 'cause you have high standards in men. I don't want you lowering yourself, you hear?"

"Ex-Excuse me?"

"No offense to Jackson since he's also a tight end, right?" I ask and look at Brock for confirmation, and he gives me a thumbs up. "How do you go from quarterback to tight end? Sweetheart, you're going to the back of the line in elite positions. Don't do that."

"LORD! I need a beer," Brock cries out.

Jackson is carrying a soured expression while the other guys are punching and pushing him.

"The man lost before he could shoot his shot!"

"Roasted!"

"Get to the end of the line, Jackson!"

"D-Don't go insulting him," she defends as if she wasn't off his lap in three seconds when she saw Tyler.

Hypocrite. Bet she brought them here to this club to try to find Tyler with his "new" celebrity chick... aka me.

"That wasn't an insult. It's just facts. I like being factual. Just like how I respect honesty, communication, and big cock energy," I disclose, and Cassidy loses any resistance she had left not to laugh.

“Riley!”

“What? Tyler has BIG cock energy,” I whine and turn to my man to see his expression is a blank canvas, but he lowers his gaze to me.

One look and some lines of emotion seem to seep into his eyes, and it grows when I press against him once more and take his hand.

“If a man says less and does more with his actions, he’s got a big cock. Say too much and I know you’re the ones trying to hide.”

“That’s dick discrimination,” Brock whines.

“Oh, please,” Cassidy groans. “You’re being too loud and falling into a statistic, Brock.”

“You’d be able to personally vouch if I have a small cock, Cassandra,” he comments with a huff, the answer clearly immediate versus thinking about how to answer.

“OH!”

None of us expect that. My bestie is red in fucking seconds.

“And I said too much,” Brock declares and looks my way. “Can we go? Pretty please, for my own safety?”

“Off to the car!” I cheer and move Tyler’s arm, so it hooks around me. “You have to guide me, though, ‘cause I’m drunk as fuck.”

“Hearing Miss Sullivan admit that is far too cute.”

“I like her!”

“Tyler really pulled a celebrity pop star. I’m baffled.”

“Better be at our meeting tomorrow, Ty!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Tyler finally responds. “We’re going.”

“Bye!” the guys reply in return.

I see Britney wants to say something with how she opens her mouth, but my gaze is moving up because Tyler has his hand around the front part of my neck. Tipping my head back, he rewards me by smothering my lips with his. The kiss is quick, yet it’s everything a possessive man would do to validate his relationship in public.

I’m fucking obsessed.

“I promised your bros to buy you a ring,” he surprisingly announces, and I’m lost in his eyes as they peer into mine.

“A RING ring?” The idea of already having a new one is exciting and a bit nerve-wracking.

“Mhmm, but they said only if we last for six months can I propose to you.”

“DEAL!” I agree immediately, which makes that last bit of tension leave his face when he smiles.

“You’re not one who likes asking questions, huh?”

“I have Cassidy for that,” I argue, knowing it’s the truth. “Treat me right like you have been, Mr. Owens, and I’ll gladly carry your last name.”

The whistles ignite ‘Damns’ and ‘Wows’ from his boys.

“God, get a fucking room already,” Jackson groans.

He’s acting like a sore loser.

“We don’t do hotel rooms,” Tyler declares.

My confident man is back.

“She’s coming to my place tonight,” he reveals. “Besides, I was at hers last night.”

“This is too much!” one of the guys cries out.

“TELL ME I’M SINGLE WITHOUT TELLING ME I’M SINGLE,” another guy cries out.

“Why can’t we be smooth like that, dammit?”

“If Tyler doesn’t make a whole course on how to ‘Marry the Queen of Florida Music Entertainment,’ I’ll be lost in the dating realms forever.”

“Show us your ways!”

“Bye, Kingsman!” I can’t wait to leave because I’m a horny pop star and can’t wait to ride this man into oblivion at his place. “Bye, Britney! A pleasure to meet you!” I say it loud on purpose, hoping someone eavesdrops on our interaction and catches how nice I am to her the entire time.

Cassidy is going to pull something, watch.

I can tell that’s the real reason Britney is around. Someone must have told her we were here dancing or something. What better way to use Jackson, one of Tyler’s teammates, to set him up?

Pathetic.

The moment we’re outside, I realize it’s raining, but it feels amazing to be out in the cool atmosphere.

“Rain!” I squeal and turn to Tyler, who’s slipping off his coat.

“You’re gonna get sick,” he groans and tries to catch me, but I scoot back and stick out my tongue. “Catch me if you can!” I take off before he can say anything.

“She’s a runner... a track star,” Brock whistles while Cassidy curses.

“Oh God, Tyler, don’t lose sight of Riley, or she’s a lost poster girl!” Cassidy calls out, which makes me laugh. “Brock! Move, dammit!”

“Wait? Why are we running?!”

“After them!”

I hear their commotion, but I’m having too much fun trying to run in damn heels from Tyler.

From the sudden silence, I think I’ve done justice, only to squeal when my whole body is up and in muscled arms that have me over his shoulder in a heartbeat.

“What intrusive thought made you think you can outrun a professional athlete?” he questions, completely out of breath, just as he’s completely drenched.

“I made you run for at least a minute!” I declare with pride and laugh. “And I HAD to do it!”

“Why is that?”

“You’re happy again,” I declare as I lift myself to peer down at him. Placing my hands on his wet cheeks, I lean down and give him a firm kiss. “She really hurt you, didn’t she?”

The way he just stares up at me in realization follows with a broken look that makes him smile just slightly.

A smile that makes my heart ache for him.

“She did,” he whispers, confirming my quarterback still has wounds that haven’t fully healed.

We both do.

“I just wanted you to forget for a moment,” I whisper. “Besides, who can say they danced in the rain with a pop star?”

He mockingly laughs as his eyes roll.

“Just like saying no one has ever danced with a quarterback in the rain.”

I wiggle until he puts me down, but I grab his hands and force him to spin around with me a few times. When we come to a stop, I put my hands up in cheer.

“Surprise! I’m the first.”

My words finally click, and instead of being mad with my silly stupidity, my big, muscled quarterback is laughing so hard, he could be actually crying.

“God, woman. I think I’m madly in love with you.”

“Good,” I vow and laugh with him. “I think I don’t want it any other way but to be with you.”

He takes my hand just as Brock and Cassidy are almost where we are.

Tyler lifts his hand, cueing our car, which I realize must have been tailing us this entire time.

“My place after we drop Brock and Cassidy off?” he whispers to me.

“Your place,” I sweetly state as I move against him and lift up to my tiptoes. There’s no doubt in my mind that my lips will be claimed by his.

Kissing in the rain while washing the pain of heartache away.

REWARDING APPETIZERS



I forgot how it feels to be completely frozen in stillness from the sight of one individual. How my heart stops for what feels like eons, only to hammer against my chest like warning drums, desperate for me to get out of there. If it wasn't for Riley, I'm not sure what I would have done. She took the lead without a second thought, despite that woman intentionally reminding her and the rest of my teammates, who didn't know who she was, that we were once something. I hate it. That moment of complete vulnerability on a night that didn't prepare me for such.

During those beginning moments, I feared my relationship would be over. Then came the boiling anger, wishing for one chance to lift its ugly head and tell this woman how much she hurt me. Ruined me. Made me feel like a villain when all I ever wanted was to be the hero in her story. Then I felt numb, wishing I could just disappear.

That's when Riley drew my attention. So effortlessly, she pulled me out of it with such simple things. Touch. Public intimacy. Bringing me back to the present instead of leaving me in the past of my regrets. What really sealed away any lingering doubt was when she entered the rain. She ran and told me to catch her, and for those racing seconds, I thought she was leaving me. Running farther away, as though I'll never get to

feel her warmth again. I ran as though my life depended on it, and maybe it did. Having her back in my grasp rewarded me with comfort with my Songbird's expression of why she did what she did. So brilliant in knowledge. The night may feel like it's over, but I'm confident it's still young in our eyes. I want to reward my queen for her intervention. To remind her that she's my world now.

— **Journal Entry #561**

by Tyler Sinclair Owens

~ *T*YLER~

I THINK I broke a family photo.

That's the least of my cares as the slam of the door reaches my ears, only for me to slam the woman passionately kissing me against the wooden surface.

It's hard to be gentle with her when I've desperately wanted to fuck her since we dropped Brock and Cassidy off.

My sweet, protective Songbird, Riley Maddison Sullivan.

Whether it's the palpable hunger that makes the closed space so tense or the way her hand easily moves along my leg while she stares out the window. Touch is my love language, but I've never experienced what it's like to be on the receiving end.

Having a woman caress you, hold your hand, play with the tiny strands of your hair, or rest against your shoulder to sneak tiny kisses to your neck and cheek.

Riley responds to everything I do for her, and her responding back all through the night set a new bar in my mind.

Men can be pampered with affection as well.

Men don't have to give everything and be left empty in return.

Men deserve to feel love from their partners.

I'm deserving of more...

Tonight proved exactly that.

It also confirmed that my coach was right about Britney stalking my movements.

He'd noticed on a number of occasions Britney's appearance at games, events, and charities, but I was always too busy being one of the highlight players everyone wished to get some sort of comment from to pay mind.

I didn't want to acknowledge her existence. Let alone accept the idea of her 'stalking' me in hopes we would coincidentally meet and somehow make up.

That's what she tried to pull tonight.

Riley was my saving grace.

Now, we were making out against the front door to my home, our bodies still drenched from the heavy rain. The sound of the heavy downpour through the city makes tonight a perfect one to fuck until our hearts and bodies are content.

Breaking the kiss, I lift her with ease, needing to get upstairs and into my room where we could work on warming up. If I was in the proper mindset, I'd encourage us to shower or take a long bath, but I can't do any of that. I'm already

fighting my spiraling mind with some common sense, like putting the fireplace on the moment I close the bedroom door.

That gets delayed because I can only do one thing at a time.

Right now, all my attention is on my Riley.

I only break the kiss because I'm sure we both need air. It's rewarding, though, to have my Songbird in my arms, her legs hooked around my waist, and those loving, soul-diving eyes peering into my half-opened ones, as though I'm the center of her world.

Frankly, maybe I am to her, but truth be told, it's the other way around.

She's the controller of my orbit, and I can't pull away from this blossoming connection.

I already know I'm in love.

Madly in love with Riley Maddison Sullivan.

Now, however, it's time to prove to her how much I love her.

Worship her the best way I know how.

"I need you naked, Songbird," I encourage, catching my breath. I'm craving to see her luscious body, all bare and ready for me.

"Only if you get to be naked, too," she whispers, almost hesitantly.

Cupping her cheeks, I softly kiss her.

"Ask me again, but with that confident firmness in your voice," I encourage because I can't have any of that hesitant energy here.

She bites her lip, but maintaining her eye contact gets her to understand tonight isn't about who's in control.

Tonight, we express what we want and get it.

“Only if you get to be naked, too,” she repeats, firmer this time. “I’m not used to... getting to say what I want.”

“I know,” I reassure her with another kiss. “But we’re changing that, aren’t we?”

“Yes,” she breathes and enjoys when I tug on her bottom lip and tenderly suck it. “God...I’ve always wanted something like this. Someone like you.”

I can feel the raw emotions in her voice. This must feel like a dream come true for her.

She has to know I feel the same.

“Likewise, Songbird.” I want her to understand we’re so similar in a number of aspects. “Now you have me, baby, and together, we can do whatever we want tonight.”

“If you come... and well...” She needs a moment to think out what she wants to admit. “And if I don’t, we won’t stop there, yes?”

God, no.

“We won’t stop until you’re begging me to, Songbird,” I vow. I’ve been dying for tonight, and I know the stamina within me will keep me going for a few rounds. “But that means ensuring you come as many times as your body desires.”

My hand tangles in her hair as I give her a deep, tongue-exploring kiss.

“I need you squirting all over my bed sheets, Riley.”

She shivers with anticipation, making me grin before I plop a kiss on her lips.

“Get naked and start the shower for me.”

“Yes, Daddy,” she whispers.

I groan and kiss her before she can get out of my grasp.

“If you call me Daddy throughout the night, I’ll fucking die.”

“That wouldn’t be good,” she teases, and it’s her turn to claim my lips and make me groan into her mouth, which dominates mine. “I like calling you Daddy.”

“You can call me anything, Songbird, and I’ll be on my knees for you.”

She smiles against my lips as the two of us kiss for what feels like forever. It takes her shivering against me to remind myself of the tasks at hand.

Hot shower to warm us up.

Then it’s fucking time.

“Go start the shower,” I urge against her lips. “Play with that dripping pussy of yours until I get there.”

“Yes, Daddy,” she approves with that sultry, whimsical voice that sends shivers of need through me.

My cock is twitching with anticipation.

My eyes trail after her, longing beating within me from her absence. I begin to move when she pauses at the washroom doorway, the light being flicked on to illuminate the once-dark space.

She slides out of her sparkling outfit. The dress has been driving me mad all night with how short and absolutely

amazing it looks on her curvy frame. It drops to the ground, and she proceeds to slowly crouch to pick it up, all while she peers forward.

As if she doesn't know I'm watching her every move.

I struggle not to race after her when she stands once more, my eyes specifically on her plump ass.

I want my face to be up there.

Fuck... what if she wants anal? Has she delved into that shit? God, I'd die a happy fucker. I need to find out everything she's okay with.

That's my newfound mission as she finally disappears into the washroom and closes the door behind her. Snapping out of my void of burning lust, I force myself to repeat my tasks in my mind again and again, so I don't forget.

Fireplace, check. Bed in one piece, check. Condoms? Shit... do I have any?

I check the nightstand, realizing I don't.

I'll have to ask if she's on birth control.

The topic makes me frown, especially knowing what Chase did.

What he's the culprit of committing with no retributions.

I've been thinking of a way to get it out of him, for him to reveal the dark secret he forced my Songbird to keep to herself.

Cassidy and I know, but that's not enough.

Everyone needs to realize what a true monster Chase is.

Setting the LED lights in the room to dim, I strip out of my clothes and step into the steamy bathroom. The scent of

arousal hits me as I approach, making me lick my lips before I admire her silhouette in the glass space that's covered in steam.

"Is my Songbird being good?" I wonder as I open the door and step in to see my naked beauty with her hand between her legs, touching herself. Closing the door, I admire her under the stream of hot water, looking fucking delicious.

"Trying," she moans, her fingers deep and trusting into her wet pussy. "Could use some help."

Don't need to ask me twice, baby.

I move us until we're away from the stream and against the glass wall, kissing desperately while I urge her fingers out of her pussy and replace it with one of mine. Her moan of relief is loud and clear, the sound echoing in the hollow space. Teasing her with a few pumps leaves my fingers dripping with her juices that cling to them as I pull them out.

Spinning her with my other hand, I press her against the glass once more, her back against my front side while those hard nipple breasts are firmly pressing the steam-covered glass.

I can already imagine it being the perfect window where everyone would have no choice but to see the dirty things we're doing.

Goodness, the tempting things I can do with this woman.

What turns me on even more is knowing Riley would go along with the ride.

"I want you singing hymns of pleasure when I make you cum, Songbird," I urge her while my hand is back between her legs. Slipping two fingers into her dripping cunt rewards me

with that melodic moan that ignites quivers of excitement through me.

“Yes, Daddy,” she moans and arches into my hold, her round ass pressing against my erect cock.

“Tease,” I growl into her ear, tugging her ear lobe soon after. The side of her neck is the next thing I enjoy taunting with kisses and nibbles, finding the perfect spot that makes her mewl and squirm. As I begin to build my speed with my fingers, her moans and pants grow louder and quicker in pace.

“You like that, Songbird?”

“Mhmm!”

“Like how my fingers are pumping into your greedy wet pussy?”

“Yes!”

“See how tightly your cunt is squeezing my fingers? You don’t want them sliding out, do you?”

“No, Daddy... please,” she begs.

I know she’s inching closer to the edge. She needs this release after so much stimulation.

“You better chokehold my cock when I fuck you nice and deep, Riley,” I growl into her shoulder, unable to stop myself from gliding my cock along her ass.

It feels so fucking good to be against her, to have my fingers being squeezed into oblivion with each thrust I deliver. Her moans and cries for more are music to my ears while I chase my own high while encouraging her to embrace hers.

“C’mon, baby. You’re gonna cum any minute, aren’t you?”

“Mhmm! Yes. Just... ah... please!”

She's so fucking close.

“That’s it, baby. Cum all over my fingers. Leave me dripping with your juices. *Cum, Riley.*”

She whimpers and shudders in seconds, her body arching against me as her climax consumes her. Making her cum doesn’t stop my fingers from thrusting rapidly into her, my pace in sync with my gliding cock as I get closer to my own climax.

“Fuck,” I curse and grunt a few times as my fingers sink as deeply as I can go into Riley’s pussy.

She cries out in what I assume is another orgasm while I’m hit with my own release, which leaves me groaning as my head presses into her shoulder.

I cup her pussy, my two fingers still deep inside, to keep her upright because her legs are shuddering. It’s thanks to my hand that’s pressed on the glass that manages to keep us standing, or else we’d both be on the shower floor.

That was so fucking good.

I don’t have my cock inside her yet, and I’m already experiencing ascending-inducing orgasms.

This woman is everything.

My twin flame star-crossed lover or whatever they term it in that whole clairvoyance astrological stuff.

Pulling my fingers out, I move her against me before maneuvering her around, so her back is now against the glass.

Offering my drenched fingers to her mouth, she rewards me with a brief look before she opens her mouth and sucks them dry.

God...

Pulling my fingers out, they're replaced with my tongue, which goes on an explorative adventure. Just tasting bits of her juices in her mouth has me twitching hard. I break the kiss to calm myself down.

A moment to think.

"I don't have any condoms here," I mutter. "Want me to go out?"

"At three in the morning?" she inquires with amusement in her mesmerizing eyes.

She's mocking me with those eyes. It's kinda cute.

"Don't think I'd do it?" I'm curious as to what she's thinking now.

"Honestly, I haven't thought that far," she admits. Placing her hands lightly along my chest, she admires my muscles, and I know she's deep in thought.

"Talk to me, Songbird." My voice is as tender as it can be, while my eyes seek hers as she lifts her gaze until we're sharing a stare of longing.

"I'm not sure I can have kids after what Chase did," she mutters with her eyes downcast. "I still take birth control... it's just..."

"Would you explore other options?" I lift her chin so she'll look up at me again. "Don't look as if you've disappointed me, Riley."

"But... you want kids, don't you? I mean... you're a family man. You value family. I can see how important it was for you to communicate with my dad and brothers. You even

survived my mother's scolding wrath," she huffs the last part, which is adorable with her pouting lips.

"She wasn't that bad," I say with a wink and lightly peck on her lips. "Yes, I want kids. Yes, family is important to me, but we're in 2025, Songbird. There are plenty of other ways of conceiving."

I see a hint of hope as well as worry.

"But... if I can't carry."

"Is it important to you that you're the one who carries our children?"

"Not really?" She's staring up as if thinking about her options. "I mean... I would have liked the opportunity of carrying my child, to experience carrying a child full term. Then again, I'm not opposed to other options."

"We can do IVF," I whisper to her as I reach over to turn the shower off. Cupping her cheeks, I make sure she has my full attention before continuing. "We have the financial means to do IVF. You're also still extremely young, Riley. We have years to try, and if IVF is too complicated or risky for your health due to past traumas, we can do alternative options, like a surrogate carrying our child."

"I forgot there was that option," she admits, and I can see that little sprout of hope grow.

"If anything, we can adopt as well."

"You don't mind if they're not blood-related?"

"I don't care," he confesses. "Family doesn't have to be blood-related. As long as we love, protect, and cherish one another throughout our lifetime, we're a family. Whether we carry our own bundle of joy or adopt a child who finds their

way into our arms, we will love them unconditionally, and together, we'll be the loving Owen's family who continues to spread kindness, love, and their talents with the world." I kiss her forehead, noticing the ease in her once-tense body.

"Does that make you feel a bit better, Riley?"

"Yes," she whispers with teary eyes. "We can fuck like wild animals now."

I don't know if it's the way she says it or her adorable, innocent look, but I'm snickering and caving in laughter.

"Why are you laughing?"

"I... I don't know. I think it's your face."

"What's wrong with my face?"

"So fucking cute," I laugh and hug her.

"You're lying. Why are you actually— EEP!" I'm tickling her before I know it, her giggles echoing with my wave of laughter.

"Tyler! Hehehe."

I hug her and kiss her cheek before letting her go.

"Let's clean up a bit," I encourage.

"Even though you're going to leave me in shambles?"

"I love how confident you are in my abilities without seeing my sex game," I note with a grin that makes her eyes twinkle with mischief.

"You're going to reward me, aren't you?" she suggests and gives me those doe eyes that can make any man weak.

"Oh, I'll reward you, Songbird."

My hand is already wrapped around my cock, stroking it impatiently.

“Get on your knees, Songbird.”

She’s down and peering up at me like the obedient kitten she is.

“Time to enjoy your rewarding appetizer.”

Before the main course.

LET KARMA BE THE EXECUTOR



How can one be so serene looking in their sleep? Watching how peaceful Riley is sleeping in my arms has been the highlight of this morning so far. I've barely slept, knowing whether I like it or not, I'm gonna have to attend the group meeting with the rest of the team. I'm hoping they're all late, so I have an excuse to be late as well. Honestly, I'm tempted to skip it all together. If it means I get to continue writing in this journal and watching my angelic Songbird sleep peacefully, I may pull it off. Thinking about it, I can see Riley wrinkling her nose in disapproval and getting Cassidy to give me her lengthy input on why I, a professional NFL quarterback, shouldn't be tardy at this stage of my career. Boo. I'll have to use that as a reminder of why I found the motivation to go back to reality, but despite it all, last night was simply blissful.

For a single moment, as we both came, it felt like our souls entwined and birthed something new. Riley was the first woman I'd ever felt such a heightened connection with, and that was further proven in the early hours as we became one. I can't lose her now, which is also why I reached out to my jewelry guy. I need something special. Unique and different, which screams Riley. Not too big and flashy. It needs to be balanced, but a sight that screams millionaire's wife. I can't wait to propose to her. Only five and a half months to go. It

should go by fast, but at the same time, I hope things go at a pace where we can both enjoy every minute of each other's company.

— *Journal Entry #562 by Tyler Sinclair Owens*

~ *T*YLER~

“DAMN! You went to war, my brother?”

The other guys are losing their shit looking at my body, which is covered in far too many bite marks.

My Songbird loves marking me up.

“Our quarterback brother reeled in the damn jackpot,” Brock whines. “Celebrity pop star who’s humble, stunning, has the same morals, and can meet this man’s sexual appetite? Just marry her at this point.”

“He’s not going to actually marry her,” Jackson huffs in annoyance as he walks into the locker room. “Just admit it. Y’all did some sort of bet or something.”

“Bet?” I’m curious. “Why do you think we bet on this?”

“Had to,” Jackson stares my way. “No man in history is going to make such bold moves in public unless he’s eating a big sack of money. What benefit are you getting by stirring this pot? Real estate? Seven figures. A promotion to take her husband’s position over at the Jets.”

I can’t counter him because the other guys are groaning and cursing at him.

“Fuck off, Jackson,” Brock snaps. “You’re being a dick lately, all because your slow ass missed the chance to snatch that beauty.”

“Jackson doesn’t even have charm,” Charlie mocks.

“Jackson is boring, lacks critical thinking, and it’s already been deemed impossible for him to be of Miss Sullivan’s taste because he’s a tight end,” Alec announces so robotically, we’re choking on our own saliva over his insult.

“Shit! You know things are downhill when our boy Alec gives you his opinion!” Jamie laughs.

“Preach, Alec! In fact, say it again so I can get it on video,” Jeremiah encourages as he puts his phone on record.

“Stop bringing the conversation over to me, dammit,” Jackson snaps. “It’s fucking obvious you’re playing some sort of game and using Miss Sullivan for whatever gimmicks you have planned.”

He walks over to me, and I feel the shift in tension in the room with his approach. My already obvious frown deepens, but I don’t rise from the bench I’ve been chilling on since he started this ‘rant’ to say my relationship with Riley is “fake.”

He’s on a mission for me to admit shit.

“Did Chase blackmail you? He must have. He was your best friend,” he brings up.

That has me standing up and in his face so fast, no one predicted it.

“Fuck! Ty man,” Brock’s hand is on my shoulders, trying to stop me from pounding the shit out of this fucker, but I’m still portraying a ‘calm’ demeanor.

At least on the outside.

“When I was six, Chase broke my arm by ‘accident’ because I told him I could beat him in hockey,” I begin, grabbing their attention. “When I was ten, Chase told me the wrong time for the soccer tryouts so I wouldn’t be able to get

on the team. At sixteen, I missed out on my game advancement for basketball because his mother got into a car accident, and he didn't want to lose the chance on the team because he was the weaker link. At twenty-two, he decided our team wasn't fucking worthy to remain on. He said 'fuck you' and intentionally set me up so the executives of Jet Hawks overheard me saying I'd be loyal to Kingsman Chiefs unless the advance was beneficial to my career. Bonus points were recording the conversation, so they had additional evidence to prove I didn't deserve the management role they wished for me to have. Not Chase."

The locker room is fucking silent, and a good thing it is because if anyone dared say shit in this tense moment, I'd fucking lose it.

"What's your end game here, Jackson?" I seethe and get right in his face, which makes him tense up. "Asking me shit like, did I make a bet to be with Riley? Are you trying to pull a Chase? You think I don't know you're probably wired and recording every fucking thing we've said thus far?"

"What?" Brock gasps, and the others are also surprised by the accusation.

"Y-You can't prove that."

"I only need five fucking seconds to flip you down onto this bench and rip off that shirt to see that wire shit hidden beneath your cheap knockoff Ralph Laurent polo shirt," I threaten without a hint of remorse. "You think I was going to be fine with you somehow working together with my ex-fiancée to make me jealous? Bringing her to the club that you knew we were at and would get access to simply because you're my teammate. Did you think because you weren't present when I had my falling out with her, I should safely

assume you knew nothing about my relationship, which was trending in the news for six fucking months?”

Before anyone knows it, I have him in my grasp and pinned to the lockers. He grits his teeth but watches as I lower my gaze to the tiny mic that’s poking out of his shirt.

He follows my gaze, confirming he’s been caught, but he can’t say a single word because I’m not done saying what needs to be said.

“Riley Maddison Sullivan is the best fucking thing that has ever happened to me. I’ve quietly admired her for years, but to finally get a chance to be loved by someone who loves me in return. Who can see a fucking future with me and isn’t cheating on your ass with some toxic jerk because my image in society is ‘too good.’ You don’t know shit about Riley. Instead, you’re chasing her out of lust and because she’s deemed available! Not once have you tried to discover who she really is. You’ve made no actual effort to unravel what she hides behind the cameras and how hard her life is being a celebrity where everyone is talking shit, writing shit, and making up fucking shit!”

It makes me so fucking angry, it’s taking me everything not to punch him. I’m shaking with rage as I grip his top as tightly as I can.

“You think because I give off the persona that I don’t pay attention to what’s happening outside of sports that I have no clue of the new AI trend going around? Taking bits of words celebrities use and feeding them to AI to get a good reflection of their voice. You were gonna set me up, tell the world I’m playing with Riley’s heart, and trying to take down my career and image because I’m an evil person behind the scenes,” I

summarize and watch his eyes widen now that I caught onto his plans.

“Bet they would believe you, yes? My own tight end, listening to me talk shit in these very lockers. You’ll be the brave fucker who wants the world to hear the truth, yeah. Brock, my best friend, wouldn’t say shit. My teammates who’ve known me fucking years on this team wouldn’t have a thing to say. But you... less than a year on our team after multiple teams denied your application.”

The corners of my lips begin to lift as I lean in to whisper into his ear.

“He’s drama, Kingsman. Talks shit. Ruins shit. An envious motherfucker who can’t help but enter a team, humble himself for a few months, and starts tearing up the team from the inside. Almost like a dangerous predator trying to destroy any colony of powerful beasts in the wild because that’s what you’re good at.” I lean back so he can see my chilling expression as my smile reveals my white teeth. “You’re not here to make connections. You’re here to destroy them.”

Pin drop silence.

I pull away then, noticing the slight tremble in his frame. Patting his shoulders a few times makes him carry a fearful look in his eyes.

“I’m the one who vouched for you.” I enjoy how his eyes widen with surprise. “You think coach gave a fuck about your extensive experience and gameplay? Rule number one in the industry. If the boy is messy, we don’t want him. You’re a walking red flag that everyone questioned in the shadows why we allowed you to enter our team. What did everyone say? Ah. It’s all because of Owens. That kind-hearted soul who wants to give everyone a shot in life.”

I chuckle at that and shake my head.

“Why else would I let my so-called best buddy fuck me over again and again throughout life? Any sport I became good at, he was right there to ruin it for me along the way—hockey, basketball, soccer, even badminton. Any competitive support that put me in the spotlight too quickly was a threat from his shining light that he always wanted to be shone upon him and him alone. I kept the pattern on until I found the one thing I wouldn’t let Chase fuck up—football.”

I can see the fear in his eyes now as he’s wondering what I’m planning with such a mischievous grin on my face.

“He thought he did me dirty with me not getting that promotion. Little did he know it was a setup to get him out of the team. Chase Arnold Benedict was doing exactly what you’re trying to do now. Building the tension in our team so our focus begins to dwindle, and we turn on one another. Obviously, one Super Bowl win is all we should be allowed to achieve in your mind and those you surround yourself with when you leave this place. No longer can we be a threat, so you have to work from the inside out.”

I shake my head in dismay.

“A shame, really. I liked you. Rooted for you. Vouched for you multiple times. Coach didn’t even want you to play during the Super Bowl. He knew you were wearing recording devices under your uniform for months. Trying to get shit not just on me but everyone,” I reveal and notice how my other teammates are wide-eyed and gawking at Jackson, who they thought was one of them.

Reality hits hard.

“That’s exactly why Florida Kingsman Chiefs has protective service in place to prevent something like this from happening again,” I announce and point to one of the corners of the locker room where a black speaker box is placed.

“Th-That’s not a camera,” Jackson mutters but doesn’t sound confident. His face is far too pale now, making his already light complexion replicate a ghost.

“You’re right. It’s not,” I assure him. “On the outside, it’s a speaker and actually does a good job getting announcements through here when coach needs us. However, it’s actually a recording device. It records anything said in this room and stores it in iCloud for up to a year. Professionals who’ve worked with the FBI and CIA in the past analyze the recordings on a weekly basis, make transcripts, and keep them filed in a database in a different location that’s not disclosed to anyone but the CEO. This initiative was started after Chase set me up.”

He’s about to speak, ready to counter me or say something stupid that would piss me off, but I’m a step ahead of him.

“Is this legal? Yes, it is,” I vouch, shutting him up. “In fact, we all signed in our contracts that this device is present in all stadium sports practice locker rooms and meeting rooms for the sole purpose of preventing negative propaganda and AI manipulation.”

It feels far too good to reveal something I’ve kept secret for the longest time.

“If you’d read the fine print of your contract, you would have seen that small tidbit in Article 5, Section W. I know contracts are lengthy and a pain to read when you have five professionals waiting for you to sign the dotted line, but a real

pro would have taken the time to review it, even if that means it takes another five hours to do so,” I summarize.

When he has nothing to say, I brush his shoulders and take a step back.

“Clear your locker. Drop your shit in coach’s office,” I declare in an emotionless voice. “You want to run my name to the ground? Go ahead. Actually, be my fucking guest, Jackson. I’ll be more than ready for you, especially when I have folders of shit on the magnitude of missions you’ve taken upon yourself to fuck up various football teams throughout the American League.”

I watch how he gulps and pales further before he looks around at the men he obviously betrayed.

“But let me make one thing crystal clear.”

His eyes are back on me.

“Dare try to ruin my relationship with Riley in any way, and I swear to the Heavenly God above that I will bring you to the fucking ground,” I growl as if spitting venom. “My Songbird is mine, and I’ll do absolutely anything to ensure not a single man dares try to break the last bits of humbling diamond heart.”

My vow is loud and clear, and I know if anyone else in this room was planning shit, this confrontation would fuck those plans right up.

“You’re dismissed.”

I sit back down and gather my things, knowing I’m done with today. I’d rather be at home snuggling with Riley in my arms than dealing with this bullshit.

The other guys don't say a word. In fact, they quietly go to their lockers and are doing the same in gathering their own shit.

Jackson stares at me long and hard, but I know he won't do shit. He's already been caught and now has lost this game he's been playing for months. Soon enough, he's gathering his stuff, but unlike us, who throw our remaining stuff inside our lockers and lock it up, he takes all his belongings and heads out the door.

When he's gone, the silence is still loud as ever, and I know today's practice would just be shit if we even tried to get anything done.

"I'm taking the lead," I announce as I'm up and pulling my bag strap over my head so the strap rests along my chest.

"Tell coach the deets. Practice is canceled today. I'll see you guys at Disney." I head to the door and open it. "And make sure that bastard is out of group chat."

"Already done," Brock mutters.

"Good."

One done. Just one more fucker to go.

I ALWAYS BELIEVE IN ONE THING



“Sweet love, sweet company. What a dream that has unraveled into reality. Your arms bring me comfort, your words nothing but grace. I’ve never felt so whole, so pure. I’ve never expected this fate. As a dreamer, I prayed. As a lover, I hoped. Those expectations wait patiently to turn into manifestations. Sweet love, I’ve finally found you, the one destined for me. Sweet love, oh sweet company.”

— *Sweet Love Sweet Company by Riley Maddison Sullivan*

~ *R*ILEY~

“So sleepy,” I mumble into the pillow, having snuggled the cushion for what feels like two hours already.

I was drawn to it because of the clinging cologne that reminds me of Tyler, his scent making it so easy to drift back to sleep for hours at a time.

He kissed me and whispered he had a meeting with the team, so I should sleep for as long as I needed. Rarely do I sleep in. I’ve gotten used to being on the move just to avoid Chase and his complaints about how insufficient I am in a number of areas.

Pushing him out of my mind, I slowly sit up and run my hands through my hair. Opening my heavy eyelids rewards me

with the low beams of sunlight that sneak out of the tiny cracks in the blinds.

Staring at the light, I sit there pondering a magnitude of things, making words float in my mind and a melody so easily hum in pursuit. By the time I'm up and in the washroom, I'm humming a sweet tune, one I can picture someone playing in the early hours as the sun begins to rise into the sky.

"Sweet Love, Sweet company," I end up singing, and soon enough, I'm searching for something to write the lyrics down.

To my grateful surprise, there's a notepad, a pen, and some pieces of chocolate on the nightstand. Noticing the sticky note pressed on the oakwood, I pick it up to read the note from my lovely quarterback.

Thought you could use this. Just in case you have any inspiration before I'm back. I'll be back before three in the afternoon. Love you, Songbird.

It's the first I realize he's expressed that he loves me. I'm staring at the note, reading it again and again as my eyes scan line to line. I admire his handwriting, noticing how neat and beautiful it is, especially for a man's handwriting. I've never gotten cute notes like these.

Little sticky notes that express another's loving intentions for you.

Funny to admit how envious I used to be of all those couples who got to experience these little things. The tiny expressions of love in the form of actions that don't need money or connections to make someone's day.

Knowing he had a meeting to attend, Tyler took time to find trinkets that would make my life easier in a space I'm not

familiar with. He even went the extra mile to write a note of reassurance and kiss me farewell.

“I can’t be more grateful to you, Tyler,” I whisper to myself before kissing the sticky note.

Staring at it once more, I can’t help but smirk and think of something far too sinful for this fine morning, but I can’t erase the potential it’ll have in making Tyler’s day.

Goodness, I’m becoming a risk taker, thanks to this man.

Getting on the bed, I place the sticky note in the perfect spot and angle the camera after setting it at the farthest lens.

With the timer app, I see my naked reflection with the sticky note placed right on my coochie — my legs spread as wide as I can, especially at this angle.

I hope my stomach looks decent, especially when I haven’t done any sort of cardio in days. Taking the photo with my non-work phone, I decide which one is best and hide all of them in a locked folder.

Just in case Tyler wants different angles.

I don’t even know if it’ll turn him on, but goodness, it’s a risk I’m willing to take.

If he does love it, I can’t fucking wait for him to come home and give me more rewards.

Just the idea makes me lick my lips, remembering how he fucked my mouth with his thick shaft that pounded me into oblivion well into the early hours of today.

Deciding to get back to writing those lyrics in my mind, I manage to write a good portion of the song before I search for something to put on.

I end up stealing one of Tyler's jerseys. It must have been a spare he brought home to wash if he didn't bring it with him for today's practice.

Putting it on is a reminder of how big my quarterback is because his jersey drapes me like a dress. I haven't been keeping up with the news, but his jersey is one of the most sold in NFL history, with sales up to 900% and selling out so fast, they had to buy another entire warehouse complex to make his jersey solely.

Wild.

Seeing his popularity rise makes me happy.

That we've been spending more time together, I can see Tyler isn't the lazy type. He needs to be moving, working on various projects, or working on himself so his performance can be on par with his competitors, if not higher.

"I'm hungry," I admit, realizing it's already past twelve. From the looks of it, I just spent an hour writing lyrics. Honestly, it was a good distraction, or else I would have gotten too nervous about my frisky text and deleted it before Tyler could get a glimpse.

Leaving my phone upstairs, I take the notepad and pen and head downstairs. I'm glad I left my phone on Do Not Disturb, or I know it would be going non-stop with me not answering anything before twelve.

I'm sure anyone who desperately needs me would reach out to Cassidy. She'd remind them that I actually have a life outside of my song creations.

With the news of the divorce beginning to calm down, I've decided I want to take more than a month off.

Maybe three?

My final tour concert will be here in Florida, so it would be the perfect time to reveal my new album and play some new songs for added promo.

A surprise launch may be even better.

Thinking about it makes it more possible, which has me singing my new melody as I go down the stairs and find my way to the kitchen.

The scent of coffee immediately catches my attention, and soon enough, I'm singing this new song I've just invested in and creating the beat in my mind. I could easily record it for Jax and Ace to get started on it. Honestly, if I give us one more week, we could have the base sounds for every song on the album.

With nine songs already, I could write three more and have a full album ready to go. I'm giddy thinking about it, which has me dancing as I wait for the Nespresso machine to work its magic.

"Sweet love, sweet company. What a dream that has unraveled into reality. Your arms bring me comfort, your words nothing but grace. I've never felt so whole, so pure. I've never expected this fate. As a dreamer, I prayed. As a lover, I hoped. Those expectations wait patiently to turn into manifestations," I sing and open the fridge, my eyes scanning the contents for cream. *"Sweet love, I've finally found you, the one destined for me. Sweet love, oh sweet company."*

Pausing in my singing movement, I tilt my head and take a slower look to try to find any sort of creamer.

"Is my husband not a cream lover?" I wonder while I pout my lips.

No. He wouldn't eat me out like he did last night otherwise.

I'm tempted to laugh at my own thoughts.

"It's on the right, love."

I move my gaze to the right, realizing the creamer is indeed there in three different flavors.

"There is some!" I beam at the sight like it's made my entire day. "Thank...wait a minute!" I turn my head to look back and see I'm clearly not alone in the kitchen.

In fact, there are two individuals sitting at the corner table admiring me with big smiles.

"See, if Tyler wouldn't kill me, I would have at least taken a photo to prove that Riley Maddison Sullivan, the Pop Queen, was singing an unknown song and dancing in front of our coffee machine," the deeper voice is from the black-haired man sitting to the right.

"Now, Trevor. You do the same when your girlfriend bakes you apple pie for dessert whenever your team wins a game. You dance in front of the oven, waiting for the final seconds to tick away on the timer," an older woman who had to have been the one to direct me to the creamer announces.

"Awww, Mom. Don't embarrass me like that," Trevor whines. "You're making me look uncool in front of THE Riley Maddison Sullivan! You know, I've been begging Tyler to stop being a selfish douche and bring her over, but NO! My bro is too busy winning Super Bowls and falling madly in love on LIVE television. See! If my gut didn't tell me to come with you today to pass by, I never would have gotten this chance to see my brother's idol!"

"And your obsession," his mother comments as she sips her coffee, making him choke on whatever he's about to say.

"Mom! I'm not obsessed!"

“The way your room is decorated tells me otherwise,” she sweetly hums. “You’re lucky Marilyn is just as much of a hardcore fan as you are, or you two would have broken up the moment she walked into your room to see wall-to-wall posters of Miss Riley.”

“Mommmmmmm.” He’s hiding under his crossed arms in defeat. “First impressions!”

“Oh, right!” His mother sweetly announces and looks at me. “Good morning, Miss Riley. Sorry we didn’t make our presence known earlier. We wanted to, but you looked very into singing your song. Don’t want to interrupt an artist at work,” she reveals with the most loving smile. “I’m Mrs. Owens, Tyler and Trevor’s mother.”

I’m speechless because... wow.

She seems like the nicest mother a child could be blessed to have in their lives.

“Um...G-Good morning!” My voice is like a squeaky mouse. “Uh...” My cheeks are growing redder by the second as I slowly peer down at my attire, realizing I’m naked under the jersey and had been shaking my ass, dancing like no one was watching.

Oh hell, that’s the least of my problems!

“Please don’t tell me you both were here last night,” I say in horror, which has Mama Owens laughing while Trevor is smirking.

OH MY GOD!

I’m petrified as I stare at them in utter horror.

What a way to introduce yourself to your boyfriend’s family.

Oh, hello there. I'm the pop star your son/brother fucked marvelously all through the early hours, thinking no one would be listening to the dirty talk we like to say to one another when he's nine inches deep.

Yeah, I can die now.

No way in heaven can I go to a single family together ever in existence once married to Tyler.

“Stop pulling her leg.” An arm is around me for seconds, encouraging me to turn my horrified attention to the man in question, whose annoyed expression softens immediately with our locked gaze. “Morning, Songbird.”

He kisses me not a second later, taking his time to give me a firm kiss that doesn't make me feel like my new, wonderful life has crumbled down from sheer embarrassment.

“They got here this morning,” he reveals. “Shortly before I had to go to practice.”

“You're no fun at all,” Mama Owens whines.

“Miss Riley looked like she was going to transcend out of our house and into another dimension,” Trevor acknowledges. “Yo, Bro. Thought you said practice ended at three?”

“Yeah,” he mutters and gives me a kiss on my forehead before looking at his brother. “That got fucked up real quick when Jackson decided I'm deserving of a smear campaign.”

“Huh?” I snap out of my dreadful state to give him a concerned look. “What do you mean, smear campaign? Why would he have any intention of bringing you down?”

“Isn't that the douche who was seen with your bitch ex-fiancée?” Trevor barks in anger.

“Trevor,” Mama Owens drills. “Language.”

“Oh, c’mon, Mom. She’s a fucking cunt ass bitch who’s been stalking Tyler for MONTHS! They have TikTok channels that now follow her every move, knowing she’ll be close to wherever my bro is that day. Do you think it was just a coincidence he was at the club Ty was at last night? Hell to the fucking no.”

Mama Owens doesn’t answer him, focusing her attention on Tyler. “Did things turn out alright, son?”

“Thankfully, it did,” he admits and breathes out a stream of air. He’s taking a second to admire me, as if he just realized what I’m wearing.

Then he’s smirking.

“I need a photo of you in this.”

“No.” I huff and try to squirm away, but he already has me in his captive grasp. “Tyler! Your family is right there.”

“And?”

“Morals!”

“Morals were left at the front door,” Tyler argues and can’t stop himself from tickling me, which has me giggling.

“God, he’s madly in love,” Trevor says in disgust, yet he’s clearly recording our couple’s conflict. “I’m baffled.”

“Just say you’re happy for your brother to be in love again,” Mama Owens declares and gets up. “Why don’t you both pour yourselves some coffee? We actually should be getting the brunch delivery any minute now.”

“You ordered food?” Tyler has me in a hug, his chest pressing against my back as we both stare at his mother.

“I figured it would be a better option, so Miss Riley could sleep in. I can only assume as a pop star, you don’t get many opportunities to get a few hours of sleep at a time, let alone sleep past ten in the morning. If I started cooking up a storm, it would have woken her.”

“Because of the sweet aroma of pancakes?” I question, to which my stomach growls loud enough to get everyone’s attention. I’m blushing and pouting at my stomach. “You betrayed me.”

That has all three of them laughing before Tyler kisses my cheek.

“Go sit, Riley. I’ll make us each a cup of coffee.”

“And to answer your question, nah. It’s Mom’s loud ass country music she blasts for the whole neighborhood to hear while she’s making a breakfast big enough for anyone who hasn’t eaten yet,” Trevor admits.

“That’s so sweet, though.” Walking to the table, I offer my hand to Mama Owens. “Riley Maddison Sullivan, but please, call me Riley. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Owens.”

“What a restful child you are,” she beams at my introduction and moves to hug me tightly instead. “I’m sure with how humble you are, you were raised with a good sense of discipline. It’s difficult to find that these days in the young artists who’d rather insult the elderly for clicks.”

“I feel like Riley raised herself more than her parents, though,” Trevor mutters surprisingly as he rises from his chair to offer his hand. “Trevor Sinclair Owens. I’m kind of a super fan, though the only concert I missed was your Miami one a few years ago because SOMEONE stole my fucking ticket!”

He’s clearly referring to Tyler, who gives him a glare.

“Get over it already! I paid for you to get VIP tickets to her final concert in Florida. Shut up.”

“It’s not the same!” Trevor huffs before he smiles my way and shakes my hand the moment his mother lets me go. “Sorry, I missed out on that one. I heard it was one of your best and most emotional performances.”

“Trevor.” Tyler’s tone catches their attention. “Drop it.”

“What, man? I can’t praise your celebrity girlfriend for being a queen on the stage at a concert you got the privilege to go to because you stole MY ticket.”

Mama Owens is sighing before she reaches for my hand and pulls me aside.

“That’s the sign they’re gonna go at it, so we can go to the other room if watching two grown-ass brothers duke it out isn’t your early afternoon entertainment.”

“Ah. They don’t need to fight,” I admit with a shy smile. “It was an emotional concert, after all. I mean, I did lose the baby that day, so—”

I don’t catch my words until they’re already out.

Oh, shit...

Honestly, I don’t even know why it came out almost effortless. Something I’ve struggled for years to even comprehend is now a topic I can admit to three sets of individuals.

Tyler sighs, lowering the mugs in his possession.

He’s at my side in a heartbeat, pulling me away from his mom so he can turn and peer down into my eyes.

“We don’t need to talk about this if you don’t want to,” he states while cupping my cheeks. “We can avoid it completely and pretend it wasn’t said, or we can discuss it if you’re comfortable with my obnoxious, ‘I can’t read the fucking room’ younger brother and my dear mom being present,” he offers. “Also, they signed NDAs a long time ago. They’ll never share anything, even videos and pictures, without our consent.”

That’s nice to know.

They all wait for my answer, which is rather comforting.

“Honestly... I don’t know why it came out so easily,” I admit with an odd expression. I don’t know whether to smile or frown. My face probably looks construed in some sort.

“Its anniversary is coming up,” I say with a voice that’s a bit too perky. “I don’t really do much cause... I get really depressed and stuff, so you know, in a few weeks, if I’m suddenly MIA or something, that’s probably the reason. It’s not because I don’t love you... Oh, shit. I just said I love you, which I realize you wrote on the sticky—”

He’s kissing me so I don’t continue on my obvious rambling. When he breaks the kiss, he presses his forehead against mine.

“Breathe, Riley,” he whispers. “No one is judging you. No one is pressuring you to overshare. You don’t need to be so nervous. I promise this won’t leave the walls of this house.”

“Ah... okay,” I whisper and meet his worried eyes. “Sorry... I’m... used to having to defend myself when I’m in trouble with Chase, so...”

“Riley...” Mama Owens looks so concerned for me. “Why would you think you’re in trouble for sharing your trauma?”

I admit seeing her loving and worried expression gives me a glimpse of what it's like to have a mother who actually cares for you.

A mother who's concerned about your well-being and not about all the things you haven't accomplished in the created timeline.

“I come from a family where a lot was expected from me. My Dad wasn't too bad. Was he harsh? Yes. He served in the Navy and even the Secret Ops, so I expected that a long time ago. My mom, however, was far worse. She never showed compassion unless we achieved something ahead of her timeline. That's why when I suddenly dated, then married Chase at eighteen, I'd fucked up the entire 'life plan' she continued to change and update. I construed her plans, which led me to always have to explain myself before anyone really asks it of me,” I reveal. “So... I thought I was in trouble for ruining the mood.”

“You didn't ruin the mood at all, my dear.” Mama Owens is at my side and pulls me into a hug. “I don't know what obstacles you've gone through in your young life, Riley, but please know from this moment onward, you have me to be there for you if your mother won't be,” she reassures me and pulls back to stare into my shocked eyes. “Life isn't easy when you don't have your parents there to be on your side, is it?”

I swallow the lump in my throat and shake my head.

“It's not,” I confess, fighting tears.

“We're changing that,” she vows and squeezes my hands, which are now in her grasp. “You're not obligated to share anything you're not comfortable with, you hear? Even if my son sometimes delves into conversations without reading the room.” She pauses and looks at Trevor, who lowers his head.

“Sorry, Miss Sullivan. I didn’t mean to bring up something traumatic.”

“It’s okay,” I reply, not liking how deflated he looks. “I’m... healing. I think it’s healing. I never could have told a soul if it wasn’t for your brother, actually. It’s been a secret from the world for two years, and well... Tyler was the first to know about it.”

“May I ask why?” Mama Owens whispers. “If it’s too much to answer, you don’t need to, but from the songs I’ve heard you sing, family, specifically children, are important to you.”

“Yeah... well...” I shrug, as if it doesn’t hurt to admit this part. “Chase killed it.”

“Killed. It?” It’s Trevor who questions my statement, then turns to Tyler with a look that tells me I’m missing something.

A trigger, maybe?

“Chase poisoned me, and I lost the baby the day of the concert. I didn’t know. He gave me some water, and that’s all it took. He threatened the doctor, who confirmed what had been done to me, to ruin their entire practice and take their license away. No one else knew about it.”

The way they stare at me in horror makes me smile in gratefulness for their concern.

“It’s life... you know?”

“That’s not life, Riley.” Trevor is fuming. “We have a justice system for a reason. You had evidence that proves what he did.”

“Yes... but who would believe me?” I watch him frown as he clenches his fists, which I realize are trembling. “I was

twenty back then. People barely took me seriously. In fact, some only started taking me seriously recently, especially with my net worth being public knowledge with the divorce settlement. I'm now deemed important because of my overall worth to the industry and overall economy. Other than that, I'm just a TikTok star who blew up and is now rising to the top. My struggles, whether physical, emotional, or dare I say mental, don't matter to the public unless it's drama. So, why would they believe me versus Chase during a time when he was in his prime?"

Trevor has nothing to say, which is fine by me.

"Either way, it's been two years, and the estimated birth is coming up, so... I don't know. Maybe I'll do a special song or something to commemorate that time in my life, but that's why I was so emotional that day and took time off."

The doorbell rings.

"I'll get it," Trevor announces and is out of the kitchen.

Mama Owens pulls me into a hug before whispering in my ear, "Please don't be offended by his anger. Children, in general, are a bit of a triggering topic for him."

"I apologize," I whisper back and frown. "Aww, I made this so awkward."

"Not at all, silly," Mama Owens argues. "I'm glad you're willing to share something that's very important to you. Not only because it'll help you heal, but it will also further honor that angel who's watching their mommy continue forward in life despite the hardships that plagued you. I know I could never remain with a man who forced me to get rid of my child." She shakes her head. "It took me almost ten years to have Tyler. Then we were lucky to have Trevor two years after

that. It boils my blood to know that man, who dares call you his wife, did that without your consent because he didn't want to man up, but you know what I always believe in?"

"What?"

"Karma," she vows. "Karma observes and never forgets, and when the time is right, the individual in question is delivered what they earned. Whether it's negative or positive is beyond what is judged from above, but I know when Chase least expects it, his life will come crumbling down." She lets go of my hands to wipe away my tears.

"Now, sit down, my dear, drink some coffee, and let us spoil you. I made sure to order blueberry pancakes. Tyler said you have a mini obsession with them."

That makes me laugh.

He remembered.

"Thank you, Miss Owens."

"Mama Owens," she says with a wink. "I'll go see what's the hold up with Trevor." She gives me one more squeeze and is gone, leaving me with Tyler.

"Sorry." He pulls me in his arms and sighs. "This afternoon seems to be challenging us both."

"Was your thing with Jackson that bad?"

"Not as stressful," he admits. "I handled it, but are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, I'm alright," I assure him and genuinely smile. "I wish my mom was like yours. Maybe I wouldn't have felt so alone and abandoned back then."

He pulls me against him, his lips pressing the top of my scalp as he rubs my back.

“I can’t change the past, but God is my witness when I say you’ll never feel alone again, Riley. You have me, my family, and anyone else who genuinely wants nothing but happiness for you.”

“For us,” I correct and lean back to see him smile.

“For us,” he agreed.

We seal those hopes with a sweet kiss.

MAKE HIM PAY



~TYLER~

My biggest worry was Trevor being in the same place as Riley. I love my brother. He's an annoying ass, but he's only allowed to be annoying to me. Everyone else finds out real quickly how they can't do shit to him with me around, especially in this industry. He's also a crazed fan of Riley's. Things could have gone south with the conversation we had. When Trevor gets so hyped about things, he doesn't see the obvious signs that scream 'change the subject.' He doesn't get it, even with Marilyn, his long-term girlfriend. They've almost broken up a few times because of it, but crazy enough, it's been Riley's music that always pulls them back together. Maybe the Universe wanted this to occur, for the conversation to be spoken about, so Riley could see the vast difference in my family's dynamic versus hers. I know she felt the support from both of them.

I haven't stopped trying to find a way to get Chase convicted. I've been working on it with Cassidy behind the scenes. Riley may not want this to blow up into something dramatic, but I can't sit with the idea of Chase being free any longer after purposely poisoning her. How about if she died? If she wasn't a celebrity, would he have just hushed everyone around him up and hid her body? It frightens me just thinking about it, for I never would have met her Riley otherwise. Most importantly,

her little baby chick deserved a chance at life. Deserved to have a shot in this world and not be cut off, thanks to their selfish prick of a father. That's what really hurts us. Hurt me. Hurt even Trevor. Some people take advantage of being able to conceive, while others are forced to acknowledge the growing fact they can't.

Until I give that shining light of life the justice they deserve, I just have to keep working hard to find a way. That's the least I can do for my Songbird. Chase will enjoy the walls of prison for everything he did. Just wait and see.

— Journal Entry #563 by Tyler Sinclair Owens

“*T*YLER! You can't hang this in the man cave?! ARE YOU MAD?!” Hearing Riley scream through FaceTime is making me grin like a happy golden retriever.

Seeing these emotions from her the last few days is a rarity.

My Songbird is on a three-month break right now, which aligns perfectly with my schedule. We're entering the off-season, which means I'm gonna be free as fuck to spend all my days—and freaky, sweat-dripping nights—with my sweet girlfriend, Riley.

It feels weird to refer to her as 'girlfriend' when, in my mind, I already see her as my wife. I've caught myself more than once having to correct myself when introducing ourselves, which only leaves the girls swooning and the guys giving me a 'don't fuck us over like this man' look for hinting the need to step up and propose to their partner in question.

The break has allowed us to be together and socially available, but with the death anniversary of baby chick days

away, I've noticed the change in Riley.

The weight of depression that plagues her to the point she barely wants to come out of her room.

Her team understands it, just as I do, and we've been giving her the space and support she needs. This is why I'm fighting for her closure.

For the culprit to be punished and for her to be free of the ongoing guilt his freedom leaves on her tired shoulders.

“TYLER! You're ignoring me on purpose, aren't you?”

OH. Right. FaceTiming the woman of my dreams.

“Hearing you shout at me is a different type of turn-on for me, Songbird,” I tease and watch her whole face go red before she groans.

I can hear someone laughing hysterically in the background.

“Absolutely smitten for your ass.”

Thank goodness Cassidy is with her.

I'd be lying if I acted as though leaving Riley alone right now didn't freak me out. Depression was tricky to deal with, especially in Riley's circumstances.

I know this time will pass, and she'll be back to her joyous, busy self in no time, but it doesn't dismiss the possibility of her sinking deeper into the pit of sadness when none of us least expect it.

That's why it's good to keep an eye on her.

There's a whistle in the background, which I can assume is Cassidy.

“Bitch, I love you. I really do, but what possessed you to do this pose?”

“NO! Don’t stare at it!”

“Why? It’s actually really hot,” Cassidy admits. “Your lucky I’m addicted to cock, or else I’d be stealing you from your husband quarterback so fast, he wouldn’t realize it until you’re swept away and walking down the aisle in Vegas.”

Riley is laughing now.

“Whatever happens in Vegas...” she begins, and they both continue together, “STAYS IN VEGAS!”

They burst into laughter, enjoying some sort of inside joke among themselves. I take a few screenshots, noticing how brilliant Riley’s smile is.

She really is so beautiful when she’s thriving on the happy train. It’s these moments that I crave to capture. Maybe one day we could do a nice collage to share with the world.

At the private wedding ceremony, maybe?

I’ve been printing these moments and making a miniature vision board of sorts. I hope to give it to her soon, but there’s one centerpiece that’s missing.

Just a bit of planning.

“Alright, why don’t you hang it in you guy’s bedroom? I mean, it can go in yours for now so you can admire your flat stomach, thick thighs, and pretty covered coochie,” Cassidy suggests.

“Cassidy,” she whines.

“Stating what I see,” she hums. “I seriously like it, though. To get a machine to actually paint this from scratch is wild.”

“Ensured privacy,” I speak up as I begin to do bicep curls with my other arm. I haven’t finished my weightlifting set, but talking to Riley is a priority. “The machines then speed dry it, coat it with a protective layer, finalize it, wrap it, and box it up. No one can see what it is after that. Pretty amazing for us celebrities who want to decorate our homes with pieces of work that people can’t blatantly copy when they see it on live streams or TikTok posts.”

“True,” Cassidy agrees. “You almost done there, weight training beast?”

“A few more sets and I’ll head back,” I assure her.

“Cool.” She actually smirks.

“Wait, Cassidy. If you need to go, you can go,” Riley encourages. “I know we’re all on break and stuff, so you really don’t need to stick around.”

“I want to,” Cassidy huffs. “When do we hang out as two best friends on a Friday afternoon? C’mon, let’s do a Netflix marathon or even read some trending hockey books.”

“Hockey’s trending now?” Riley ponders.

“Not really. It was, then it died. Another round of Booktok drama. You don’t want to get into it. The hole is DEEP.”

“I’m intrigued,” Riley declares.

“Or you can read a football romance,” I offer and get their attention.

For about five seconds.

The way these two are laughing in return has me pausing my final rep to give them a ‘What did I miss?’ look.

“If anyone caught us reading football romances, it would blow up,” Cassidy laughs.

“Tyler, we’re around footballers on a regular basis since the Super Bowl. I don’t think you’d like me falling for a sexy fictional tight end, who wouldn’t hesitate to fuck his marriage-of-convenience wife against the shower walls while his entire team is in the locker room after another winning game.”

I drop my dumbbell while fathoming what kind of scenario that would be in real life.

“You’re not serious,” I end up saying.

“This is why real men can’t compete with fictional husbands,” Cassidy summarizes.

“What if they were caught?” I argue.

“That’s a chance they’re willing to take,” Cassidy replies. “Men... you guys really can’t use your imagination.”

I’m still trying to process it.

That’s why I’m looking over at Riley.

“Songbird? You want to be fucked in the showers while my team is changing in the lockers?”

“O.M.G!” Riley screeches while Cassidy laughs so hard, she’s falling off the barstool in the background and literally on the floor.

That has Riley laughing even harder, the two of them consumed by laughter.

“DID YOU SEE HIS FACE? HIS FACE!!!!” Cassidy can barely breathe. “Please, for all that’s holy and blessed, tell me you took a screenshot!”

“I DID!”

“BAHAHAHAHAHAH!”

I sigh with a slight head shake, only realizing Coach is not only at the door of the mini gym but must have been standing there for a few minutes with how wide his knowledgeable grin is.

“I’m gonna leave you two to your fictional husbands,” I conclude. “I’ll be home soon. Love you, Riley.”

“Love... hehehehe... his face bahahahaha. Can we frame it?” Riley asks Cassidy, who’s clenching her stomach.

“Bitch! Finish your damn sentence, dummy.”

“Oh, right!”

And they’re laughing again.

I ended up hanging up and texting her real quick that my coach walked in, so I’ll see her shortly, so she knows I’m not mad in the slightest.

To see those two laugh like that makes me pleased I can uplift them in some way. Their positions are both extremely draining, so having them bond with one another and talk about hobbies they may never get the time to do now that they’re adults is rewarding, in my book.

“Hey, Coach.” I toss my phone on the floor somewhere. Poor thing needs a new screen with how I discard it during workouts, but it’s a bad habit that proves to continue.

“Looks like your relationship is going strong with the pop star, hmm?” he offers with kind eyes.

Coach never judges me. He’s always been considerate of my life outside of football and very vocal in protecting the peace of his players.

“Very,” I admit with a smile. “She really is a diamond I’m hoping to cherish forever.”

“I think you’re on the right path, Ty,” he praises.

“What’s up?” I decide to get to the point, so I’m not wasting his time. “I know you don’t interrupt me when I’m working out unless it’s vitally important.”

He smiles, pleading with me in return, which makes me sigh.

“If this is about Jackson, we aren’t taking him back into the team. Don’t care if he’s now jobless and struggling to not get deported.” That’s a whole shit show I’m not dipping my fingers into.

“It’s not about Jackson,” Coach reassures me.

“Then?”

“There’s a huge charity event that Johns Hopkins All Children’s Hospital wants to host, only it’s not necessarily an annual ball or even where multiple organizations come together and contribute.”

“Okay.”

I’m listening.

“Due to the high spike of football fans this season—because of Riley, obviously—they’re requesting that we do an encore game.”

Huh?

“An encore game?” I question and think about it. “So, we’re going to face the Jet Hawks again, but the proceeds raised from the event will all go to the children’s hospital?”

“That’s what the league is thinking,” Coach declares.

Alright. That doesn't sound bad at all.

“What’s the problem, then?” I ask. “You know I’m one of the top donors to John Hopkins and fulfill wish campaigns all the time. We passed by there after Disneyland three weeks ago, and Riley even pulled off a little concert for the hospital that went viral.”

Now, I start to think outside the box.

“If you wanted me to invite Riley, I’m sure she’d attend, no questions asked. I’m sure she wouldn’t even mind doing a smaller concert if you guys can get the equipment and confirm it aligns with her schedule,” I summarize.

I really don’t think she’d have a problem attending. I’d want her to be there and cheer me on. She hasn’t gotten to see me play on the field for long, aside from the Super Bowl and a few recent practices, so this would be fun.

A good way to show off.

“That would garnish a lot of interest,” Coach agrees.

“Then, I’ll get that sorted,” I assure him as I rise and pick up my dumbbells to put them back on the rack.

Heading over to grab my phone and water bottle, I take a moment to sip half of the dripping chilled bottle before I realize Coach is still here.

“Is that all?” Lowering the bottle from my lips, I give him my full attention once more. “If you’re worried about whether Riley can come, I can call her back.”

“No, this doesn’t necessarily have to do with her. At least, not directly,” Coach admits, treading carefully.

He doesn’t have to say anymore.

I'm frowning.

"Nope."

"I haven't even proposed what I'm about to say."

"You don't have to, Coach. I can read that expression from 120 yards."

"That's not true," he mutters, but I can tell from experience I most certainly can.

"What does Chase have to do with anything?"

"He's going to be playing on the Jets."

I give him a blank stare.

"They don't want this predicament, trust me," Coach pleads. The lines of frustration on his face are enough of a confirmation that this is stressing him and probably the majority of the Jet Hawks administration. "They have no choice. Chase's contract literally ends on the scheduled day of this potential charity game. At 11:59 p.m., to be exact."

How marvelous!

"So, why hasn't he been fired when they easily demoted him?" I inquire. "And what does this have to do with us? He can sit on the bench the entire time."

"He's a potential quarterback," Coach reveals.

"Fuck," I groan. "Don't tell me he's setting it up just so this shit is in his favor?"

"I believe he's doing anything so he can come face to face with you and potentially beat your ass on live television," Coach admits in a matter-of-fact tone.

I'm pretty confident he took that from Alec.

“It’s a family event.”

“That hasn’t stopped any of you from tackling the life out of some players when you’re riled up on adrenaline and need to win, has it?” Coach counters.

Nope, it certainly hasn’t.

“Coach...”

“I’ve tried every angle, Tyler.” The fact he’s emphasizing this now with his pleading eyes confirms he has done everything in his power to fix this fucked-up shit. “We’ve all tried. Do you think the Jet Hawks want him? Everything from their stocks to general sales has dropped significantly, thanks to Chase’s existence on their team. The demotion only makes it seem like they’re still supporting the fucker. I’ve never seen the CEO as mad as I did this morning at the emergency meeting.”

“That bad, huh?” I mutter.

“They need him out, Ty, which is why they’re begging our cooperation with this fundraiser game. Chase has one more game on his contract, which is normally the yearly encore game that happens later in the year. They can’t afford to wait that long. If Chase remains on the team, they may go bankrupt in six months.”

Fuck. Their revenue is plummeting.

“So, you’re asking me because...” I don’t see how I have a choice in the matter.

“Everyone knows you as a team player, Ty. If you’re on board, many of the fans will support this charity game, despite Chase’s attendance. I know you two have a beef.”

I laugh at that.

“It’s more than a beef, Coach.” Saying that leaves a bitterness in my mouth. “Fucking cheating lunatic who’s obsessed with me upping him. You’ve watched it over the years, haven’t you? Now that I upped him by getting his ex-wife, he needs to do something to return the favor. This is desperation at its peak, and you guys are all falling for it.”

“He wouldn’t do anything to harm Riley, Ty.”

“The man fucking gave her poison to kill their child!” I snap, not realizing how angry I suddenly am until my voice echoes in the hollows of the small space.

My coach holds off whatever he’s going to say while I breathe heavily and pinch my nose to try to tame my anger.

Seeing Riley’s dips in her mood as she quietly grieves her unborn child has buried a burning anger that can’t wait for Chase to pay.

Is it healthy? No.

Do I care? *Fucking No.*

“Do we need to talk about this?” Coach asks.

“No.” I’m done with this conversation. “I’m leaving.”

“Ty, please.” I realize I’d passed him and only stopped before the glass doors because of his usage of ‘please.’

Only one other male figure in my life speaks like that when he needs me to help him. When he puts his pride aside to acknowledge the position he’s in needs another’s aid in becoming right.

My father.

“He doesn’t go near her,” I growl and glance over my shoulder. “Understood?”

“She’ll be as far away from him as we can make it,” he vows. “And if she performs, we’ll ensure he’s off the field and watched by a security team privately hired by us. I’ll also ensure security is doubled at the game.”

It’s the least he can do, but I’ll have to talk to Cassidy about it to ensure Ricky and the other guards don’t let up on their protection of Riley that day.

“Fine.” I can live with that. I turn away. “Make sure what was spoken today is between us. Riley will share her story when she’s ready.”

Or when the Universe thinks it’s right.

“Understood.”

I don’t say goodbye.

All I can think of is making Chase pay.

A LIGHT IN THE ENDLESS SKY



~RILEY~

Starlight skies. Twinkling memories. I wish I could cradle you in my arms. Oh, Sweet Babe, my shining light, how I envision the purple haze. All the memories we'd create. Day by day. Some days stressful, while others are filled with bliss. You'd begin to grow, too fast for my own good. For the years will fly by, and I'll realize our time together is far too short. My Purple Starlight, keep shining brightly in the sky for me. I know you're waiting for Mommy. In time, we'll be together, not just briefly. One day, we'll feel complete. Twinkling together in the sky. Don't shed a tear, my love. Shine on and bright. Mommy still has lots to do down here, so until then, please keep shining brightly.

— *Purple Starlight Skies*

by Riley Maddison Sullivan

“*A*nd in other news! The buzz in the sports news is reaching viral exposure as the Charity Football Game was announced this evening. The Pennsylvania Jet Hawks and the Florida Kingsman Chiefs will have another match to raise funds for Johns Hopkins All Children's Hospital.”

I'm under a blanket, exhausted eyes staring at the screen in the midst of the dark. Sleep has been impossible today, so I've forced myself to sit under my weighted blanket, nibbling on buttered popcorn and watching the boring news.

My mind just drifting as the clock keeps ticking...

“All proceeds will go to the biggest children’s hospital here in Florida. It’s an amazing movement to see both teams come together to play, especially when we’re entering off-season. However, that’s not what’s making this topic a viral debate!” The reporter reveals. “Football fans, as well as pop fans of the mega-celebrity pop star Riley Maddison Sullivan, are going into rounds of online war in regard to Miss Sullivan’s ex-husband, Chase Arnold Benedict, being a part of the upcoming roster for this charity game!”

I’m tempted to turn the TV off and sleep, especially when they display Chase’s photo to the left of the screen while Tyler’s photo is on the far right.

Of course, I’m right in the middle—the center of the world’s attention.

“It’s been reported that many football teams have rejected Mr. Benedict’s applications to be transferred to their team for a number of reasons. Obviously, with the brewing romance growing between Miss Sullivan and Mr. Owens the last few months, it’s becoming very clear that secrets regarding Mr. Benedict’s behavior behind the scenes are coming to light.”

Now I’m really intrigued as I find the remote to put it a bit higher in volume.

“As we’ve reported in the past, Miss Sullivan recently divorced Mr. Benedict in late February. Many were shocked by the swiftness of this decision, and it was proven by some of

Mr. Benedict's close friends and even his lawyer that he pressured the divorce to go underway, giving his wife no prep time before being called for a private court hearing. Thanks to Miss Sullivan's obvious celebrity status, she must have had a team of lawyers waiting for Mr. Benedict to pull such a move, and the result? Well, that left Mr. Benedict with only two million to his name."

"Man, they make the news juicy these days," I mutter and pop some more popcorn into my mouth.

"This divorce may have seemed like a blessing to Mr. Benedict, but some say it could very well be a curse. Not only did he not realize how low his net worth was, he also ensured to sign documents that affirmed he'd be unable to claim any assets of financial aid from his ex-wife, Miss Sullivan, whose reported net worth after today is 350 million."

"How does the public learn about this stuff before we do?" I have to ponder because I'm completely baffled as to how I went up another 100 million in three months.

I didn't even release new music yet.

"This is obviously a surprise because Miss Sullivan not only took a break after the divorce but then extended the break. Many worry she'll be quitting music altogether, which may be creating a scarce reality where everyone and their grandma and grandpas are desperate to stream and buy any merch they can of Miss Sullivans."

Intriguing. So the sales have increased since my break because they think I'm leaving the industry. How gleeful my competitors probably are at the news.

"What is growing suspicions with Miss Sullivan's potential desire to quit music is the sudden firing of almost 90% of her

staff. Like a spring plague, many were fired from the corp and given financial packages that would secure the individuals for six months while they looked for other employment. Something we've never seen any cooperation in music conduct. This notion not only made these workers realize what a blessed environment they were working in but also left a huge demand for employment! Enough that the unemployment rate actually spiked because of this movement.”

We were employing that many people?

Cassidy keeps track of the majority of the organizations in connection to ours, but I guess the layoffs created a cascade effect.

“This just proves how powerful Miss Sullivan is! Not only as a celebrity but as a firm contributor to the economy. Due to this swift change, other music organizations have started to wipe through their rosters of employers in hopes of potentially mimicking what Miss Sullivan may do next. It's a risky move that many are calling out as ‘premature’ and ‘insulting’ for some of these creators and music producers have been in these corporations for years while being underpaid in hopes their seniority would be beneficial in the long run.”

Hmm... I wonder...

Licking my fingers, I close my popcorn bag by rolling the top half until it's halfway, then place it on the nightstand. Grabbing my phone, I text Cassidy. It's three in the morning, so I don't expect her to reply, but I give her a brief summary of the news report and request her to look into the list of let-go employees when she's free.

One man's trash is another man's treasure.

“I bet you’re wondering how all of this pertains to Mr. Benedict’s downfall. Well, some of the clients of Miss Sullivan are actually coming out! Though they are bound by NDAs to release information directly about their work with Miss Sullivan, many have taken an unexpected stance against Mr. Benedict! Here is what some had to say.”

I almost drop my phone when I see the familiar faces of workers who helped on set and with the camera crew. There are even a few who worked on makeup and were in charge of outfit changes.

“Chase has to be the reason why we lost our jobs! He was a menace. Starved his wife all day and night. She was a prisoner while entertaining the world!”

“It was appalling working in such conditions. Not because of Miss Sullivan. She and her entire team were such a blessing to me. The workplace was as positive as it could be, if not more, but her husband. Rude. Demanding. Threatened us if we dared say anything outside of those walls. It was suffocating for so many years, but anyone who tried to hint something was suddenly fired or personally threatened by Chase.”

“Mr. Benedict was the toxic bully no one wanted to see in the hallway! The moment you caught sight of him, everyone rushed to go in the other direction. What angered many of us was his treatment of his wife. I’m surprised Riley managed to keep her weight when she’d be starved for some days twenty-two hours a day, leaving her literally with a two-hour window to eat.”

“I remember during one of our toughest tours, Riley literally fainted. News went out saying it was simply out of exhaustion, but we all knew the truth. Chase was hiring people

to be insiders and try to get people to speak out so they could fire them before it went out to the public.”

I gawk at the screen, surprised all of this is coming out now.

“Riley is the sweetest boss we could ever ask for. She cares about her workers and makes sure we are all fed... even when she is starving, doing two to six hours of choreography, writing her own music, and practicing the whole ensemble. We demand justice!”

The reporter on the scene nods and proceeds to ask them the prime question I’m sure many are wondering.

“Despite Chase’s clear actions to hurt his wife through controlling and toxic methods, why are you guys now taking the initiative to speak out? It looks to many that due to you losing your jobs and the opportunity to work with such a fantastic loving artist, it seems almost selfish to now bring this up when you saw the idol you worked for suffering behind closed doors.”

I’m surprised by the reporter’s sternness. She actually looks mad on my behalf.

“L-Like we said, we were threatened.”

“And yet, Mr. Benedict is one man. You all could have banded together like you are, come to the news as you have in the present, and spoken out against this man. Instead, you’ve waited until it’s clear you’re at a loss and are probably not going to be hired in this industry without a good enough reference due to the magnitude of layoffs that have been triggered by this shift.”

“He was rich!”

“He could sue us easily.”

“W-We didn’t know his net worth was only two million. We thought he was loaded and the one taking care of Miss Sullivan financially, not the other way around.”

“That is exactly what bothers me,” the reporter admits. “You assumed her husband was in control financially, which gave him the ‘power’ over her to do the things he did with no repercussions. Now, here you all are, coming forward with allegations that can’t be proven because time has passed, and under the NDA rules and legislation, camera footage and such from your shifts can’t be used against him in court. In fact, if he wanted to, he could counter-sue all of you for defamation.”

They seemed baffled—just like I am—but the reporter shows no remorse.

“I’m drilling you guys on LIVE television because this is a common practice that so many celebrities deal with on a daily basis. In this industry, far too many are willing to be silent and let these artists who bring us soul-gripping music slowly perish at the hands of these abusers and individuals who use these artists to gain. How many artists have been physically, if not sexually, abused by producers, managers, and other individuals within these walls and protected by those who work in the same environment? All because you want to keep the job that pays you. The job that feeds you. Now that the flow of income is gone, it seems crucial to reveal the truth to the world. What if Miss Sullivan had died starving herself? What if something far worse happened, and she fell ill to a state of permanent injury? What would you have said then? How would you defend yourself in court when they deem you as an accomplice, all because of your silence during the years of abuse?”

The level of speechlessness you can feel even beyond the TV screen is enough for the reporter to turn her attention to the audience.

“As you can see, this is why this topic is going viral across social media platforms and being talked about. Artists are dying. Killing themselves by falling prey to drugs that help them erase the abuse they deal with from actions like this. An abuser isn’t simply someone who inflicts pain upon one’s flesh. Abuse can be in the form of silent negligence. Ignoring the obvious wrongs unfolding around you because it’s ‘not your business until it is your business.’”

I’m moved by her words as she takes a moment to breathe.

“I take this very seriously because Miss Sullivan’s music helped me during my postpartum depression stages when raising my twin daughters. She helped me see the light through those times when I felt alone. What I, and many speaking out lately, see is the decline in sightings of Miss Sullivan. The sudden breaks and worries she’ll quit the career that most likely has been an outlet for her without any of us knowing it!” she stresses. “Go listen to her music... to all the albums. Listen to the words and find the roots of them in yourselves. Let yourself feel what her words do when you decipher their hidden truth. Then we may realize how responsible our silence has been all this while as she carried this burden all on her own.”

“It’s a very emotional topic to unravel and discuss,” the reporter from the station emphasizes to her colleague.

“It is, and I want people to finally acknowledge it. To stop acting as if she deserves to be on this journey all on her own. Miss Sullivan’s light is so bright. She helps so many with her music and her contribution to the economy itself. It pains me

to admit that I feel we, as a community, especially with her being Florida-born and raised, have let her down. I hope if she ever gets the chance to watch this, she realizes she's loved, and it's time for us to hear HER story. To listen to the words from her very lips of the struggles and torment she silently endured for the benefit of everyone but herself. Whether that's in the shape of another album, a memoir, or an exclusive interview. Anything so that we can know the truth and bring justice to the abusers who have avoided their punishment for far too long.”

“I completely agree. With that being said, we'll be taking a short break and will be back on how the Jet Hawks are threatening to disband if Mr. Benedict is not removed from the team after the upcoming charity event.”

I stare at the screen as tears stream down my cheeks. Seeing the fierceness in those women reporters' eyes and having them speak on my behalf, someone they barely know, really made me feel as though I was not as alone in this as I thought.

The knock on the door drew my attention, leaving me to look to see Tyler with a loving expression.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

He walks to the bed, not caring about my messy look. Sitting next to me, he pulls me into his arms, even with the blanket wrapped around my frame.

We don't need to share words.

He just holds me, as though he knows I need his warmth, which is far stronger than this heavy blanket.

It's not long before he helps me out of it, just so I can hug him directly. I don't remember how long I've been sitting in

this bed, but he doesn't care about any of that.

He just holds me.

Lets me cry my heart out.

Soothes me with back rubs and soft kisses.

Keeps me in his arms for as long as I need.

It's not until it's inching to five in the morning does he whispers, "Want to go somewhere?"

"Only if it's okay that I look like a mess."

"You don't look like a mess," he whispers against my cheek before kissing it. "I do think you'd like to wear something pretty."

"Pretty as in sparkly pretty?" I question.

"Sparkly pretty," he vouches with a loving smile.

"Fine." I stare at him for a few seconds. "Only if you join me in the shower."

"Anything for my Songbird," he assures me.

Guess it's time for a morning date?

* * *

"YOU DON'T LOOK like the type who'd watch the sunrise." I inhale the crisp air while we sit at the top of a beautiful mountain cliff. I never realized how empowering a hike would be on a day like today. The fresh air, the wilderness, the freedom it delivered to my pained heart.

Like a chained being with shackles around my wrist, I'd somehow easily slipped into a mentality that kept me captive and away from the world. It was so easy to fall prey to its

comforting arms, I didn't grasp it until I was deeply woven in its warm embrace.

The news had been the offered rope of help to get out of the valley's depths, but it was Tyler's encouragement to get me out of the house that pulled me out of that crippling void.

And here I was, waiting for the first glimmers of light at the edge of the horizon, those warm rays of sunrise.

"Not romantic enough?" he taunts, his hand firmly wrapped around mine.

"This is the most romantic thing since you bought me that NSFW painting," I point out with a side glance that has him chuckling.

"Admit it. You love staring at how good you look with your legs spread." He uses that forbidden husky voice and leans over to kiss me. "Just for me."

"Cocky quarterback," I grumble, making him chuckle as he gives me one more kiss.

Pulling me against his side, we continue to watch the twinkling lights of the city, my eyes noticing how there's so much more purple among the magnitude of illumination throughout the city.

It matched my outfit, a sparkling pink dress with a sequin jacket and some iridescent runners. The outfit was giving expensive hikes for influencer vibes, which made me feel extra pretty with me taking the time to go through my hair that was a bird's nest.

Tyler made everything so much easier, especially helping me wash my hair. Getting ready overall didn't take as long as I thought it would, which may have been the reason why I'd been struggling to get out of the house to begin with.

Now, I was here, relaxed against him, waiting to watch the sunrise. I even had my notepad in my lap, which was why I ended up writing the lyrics that came to my mind the more I invested in the various purple glows.

“Sometimes, I feel my baby chick would have loved the color purple,” I end up admitting as I finish writing the words, ‘Purple Starlight Skies.’ I’m pretty confident it’ll be another song title for the one I’ve just created.

“You think so?” Tyler whispers.

“Yeah.” I’m lost in the various glows that twinkle on, knowing that in a few short moments, the lights will begin to disappear as the sun rises high into the sky. “Sometimes, I see them in my dreams. Glowing brightly. An orb of purple glimmer. Like a shining star, watching over me.”

“How does it make you feel?”

“In the beginning, kind of numb. Guilty especially. Now, the pain has eased. The numbness is still present from time to time, but it’s not as hollow and consuming. I can breathe and not envision that night where all I could see was red on the graffiti floor.”

“Is that why you sometimes wander to the bathrooms when you’re drunk?” his curiosity makes me laugh.

“God... I really don’t know why I do that, but then again, it could be trauma I never decided to confront,” I confess and think about it. “That night, I locked myself in the venue washroom for a long time. It was private, per se, but there was so much graffiti on the walls. It draws me in sometimes. I think to myself, if I go here, will I see my sweet child? Sometimes, I try to convince myself how stupid my mentality is, but I’ve come to embrace it.”

“It’s not stupid,” he reassures me. “I’m sure baby chick is proud to be remembered by the woman who so desperately wished to carry them to full term.”

“I really did,” I admit and smile. “Would have been nice to see how my purple baby shone brightly in this world.”

He runs his hands through my hair, the motion so relaxing, I briefly close my eyes. For a moment, I feel from the back of my eyelids a soft glow of purple. It grows and grows, its warmth almost feeling whimsical and foreign in nature.

Eventually, I open my eyes, only to be surprised by the single glowing ball of purple that is rising into the air from the city.

“A purple lantern? Maybe it’s those ceremonial pieces that you light up and change to a different color as it rises,” I explain while trying to unravel the possibilities.

Then I see another one.

“Oh? Another one,” I point out and use my finger to show Tyler. “Look.”

“It’s pretty,” he admits, only for him to point in a different direction. “There’s another one.”

“Wait, another one is there, too!”

By the time I’m picking up more and more lanterns, they’re filling the sky, leaving me speechless as my wide eyes acknowledge the ensemble of purple lanterns that drift higher and higher in the sky.

By the time every lantern is on the same level and heading farther into the sky, I watch as the sun begins to rise on the horizon.

The whole projection leaves me emotionally stunned. Tyler hugs me from behind, as if he knows his warmth is exactly what I need to not completely emotionally break down from the sheer consideration.

“I decide that your baby chick deserved to be celebrated, despite those not knowing who he is and what the purple light represents,” he whispers in my ear. “One day, I want them all to know who they were.”

“So... you did this?” I finally clue it all in. “For me?”

“And baby chick,” he adds. “I know today is normally sad, but I wanted this year to add a moment to celebrate the life of baby chick. To let them see all the twinkling purple lights that may one be the lights that guide us all back to our Creator,” Tyler reveals.

“Tyler...” I whisper.

“You know...” he begins while we stare at the scenery of purple paradise in the sky. “She was pregnant, you know?”

I looked at him while he stared aimlessly ahead.

“That’s why we were rushing to tie the knot before she started to show. Then I found out she was cheating on me. Revealed it in front of those I cherished as friends and family. The humiliation ruined me, but it was finding out that she aborted the child that took a piece of me.”

I can’t even fathom the emotional turmoil he endured.

That’s why...

“Tyler.”

“At first, I sought comfort, praying that it was the cheating fucker’s child and not mine. I never got that closure, really. Losing a child... it’s a big deal in our family. I dealt with that

shit while Trevor had difficulty being able to get a woman pregnant. So, to realize he may have lost a future nephew or niece hurt, especially when there are couples who wish to carry their own babies.” He looks at me. “When I found out what Chase did to you, I told myself that I’d ensure his world began to crumble. That he’d regret not only trying to ruin you with all the torment and abuse but that he’d regret killing your sparkling gem.”

When he looks deep into my eyes, I see the determination in the root of his pupils.

“I wanted to do something today, knowing many would catch onto this display, take photos and videos, and share it. I basically needed them to create a space where every year, you can come back to this place or even monitor TikTok and see this newborn trend of purple lanterns rising in the night sky.”

“Tyler...” I’m emotional as I reach over to hug him. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“Always, my Songbird.” He hugs me tightly and me to him. “Let’s do this every year and celebrate baby chick’s life, okay?”

I lean back to see the loving emotion in his glassy eyes, knowing he’s hurt by my suffering and the loss of baby chick.

Neither of us can go back in time and fix the people who we thought would be our forever lovers, but we can grow, pray, and hope to be blessed by the Universe with our union.

That maybe one day, we can carry children of our own.

We love you, my Purple Starlight.

FEAR OF A REPEAT CYCLE



~TYLER~

“Purple Starlight. That’s what she calls Baby Chick. Cassidy was right about her observations. How Riley always wears purple around this time, as if to symbolize her baby’s significance in life. The purple lantern ceremony at the crack of dawn ignited through Florida shortly after that. Many wondered about the significance. Some even wondered if it was a sign that something new was coming from Riley because they noticed, just like Cassidy did, that this time of year, Riley’s outfit centers around purple. I finally told her about the abortion Britney did without my acknowledgment. I explained to her the heavy burden I still carry to this day as to whether that tiny being was a part of me or confirmation that Britney was cheating on me for much longer than I’d like to admit. Needless to say, getting those words out did good for me. Washed away a bit of guilt and frustration. Sharing it with someone who understands how precious a child is in this world. The hike did good for my Songbird. She had a moment to be one with nature. To be free and not bound by the past that enjoys tormenting her. That this new tradition will carry forward, and I hope by next year, the Anniversary of Purple Starlight’s Ascension out of this world will be acknowledged by many more while the culprit rots for his actions.”

— **Journal Entry #564**

by Tyler Sinclair Owens

“*I* think we need to end the concert early.”

I’m tugging my eyes from my phone to Ricky’s serious voice.

“Why? What’s up?” I’m already on alert as I move off the beam I’ve been leaning against as we’re waiting for Riley to move on to the next song.

My eyes are going back and forth between Ricky and the stage, though my eyes linger on Riley as someone offers her a pink water bottle.

I can see her shake her head and ask for something else. The person nods and quickly scurries to get what she needs.

“Potential threat,” Ricky admits, his eyes darting through the entire crowd. “The team already apprehended three people outside.”

“Wait, seriously?” I whisper urgently while the strum of Riley’s guitar forces us to return our eyes to her.

“This next song is something I wrote recently. It’s called Purple Starlight Skies,” she begins and nervously takes a breath.

Many fans begin to cheer her on, seeing the emotion that floods her face as she tries to get the next words out.

Her eyes search for mine until she finds me, and how easy it is for us to get lost in that intense gaze. I can’t help but mouth words of encouragement.

“It’s just you and me, Songbird.”

I see the way my mouth words reach her, the lines of worry and fear on her face fading away in seconds.

With another deep breath, she returns to looking at her fans.

“I’m sure many of you have been watching the news of my suddenly dramatic life,” she says so sweetly, it’s a bit amusing. It’s like she’s about to narrate her life, which has a few fans laughing at her cuteness.

“And well... I recently went to a really dark place. Honestly, around this time, I always kind of slipped into this darkness. Like a sucking void that keeps me prisoner for a few days...” She takes another deep breath and lets it out. “I’ve always felt like a prisoner during this time out of immense guilt. I felt broken, which when I think about it now, seems stupid because, on the outside, everything is working just fine.”

She moves her arms as if to prove she functions just fine.

“However, I realize the situation wasn’t truly my fault. In fact, it was completely out of my control. I wasn’t given the choice to make that decision, and it’s haunted me for a while now. So at three in the morning, when I was under my weighted blanket, feeling sorry for myself, I decided to watch the news. A reporter came on, giving updates. She was furious about the situation at hand and how celebrities carry so much burden, sometimes unnecessarily.”

She pauses and shakes her head.

“We’re so used to burdening things on our own because we feel like our fans and society have helped us reach a platform we prayed and begged for, so who are we now to complain, whine, or express that we’re struggling with fame or even

fortune? Some stars have never had more than a hundred bucks in their accounts at times, yet they become rich overnight thanks to the immense support, but they're left unsure how to manage it all. This comes with the emotional highs and lows, and the most important aspect is the support and team you surround yourself with.”

She smiles at that and bobs her head.

“You all heard that I decided to change up my team, and it's because of my boyfriend, Tyler, who first made me see the light of my situation. Adding my new manager, Cassidy, into the mix, I started to understand the lack of control I carried in my own corporation. My music career relies on team effort. I understood where I wanted to reach and how far I've managed to come, but if I'd had the right team and proper support, would it have felt so lonely?”

Multiple fans say ‘awww,’ expressing their dismay and sadness. Many are recording, some videos being LIVE, which I'm sure will be going viral within seconds.

“Needless to say, day by day, I'm gathering the courage to say my truth, and well... the purple lanterns you guys saw a few weeks ago before sunrise... that was something very special to me. This song is a representation of that, and I hope very soon I can share with you the hidden meaning behind this piece.”

She sighs in relief, smiling at the fact she was actually able to say all that.

“So now, without further ado, here is Purple Starlight Skies, one of my unreleased songs.”

The cheers are deafening as she begins to strum her guitar, the acoustics of the piano, violin, and harp on the stage adding

to the ensemble of music that echoes melodically through the room.

I'm back to looking at Ricky, but I realize he's gone. I wonder if I should be concerned, but I know he's the top in his field, and Riley trusts him to handle business.

“Starlight skies. Twinkling memories. I wish I could cradle you in my arms. Oh, Sweet Babe, my shining light, how I envision the purple haze. All the memories we'd create. Day by day. Some days stressful, while others are filled with bliss. You'd begin to grow, too fast for my own good. For the years will fly by, and I'll realize our time together is far too short. My Purple Starlight, keep shining brightly in the sky for me. I know you're waiting for Mommy. In time, we'll be together, not just briefly. One day, we'll feel complete. Twinkling together in the sky. Don't shed a tear, my love. Shine on and bright. Mommy still has lots to do down here, so until then, please, keep shining brightly.”

The moment the music takes over, Riley moves the mic further away from those delicate lips, and we're blessed with a range of notes, each one so high in pitch, it's like she's an angel singing a harmonic lullaby.

You can feel the immense emotion, every note that leaves her throat making my eyes blur with tears. I swallow the lump forming in my throat, envisioning how alone my Songbird really was back then.

At the back of the stage, curled up on the bathroom floor. Blood oozing out of her, a constant reminder of what she's losing every second. Tears stream down her face, and no future of hopefulness is in sight.

“Don't shed a tear, my love. Shine on and bright. Mommy still has lots to do down here, so until then, please, keep

shining on.”

Even as she sings the final note, the audience is left in haunting silence, the words resonating with so many while the lingering truth continues to hover in the atmosphere.

“That is Purple Starlight Skies. We’ll now take a brief intermission.”

That ignites the endless cheers that carry on for what seems like minutes. The applause, the cheers of support, the sobs and words of affirmation that support Riley and what she’s gone through in silence make my girl’s eyes fill with tears. She smiles and rises to bow to the audience, who won’t stop applauding her strength and courage.

I couldn’t be prouder as our eyes lock. The look we share makes her smile grow, and I couldn’t be more in love with this woman.

My strong Songbird, who keeps getting stronger every day.

Fans begin to wait for the next set, chatter consuming the crowd. I watch Riley as one of the crewmen in black comes from the back to give her a water bottle.

She’s talking with a few people at once, her head nodding and bobbing before she quickly takes the bottle and thanks the man. She’s pointing at a few sheets of paper as if to confirm some details. Once they’re done, she takes a swig of her water, drinking a bit of it before Cassidy is on the stage and whispering something to her.

They share a look before she nods to her and rises to follow her to the back.

Deciding to pull out my phone, I realize Brock has been calling me. Dialing him back, he picks up on the first ring.

“Yo! I’ve been fucking calling you.”

“I’m at Riley’s concert,” I announce. “I told you it was tonight.”

“I know it’s tonight,” Brock presses. “I’m literally outside the venue, watching Ricky beat the shit out of some douche.”

“Huh?” I frown and look at the stage to confirm Riley isn’t back yet. Getting through the crowd, I head for the side exit, so it’ll be easier for me to go around to the front of the building.

Quickly flashing my VIP badge, I enter the crisp evening air.

“What’s wrong? What happened?”

“Dude. I think it’s Jackson.”

What? What the fuck he’s doing here?

By the time I reach the front, I hear him screaming.

“I’m fucking innocent, dammit!” he screams. “I came to warn you!”

“You’re under arrest for trespassing, buddy.”

“Hold on!” I announce, grabbing their attention as I realize Brock is in front of the crowd.

“Fuck! Tyler! Riley’s in trouble!”

That has me on high alert as I reach him.

“What? Why?!”

“I’m in this private group, man. Someone said an anonymous client hired him to drug Riley! I’ve been trying to get in and warn someone, but no one would fucking listen to me!”

Wait, drug her?

“She hasn’t eaten or drank...” I slowly trail off as I replay what just happened.

The man in black offered her a bottle of water.

“CALL AN AMBULANCE NOW!” My head turns as swiftly as Brock’s and Jackson’s at the sound of Cassidy’s shrill voice. “MAKE SPACE! EVACUATE THE ENTIRE VENUE!”

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Panic starts to settle in, and before anyone can stop me, I’m running and tailing Cassidy, who rushes back inside.

“Cassidy! Where’s Riley?”

“Follow me!” she orders. “I need you to carry her.”

Carry her? Fuck!

By the time we’re racing down another hall and skidding into an even smaller hall, I already see a crowd of emergency health workers surrounding the small woman on the ground, who I realize without a doubt is Riley.

“RILEY!” I scream, and Brock has me in his grasp in a heartbeat. “LET ME GO, BROCK!”

“Let them stabilize her!” he growls, struggling to keep me apprehended.

“Riley? Can you hear me?” Cassidy is already at her side and opens her eyes to help a healthcare worker flash a light to her pupils.

“We need to get her to the hospital immediately! She’s going into shock,” the man with the flashlight demands. “Get a stretcher!”

“The ambulance is here!” another person announces. “Side entrance!”

The announcement has me easily getting out of Brock’s hold with a pinch of my strength and dropping down to Riley’s side in a heartbeat. I scoop her into my grasp while Cassidy rushes to grab a large bag that must have Riley’s important valuables.

“Evacuate the place. Don’t talk to any news press! I’ll handle it,” Cassidy orders and is right behind me as we rush out the side door where the ambulance is opening its doors.

“I have her!” I announce, not needing them to waste time to pull out the stretcher from the back. We easily hop in, and I realize Brock slips inside with us.

“Lay her here!” one of the paramedics orders.

The moment I do, he and his colleague get right to work, hooking her up to oxygen and a bunch of machinery while they start asking for her identification.

Cassidy gives them everything they need.

They’re flashing lights into her eyes while calling out her name again and again.

“Take her to the private hospital, Leon. Room is already stationed and ready for arrival.”

“Got it!” Leon, the driver, says as the ambulance speeds onto the freeway emergency lane.

“What happened?” Brock presses. “Jackson was saying someone threatened to poison her!”

“I-I don’t know! I didn’t even see when she drank anything. Riley only drinks sealed water bottles. Nothing else.”

“Someone in black offered her a water bottle,” I press. “A crew member in black.”

Cassidy already has her phone out and is calling someone.

“Ricky! We’re on our way to the private hospital! Riley was drugged! Tyler saw her sipping some water that was offered to her by a crew member in black! What? Did you apprehend them? Make sure they’re arrested, no bail. Understood.”

“They got them?” I ask for affirmation.

“Yes. They took him down the moment he tried to flee the scene. Now that they know he may be the culprit, they’ll hold him until deemed otherwise.”

“Fuck,” I curse, realizing how shaky my whole body is.

“Riley?” The paramedics are calling her name the moment the monitors are beeping oddly.

Brock has Cassidy in his grasp, stopping her from moving, but I can’t stop myself from squeezing into the other corner where I can hold her hand.

“Hang in there, Riley,” I urge her as the paramedics inject something into her while her body shakes uncontrollably.

“She’s having a seizure. Get me Narcan now!”

I don’t understand what’s unfolding.

All I can do is hold her hand and pray to the Lord and the Universe not to let this incident take away my precious Songbird.

Please. Please. Don’t let her slip away from me.

* * *

“HOW COULD SHE BE DRUGGED?! WHAT IMBECILE ALLOWED THIS TO HAPPEN?!”

I’m inching to my limit, as is everyone waiting in the dark hall, which I’m thankful has soundproof doors on each end.

I’ve never been to a hospital that’s exclusive for celebrities and elite individuals, but to sum it up, it’s a fancy space that looks more like a hotel than a medical building that saves lives.

Riley was drugged.

Riley had a seizure on our way here.

Riley’s heart stopped.

For a moment, my whole life felt like it flashed before my eyes, and it took Brock shaking me to get my brain to remind me to fucking breathe.

We watched them resurrect her the moment we arrived at the emergency room, and the moment those doors opened, everything was a blur of orders from medical professionals in black and magenta scrubs. Doctors in medical coats rushed with the stretcher that rolled Riley into the next section, which none of us were allowed to go into.

We’ve been standing here since.

“Miss Sullivan,” Cassidy pleads with her. “We’re trying to get to the bottom of this. The police are involved. The FBI has picked up the case. It’s become a national situation, and they’ve already found the organization that allowed this to transpire. They just need to find the final culprit who instigated this. It’s being worked on.”

“THAT’S not the problem! This never should have happened! You all should lose your jobs! This never happened

when the previous staff were in control!!”

“Mother!” Rory growls. “Stop this madness!”

The fuming woman turns to glare at her son.

“Your twin sister is in there fighting for her life, and you’re standing here protecting this stupid bit—”

“Enough!” Brock shuts her up. “I won’t let you stand here and insult Cassidy! This is beyond her control. What do you want her to do? Manage everything that’s happening at once?! She wasn’t the one who gave Riley the bottle of drugged water! Why the fuck are you even giving a shit when you never insert yourself into Riley’s life, anyway?”

“Brock,” Cassidy whispers and reaches for him, so he won’t get right in Mrs. Sullivan’s face.

“You don’t know shit about our family dynamic! You’re just here because of that dimwit quarterback who couldn’t even protect my daughter!”

“This is absolute madness!”

I’m surprised by the firm voice that comes from down the hall. The middle brother, Raphael, alongside Mr. Sullivan. From their appearance, they’ve been running and are breathless.

I stand up a little taller, knowing damn well this is going to fall on me in some way.

A hand falls on my left shoulder, and I realize Trevor is standing next to me with a look that screams, ‘I got you.’ I’m glad he and Mother were both present at this frightening time.

If I was here by myself, I wouldn’t know what I’d do to try not to fall into complete despair.

“Rapeal!” Miss Sullivan demands and points around. “Fix this! All of this! When Mr. Benedict was Riley’s husband, her life wasn’t going downhill! She was never harmed, let alone drugged! This has to be a setup! A damn set up!”

She’s glaring my way now, and I tense up when she stomps up to me. Swallowing the lump in my throat, I stop Trevor from trying to stand in front of me, knowing I need to confront this woman now, or it’ll be a never-ending battle.

She goes right into poking my chest.

“You were at the venue and didn’t do a damn thing!”

“That’s not true!” Cassidy defends. The poor girl is so pale, I’m frightened she’ll pass out with how she’s been moving on autopilot. “If it wasn’t for Tyler, we wouldn’t have been able to identify the culprit!”

“That’s exactly it! See!” She pushes me with all her might, but I barely budge.

“Hey!” Trevor snaps, but my mom has him in her grasp.

“Let your brother defend himself, Trevor,” my mother firmly states. I can tell from the tone of her voice that she’s upset, but she wants me to be a man in this confrontation.

“You’re the real trouble in all of this. I bet this was your plot to make Chase look bad in front of the world and ruin my daughter! I knew you were bad! All good before the world but a true demon!”

“Mother!” Rory snaps, but she points over to him.

“Shut it, Rory! See! You all didn’t back me up when I said Chase was the better husband. You entertained this fool who came into her life for what? To make her fucking delusional?”

All the news saying this quarterback EMPOWERED my daughter. Empowered her with what? Stupidity and recklessness. When she was married to Chase, she was silent. No problems, nothing! She was better off! Now she almost died!” She’s back to pointing into my chest again. “All because of you!”

She’s huffing and puffing when she’s screamed her say in my face, and I know all eyes are on me as I decide I’m done with this nonsense.

I’m done with no one defending my Songbird from the true villain.

“So, that’s why it’s okay that Chase killed their baby, yeah?”

I drop the bomb without a hint of remorse.

Honestly, I don’t recognize my voice now, and from the surprise rising in her eyes, I’m showing the face and demeanor I never show unless I’m extremely mad.

The appearance that makes me look exactly like my dad.

“Wh-What?”

“You heard me,” I growl. “You’re a supporter of forced abortion, yeah? Since you love Chase SO FUCKING MUCH, more than your own daughter, you never once checked on her when she took time off two years ago in Miami. Never gave her a ring and asked why the public hadn’t seen her for weeks. Why she put things on hold while Chase was enjoying life, attending events and parties? You not once thought, ‘maybe my daughter needs me to check in,’ yeah. But here you are. Pointing fingers at me as if you’ve been a saint of a parent!”

“H-How dare y—”

“Mother SHUT THE FUCK UP!”

We’re surprised by Raphael’s booming order, and I realize he’s next to me with glaring eyes that reflect his burning rage.

“What did you just say?” he slowly peers over to me. “Chase killed our baby sister’s child?”

“Two years ago, Chase poisoned Riley when she found out she was pregnant with their child,” I announce loud and clear. “He threatened the doctor to never disclose the evidence and forced Riley into silence. She performed that night, even though she was in excruciating pain and bleeding out from the forced miscarriage.”

No one, not even her mother, can say a thing.

“She never told anyone. Not Cassidy, not her team. No one. Instead, her sadness was portrayed in her lyrics. Not too obvious but woven into her words and the emotions she portrayed. The last two years, she fell into deep depression and isolated herself to mourn the loss of their child. It’s the very reason why she never drinks unopened bottles and drinks. If she gets anything made at the bar, she watches it being made to ensure nothing is put into it,” I explain.

“Tonight, she was distracted because multiple people were talking to her at once. She was thirsty after singing such an emotional and demanding song. I saw a crew member come from the back and hand her the water bottle. She didn’t pay attention to see whether it was open or not. We didn’t find out until Jackson came to the venue and revealed there was a plan to drug Riley.” I summarize everything, so he gets where we currently stand and why I’ve put up with this bullshit.

Then I turn my attention to the woman before me.

“You call yourself a mother? A woman who carried Riley to full term and birthed her into this world?” I ask accusingly.

“O-Of course I carried her!” she snaps.

“And yet you stand here and tell me I’m the problem. That I’m the trigger of Riley’s problems. If it wasn’t me, the interferer, do you think Riley would have been here much longer? I’m the person who made Riley realize how much fucking abuse she went through and continued to deal with! I’m the one who listened to her first, and because of the vibrant connection we share, Riley has been willing to open up about things. If it wasn’t for me, Riley would have surely killed herself by now!”

“Y-You don’t know that!!”

“YOU don’t even listen to your daughter’s music! You don’t hear the pure agony in her sound and how desperate she is to seek a listening ear! The world resonates with her music because so many of us are trapped in this very cycle! Family and friends who are so busy running their own lives, they don’t take two fucking seconds to reach out to those in their own family to ask how they’re doing!” I snap as everything that’s been boiling inside me finally flows out.

“Did you know the reason Riley wears purple this time of year is to commemorate the child she lost? She stopped having sex with Chase because she feared getting pregnant again. Exactly why she stuck to birth control because she was frightened Chase would force himself on her and try to get her pregnant again, just so she could deal with the trauma and possibility of him getting away with killing another unborn child. You’re like everyone else. Every other fucking person who has an opinion about her life when you know jack shit!”

“Y-You barely know her!” she snaps as tears form in her eyes.

“You’re right!” I snap and lift my arms in the air. “But you know what? I try! I listened to her for hours as she told me about her life. Told me about her childhood and the unique things she loves about her brothers. She talked all about her military father, who has so many achievements and loves her in his own special way that she understands. And despite how cruel you’ve been, she still has kindness in her heart to admit that you’re a mother who’s rough around the edges, but deep in that cold fucking heart of yours, you love her!”

I watch her hold her tongue as her tears fall down her flushed cheeks.

“That’s why you’re here, right? Why else would you be here, belittling everyone as if we’re the culprits to your daughter’s suffering?! Would you be those same parents who ignore their kids until they walk in and find them hanging from the fucking ceiling? Would that be the time when you’ll ask the world what possibly could have happened?”

“R-Riley wouldn’t kill herself!” she snaps. “Sh-She...”

“Riley told me the morning of her unborn baby’s anniversary that she had every intention of ending her life this year,” I disclose the secret I’ve kept since she told me. It was the hardest and heaviest weight to carry, but I did so these last few weeks while taking steps to help her.

“The moment she told me that, you know what I did? I took her straight to a private evaluator and got her assessed. We stayed the night with none of your knowledge and ensured she felt okay mentally before looking at every option possible to start her walk toward recovery. These last three weeks, she’s gone to therapy consistently, and I’ve begun to see her

blossom into the Riley she once was when she first entered this industry. The woman who held a growing spark in her eye that screamed ‘hope.’”

I blink my eyes, ignoring the tears streaming down my face.

“She sang Purple Starlight Skies. That song is all about her forced abortion. All about the agony and pain she carries in her heart and the regret she holds like a perished jewel because the culprit of her agony is still out there, being protected by people like you! She had the courage to let the world hear it, knowing it would reveal that she endured a miscarriage, and no one fucking knew. My sweet, innocent, loving Songbird is finally allowing herself to heal, but you fucking think I’m gonna keep standing here and letting your toxic self be anywhere near her?”

She tries to find words, but there’s nothing she can say.

“You took no initiative to find the culprit who was hurting your daughter. You assumed everyone who’s been in your daughter’s life and made it somewhat survivable is a villain. Your own sons can barely keep a conversation with you, and hell, I honestly can’t even comment on your husband because he’s just a patient saint for putting up with you,” I seethe. “But from this moment onward, I’m done with this. Done with you being in Riley’s life as though you want to be in it.”

“Wh-What are you trying to say?” she glares at me. “You can’t get rid of me! You’re not married to her! Y-You have no righ—”

“I have every intention of marrying your daughter, Mrs. Sullivan, and I’ve already gotten your husband’s permission.”

That surprises her as she looks down the hall as the man in question begins to walk toward us.

“Y-You didn’t tell me anything?! How dare you—” she begins with a look of betrayal, but Mr. Sullivan interrupts with something else.

“I want a divorce.”

We all freeze at his firm declaration, our eyes landing on him as we watch Mrs. Sullivan’s eyes widen in pure shock.

“Wh-What?”

“You knew about Miami,” he whispers with a trembling voice. “Riley told you something when she was in Miami, and you kept yelling at her, saying it wasn’t the right time. She was too young. Over and over again. I asked you three times to tell me what it was about, but you refused. You wouldn’t tell me.”

“Honey... we can talk about this—”

“DID YOU KNOW ABOUT THE CHILD, KRIS?”

She’s not the only one to flinch, leaving her no choice but to answer the truth that spurts out of her mouth.

“Y-YES!”

Wow...

Finally, hearing it hurts even more; for now, this proves the truth.

Her mother really failed her.

Mr. Sullivan stands there and watches his wife tremble before she’s on her knees in front of him.

“W-Wait, honey. I can explain. I didn’t... I thought it was her choice to get rid of it. I had no clue—”

“Twenty-four hours,” he declares. “All your things. Out of my house. You’ll go to the office and clear every single thing of yours. Before you leave, you’ll ensure you sign an NDA and a restraining order that will ensure you don’t go near Riley.”

We watch him tug his ring off and throw it to the ground with his trembling hand. He then points directly in her face as she tries to plead between her sobs.

“Riley and Rory were our miracle babies. Despite having Raphael, Rowan, and Raymond via surrogate, you begged me for us to try IVF so you could carry. She should have been the child you protected. Instead, you became a jealous bitch who hated how my attention went to her and not to you! Even when she migrated from your life plan bullshit and tried to make a life for herself, you had to have control! To contribute to her struggles.”

He shakes his head while his gaze is so filled with menace, he’s almost recognizable.

“No more. My baby girl will never get close to you again. I will never share a space with you again from this moment onward.”

He turns away and stomps out of the hall.

“No, honey, wait! Please! I beg you!” We watch as she grabs the ring and races after him.

We’re left in a silence that’s tense and heavy.

The sudden unlocking of the door brings our attention to the man who walks out with a white coat along his shoulders.

My eyes widen.

“Dad?”

Aside from Mother and Trevor, who recognize him, everyone else is looking back and forth because we look practically identical.

“I wasn’t sure this was going to be a conflict of interest,” he admits as he pulls off his gloves and disposes of them in the box engraved into the wall. “However, due to the circumstance, I don’t think it could be avoidable.”

“Your dad’s a doctor?” Cassidy gasps.

“Yeah,” I confess. “Dad, is Riley okay?”

“Stable. Resting. Clear of any signs of poison in her system,” he announces, which relieves everyone.

“Thank goodness,” Cassidy admits and is on the verge of crying. My mother moves to comfort her, with Brock holding her tight, while my dad nudges his head in the direction of the room. “Can I speak with Riley’s partner, then?”

“Yeah,” I reply and look at Raphael.

His expression seems clouded, as though he’s trying to wrap all of this through his mind, but he meets my gaze.

“I love your sister with all my heart,” I vow. “I know I haven’t done enough to prove how much I adore and would do to protect her, but give me a chance, and I promise to never let you down again.”

“You didn’t let us down,” he grumbles while Rory moves to stand next to him. “We did.”

Rory puts his hand on Raphael’s shoulder before looking my way.

“But we’re going to fix it. We’ll heal and become stronger than before,” he declares. “But for now, you need to be there for Riley.”

He's right.

“I’ll do my best.”

Leaving them, I head into the room where Riley is quietly sleeping. She looks so much better, her complexion more vibrant, while her expression is peaceful.

“I gave her a sedative so she can sleep a little longer. She needs all the rest she can get.”

“After that fiasco, yeah...” I sigh and pinch my nose.

“That, and the fact she’s growing a little bundle in her.”

I freeze.

My eyes widen.

I slowly look up into my dad’s calm eyes, which soften at my obvious surprise.

“I would have liked to be introduced to her before I found out you two were pregnant, Tyler, but I’ll make an exception due to the circumstances,” he summarizes and smiles proudly. “Besides, it’s nice to see you stand up for what you cherish.”

“Riley’s... pregnant?” I whisper.

“Twelve weeks already,” he reveals. “Guess she was asymptomatic. Especially with no morning sickness.”

“Th-The poison—”

“Wasn’t in her system long enough to harm baby,” he assures me. “She’ll be okay. Just needs some rest and fluids.”

“I’m... gonna be a father,” I whisper in shock as elation rushes through me. “Dad!”

“Shh,” he hushes me. “You’re so loud.”

“The hall is soundproof!”

“The hall, not the room,” he says with an eye roll but opens his arms. “Come here, boy. I’m proud of you.”

I’m hugging him tightly in seconds.

Then I cry my heart out, realizing that not only is Riley safe, but so is the little growing songbird inside her.

WHO'S THE REAL WINNER?



~RILEY~

“Miracles are blessed mysteries. Coming when you least expect it. Opening doors, healing hearts, and making our world a wondrous place. Life is a rollercoaster, with challenges on the left and uplifting opportunities on the right. With loved ones, we can strive forward. With love, we can continue to fight. I’m waiting for that Miracle to blossom. Waiting for it to spout. Miracles are blessed mysteries. No longer will I doubt.”

— *Miracles*

by Riley Maddison Sullivan

*“A*ND THE UNIMAGINABLE IS HAPPENING AS WE SPEAK! Chase Arnold Benedict, formally known as manager and completing his final day as Quarterback of the Pennsylvania Jet Hawks is currently being arrested upon the field of Ben Hill Griffin Stadium!”

I’m staring in disbelief, on the stage about to perform to see Chase get tackled by S.W.A.T. members.

This is right after we watched Tyler tackle the man into the sky and break at least a few of his ribs.

From the sound of it, Tyler was going to be given “suspension” for a few months, but the way everyone in the stadium celebrated the violent tackle was beyond unfathomable.

I still can't believe it happened.

We were now about to start intermission, to which I was on stage, dressed up, seconds away from strumming my guitar when there was Chase, running full speed across the field towards the stage.

The stage that I'm on.

I don't think anyone expected S.W.A.T members to run so fast, but those men raced like Olympic athletes in full gear and tackled him down to the ground.

I notice the bottom of the stage is filled with my entire security team, which includes Ricky at the forefront, but it clearly deemed unnecessary because they're apprehending Chase in front of everyone.

News reporters don't hesitate to race over and get the first LIVE footage of what's happening.

From this distance, it really looks like he's having a mental breakdown.

A brave reporter dares to bring his mic close enough to the struggling man who is still trying to fight the men sitting on top of him while beginning to tighten his handcuffs, allowing us to hear what's being said as the LIVE news report is connected to all the screens across the stadium.

“YOU THINK YOU COULD RUIN ME, RILEY!” He snaps angrily as he still fights to resist his obvious arrest. “I'm the one with the last laugh! I'M THE FUCKING WINNER!”

He tries to wiggle like a helpless worm, but it's no use.

“YOU THINK YOU'RE GONNA GET THE WORLD SYMPATHY! WELL, LET ME TELL THIS FUCKED UP WORLD THAT YOU'LL NEVER GET PREGNANT AGAIN! YOU'LL NEVER HAVE A KID AFTER INJECTING THAT POISON!”

Fans are gasping, mothers screaming, and men fighting out of their seats to go down there and get close enough to get a hit on this madman.

“YOU WANT THE TRUTH?! I'M THE ONE WHO PAID TO GET YOU POISONED AT THE CONCERT! Your OWN mother spotted me the funds to ensure you and Tyler will NEVER get pregnant. You thought you were gonna win, eh? Ruined everything revolving around my career! Stole my wealth, and career, and think you'd go scott-free?!” he laughs manically as the officers force him up to his feet.

“SING ALL THE SONGS YOU WANT! TELL THE WHOLE FUCKING WORLD THAT I, CHASE ARNOLD BENEDICT KILLED OUR BABY TWO YEARS AGO BECAUSE YOU DIDN'T DESERVE TO BE A MOTHER FOR NOT ATTENDING TO MY NEEDS. TELL THEM! THEY'LL SUPPORT MY ACTIONS!” He's really lost his mind now. “MY LEGACY WILL LIVE ON! MY MISTRESS IS PREGNANT AND SHE'LL BEAR MY CHILD! JUST YOU WAIT. AS FOR YOU, YOU'LL NEVER HEAR A BABY CRY!”

The ignition of 'BOOS' and screams that ignite follow with prayer warriors screaming 'WE REBUKE IT'. The other side of the audience is sending pure insults.

“FUCK YOU!”

“MURDERER!”

“ARREST HIM!”

“GIVE HIM THE DEATH PENTALTY!”

He laughs and gives the biggest grin my way, and it seems like the world is staring at me to see my reaction as the screens now show me as I hold the mic stand.

At first, my expression is blank, and I think about whether or not it’s worth saying this out loud in this moment.

For a moment, I notice a purple light in the sky, and I can’t help but stare at it for a few seconds before it disappears into the drifting clouds.

Is that my sign to be brave, Purple Starlight?

My lips lift before I know it, and when my eyes return to the man who’s doing everything to stop the officers from pulling away, he remains completely still.

That forces the officers to stop as well, wondering why his resistance suddenly stopped, but that invites this perfect moment as I open my mouth to speak.

“I’m glad you’re able to admit your crimes to the world, Chase. That they can now see who the true villain is in my life,” I confess and watch him laugh.

He thinks he’s won, but I continue.

“As for you wishing for me to never hear a baby’s cry, I’ll let you be the first to know that Tyler and I actually got accepted to be parents today of a child who’s growing in a young mother’s womb and will be ours when she reaches term.”

Everyone gasps and cheers, but there's Chase laughing as he pulls at the guards just so he can speak into the mic.

“STILL NOT YOUR OWN CHILD! I STILL WIN.”

“That's where you're wrong, Chase,” I vow but further smirk. “There's no point in explaining to you, but to me, Family is more than just blood. As long as love, protect, and take care of one another, that's all that matters,” I repeat Tyler's words as my hand moves until it's right on top of my belly.

That has the camera's attention before everyone's curiously staring at me, waiting for what I have to say.

“Besides, thanks to your poisoning act, Tyler and I found out I'm officially twelve weeks pregnant with our first child.”

The man gawks in pure shock while the stadium is losing it in sheer happiness. People are jumping, screaming, and cheering my name as if I was the one who just won the Super Bowl.

“So I wonder, Chase?” I whisper. “Who's the real Winner?”

He can't reply because he's being dragged away by force — two men picking up his legs so they have no choice but to carry him away.

The stadium is so loud, I feel like I'll pop an eardrum at this rate with the screams of approval and happiness, but if it was loud before, it only grows louder, leaving me confused as I look around in wonder why everyone's even more excited.

All it takes for me to turn around completely to see Tyler.

Bent on one knee in a sequin purple suit that matches the purple Swarovski dress I'm wearing in Purple Starlight's

honor.

“T-Tyler?” I gasp in shock, and even more shocked to see my family and his all lined up behind him, as well as Cassidy, Brock, and a few of Tyler’s teammates.

Brock does the honors of quickly shuffling to give Tyler the mic, and he has everyone’s attention as the stadium falls silent.

“Riley Maddison Sullivan,” he whispers. “Here on this very stage, my eyes locked upon you. That simple connection shifted something inside me. Something that I thought died when I was betrayed and left a mockery. Instead of fearing the unknown, I chased the striking sensation that sparkled and bloomed between us.”

His eyes are watering while mine are already overflowing with tears.

“I told myself if I was going to marry you, not only would I ask for your family’s permission, but I would be supported by their presence to show that you matter not only to me, but to them, and your friend, and all the fans within this stadium who’s been touched by your existence”.

“Tyler,” I whisper.

“Riley. My Sweet, Powerful Songbird. Will you marry me?”

I swiftly nod my head.

“YES!”

He smiles brilliantly as he reaches out to slide the unique purple diamond that’s surrounded by iridescent stones.

Without delay, he hugs me, and in front of the world, he kisses me with everything he got

The cheers are ballistic, confetti raining down on us in seconds, and the world is a buzz of congratulations and applause.

Tyler can't help but take the mic and scream at the top of his lungs.

"I'M GONNA BE A FATHER!"

"AHHH! The crowd screams before he scoops me up and spins me around, making me laugh hysterically.

"TYLER! Don't spin her around! She's pregnant!" Cassidy screams.

"Let them have some fun," Brock laughs and has Cassidy screaming as he picks her up and proceeds to spin her around, causing her to laugh.

We celebrate this new era as I finally realize that the man who wished to destroy me will be behind bars for all the injustice he did to me.

Me and my child...who can finally be at peace.

To think it all started at the Superbowl.

And ended with me marrying a quarterback.

THE END.

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I hope this books ignites a new era for me...and maybe for you as well.

Thank you for all the support.

- Roxanne Steele

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Roxanne Steele

is a debuting Sports Contemporary Romance Author.

Roxanne was inspired to write this story after sitting in a hospital room and realizing how precious life really was.

She held onto this dream of being an author, and decided, it was time for her to try.

Before here own time in this world runs dry...

If you enjoyed her work, please review, follow her social media platforms, and let her know that her decision was worth fighting for!



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