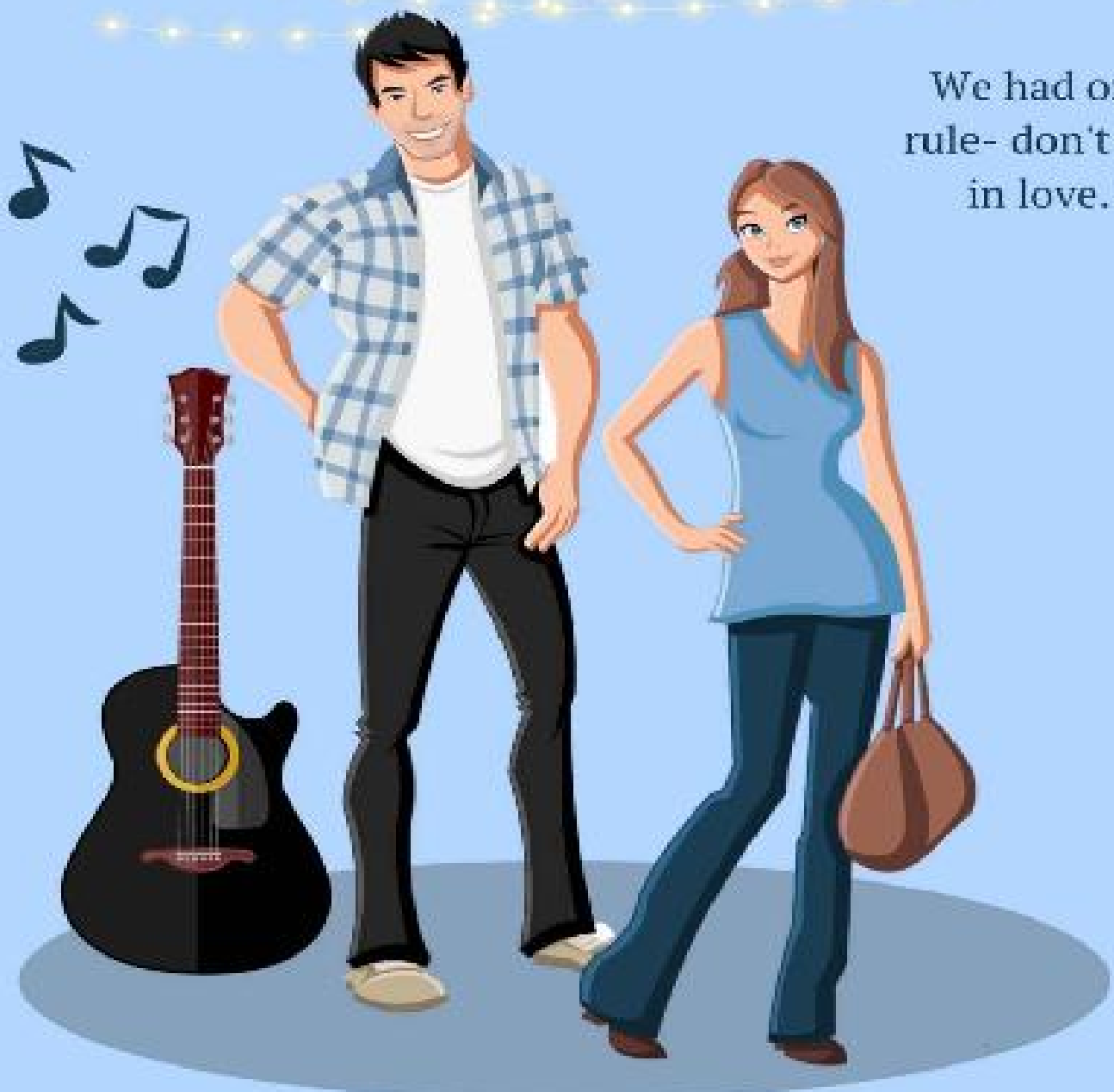


More Than Our

Fake Vows

We had one
rule- don't fall
in love.



The Frayed Outlaws Book 1
Katie Richard

More Than Our
Fake Vows

Also by Katie Richard

Destiny

Into The Storm

My Last Hope

More Than Our
Fake Vows

The Frayed Outlaws Book 1
Katie Richard

More Than Our Fake Vows

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This book is for those of you who never felt good enough...
Find your happily ever after, they're out there looking for their
missing piece too!

Chapter One



Teagan

The scent of cigarette smoke, beer, and deep-fried food slaps me in the face when the door in front of me swings wide. A patron steps out, holding the door for the three of us to enter.

After a long day of showing a few properties in the area, Bruce, the local realtor, decided to stop into the town pub to discuss our options. It's a really small town, and I'm not sure if I want to go that route. The whole point of getting away from the city is to lay low. I guess staying in a rinky-dink place like this and hiding behind a fence might do the trick. I've vacationed in a few towns over the last couple of years. Hickory Valley, Georgia, might be able to offer what I need—an escape from what's become of my life.

The shitstorm Harper created for me seems endless. I never should've dated that woman, and I was warned she was nothing but a gold digger. All I saw was a pretty redhead with an hourglass body. I wasn't thinking with the right head, apparently. A fact I'm all too aware of now.

The Duke's Tavern waitress, who immediately seats us off to the side, seems friendly enough. Her name tag reads Gabriella, and she's a cute little blonde. Her torn-up jean shorts and tight black ribbed tank top with the bar's logo across her tits leave little to the imagination. Scanning the bar, I notice a few other women are dressed the same. It must be their uniform. That explains the crowd, mainly men, with a couple of women

scattered here and there. It's not hard to figure out what the owner's intention is. The old saying still rings true: sex sells.

Scanning over the menu, I find the typical bar food: burgers, chicken, and ribs. The waitress takes our order and leaves. Flipping through the folder of the property listings in front of me, I cast another glance around. It's something I've had to learn to do over the years. Somebody with a camera always wants to snap unwanted pictures of you. I love to sing, but I don't like the attention unless I'm on stage. Even then, sometimes I don't enjoy it. The limelight can put too much pressure to be perfect, and clearly, I'm far from being Mr. Perfection.

My gaze lands on a brunette working the bar. Her long hair is pulled up high in a ponytail, with the curly ends bouncing behind her as she refills and pours drink after drink. Her easy smile draws me in as she converses with the men before her. She grins and shakes her head at one guy who seems to have no qualms about ogling her. She's definitely a sight for sore eyes. Hell, if I weren't in my predicament, I'd probably be hitting on her too. Let's just say she fills out that tank top like it was made for her. Female perfection at its best. But I know better than to fall for that pretty smile.

Sighing, I look back down at the six-bedroom Colonial. This one boasts the best security out of all the houses I've looked at. A ten-foot-high fence surrounds the entire property with a key code gated entry at the driveway and all the doors. Far more bedrooms than I need, but at least I'd have enough room if the guys in the band wanted to visit. The backyard is large

and already has a hot tub and a fire pit. We looked at some smaller houses, but none had a fence, and only half had an alarm system already in place. This town seems far too trusting of its neighbors.

“You keep turning back to that one. Is it the one?” Jared asks. He’s my best friend, who later became the agent for our country band, Frayed Outlaws. He’s been by my side through a lot and gotten us out of a few jams. Let’s hope he’s good enough to get us out of this most recent clusterfuck.

“I’m thinking so, but I wanna sleep on it,” I tell him while closing the folder and setting it aside. My gaze automatically locks on the bartender.

She flashes me a grin when she catches me staring. Caught red-handed, I smirk and turn away but still feel her eyes on me like a heat traveling up my spine. Maybe she recognizes me. She’d be the first in this town to do so. Chancing another glance her way, I find her busy taking plates from the small window leading to what I can only assume is the kitchen. The stone wall, with gray grout around each smooth stone, surrounds an opening that looks like something you’d find from an old cottage in the woods.

Gabriella returns with our food and hurries to seat the next patrons coming in. I’ve noticed by going to all these towns that the best food comes from the places you least expect. Take this place, blasting old-school country music from a jukebox in the corner, the overhead light fixture flutters

occasionally, and the women are dressed like Daisy Duke. Maybe that's why they call it Duke's Tavern?

The realtor keeps rambling on and on about the places we went to today and all the homes he's sold recently. He's like the talking energizer bunny. To be honest, I tune him out. He gave me this spiel earlier, and I'd like to eat and return to the hotel. My brain's on information overload.

My career as lead vocalist and the band's fate depend on my reputation, which is going into the tanks because I was too blind to see through a woman's motives. I should've known better. Now that people know my name, they only want me for that. They don't care about the man underneath. I scrub a hand roughly across my face. I'd forgotten to shave this morning, judging by the amount of stubble on my chin.

Each waitress rotates, working the bar and then the diners. The brunette bombshell heads in our direction as I toss the last french fry in my mouth. Long tan legs stretch from her distressed cowgirl boots to a frayed pair of cut-offs wrapped tightly around a firm ass and hips I'd love to grab hold of. She struts from table to table and lands next to mine. She doesn't even give me another glance. It's as if that look she gave me earlier was meant for someone else. Or maybe they get better tips when their flirty. But she's not even our waitress.

Trying not to be obvious, I turn my head so I don't stare at her ass. That's a hard feat; the woman has an ass to die for. Jared smirks at me and wiggles his eyebrows.

"Don't even start," I mutter, warning him with a hard glare.

“I didn’t say anything.” He shakes his head and glances at the beautiful woman again as she writes down the customer’s orders on a small notepad.

Her sweet voice is like a silk caress on my ears. I can barely see her from the corner of my eye, but I can feel her presence. My heart rate ticks up a notch when her coconut-scented perfume drifts toward me. Thoughts of rubbing suntan lotion all over that supple body makes it hard to ignore the building sensation in my groin. It’s been a few months since a woman warmed my bed. I haven’t dared to bring anyone home.

“Hands off, Tony!” she commands, and my head snaps in her direction as she swats a fifty-something’s hand away from her ass.

“Oh, come on, Natalie. You know you love the attention,” he slurs the last few words. His receding hairline is dusted with more grays than his light brown, and his navy polo has a grease stain.

“No. Don’t fucking touch me again,” she snaps.

Oh, I love a firecracker. Something about a woman who’s not afraid to speak her mind. It’s the quiet ones who don’t say much you need to worry about. The ones with no filter? Well, you never have to guess what’s on their mind.

“Rules, schmules,” he says, chuckling. “Such a tease.” He places his hand on the back of the junction between her thigh and ass cheek, yanking her closer. She lets out a yelp and almost falls in his lap before catching her balance on the table.

I stand abruptly, my chair screeching on the dirty tile floor. What the fuck is wrong with this guy? Jared grabs my arm to pull me back, hissing something about laying low. I don't care. I can't stand back and watch a woman being mistreated. It's not right. It doesn't slip past me that no other patron moves to intervene.

She reaches behind her, grabs his wrist, and twists hard, making the old man cry out, "Okay, okay. S-s-s-sorry got carried away."

"I warned you, Tony. You know the rules. We're off-limits," she practically growls as she holds his arm at an odd angle.

Damn, that's hot, and it's not helping the situation in my pants at all. A woman that can handle herself and look that good? What kind of town have I found myself in?

The man contorts his body in the same direction she twists it. He nods feverishly before she releases him, and as she turns, her light blue eyes lock on mine. A small amount of gray circles the outsides of her iris, and several tiny streaks compliment the sky-blue shade. Standing only a foot away from me, her gaze flicks to Jared's hand, still on my bicep. She throws me a half smile before fleeing toward the bar as a big, bearded guy comes through the half doors of the kitchen and they continue to swing on their hinges.

I sit back down as the music from the jukebox goes silent between songs. She slaps him on the chest before telling him, "I'm taking five. You can wait Tony's table for the rest of the

night, or he can leave. But I won't go back over there if he stays."

The big guy turns toward Tony and glowers just as *Achy Breaky Heart* begins to play. Stalking over, he has a hushed conversation with him, and the only words I pick up on are, "You don't touch my girls," before the drunk stumbles his way to the front door. Then the bearded man disappears behind the swinging doors the brunette went through moments ago.

Jared blows out a frustrated breath. "What part of lay low is confusing to you?"

"Are you serious?" I crank my head in his direction.

"You can't get involved with shit like that, and you know it. You want to look like the hot head she's making you out to be, then by all means." He throws his hands up in the air. "What the hell am I even doing helping you?"

"It's okay, Teagan. Unfortunately, the ladies here deal with that often. Hazards of the job. They know how to handle themselves," Bruce interjects.

"They shouldn't have to," I say between clenched teeth. My palm itches to grab ahold of Tony and teach him a lesson. Women don't deserve to be handled like they're a piece of flesh.

"Tony's a regular, and he's usually fine, but he tends to get handsy when drunk. It's not the first time he's been thrown out. And he should know better about Natalie. She doesn't

take shit from any of them if they cross the line.” He laughs, and his forehead wrinkles in amusement.

There’s nothing funny about her having to protect herself at her workplace. His nonchalance with the situation puts a sour taste in my mouth. Are all the men in this town okay with that? I turn toward the front window to see if I can spot Tony. A couple walks by holding hands on the sidewalk—no sign of the pervy old man.

“What’s her story?” I sit back in my seat, wanting to know everything about the woman. I’m not used to a woman acting like I was nobody.

“Well, Natalie’s new here, only been working here for about five or six months. She’s an interior decorator and a damn good one at that. She mainly works in Emory Falls but does a side hustle here nights and weekends.”

Hmm. An interior decorator? So why would she be in this place?

“Is she single?” The words tumble out. It shouldn’t bother me if she might have a man at home warming her bed. And... it doesn’t.

“Why are you in the market?” Bruce grins as he leans back in his chair. A challenge glints in his brown eyes.

“No. Just wondering why she would choose to work here as well. Money problems?” It’s a good cover story. I can’t get into a relationship with anyone right now, especially not with somebody hurting for cash. My career must come first, no

matter how rockin' that body is. Women aren't worth the hassle they bring or the risk I'd be taking.

“Definitely not. Natalie makes bank with her decorating. She's the assistant manager at Turnkey Design. I assume she's a workaholic. Never seen her with anybody besides the other waitresses. Most men in Hickory Valley have asked her out, but she's refused every one of 'em.”

Hmm. Usually, when you're a workaholic, it's because you're running from something or someone. I should know. That's what I do too. I slap some cash on the table. “Well, gentleman, I think I'd like to ponder my options alone with a few drinks.”

“I can take a hint, have a good night.” Bruce nods before shaking my hand in his firm grip.

“Can I trust you if I leave?” Jared's eyes narrow as he crosses his arms, puffing out his chest as if he'd stand a chance of actually holding me back from a fight. The only thing that stopped me from grabbing that dirty old man by the throat was the waitress's quick reaction.

“The asshole's gone, so I don't see why not?” I snap. Who the hell does he think he is? I don't need a damn babysitter. He may help me out in a jam, but nobody, and I mean, nobody, tells me what to do.

“Okay. I'll talk to you tomorrow then.” Without another word, he slips out the front door, and I wait to see him climb into his Tahoe before unfolding myself from the chair.

Bruce flags our waitress down while I take one of the few empty stools at the bar, tucking the folder under my legs for safekeeping. Within moments, the brunette pushes the swinging doors open and surveys the bar. She works her way from the farthest end, about twenty feet away, then back to me.

As she gets closer, I notice her hands shake as she pours drinks. She carefully keeps enough space between the glasses, ensuring they don't clink together, while smiling and nodding to the customers as if there's not a firestorm raging inside her. I can spot the signs of somebody barely holding it together; I've been there myself several times.

"What can I get ya, handsome?" The gorgeous bartender flicks her eyes down the length of the bar again. Never settling on anyone or anything longer than a few seconds. She barely meets my gaze. Not the bubbly woman who commanded attention behind the bar earlier.

"Whatever you're having." Obviously, she's not okay and needs a distraction to take her mind off what happened with the drunk.

She finally looks at me, and it's like she sees right through me. The flirty waitress from earlier is gone. "I don't drink when I'm on shift."

Clasping my hands together, I set them on top of the polished wooden bar. "I think the boss would make an exception after what just happened. Pour us both your favorite. I'll buy."

She tilts her head, her dangly silver earrings catching the light. “You’re not from around here, are you?”

“No. I’m from out West.” That’s all she needs to know. The last thing I need is for the paparazzi to follow me here. I need a break from Arizona and everything that life inflicts, and I can’t risk drawing the vultures in.

“That explains it. Thank you, by the way.” She begins pouring vodka, Malibu coconut rum, Peach Schnapps, and pineapple juice into a shaker bottle.

Giving it a good shake before reaching under the bar for the glasses. When she bends down slightly, I catch a damn good glimpse of cleavage with a small silver chain tucked in between her breasts and manage to yank my gaze from where it shouldn’t be before she slides a tall glass in my direction. She repeats her steps, making another one. Taking a sip, I find myself being transported to the beach. I’m more of a beer type but, it’s tasty, light, and fruity. They may go down too easy, though. That may be the point. Great marketing technique.

“For what?” I ask, wanting to know if she thought I’d punch that guy in the nose for manhandling her because I would’ve. I suppose if she hadn’t reacted as fast as she had, my night could have ended far differently. It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve ridden in the back of a cop car, and with my luck, probably not my last.

“For trying to step in.” She doesn’t raise her eyes to me but is fixated on the liquor bottles.

“You don’t have to thank me for that.” I take another sip.
“What is this? It’s good.”

“A Fat Hooker,” she replies, and I nearly spit it out while taking another sip.

What the hell kind of name is that? “Really?”

“Yeah.” Her lips tip up into a smile, and her eyes take on a mischievous glint.

“People actually ask you for one of those? By name?” I’ve been to many bars and never once heard that one. I’d remember it.

“They do.” She wipes down the bar beside me and then tosses the dirty rag in a bin behind her.

“I never thought I’d say I like fat hookers, but here I am.” Pointing my finger at her, I say, “You’ve corrupted me.”

She laughs, and her baby blues twinkle before glancing out across the tables. “I’ll be right back.” She takes a gulp of hers before putting it behind the bar.

The blonde from our table stops her before Natalie reaches the opening of the bar. “We’ll all split your tables if you man the bar.”

“You don’t have to do that.” Natalie shakes her head, and her long hair sways behind her.

“We got you, babe.” The blonde winks at her.

“Thanks.” Natalie’s shoulders relax slightly. She probably feels safer behind the bar where customers can’t grope her.

Is this a normal occurrence here? My fingers curl into fists at my sides. Natalie grabs another beer and twists the cap off for a man at the end the bar before returning to me. Leaning against the counter, she studies me without saying a word. It feels as if she can see through the casual newcomer appearance I was going for.

“Does that happen often?” I ask. My cell phone buzzes in my pocket, and I fight the urge to pull it out. Whoever it is can wait.

“Them taking my tables?” Her eyebrows squish together.

“No. Being manhandled.” I barely contain the venom in my voice. My jaw clenches at the thought. Please say no. If not, I may have to add local bouncer to my resume.

She bites her lower lip. “It happens enough. But what does Duke expect having us dress like this?” She rolls her eyes and points at her outfit. So she’s not a fan of putting herself on display like this then.

Duke must be the big bearded fella. “Even at strip clubs where women walk around in barely anything, you’re not allowed to touch ‘em,” I comment without thinking.

“Go to many of them, do you?” Her eyebrows rise, and her smile slips.

Great, now I seem like a perv. “A few. For bachelor parties. Not exactly my scene.” I like my women to have a little more modesty than that. Pressing the glass to my lips, another swig of my drink goes down smoothly.

“Huh.”

She might scoff, but it’s the truth. Deciding to change the subject, I ask her, “I noticed your hands shaking. Do they usually?”

“Are you always this observant?” She fires back.

Her eyes narrow as she tucks a stray lock of caramel-hued hair behind her ear that fell out of her ponytail. Then she put her hands in her back pockets. No doubt, to hide them from view.

“Sometimes. You can tell a lot about a person from their body language.”

”And what is my body language telling you about me?” She crosses her arms over her breasts which only manages to push her cleavage up higher.

I lean back on my bar stool and pretend to assess her, not like I haven’t been watching her frequently since I walked in here. I already figured a few things out before coming up here.

“Well, for starters, you’re uncomfortable either with me or the situation that happened earlier.” She holds my gaze and raises her chin slightly. ”You put on a brave face, but underneath is a woman who doesn’t want attention. You’re upset.”

“You got all that, huh?”

“Am I right?”

Her eyes fixate on a knot in the bar top. “It’s just nerves. It’ll go away soon.”

I don’t miss how she didn’t admit or deny the rest of what I said, which confirms my suspicions.

“When I get keyed up, I remind myself it’s just a job. Look at the task, execute it, then move on. Like it’s a script, you’re replaying for practice.” That helped me a lot on the stage in the beginning. Looking out to see a massive swarm of bodies is intimidating. Sometimes, I still get anxious going out there. I’d pretend I was just in the studio, recording with the guys.

“I’ll try that. So, are you looking at buying a place around here?” She toys with the thin chain around her neck with her fingers.

My hackles rise, a chill sweeps through me, and I ask a little too harshly, thinking suddenly she might know who I am, after all.. “Why do you ask?”

Lips thinning, she shrugs. “Bruce always brings his clients here. I just assumed.”

A breath escapes me. I don’t know why, but I hate the idea of her knowing who I am. I want a woman to see me as me, not for my money or fame. I make a point of softening my voice. She doesn’t deserve my mistrust. She’s done nothing wrong.

“I looked at a few here and some towns nearby, but I’m not sure yet. Can you give me any insider information about Hickory Valley? Is it really this small?”

“We do have two stop signs, but no traffic lights.” She smiles. “There’s not much, other than the tavern, a motel, cafe, and a few little stores. I’ve been here for about six months, but work two jobs, so I’m not not the best one to ask. All these folks here, though.” She gestures to the crowd. “They could tell you more.”

But I don’t want to talk to them, though. She has this perfect mixture of strength and vulnerability to her that pulls me in, like that shot of whiskey you know you should leave alone, but you can’t. It’s going to burn all the way down, but your body craves the sting. That’s Natalie, wrapped up in a pretty bottle with a big blue bow.



Natalie

Setting my extra-large caramel mocha latte down on my desk, I power up my laptop. There's never enough caffeine for a Monday. I'm drained. I don't know how long I can pull the hours I've been working. My body is craving a rest I haven't allowed for months. When I relax, that's when I remember what I'm running from. The memories then start trickling in.

I don't have to relive what I've been through when I'm busy. I can be the busy woman focusing on her career who everybody thinks I am. Well, besides that guy from the bar a couple of weeks back—he pegged me right down to a T. I hate how much thought I've put into what a complete stranger knows about me — far more than the people I've known in this town for half a year. How did he gather that much?

“Oh good, you're here,” Caroline says as she waltzes in, stealing a few candies from the dish on my desk and tearing me away from thoughts of him. Dressed in a bright pink pantsuit, her pointy-toed black heels clack on the tile, and her short blonde hair is styled in a chic bob. Caroline's the owner of Turnkey Design, and I've worked my ass off to land the role of her assistant. “Bruce called and requested you for a project.”

Caroline and I stage a lot of homes for Bruce, one of two real estate agents in Hickory Valley. Other than me, Hickory Valley has no local decorators. I only moved there to escape

Emory Falls, where I could turn a corner and bump into him or even her. Caroline was the only reason I didn't completely up and leave this city. But that doesn't mean I have to live here.

“Sure. When does he need it finished?”

“Well, it's for a house his client just bought. The new owner wants a total overhaul of it. Apparently, it's not his style.” She shrugs. “I thought you'd be perfect for the job.” She waggles a finger in my direction.

Not the strangest request I've heard. Many people like the general layout of the place but not the color scheme. “Did you set up a meeting?”

“I wasn't sure what your schedule's like. I told him you'd call him when you came in.” She taps her painted nails against the doorframe. I get the feeling she wants to say more, but she holds back.

It's best she left the schedule up to me, I have other projects penciled into my planner I carry with me. I assure her I'll call him right after I check my emails. Nothing is urgent when I scroll through the few emails I received over the weekend. Calling Bruce, we plan to meet over lunch at Sugar and Spice, a quaint little cafe in Hickory Valley that I may have a slight addiction to.

Between checking orders we've placed for supplies and following up with some of my clients, I find the rest of the morning goes by in a blur. By lunchtime, I'm starving. The scent of cinnamon rolls wafting out from the cafe's open windows makes my stomach growl. Opening the door, I

immediately spot Bruce sitting at a table and waving his hands like a lunatic.

I've never seen someone more expressive than him. If his flashy suits didn't make him stand out, those arms would do the trick. Today, he's wearing a gaudy orange vest over a white button-up with black trousers. My first thought when I notice the colors is a damn jack-o-lantern. Does this man even look in a mirror when he dresses? Maybe I should gift him a suit as a friendly courtesy.

The client he happens to be with is that cute guy from the bar a few weeks ago. The one who actually was going to stand up for me for a change. Not like the other men in this town. They sit back and watch the show. He also happens to be the man haunting me with his uncanny knack for knowing my unspoken secrets. It's unnerving, to say the least. Standing here in front of him, I feel bare, as if he can see everything I've hidden from so many people.

He's wearing a navy flannel shirt with dark jeans, and his hazel eyes are more intense in the sunlight streaming in through the large windows than they were at the bar. Not wearing the five-o-clock shadow last time I saw him, he's clean-shaved, making the hard edges of his jaw more pronounced. Shit. He looks fucking delicious.

"Hi," I say to the new guy.

I never did catch his name when we talked. He probably doesn't even recognize me. I'm sure I don't even look like the

same person. I'm wearing slacks and a blouse—a far cry from jean underwear and a tank top.

“Hey.” He flashes a cocky grin as he pulls my chair out for me.

Yep, not from anywhere close by. They don't seem to grow gentlemen in these parts of Georgia. Only handsy sleazeballs seem to be the offspring of the locals. He said out West if I remember correctly, I could be wrong, though. Some of that night is a blur. The part that sticks out the most, besides the obvious, was how he could settle my nerves. Nobody's ever had that effect on me before.

“Natalie, this is Teagan. Teagan, Natalie.” At both our nods, he continues. “Teagan just bought the place on Lakewood Drive, you know, the six-bed colonial,” Bruce says with a huge grin. No doubt that'll land him a fat commission.

“I do, yes.” Damn, if he wants an overhaul of that place, it'll take some time. It could be the perfect distraction to take my mind off everything else going on later this month.

“Well, before we get into the nitty-gritty, I'll hand this over to you.” Bruce slides a sheet of paper with two signatures already scribbled at the bottom.

Quickly scanning over the document, I see it's the standard non-disclosure agreement I sign for most of our clients. It protects them and their information. Working in people's homes, there's no shortage of strange things you can witness. I don't bother reading it; I've signed a dozen of these just in the

last few months. Putting my John Hancock at the bottom, I slide it back across the glossy finish of the table.

“You’re not even gonna read it?” Teagan bristles across from me, his whole body tensing.

“No.” I shake my head. “They’re all the same; my lips are sealed, and Bruce always emails me a copy if there’s ever a question. It may not have seemed like it at the bar, but I take my career very seriously.”

He frowns, and I fight the urge to scowl at him. Stay professional. Why do I feel like I need to explain this to him? Maybe working at Duke’s isn’t such a great idea. I could be giving my customers the wrong impression. But how else would I fill the void of free time if not working? I have a ton of succulents, I call my plant babies, but they don’t need much work. There’s no garden space at my apartment, so that’s off the list. There’s only so much reading I can do. I need more hobbies, apparently.

“You really should, whether you trust the party or not. No offense, Bruce. You’d be surprised what people can sneak into a few lines of text.” He stares out the window, watching the cars drive by on Main Street. A distant look crosses his face as if remembering something.

Bruce is silent as I ponder that thought for a moment while I study Teagan for any signs of where the hell that came from. I take it he was snowed by somebody with legal forms.

“Your concern is noted. So, what did you have in mind for the place?” I try to steer the conversation away from whatever

the hell that was.

“I’d like a little more color; mostly everything is white. I was looking at your portfolio online, and I was hoping to give you a tour and see what you come up with?”

“Yeah. I can do that.” Flipping open my planner, I scan the days ahead. My eyes drift over the blaring date at the end of the month. I clear the lump that forms in my throat. “When do you need this done?”

He leans his forearms on the table and clasps his hands together. “A month or so, if that’s doable?”

“It depends on how much needs to get done, but I think a month is a good timeline.” That’s a pretty large house. If he wants all the walls repainted, that could take a while.

“I travel a lot for work, so I won’t be in your way much.” His eyes crinkle with a slow smile.

“That’s fine. I’m used to working around others anyway.” Gosh, that smile is something. I roll the silver chain between my finger and thumb to remind me of all the reasons I can’t date anyone.

Not that I’m thinking of dating Teagan; he’s a client. I’m on a no-man ban for a year. The last one did me so dirty I don’t think a year will cut it. I might even need two. But Teagan is handsome enough to make me question the what-ifs. What if he’s different? What if he could be the one? Nope. I shut that thought down right off. Just looking at that face, I know he’s a

heartbreaker, and mine still isn't whole from the last brutal attack it barely managed to survive.

His hazel eyes study my hand on the chain of my necklace and dips lower. My silk blouse shows no cleavage and my old engagement ring is hidden from view. I drop my hand to my lap, hoping its enough to keep his gaze away from the necklace. I shouldn't have kept the ring. I was going to sell it, and I almost did. Now, the ring never leaves my neck. It's the one thing guaranteed to turn me off from wanting anyone again. My body may crave a man, but my heart can't take another beating.

I clear my throat. "When do you want to show me around?"

"Are you busy after lunch?" he asks as the waiter delivers our food.

The smell of my flapjacks is nearly mouth-watering. Everything from this place is delicious. I glance down at my planner to double-check my availability. "I'm free 'til five."

I have to work the bar tonight for Gabriella. She caught the stomach bug that's been circling Hickory Valley. The rest of the meal is filled with small talk from Bruce. He's a chatterbox, and I don't have to worry about trying to make conversation when he's around. Teagan seems quieter, more reserved than he was at the bar. His eyes, a beautiful mix of gold and green, have that far-away look in them.

The waitress returns to check on us, and I ask, "Can I get a six-pack of cinnamon rolls to go as well, please?"

“Hungry?” Teagan asks.

“If you haven’t had their cinnamon rolls yet, don’t. They’re an addiction that you won’t be able to kick. I’m bringing them to the office tomorrow as a request because we’re all hooked on them.”

Maybe it’ll cheer up Caroline, she’s seemed off lately. It was Alice, our assistant, who asked me to grab some.

He laughs. The sound is low and enticing. But the way he’s surveying our surroundings and everybody in and around the café as if he’s on high alert. He doesn’t look like a cop; he could be undercover, though.

His wariness sets me on edge. I don’t like secrets, not that he owes me anything. But secrets can tear somebody apart quicker than a pack of wolves.

I would know.

Chapter Two



Teagan

After lunch, Natalie follows me in her white Durango back to my new house. She looked different today. Still beautiful but in a more polished way. I'm unsure which woman I prefer: the proper career woman or the raw firecracker bartender. She's still the same person; she must reign in that snarky side as a designer. Pulling up to the gate, I type in my pin code. I already have one set up for Natalie as well. She'll need access to my place while I'm away so she can paint and decorate it.

I pray I'm not making a mistake by letting her into my life. There's just something about her that I can't place. I want to help her. I could tell that night at the bar something more was bothering her than being groped. She hides her pain behind flirty smiles and surface conversation, but I saw it.

Parking in front of the garage, she exits her vehicle before I can get to her door. I don't even need a decorator. I'm usually a sleek no-clutter kind of guy. I don't need any frilly things taking up space on my walls or floor space, but I like the idea of her being around. I know I can't date her; that's not my plan. I just want to know her. I miss the company of a woman.

Most women fall all over me, not her. She must be immune to my charms, which is even better. As far as I can tell, she doesn't know I'm in a band, so I don't have to worry about her having ulterior motives. Plus, she clearly doesn't need money.

The purse she's carrying costs several hundred dollars. The only reason I know this is because I bought Harper one very similar last year.

"This place is gorgeous." She turns her head toward the flower gardens, and a wistful smile tugs her lips up.

"Thanks, it's more space than I wanted, but I was sold on the security." I'll be as honest as I can be with her without getting into details.

She freezes mid-step, and her eyes widen before looking over her shoulder and whispering as if somebody could be listening. "Do you have a dangerous job?"

It's cute how she's trying to be under the radar, but this woman could not make a living as a spy.

"Not really. I work in the entertainment business, but I like my private life to stay private, you know?" My keys jingle as I unlock the front door. The alarm beeps a warning. If the correct code isn't typed in within fifteen seconds, it automatically will send the police to my residence.

"Can't blame you there. I do too. At least you don't have to worry about nosy neighbors here." She casts another glance over the vast front yard behind us.

Typing the required digits, I tell her, "I already have codes for you to use and a set of keys."

"Alright." She steps inside and dips at the waist to remove her pumps. The thin fabric tightens across her ass and thighs, accentuating her curves.

“Leave them on.” Flashes of me bending her over the couch in nothing but those heels sends a wave of desire through me. What would her throat feel like as I cup it from behind while pounding into her? Would her tan, creamy skin turn rosy easily?

Fuck. Not happening. Look where that got me last time. I turn away before she sees my expression. What is it with this woman? Being around her makes me think of various ways to dirty her. I give her a quick tour of the house, spending the least amount of time in the bedrooms, and she snaps pictures as we go. Directing her to the couch to discuss what she can offer me, I join her on the opposite end.

“What are some things you want to be changed?” She pulls a notebook from her tote purse and crosses those long legs. Reaching back in, she snatches a handful of assorted, wrapped candies and holds her hand out to me in offering.

Taking one that resembles an orange slice, I pop it into my mouth. Natalie selects a red one and puts the rest back in her purse.

“I’d like some more color, maybe make it look a little more lived in. I like the style you decorate with, and I’m curious about what you’ll come up with.” Damn, that sounded like a recording; maybe because I practiced it half a dozen times.

“Okay. What are some of your hobbies or things you enjoy doing?” she asks, and I quirk an eyebrow at her. “I’m just trying to get a feel for the theme. Do you want golf portraits all over the place? Maybe a golf ball statue over there in the

corner?” She points to where the walls join next to the large bay window and pulls her lips in with her teeth to stop smiling.

“Uh. No. I’m definitely not a golfer.” I lean forward, resting my arms on my knees, fighting my own smile from dusting my lips. I think it’s cute that Natalie’s a smart ass.

“Didn’t think so.” She sighs and places her pen down on the blank page, leaning back into the plush cushions. “You’re not exactly making this easy on me. I can’t get a feel for what to play around with if you don’t give me something to work with.”

That’s true. How can she know what I like if I don’t tell her? I feel like everything I could say will point her toward knowing who I am. I just want to hold on to this feeling of being a nobody for a while. It’s refreshing to be around somebody without feeling like I’m poking holes in everything they say to find what’s motivating them to talk to me. That life is exhausting and lonely.

“I’ll make a deal with you. I answer, then you answer. A question for a question.” This may not be so painful if it’s not just me giving up personal information. “Truth for truth.” This could get dangerous quickly if she asks something directly about my work.

“If that’s what it takes.” She tilts her head, and her light blue eyes bore through me. I wonder if she doesn’t open up much, either. If two weeks ago is any indication, that’s a huge no. “I’ll start then, do you play guitar?”

“What?” I bark. How the fuck would she know that?

Natalie retreats back into the couch at my reaction. She gestures with her finger to my arm. “Your tattoo,” she says quietly.

Oh. Duh. The band’s logo of a skull with two guitars crossing behind it with our band name, Frayed Outlaws, inscribed at the bottom, is on the underside of my forearm. A dead giveaway for who I am. How could I have been that stupid? I must’ve rolled my sleeves up without noticing earlier. I’m not used to hiding my tattoos.

Yanking my sleeves back down, I tell her, “I like music.” That doesn’t give too much away. Maybe from this distance, she only saw the skull and guitars.

“What kind, rock, metal, hip-hop, country?”

I love how country was last. My muscles clench. She’s getting too close. “Mainly country.”

“That’s a start.” Natalie logs that down in the notebook.

“What about you? What kind of music do you like?”

Looking up from the notepad, she tells me, “I’m on a rock kick lately.”

Of course, she is. It might not be a bad thing, though. Our band is technically country, but some of our songs are more rock. “And yet you work at a country bar?”

“Have you seen the town we live in?” She laughs. “I work there because I literally rent the apartment behind it.”

She didn't have to tell me that, but she did. I file that away for later. "So you don't like country?"

"Not anymore, no." She bites the inside of her cheek and takes in the room again. A slight blush tints her cheeks. Her skin does redden easily. Good to know.

"Why?" I ask as a tightness forms in my chest.

"We're getting off-topic here," she redirects. "Other hobbies?"

When I asked, I didn't miss how she looked down at her feet. There's a story there, and I want to know what it is.

"I like to hang out with my friends, shoot some pool, and have a few beers around a fire. Go to concerts." I threw that last one in there to see how she'd react. I'm starting to wonder if she knows who I am and she's just fucking with me. My jaw tightens, and my body temperature rises with the thudding of my heartbeat.

After jotting it all down, she swallows and clears her throat. "Favorite colors?"

"Oh no, you don't. You skipped my question." I lean into the couch and put my arm across the top. She squirms across from me, clearly uncomfortable with the intensity of my attention. I take in her rigid posture, her quickened breathing, and her avoidance of looking at me.

"What's your question?" Her jaw ticks, and her nostrils flare ever so slightly as her eyes finally make contact with mine.

Oh, I have lots of questions. But how can I ask her if she knows who I am without giving it away if she doesn't? "What are your hobbies?"

She releases her breath; this question isn't what she worried I'd ask. "Well, I work Monday through Friday at Turnkey, then I usually waitress Friday through Sunday. It doesn't exactly leave much room for hobbies. But I guess I like poetry and succulents. I'm a crazy plant lady." She shrugs.

"Why do you work so much?" I fire the next question off as my finger taps the couch to a beat from one of the band's songs.

"Because I need to." She frowns and tucks her long hair behind her ear.

I wrack my brain trying to think of why she would work that much if it wasn't for needing money. "But why?"

She inhales through her nose and lets out her breath slowly. I'm getting under her skin by asking personal questions. I can tell she's trying to stay polite. "I'd rather be working than sitting at home doing nothing. I like to stay busy. Colors?"

Still vague, but I let it go for now. Playing with her necklace seems to be a nervous habit of hers. I saw it at the bar, too. She rolls the dainty chain between her thumb and pointer.

"Blue and gray." It just so happens to be her eye color as well.

She nods. "Would you want those colors on some of the walls?"

“Sure.” I circle back to the music question. “Why don’t you like country?”

She stiffens. “Why do you care?” Her tone ratchets up a notch as her eyes snap to mine. The firecracker side of her is coming out.

“Just curious. You seemed anxious when I brought it up.” Steeling my expression, I tell her, “I want to know why.” Even though I’m aware I’m becoming irritating, I can’t stop myself. I need to know if it’s because of who I am.

She looks at me for a long minute while my gaze never wavers. Natalie lets out a soft sigh before slumping her shoulders. “If I tell you, will you drop it and not ask any more about it?”

I nod—moment of truth. The hypothetical drum roll beats in my head, and my pulse thrashes along with it.

“My ex proposed to me at a Cassandra Blake concert. She was my favorite. I used to listen to her all the time.” She pauses, pulls her long brown hair over her shoulder, and lets out a shuddering breath before continuing in a voice barely above a whisper, “But when we broke up, it was too painful to listen to any of them. So I avoid it all.”

That’s not what I was expecting at all. Shit. Now I feel like an asshole for prying. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. I just don’t want to talk about it.” Natalie sits up straighter and glances over her handwritten notes.

“Understandable.” The only silver lining is that maybe she’s been out of the country scene long enough not to recognize me. They also seem to play older country at the tavern.

Her notebook snaps closed. “I’m thinking country boy style, woods, and neutral colors. I can make some mockups with the pictures I took and get back to you with some ideas?”

Natalie scoops up her purse and slings it over her shoulder like she can’t get out of here fast enough. She barely looks at me when I agree, almost like a wall’s been built between us, and I’m the carpenter. In one sitting, I managed to create a canyon between us. I’m such a jerk. Too busy looking for her ulterior motives to be able to read the signs accurately.

That’s what this life has done to me. Instead of seeing the good, I look for the bad. The mantra in my head constantly reminds me that everyone around me is working on an agenda.

“Is there anything else you can think of that you’d like?”

Yeah. Not to feel like such an ignorant asshole for making you feel bad. Instead, I say, “No.”

“Alright. I’ll be in touch soon.” Natalie clamors up from the couch and begins walking before I even realize what just happened.

As soon as the door closes behind her, I scrub my palms over my face. What the hell is wrong with me? Clearly, I’m out of practice talking to beautiful women with anything more than surface conversations. The pain that crossed her features when she told me why she didn’t like country music only solidifies

my resolve not to let her know who I am. If she realizes country music is my life, she won't want to be a part of it.

There's something about Natalie that makes me need her, even as just a friend. It seems she could use one as well. Maybe I can heal the sting country music brings to her. Until then, I'll keep that part of me locked away around her. Maybe in time, she'll learn how fame has shaped me.

Several hours later, I can't stand where we left things, so I dig out her business card and type out a text. Several strings of sentences later, I finally think I've written something that doesn't sound stupid—at least, I don't think it does.

Me: I'm sorry for prying earlier. I just have a hard time trusting people.

Three dots appear under my words then disappear. Blowing out a breath through my nose, I rest my head against the cushion she sat on earlier. My cell vibrates on my leg, and my eyes snap open.

Natalie: It's okay, same here. I'll send over some ideas later tomorrow.

Why does she have trust issues? That must be why she's no longer engaged.

Me: Can't wait to see them.



Natalie

Lugging the gallons of paint out of the back of my white Durango, I almost wish I had one of those utility carts. The Georgia sun blazes above me, and a bead of sweat drips from my forehead and trails down the side of my face. Teagan wants almost every room painted a different color, and he hasn't decided on the throw rugs or anything else I've sent him yet, just the paint splotches.

I was able to rearrange my schedule, and since he's not going to be around much for the next month, I should be able to finish this soon. Provided he decides on the rest of the decor. He's been less than forthcoming with his answers. At least he lives in the same town, so whenever he decides on the ones he likes, it'll be easy to bring them by.

My mind is a hot mess lately; painting will be good for me. On the last trip, I slide my plastic tote onto the front porch and dig into the back pocket of my linen shorts for the house key and the code for the alarm. After punching in my numbers and bringing in all my supplies, I lock the house back up and set to work.

Bringing each paint jug to the correct room, I crank up my radio, blasting rock music through the speakers, and run the painter's tape along all the edges. Two rooms in, and my cell phone rings. I fight the smile when I see Teagan's name across my screen. Crap, it's a video chat. I hadn't put a stitch of

makeup on, and my hair is in a messy bun. I quickly pat down the frizzy hair caused from the humidity.

“It shouldn’t matter,” I mumble while I slide my finger across the screen. “Hey, Teagan.”

“Hey, yourself. I didn’t think you worked on the weekends decorating.”

“I usually don’t, but I don’t have to be at the bar till five. I wanted to get a head start on the painting. You’re not mad I’m here, are you?” Sitting on the floor of the master bedroom, I lean against the wall. I should’ve asked him first. I just assumed since he wouldn’t be here, it was fine.

“No. Not at all. I don’t want you to think you need to do weekends to be able to get it all done. There’s no rush.”

“That’s okay. I could use the distraction, to be honest.” I cringe inwardly when I realize I said that out loud. You can tell I don’t talk to men often. Well, men like Teagan. His broad shoulders, muscular build, and bad-boy face put the local men to shame. He’s the hottest thing to come to Hickory Valley since I’ve been in town.

“What’s going on?” His tone matches the serious expression on his handsome face.

Shit, I just can’t shut my damn mouth, can I? I was supposed to marry Theo in three weeks. I’ve already told Teagan more than I have other men. I don’t like people all up in my business.

“I’ve just been stuck in my head lately.” Seems like a good answer. Hopefully, he’ll let it be.

The phone slips out of his hand before he rights it again. Teagan’s dark hair is mussed, and it looks like he’s in a bed. It’s hard to tell in the poor lighting of the room he’s in.

“Talk to me about it,” he says casually as if we know each other better than we do, like he’s just the boy next door I spill all my secrets to.

Once upon a time, there was a boy I told everything to, and I thought he did the same. I trusted him more than anybody, and he let me down in the worst of ways. I won’t put myself in the same position again.

“I’m never gonna finish your house if I’m on the phone all day.” I laugh, trying to deflect. I don’t want to tell him.

“You can’t work and talk? I thought you had mad decorator skills?” He grins and slides his tongue across his lips. I follow the movement on my screen like a hawk.

“Are you even out of bed? It’s like nine already.” I raise my eyebrows and purse my lips in a stern face.

“I work late nights.” He scratches his head and rubs at his left eye. “I heard my phone going off saying someone was at my house.”

I’ve had other clients with similar security systems that alert them whenever a door or window is opened. Crap, I should’ve thought of that. “I’m sorry if I woke you.”

“You’re not a bad wake-up call.”

“Yeah, right. Obviously, you haven’t rubbed the sleep out of your eyes, or there’s one hell of a filter on. No makeup and messy hair Saturday’s weren’t exactly supposed to be seen by anyone.” I throw him a pointed look.

Wrinkles form on the edges of his eyes as he smiles. “I can see perfectly fine. Stop redirecting. What’s got you stuck in your head?”

Damn, he’s stubborn. Resting my chin in my palm, I surprise myself by saying, “I was supposed to get married in three weeks.”

I don’t know why I’m even telling him my private business; something about him makes the nonsense pour right out of me. But he’s seems genuinely interested.

“Oh.”

Yeah. I didn’t expect much more from him. He is a guy, after all. They don’t do all the mushy feelings that we women get. Sometimes, I wish I could lock that part of myself away and toss the key.

“It’s his loss,” he finally says, with a mixture of confusion and regret. His expression doesn’t make sense.

“Thanks.” What do I say after dropping an awkward bomb the size of Texas into our conversation?

Teagan clears his throat. “Do you have plans that day?”

Odd question. Rubbing a hand down my face, I decide on the truth. “Either working or getting hammered. It’s a coin toss at the moment.”

“Them Fat Hookers better watch out.” A lazy, lopsided grin lights up the screen.

I smile. “How about you, what are you doing three Saturdays from now?”

He runs a hand through his short dark hair on the back of his head. “Working, as usual.” He shrugs. “I always work weekends, too. I could be home the Monday after if you wanted to do something to get your mind off it?”

My heart rate pulses hard beneath the surface of my skin. My hands begin to shake as I try to hold the phone still, but the screen still wobbles. My throat works hard to swallow the saliva pooling inside my mouth. I choke down the panic. Whenever it seems like a man is asking me out, I freak out.

“Listen. You should know I’m on a dating ban.”

“A what?” He squints at the camera as if that could clear up what I just said.

My cheeks warm with a flush. “When I first came to Hickory Valley, Gabriella and I made a pact that we couldn’t date any men for a year.”

He laughs loudly. Wow, this is just embarrassing. My face feels like it’s on fire now. At least somebody’s getting a good chuckle at my expense.

“Good to know. But I meant as friends.” He smirks.

I freeze, and the breath stalls in my lungs. “Oh, my God. I’m so sorry. I thought you meant-”

“It’s all good. I get it, you’re gorgeous. You’re probably used to men always wanting to date you.”

Does he think I’m gorgeous? Shaking my head, I tell him, “I never said that.”

“No. I did, and it’s the truth, I’m sure. I’m kind of in a dating ban myself. I got taken for a ride recently, and right now I’m looking for friendship, nothing more.” He shakes his head, and his eyes soften.

Maybe that’s why he’s so wary about reading all the fine print. Slapping my forehead, I admit, “I feel like an idiot.” Understatement of the year. The blush that no doubt tinges on my face grows hotter.

A laugh rumbles from him, so deep and free. “Don’t, it’s fine. I wish you could see your face right now, though. I’m not letting you live this one down, just so you know.”

“Of course not,” I scoff.

“What are you working on today?”

Turning the camera toward the walls, I show him the painter’s tape and the folded plastic sheets sitting in the corner. “I was taping all the rooms, then I’m going to start painting.” Twisting the phone back to face me, I ask, “Have you thought about the decor options I sent you?”

He stretches his arms above him with a groan, and that’s when I realize he’s not wearing a shirt. I’ve been so focused on his surroundings with his messy hair and handsome, just waking-up face that I’ve barely given thought to much else.

Oh, man. At the sight of his ripped chest and the small smattering of hair, following up to his shoulders and down his thick biceps and forearms, my mouth waters. He twists his neck back and forth as if to get the kinks out and and seems to ignore my question. The silence stretches on, and I feel the need to wipe the hypothetical saliva off my chin, but I fight it. That would be a dead giveaway to my thoughts.

“So... have you?” The words come out more like a squeak. Who let the damn mouse in?

“Have I what?” He raises his eyebrows. He must not have heard me the first time I asked.

Get it together, woman, so what if he’s half-naked? Oh my god, what if he’s completely naked? Don’t go there. A lump settles in my throat, and I struggle to clear it. My voice comes out far too breathy than I’d like. “I asked if you thought about what I sent you for decor.”

“Oh. Sorry, I missed that.” He stifles a yawn with his fist. “They looked good.”

“Which ones?” I sent him at least a dozen things.

“All of it.”

I toss my head back and groan. “Why are you more difficult than most clients?”

“Am I now?” He has the audacity to splay his hand across that bronze, sculpted chest and look offended.

“Yes!” I grit out, squeezing my other hand into a tight fist.

“Maybe I like this slightly out-of-control version of you that comes out when I press your buttons. There’s a firecracker under that persona you show to the world, isn’t there?” He drags his lower lip into his mouth and bites down. The move looks like he’s trying to stop from grinning, but all I see is a lip I’d like to sink my own teeth into. I hate that I’m attracted to him.

Well, shit. I try my best to hide that feisty side of me while working. Well, working for Turnkey, anyway. That attitude helps me at Duke’s. You can’t be a sweet little thing and have the men think you’re okay with lewd comments and touching. A shudder ripples through me at remembering Tony’s hand gripping the sensitive skin between my ass and thigh, and I almost gag.

“Did you even look at them?” I challenge, needing to get my mind off that dirty old man.

“I did. I love the flag and the rugs. The plants I’m not so sure about. I haven’t been known to keep any alive in the past.” He yawns again.

I giggle. How am I not surprised? At least there are some faults to this godly, attractive man. Albeit one I excel at too.

A single eyebrow raises. “You find something funny, sweetheart?”

I seal my mouth shut and act like I’m zipping it. “Nope, not at all.”

He sighs and twists his lips into a scowl. “I have a call coming in that I have to take. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Alright. Bye.”

Tossing my phone to the side, I shake my head, trying to get the image of Teagan out of my head. At least I know he’s not into me. It’s my own feelings I have to reign in. I should be happy he only wants to be my friend, but I can’t help but feel a little disappointed. Then again, having a guy friend isn’t a bad idea. Other men tend to stay away from women if they’re seen with another guy. He may be easy to talk to, but I don’t want him to know what happened to make me ward off men. I always feel like I was never good enough for Theo. I know that’s wrong, and I deserved better, but that’s where my ego goes when I think of my ex. How else am I supposed to feel after he cheated on me and with Zoey, of all people?

Clenching and unclenching my fists and then shaking them out helps to ease some of the despair that creeps in when I remember coming home early that day. What if I hadn’t left work early? How long had it been going on? Would they have eventually come clean? I grab my cell phone again and scroll through my rock playlist, trying to find the right song for my mood. There it is, *Bodies*. Cranking the speakers, I drown out everything else in my head and just paint. If I belt out the lyrics, I won’t have room in my head for anything else.

Chapter Three



Teagan

“This better be good, Jared.” He doesn’t usually call this early, so when I saw his name on my screen, I was already on edge.

“I’m afraid not.” He sighs, and the sound of a door shutting hard in the background comes through the line. If Jared is angry enough to start slamming doors, this isn’t going to be a good call.

“Just tell me,” I bite out. My patience has been running thin lately. Too much of the band rides on my reputation as lead vocalist.

“She said she’ll sign an NDA for two hundred fifty thousand.” His voice drips with disdain.

My blood simmers beneath my skin. The little bit of happiness I got from teasing Natalie is now gone. Nothing fills my body except hatred. I never thought I could despise Harper more than I did already. The nerve of this woman. First, she spins a story that I beat her, and now she’s demanding money. My money that she has absolutely no right to.

“Are you fucking serious?” I shout into the phone. My chest heaves violently. I can’t believe this shit.

“Yeah, man. I just got off the phone with her lawyer.”

I squeeze the slats on the headboard in my fist until the wood creaks under the pressure. Spots dance in my vision as anger

rises inside me to a level I haven't felt in years.

"I'm not paying her a dime. I didn't do anything!"

"I know you didn't. Unfortunately, that's the climate in this country right now. You only have to be accused of something to fall victim to the ploy. There's no innocent until proven guilty for people like us." The sound of a keyboard clicking ferociously comes through the line.

"But it was her ex-boyfriend. How come they're not going after him?" It's common knowledge that he comes in and out of Harper's life and enjoys manhandling her.

"Because she won't get as much of a payday from a lowlife like him. You're her meal ticket. I'm sending you over the documents to read through. Study every word before you decide on anything."

There's nothing to decide. She doesn't get to control me by threats. I close my eyes and rub my temples. A headache is already forming from the stress of the situation.

"She's not getting anything from me," I growl. Why doesn't Jared get that?

"Then what are you going to do? Will you let the career you've worked so hard on slip from your fingers and let her win?" Jared snaps.

"What would you do?"

"Honestly?" he asks, his voice sounding tired.

Duh. Don't sugarcoat anything. He knows me better than anyone. "Yeah."

"I'd pay her and be done with it. Then we can put a no-contact in place so she can't come near you again without legal ramifications."

I scoff and shake out my tense shoulders. "How is that fair to me?"

"It's not."

"What are my other options?"

He grows silent, and I wonder if he's thinking the same thing I am. Hire a hitman and be done with her for real. I only entertained the thought for a second. I could never go through with that as much as I wish this shit would disappear. Opposite of what she's making the world believe, I'd never hurt a woman. Disgust rolls through me with where my mind just took me.

"Find a new girl, make it look like a loving, safe relationship."

I bark out a mix between a cough and a laugh. "Not happening."

Much like Natalie, I've decided to take myself out of the ring of dating for a while. Needing these allegations to go away and worrying about my band's fate is taking all of my attention. I don't have time for a girlfriend, and even if I wanted one, I don't think I could bring myself to trust one again. I'll always be worried about this happening.

I start wondering if I'm going to die a celibate. The only way my dick will get wet is in the damn shower.

"Teagan." My name slips out in a frustrated groan.

"Other options?" I snap the question out. "There has to be something else we can do."

"There are no other options. As your friend and agent, the best option is to give her the money. Then it'll be over." He sounds exhausted, almost as much as I am, with this whole situation.

"No. Who's to say that doesn't instigate a lineup of women to trudge in and do the same? I'm ending this goddamn pattern of revenge from women." I pinch the bridge of my nose before pulling a pair of shorts on. "What because we no longer want to date them, we deserve to be treated this way? They can take everything from us? Who shows us mercy?"

"You're not wrong, but that's the game we have to play."

What a sad little world we live in that certain people have to stoop low enough to use blackmail and false accusations to stay with someone or take all their assets. I can't believe I ever put myself in that position. It will never happen again. Maybe I'll look into one of those gentlemen's clubs where all parties sign an NDA and people wear masks. It's not my scene, but maybe that's the only safe way to enjoy a woman.

"Contrary to popular belief, I don't have the money to pay her. I just bought the house in Georgia with what I had set aside."

Everybody always thinks singers are made of money. True, some have a ton of assets, but it takes time to earn that, and we have costs that many people wouldn't even consider. Plus, the Frayed Outlaws are still a newer band. We're still trying to make a name for ourselves.

"There are banks that will work with you on this," he says as if it's already a foregone conclusion that I'll pay up.

"Of course there is. Let me guess...the loans are called entitled bitch notes?" I don't even try to hide the bitterness from my voice. "Look, I'll read it this afternoon and get back to you."

"Just try to keep an open mind."

"Yeah, easy for you to say. You're not the one backed into a corner," I mumble before hanging up.

I check the time on the digital display by my bed. We have to head out soon. The band is playing in Dallas tonight, about four hours south of here. Touring is fun, but some days, I wonder if the toll is worth it with everything I've had to give up for this life. Until now, the sacrifices have always been worth it when we walk out there under those lights, and the sound of cheering floods my ears.

Me: Sorry, I had to cut that short. But I meant what I said: there's no rush on the house.

Natalie: I'm not rushing... Is everything okay?

How much should I tell her? That my whole world is burning around me with no extinguishers in sight? That's

certainly what it feels like. One giant menacing forest fire.

Me: Not really, but I'll get through it.

A video chat livens up my screen. Shit. Natalie's calling me.

Swiping the answer button, I find her beautiful face is filled with concern, and she picks at her lip with her finger.

"What's going on?" Her eyebrows are bunched up, and worry lines surround the corners of her eyes.

Sighing, I lean back against the headboard and tell her, "My ex is causing a shit load of problems for me."

"What is she doing?" Do I detect an angry hint in her voice?

That's a loaded question. Where do I even begin with the crap she's done?

"She's blackmailing me for money. When I left her, she went back to her junkie ex-boyfriend, and he beat her. She's claiming I did it so she can take me for a ride. I may be a lot of things, but a woman beater is not one of them." Pressing my head back harder against the headboard, I don't want to look at the screen to see how she reacted. Her opinion of me means far more than I care to admit. I don't want Natalie to think the worst of me.

Natalie gasps. "Damn, that sucks. Why isn't she going after him for the money then?"

"Because he doesn't have much."

"That's not right." Her appalled tone forces me to glance at her through the phone.

”I know.” She’s silent for a minute, so I say, “I’m probably keeping you from things. I’m sure you’ve got better things to do than listen to my sob story.”

“Well, it just so happens my client is lenient and told me I didn’t have to rush. So lay it all on me.” She sits down in the middle of the living room. I can barely make out the little blue strips of tape on the ceiling and the ladder behind her.

I wish I could. Unfortunately, I can’t tell her everything. But I can give her pieces of me. Little, tiny pieces that won’t point to who I really am.



Natalie

Caroline knocks on the side of my door and peers in. “Natalie, are you busy?”

I never have my door shut unless I’m on a call with a customer. I minimize the screen on my laptop and slide it over, giving me a clear view of my boss. Her face is pinched, and her fingers spin the silver band with the sapphire stone on her right ring finger. I always adored that ring. The deep blue hue reminds me of the heart of the ocean from the movie *Titanic*. Now, Jack was one hell of a catch. Where are the men like him hiding?

“No, come on in.” I cross my legs at the ankles.

Walking in and shutting the door, she tugs the chair across from me closer before sitting and landing her sight on me.

“There’s something we need to discuss,” she begins.

Am I getting fired? We’ve never had a closed-door conversation before. I’ve always strived to be the best employee I could be. She’s told me what a great job I do on numerous occasions. My eyes flash to the old clock hanging on the wall, and it’s nearly closing time. That means it’s not good news she wanted me to stew on all day. My pulse races, and I struggle to keep my breathing normal. I’ve never been fired before. The odd jobs I worked prior to this one, I left on good terms.

“Okay. I’m all ears.” My clammy hands rub the top of my slacks, and worry eats away at my insides.

“There’s no easy way to say this.” Caroline adjusts her posture, sitting taller with her back straight.

And here it comes. Please don’t fire me. Whatever it is, I promise I can do better.

“I’m terminally ill. I have an incurable cancer that’s spread past the point of treatment.”

What the hell? I stare back in shock. She doesn’t seem sick and is only in her early fifties. I feel like I’m twenty feet underwater as the silence between us lengthens. The realization that she won’t be around forever is daunting.

“I’m so sorry, Caroline.” I reach out and clasp her hand in between mine. It’s cold to the touch. “What can I do? Whatever you need.”

“I’ve made my peace with it. Unfortunately, this has been one of those moments when you look back and regret the things you didn’t get to do.” She takes a deep breath, and a distant look touches her eyes. “I was married at one point; did you know that?”

I swallow. “No. I didn’t”

We never discuss our personal lives, and it was a quality I respected in the workplace. You leave your personal baggage at the door with your coat. It saved me these last several months; I could clock in and focus on work and not have to talk about how bad it was.

“It didn’t work out because I spent too much time working and nowhere near the amount of time I should have with my husband.” She looks out of the window in the distance. A sad smile pulls at her lips.

“But you’re so accomplished.” I see the draw of a husband and family, but it’s not like she won’t be leaving a legacy behind her. She’s done so much and helped countless people and organizations, such as women’s shelters and group homes, free of charge.

“At the end of the road, it’s not about everything you did. It’s about the people you did them with. I have many regrets and don’t want that for you.” Her steely eyes land on mine.

The ringing in my ears makes hearing some of her words hard. Luckily, I’m good at lip reading. “What are you saying, Caroline?”

“I want to leave the company to you, but under one condition.”

My eyes widen, and my heart ceases to beat. Flabbergasted, I ask, “What’s the condition?”

“You need to get married and promise me that you won’t live a sad, lonely life as I have.” A compassionate smile warms her eyes.

Married? This can’t be happening. Is somebody hiding behind the large Monstera plant with a camera waiting to shout gotcha? This has to be a joke. She doesn’t know the

details about my previous engagement, only that it didn't work out.

I nearly shriek. "I plan to get married at some point. I just wanted to be more settled first."

I'm not ready to get married. I'm not even into anyone, really. None that can handle the baggage that now surrounds me. Maybe Caroline's disease has impaired her cognitive ability. She can't really expect that of me, can she?

"I only have six months to live, at best. You need to find an available suitor and marry before then." A frown forms as she presses her lips together and glances down to the floor.

Six months to find and marry someone? Is she insane? I blink several times, willing the tears to stay where they are. "Or what?"

"Or I'll be forced to leave the company to my niece, Carrie."

Carrie works part-time with us. She's a decent decorator, but she's really snooty and doesn't pull her own weight. I swear Alice, the secretary, does more work in half the time.

"But you don't even like Carrie." And I don't think I could work beneath her. This may be the end of my career here. No firing is needed.

She sighs heavily and leans on the arm of the chair. "But she has family values and puts her marriage first, which is what I should've done."

This is madness. I want this company. I've earned it. Maybe I should take Theo back, inherit the company, and then divorce

him. He has been trying to call me, but I never answer. I nearly vomit at the thought of being near him again. That would never work. What the hell am I going to do?

“Well, I have been seeing this guy. I don’t know if that’s where it’s leading, though,” I hedge, squeezing my fingers together below the desk.

Is it horrible to lie to a dying person? I’m for sure not seeing somebody. I’m going to hell, aren’t I? Just set my casket on fire and dump me down a volcano into the express lane. Surely, that’s where I’m headed after this. I never lie to anyone, and I absolutely despise people who do. Lies are everything I ran from when I left my fiancé.

“Well, I suggest you find out quickly. Times a tickin’.” A well-manicured finger gestures to the calendar hanging on my wall. This month’s picture is a large blue-green spiral aloe plant. Caroline’s acting so calm, like this conversation is about the weather and not about her death. If she made peace with it, that’s great for her, but this seems so... life-changing for all of us. I’ve known Caroline for a while, and even though our relationship is strictly professional, I’ve grown to care about her. Six months? How can she sit there as if her world isn’t ending soon? As if she doesn’t have to say goodbye to everyone and everything?

”Have you told Carrie and Alice yet?” My voice comes out hoarse with the effort to hold back my tears.

“No. I wanted you to be the first one to know. I’ll tell them next week.” Caroline stands and exits my office, and I’m left

gaping at the open doorway.

What just happened? What the hell am I going to do? My mind has turned into a puddle of mush. How is this real? Maybe I'll wake up and realize this last year has just been one never-ending nightmare.

The thought of dating again is terrifying. I'm not ready for a relationship. Heck, when would I even have time to build one? Just thinking about trusting another man again nearly has my lunch coming up. Thank god I have to work tonight. That should be able to take my mind off all this madness. Waitressing at Duke's Tavern ensures there's never a dull moment. It may not be the distraction I want, but it's the distraction I need right now.

Chapter Four



Teagan

“**Y**ou’re up in five,” the venue coordinator informs us.

I forgot his name already, this past week’s been a blur. One day blending into the next. After a while they all just become faceless people telling us the schedule.

Every day I’m able to perform on stage is a good day. Who knows how many of these I have left? If Harper gets her way, this could all disappear. Poof. Gone. This could quite literally be my last concert. The opening act is almost done. They’re on their last song of the set. The duo that opened for us is a married couple that kills the melodies, with the way their voices compliment the other seamlessly.

As we walk out, the sounds of our boots are muffled by the crowd’s cheers. The track lights follow us until we hit the center of the stage, I’m careful not to look directly at the beams. The brightness will make you see spots for hours. I know firsthand, unfortunately. After our typical opening spiel, I search the crowd for the perfect little helper. Spotting a small blue handmade sign held up by a young girl, I beeline for her.

It has all three of our names and what looks like illustrations of our guitars and drums under them. The little girl’s eyes widen the closer I get.

“Did you make this?” I ask her, squatting down so I’m closer to eye level with her. She’s a short little thing in her cute dress

with a daisy print. Her short blonde hair comes to her shoulders in tight ringlets.

“Ye-yes,” she stammers before pushing her glasses that slid to the end of her nose back up where they belong.

“I love it. You did an awesome job. Are you having a good time tonight?” I glance around her as more fans try to push their way closer.

She nods with a large toothy grin. Her mom, who resembles a washed-out version of Natalie with her long flowy brown hair, puts her arm around the girl’s shoulders and rubs her back for comfort.

“What’s your name?” I ask the child.

“Violet.”

“That’s a pretty name.” I smile and notice how dark blue her eyes are, the name is fitting. “Well Violet, how would you like to keep the crowd in sync with the beat? Of course, if that’s okay with you, Mom?” She’s only probably six or seven, but I’ve never had a parent turn us down before.

“It’s totally fine!” The woman practically shoves her daughter toward me.

”Really?” Violet asks looking between her mother and me. The mom nods, and I grin.

“It’s hard work. Are you up for it?” I tilt my head sideways like I’m assessing her ability to do the job. It’s not hard at all, the biggest issue is always stage fright.

”Yes, yes, yes!” She jumps up and down, nearly dropping her little sign before her mother grabs it.

“Come on up, then.” I reach down to help hoist her up on stage as Landon and Thomas slide past us to their spots on stage. “When I say go, you move your hands like this.”

Turning my back on the fans, I make a clapping motion above my head. After lowering my hands, I repeat the gesture a few times. She watches me intently, but her blue eyes keep flicking to the crowd behind me.

“Don’t worry about them. Let me see it.”

She does it perfectly.

“Good job, I knew you could do it!” I then turn to face the crowd again. “Hey folks, I have Violet here, and she’s going to keep you in line. We don’t need you going rogue with your clapping and mucking up the show. Think you can follow along?”

The swarm of people shout yes’s.

“Alright, let’s do this.” I nod to the guys behind me.

Landon starts pounding his sticks on the drums for a few seconds before Thomas joins in with his guitar. Grabbing my guitar from the stand behind me and slinging it over my shoulder, I lock eyes with the little girl.

She beams as I start to swing my arms up and she follows, matching clap for clap in tune with the beat of Landon’s bass drum.

“Come on, boss lady. Show ‘em how it’s done.” I throw her a wink as I begin to strum the notes for the verse. The fans out in the stands start following along with Violet, who performs the moves perfectly.

Every show we perform, I try to pick out a kid to come up on stage for our first song. It’s not much but they love it and it’s something we can do to give back. I mean, how many kids can say they’ve done that? I’ve always had a soft spot for kids. Too bad those aren’t in my future for a while, not only because of not wanting a relationship with a woman, but a life on the road isn’t ideal for children. I know I wouldn’t be able to tour and leave them back home with their mama. I refuse to miss their childhood. Maybe someday, but for now, a life on the road is my dream.

Once the song ends, the other two guys come up beside me, and the crowd’s cheering turns silent. Jared strolls out carrying one of the teddy bears we keep on hand for this exact reason. The super soft brown bear is wearing a black shirt with our band’s logo on the front. A VIP card secured around the neck with a mini lanyard will gain her and her family access to us after the show is finished.

Jared kneels in front of her and holds the bear out to her. “Here you go, sweetie.”

Grasping it to her chest, she tells him, “Thank you.”

After posing for a few pictures, I help lower her back down to one proud mama and continue the show. I ignore the knife in my chest that begs me to think of this as the last run. Giving

it my all, I'm winded and exhausted by the time the last song ends. Tossing the guitar to my back, I bow with Thomas and Landon and blow kisses to the audience before exiting off stage to prepare for our VIP pass holders.

Once the mom and daughter duo arrive, the mother's eyes are wet with tears. This isn't new; we encounter all kinds of emotions from our fans. Violet runs up to the pastry table—we have one at every show—and she helps herself to a cinnamon roll. I'd be surprised if she could eat it all; it's almost as large as her head.

"I hope you enjoyed the show?" I turn my focus on the mother while the girl shovels the pastry into her mouth.

"You'll never know how much that meant to us. You see her —" She sniffs and wipes her eyes, a look of anguish washing across her face.

"Hey, come here." I wrap my arms around her slender body, and she lets out a quiet sob. "Whatever it is, you got this. You have an amazing little girl right there." I usually don't hug anyone who comes backstage, but I don't usually have people breaking down in tears of despair.

She pulls away slightly and I catch Jared's wary gaze on her before nodding to me to be careful.

"Her father died in a car accident last month." She lets out a deep breath. "I bought him these tickets for his birthday several months back. I almost didn't come. But she-she said daddy would still want us to go." Tears spill over her lashes.

“That’s rough. I’m so sorry.” What can you really say when somebody delivers news like that?

“And after she went up on stage with you? She told me daddy must’ve told you to pick her.” She turns her head and spots her kid now grabbing a cupcake and shakes her head with a smile.

“I tell you what, you and Violet are welcome to any of our shows. We’ll cover the ticket and the backstage passes-for life.”

“Oh, no. You don’t need to do that, I was just”

“Hey, it’s okay. I’ll give you my business card, email me and I’ll personally see to it that it’s taken care of.”

Some of the stories we’ve heard from fans trying to get something for free are unreal, but after so many years I’ve got a pretty good bullshit radar. That is until Harper.

“Oh my god, thank you so much!”

“Mama, you should try the cupcakes,” Violet says with chocolate frosting swirled down her chin.

That woman’s story stayed with me long after she left the backstage lounge. I believe she was telling the truth, and I wish there was more I could do for her. Maybe we could set up a fund of some sort for them. Being a single mother isn’t an easy feat.

I know that from experience with my mother trying to do her best to raise two boys in a rough neighborhood on her own. There was never enough money or food on the table. Milo and

I did what we had to do to survive on the streets while our mother worked herself nearly to death. She's part of the reason I've worked so hard at my career so I have enough money to send some back to her, against her wishes. Nah, she's too proud to accept a handout. I practically force her to take it.

"I heard what you offered that woman." Jared sighs.

"And?"

Jared leans a hip on the small table. "You can't keep giving away concert tickets."

"I did it for the girl." I level my gaze on him. "It's two tickets. We can afford to lose the meager sales that would bring."

"And you think that woman was telling the truth?" He offers me a skeptical look.

"It's an easy story to fact-check. If I find out she's lying, then she doesn't get them. Simple." Leaning back in the chair, I stretch my tired muscles out and check my phone. I haven't heard back from Natalie in a while. I'm sure she's busy with that festival thing back home.

"Whatever you say, TJ." He rolls his eyes at me and shakes his head.

There's not much that irritates me more than somebody rolling their damn eyes at me. Natalie's done it a few times. It's cute when she does it, but not on a grown man.

"Listen, you know my childhood wasn't easy. Violet just lost her dad, and the way she was cramming the food down her

throat, I'd say they're probably having a tough go financially. If you're not going to help me find a way to help them, get out of my face and leave me to it."

Jared huffs out a breath and scratches the back of his head. "Let me make some phone calls in the morning, and we'll see what we can do."

"Thank," I mumble, watching Thomas and Landon interact with several females across the room. Landon, the typical ladies man that he is, is flirting shamelessly as Thomas stands beside him.



Natalie

As I lock up my apartment and turn, I notice the parking lot between my little two-bedroom and Duke's Tavern is packed. There were hardly any customers when I arrived home from Turnkey about an hour ago. I don't think you could fit another car in unless they start parking on the small strip of grass with a picnic table that Duke calls a patio area.

Crossing the gravel lot, I wonder what's going on here? And then it hits me. Oh no. It's the annual Hickory Valley Peach Fest. The town and surrounding area aren't just known for its pecan farms but also for its peaches. Some customers swear our harvests are better than others because of how the farmers here plant their crops. Most fields of pecan trees will have an acre or so of peach trees right beside it. They claim it makes for a more abundant harvest and that the peaches are even sweeter. But what do I know?

How on earth did the festival slip my mind? Oh, right. I've had a hell of a year. It's one of the weekends they dread the most at the tavern. Tourists cluster up everything: the roads, the cafe, the small shops, even the tiny little motel down the road. I wasn't living or working here last summer, but Theo and I visited the event the last couple of years.

Theo... How could you do this to us? I thought we had it good. And now Caroline?

After I tug the door open, the sounds of chaos bombard me. The loud music and chatter almost make me want to high-tail it out of here. I haven't processed much of what Caroline told me yet. I don't know how. I'm not ready to say goodbye to her. She's been my mentor and role model for so long.

"Nat, thank god you're here. I was about ready to snag a bottle of the finest whiskey and hide in the back office," Eliza greets me with frantic eyes and a flushed face.

"What's going on? Besides the obvious." When I look back over my shoulder, even more customers have piled into the place.

"Gabby and I can't keep up. Dalton has been cooking up a storm in the back, and Duke hasn't come in yet. He knows what today is."

"Peach Fest," I groan, hustling my way to the back to set my small purse down in Duke's office. Duke is usually always here on the busier nights. It's odd not to have him here.

"Buckle up, sugar, it's going to be a wild night," Gabby calls over her shoulder as I pocket a notebook and a pen. Her usually perfectly smooth ponytail has a few stragglers, and small beads of sweat dot her hairline.

"The usual section?" I ask, smoothing out my shirt that always clings too much for my liking.

"Yes, please." She slides a tap beer in front of the woman sitting at the bar.

When Duke's not in, Gabby's in charge, but we all know what needs to be done, and we have a good system in place. Between the three of us working the front and Dalton cooking, we can handle it. However, it would be nice of Duke to show up.

I make my rounds to the tables that haven't been served yet. Most of the faces in the crowded tavern are ones I've never seen here before. At least all the tourists are good for the local businesses. After repeating our daily special over a dozen times in the first hour, I'm ready to pull my hair out. It's literally right there in front of them on laminated card stock.

I plaster on the fake smile and continue hustling all my tables. Another plus will be the tip jar at the end of the night. Each place does things a little differently, but as the waitresses, we all agreed to just split the tips. On nights that Genevieve works, I usually sneak half my tips into her envelope. She's having a baby soon, and I don't really need the money. I'd rather it went to her.

Tired and distracted, I hurry to my latest table and suck in a breath. I can't hide the annoyance from my face. I'm not ready to deal with him again, and Duke isn't even here to have my back this time.

"What can I get you, Tony?" I make sure to keep myself on the opposite side of the table than his grubby hands.

"I wanted to apologize, Natalie," he begins.

"I don't have time for this tonight." I fan my hands out to the rest of the customers. "As you can tell, we're swamped. What

are you going to have?”

“I’ll have the Friday special, medium rare, with sweet potato fries and the tap beer of the night.” He bites the inside of his cheek and looks like a sad puppy while I also write down what his friend, another local, wants.

Duke’s Tavern features a local brewery on tap, and their offerings change from night to night. On touristy days like this, it’s awesome to show diners Hickory Valley offers more than just peaches and pecans.

Two hours in, and I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket. There’s a temporary lull in the customers, so I slide it out, and a slight smile graces my lips as I notice who it’s from. I roll my eyes when I read the message.

Teagan: How’s Peach Fest going?

Ugh. Even he remembered, and he hasn’t even been a local for long.

Me: I haven’t stabbed a tourist yet, so I’d say it’s going rather well. Only time will tell, though.

Hitting send, I can picture him laughing at that, and a wide grin stretches my lips. We’ve been talking quite a bit lately through video chat or text. He enjoys my dark and twisty sense of humor. Not many can take all the layers of me. He’s one of the few who I can show bits of my true self to.

“I know that look,” Gabby comments, sidling up beside me.

I quickly slide my phone back into my pocket before meeting her gaze. “What look?”

“The one that isn’t part of the fake it ‘til you make it facade. Who’s making you smile like that?” She leans against the bar top. Her long ponytail nearly feathering the top.

”No one.” I wasn’t smiling any different. Our mantra still rings true.

“Hmm. Well, does no one have a name?” Her wide eyes bore into mine, and she leans in closer.

“It’s nothing really.”

“Is it a guy?” she whispers close to my ear.

“Yes.” I huff. “But it’s not what you think. We’re not like that. He’s just a friend.”

“If you say so.” She smirks with a twinkle of mischief lighting her eyes.

”Can I get a gin and tonic?” A stout man, wearing a light blue I Heart Georgia shirt and dark sunglasses on the top of his head, asks from across the bar.

“Of course.” I silently thank him for pulling me away from Gabby.

Teagan is good-looking, but he’s only my friend. So what if I smiled a real smile when I saw his name on my phone? It doesn’t mean anything. She and Eliza, Genevieve, Duke, and Dalton make me smile. Duke and Dalton are also attractive men, not Teagan attractive, but still good-looking nonetheless. I don’t see her questioning any of those smiles.

The night passes quickly, and I'm left to wallow alone once I enter my apartment. I didn't get a chance to tell Gabby about Caroline and the implications. I don't even know where to begin. I roped Eliza into taking my shift tomorrow night. I need some me time, maybe go to a spa, get a massage and a manicure. Ah, hell, who am I kidding? I can't just sit there for that long and ruminate on Caroline's proposal. I need action.

And if I can't find a loophole? A shudder ripples through me from my toes all the way to my scalp. I guess I'll need a husband then.

Chapter Five



Teagan

Oddly, Natalie hasn't gone to my place yet today. She's been there every Saturday morning like clockwork. My stomach turns. What if something happened to her? She didn't reply to my message earlier on hardy plants either. I looked at her social media profile again, something I do far more than I'd like to admit. There's not many pictures of her recently, just her plants, memes, and work-related stuff.

Seeing all the images of her plants throughout her apartment makes it look cozier and more like a home. If she can find some that can endure my lack of attention and black thumb, I'm willing to give it a go.

Near showtime, I can't concentrate on anything other than where she could be and why she didn't answer me. Simple question or not, she usually replies much faster than this. We talk nearly every day. I usually call her while she's working, and she paints or sketches out her designs while chatting with me. Not talking to her today has made me feel off, and I don't like that.

Screw it. I'm calling her. She answers on the second ring. Once the video pops up, it looks like she's at her place. I recognize the couch in the background. Her eyes and nose are red, and she's wearing off-white pajamas with tacos all over them. If she didn't look ill, I would've grinned. She's told me before tacos are her weakness.

“Are you sick?” I blurt out.

“No.” She sniffles.

“You look sick,” I state the obvious as I scan over every millimeter of screen, trying to spot what ails her.

She tilts her head and frowns. Holding her eyes tightly closed, she says, “Thanks, Teagan. That’s what every woman wants to hear.”

“I didn’t mean...” I trail off and wrack my brain. Her wedding was supposed to be in a couple of weeks. Could she be missing him? I’ve never missed someone I broke it off with. But I’ve also been called heartless when it comes to certain things, so there’s that. Natalie’s got a heart of gold, though.

“Were you crying?”

She nods before telling me about her boss being terminal. “And that’s not all,” she says, throwing her head back in a groan.

“How so?” What else could possibly be worse than that?

She levels her gaze into the camera. “To inherit the company, I have to get married.”

Time stands still while I process what she just said. She has to get married within six months. Natalie, the one who’s on a dating ban, married. Can the owner really do that?

“Seriously?”

“Yup.” She pops the p at the end, and her eyelids squeeze tight before before she brings a wine glass to her lips.

I fight my smile when I see the design etched into it. A cactus with the words, “Stop being a prick,” just below it.

“But she doesn’t have long.” I can’t wrap my head around this. How can her boss give her an ultimatum like that? Marriage shouldn’t be on a whim. It’s a lifelong commitment, well, for most people anyway. It shouldn’t be out of necessity.

“I know.” Natalie swipes a rebel tear away and casts her attention away from the phone for a second.

“Damn.” My hand scrapes over my stubbled jaw, which feels like sandpaper. In my unusually distracted state, I forgot to shave again this morning. Until recently, I’ve never forgotten; probably too much stress on my plate.

“How am I supposed to go on these dating apps and be like, ‘Hey, I don’t really want to be with you, but can you just marry me temporarily?’ This is just ludicrous. How the hell am I supposed to find someone good, who is willing to marry me in this short of a time frame?” she huffs out angrily.

Thoughts of her out there with other men is like a blade in the heart. I tell myself we’re just friends; I only worry about her safety. Nothing more. “Dating apps are scary places.”

“I agree. I can’t publicly say what I want, but I don’t want to lie. I hate it when people lie to me.” She starts to ramble but then stops and asks, “Do they have mail-order husbands?”

“Marry me,” I blurt out while the sting of her words, *I hate it when people lie to me*, lambast me. I may not have lied, but I omitted the truth, and it’s a blurry gray line that separates the two.

My heart thumps hard in my chest. Thump, thump, thump.

“What?” She squints into the screen, her eyebrows drawing down.

I straighten my spine before I steel myself to repeat it.

“Marry me,” I say again. “You’ll be able to get your company, and you could help me with my ex issue simultaneously. We both win.” The leather creaks as I lean back in my chair, letting the total weight of what I just asked her sink into me. Holy shit, did I really say that? Fuck! What the hell am I getting myself into?

“You’re crazy.” She shakes her head and her long, wavy hair swings from side to side.

“Yeah probably.” It’s not the first time somebody’s used that term to describe me, and I’m sure it won’t be the last. But if it gets me from not having to pay Harper and it helps Natalie, I’m game. Two birds, one stone. Plus, I don’t have to worry about actually dating someone because Natalie’s made it clear she’s on a “no-man ban.” She’s safe.

“Do you have a better idea?” Only her silence greets me. “That’s what I thought. Look, neither one of us wants to date anyone for a while. I think this is your best and safest option.”

She takes a big gulp of her wine and steels her shoulders. “Alright, say I was considering this. How would it work?”

Raking in a large breath, I prepare myself for what I’m about to do. “There’s something you should know about me if we’re really going to do this. It would affect your life in ways you might not want to agree to.”

Her adorable face scrunches up like I’ve delivered the most epic riddle ever. Oh, sweetheart, you have no idea. She starts to say something, but music pounds through the speakers as they begin testing the equipment. Impeccable timing. The base slams so hard that the water bottle shakes on the desk beside me, causing ripples to form on the surface. I’m in my backstage room, but it’s still super loud here.

“Are you at a concert?” she asks, tilting her head and coming closer to the screen.

Swallowing, I hoped I wouldn’t have to tell her for a while, especially not like this. But if she’s going to marry me under the guise of fixing both our problems, she needs to know. She deserves to know all of me, whether I’m ready for that or not. I just hope the truth doesn’t crush her.

“Sweetheart.” I pause. ”I am the concert.” I twist my phone around to face the poster for the event. Thomas and I have our guitars draped over our chests, and Landon stands in the middle, pointing his drumsticks toward each of us with a haughty grin stretched across his lips.

Natalie gasps and hurt flashes across her features as if I just slapped her. Regret sizzles in my veins like wildfire. I knew

this was a bad idea.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she rasps, and her lower lip quivers.

Returning the video to show my face, I say, “I wanted you to get to know the real me first. Too many people only see me as a country star. They don’t care about the rest. I just wanted something real that wasn’t tainted by ulterior motives.”

All I see is pain etched into her face. Even if I’m not in a place to date anyone now, I’ve come to realize I wanted to have that option with Natalie later. If she’d be up for it, anyway. A fake marriage would be a good way to test that theory without getting feelings messed up in it. A trial run, so to speak.

“I- I don’t know what to say,” her words are quietly spoken, but they hold me captive. I knew the band would be rough for her to accept.

“Yo, TJ. Ten minutes,” Jared says from the other side of the door. His shout is barely heard over the beat.

“I’m sorry. I’m gonna have to cut this short. I can call you back once I finish, probably around midnight?” I let the question hang, praying she says yes.

“Okay.” She nods and swipes away the wetness on her cheeks. Sadness weighs heavily in her eyes.

“Don’t decide until we talk. I know it’s a lot, but I’ll explain everything.” I won’t let her agree to this without knowing it all. I won’t trick her into a marriage just to fix our problems.

My history with Harper will follow us around, and she'd be subjected to paparazzi too. Oh man, Natalie's going to hate that.

"I won't. Go blow their socks off, or bras off, I guess." She laughs.

I smirk. We've had bras thrown up on stage before. And those are by far the best trophies, especially the lacey ones. "Talk to you soon."

"Bye."

Well, it's out there now. Shit, did I really tell her to marry me? That's not going down in history for the most romantic proposal. I haven't found anybody I thought of popping the question to, but I know I would've done it more smoothly than I did. *Marry me?* Ugh. What a joke. I'd be surprised if she even answers later on when I call.



Natalie

Ring. Ring. Ring.

“Ugh,” I groan, reaching for my cell phone on the nightstand. I slap my hand around blindly in the dark, trying to locate the thing.

Finally grasping it, I swipe my finger across the screen and say, “Hello?”

Ring.

Damn it. The sound screams in my ear. That was the back side of the phone. Flipping it over, I try again.

“Hello?” I press the device into my cheek and lay my head back down. I drank too much wine tonight for this. I just want to sleep. My eyelids feel like sandbags are dragging them down. Sinking heavily back into the mattress, I close my eyes again.

“Natalie?” Teagan’s voice comes through the speaker, but not the way a phone call usually does.

“Shit.” I pull it away and squint my heavy lids at the screen; as expected, it’s a video call.

“Did I wake you?” His deep laugh fills the quiet bedroom of my apartment.

“It’s okay,” I grumble.

I'm sure I look like I put a finger in a light socket. Fuck my life. Pulling myself up to sit, I click the lamp on and blink several times before my eyes adjust to the warm glow from my stained glass lamp.

Luckily, I'm sleeping in a tank top tonight and have the covers pulled up high enough to where he can't see anything. Oh, man. The last two days and all it entails starts beating me over the head like a club. Caroline's sickness, the company, needing a husband, Teagan's offer, and then the last bombshell: he's in a kick-ass country band.

I may have watched several—okay, a lot of—videos of them performing after he told me. The Frayed Outlaws suits him well. He's a badass on stage, and I still can't believe I didn't know. How could he hide that side from me, and what else could he be hiding? That last thought has been nagging me nonstop since I learned about his musical background.

“How are you holding up?” he asks timidly, unlike the man I watched belting out lyrics to thousands of fans. I shudder. How can he do that? I'd probably faint at the first glance of all those people.

I shrug my shoulders. My head's already pounding, and tomorrow will be brutal. Thankfully, I only have to work at Duke's. “I'll make it.”

“I'm sure you have questions.” He draws the last word out.

Contemplating his solution, I ask, “Were you serious about your... offer earlier?” Offer sounds so dirty, like he's a

prostitute offering up his services. But what the hell am I supposed to call it?

“I know it sounds crazy. Just hear me out.” He waits until I nod to continue, “I told you some of the issues Harper is causing. Jared thinks that if I were to be in a serious relationship, her trying to blackmail me might fade away. We don’t need to be a real couple for that to work. It just has to look that way on the outside.”

Wow, he’s actually thought about this. And here I thought blurting marry me was a fight or flight instinct.

“But we could stay just friends?” This is important to me. I have far too many trust issues that need to be worked on before I can get into anything, especially knowing he’s already hidden something as big as this. Not to mention my pact with Gabby.

“That’s what I’d like, yes.” He grins.

“Would we have to um...” I clear my throat. This is so uncomfortable. “Do couple things?” God, I hope he can read between the lines. I don’t think I could say it out loud. Sex... just three letters, simple, but not.

He laughs, props his phone against something so I can still see him, and takes a bite of a fast-food burger. He’s slow to chew, making me even more embarrassed by the second. I’m sure my face is fire-engine red at this point. At least, that’s how warm it feels.

“Sorry, I’m starving. I never eat before a show. If you’re asking about going on dates, then yes. Kissing? To sell it, probably. But sex?” He pauses and licks his lips slowly, my eyes tracking the movement. Damn, if that wasn’t sexier than it should have been. I wait with bated breath for his answer. “No.”

I don’t see how he can talk about this so easily. “Okay, good. I assume our friends and family have to think it’s real, too?” How will I explain to Gabby that I broke our pact but didn’t really?

“Each person who knows the truth is a potential liability. They could accidentally slip, blowing up in both of our faces. It’s best if they all believe it’s real, but use your own judgment. If you trust them to keep it under wraps, I will, too.”

I’m silent, waiting while he eats some more. How can he be this calm about all of this? “You said earlier things that I might not want to agree to could affect my life?” I prompt him. This question kept haunting me after we hung up.

He takes a deep breath and meets my gaze. When he looks at me like that, it feels like he’s right beside me, not through a screen. “The life I live doesn’t offer much privacy. I can’t go anywhere without people trying to talk to me or taking my picture. It’s part of the reason I wanted to move to a small town. I needed to get away from some of it. By being with me, you’d be subjected to that too.”

“Oh.” Well, shit. “What are their limits, like can they look in the windows to my apartment?” I gasp. “Can they stalk me?”

He runs a hand through his short, dark hair and sighs. “There’s no telling the lengths some of them would go to. They have before. And that’s another thing…” Teagan pauses and takes a drink.

Dread builds in my stomach like a bag of cement. I don’t like the sound of that. There’s been far too many shoes dropping lately.

“What?” I ask warily.

“Married people live together.” He bites his bottom lip.

I freeze. “You’re not suggesting we—”

“I am. To sell it like a real marriage, you’ll have to move in with me.”

“What about my apartment? I need my own space, Teagan.” I nearly shriek the words.

The panic starts to seize the breath from my lungs. I don’t think I can do this. Live with him? I can’t stay with a man again. My pulse thuds against my ears like an oncoming train. Being that close to another man for an extended amount of time will surely bring back far too many memories that I’ve worked hard to repress. Too many nights were spent wallowing in self-pity, and I’ve come too far to let it swallow me again. I can’t go back to that.

“Nat, it’s okay. Just breathe. We’ll figure this out. You can have however many rooms you need at my place, and I’ll respect your bubble. I promise.” His face is a mask of

compassion, from his eyes to the little lines surrounding his mouth.

“I can’t fall for you. I’m sorry if that sounds horrible, but I’m nowhere near ready to be in a relationship. Kissing is one thing, but I can’t do more than that.”

“Neither am I. How about we make our own rule, then? Don’t fall in love.”

I nod. “And if we do?”

“We won’t.” He shakes his head, but I notice the hard set to his jaw. Maybe he’s unhappy about being stuck with somebody who doesn’t have her shit together. I may hold it together pretty well on the outside, but I’m a wreck with a capital W inside.

He’s so confident he won’t be affected, but it’s me I’m worried about feeling things I can’t afford to. “Are we really doing this?”

“How about Monday night after I get back into town you come over for dinner, and we’ll iron everything out?”

Chewing my lip, I have to remind myself why this is a good idea. We’re both gaining something from this. He gets Harper to lay off, and I get Turnkey Design. When Caroline hired me, she planned on retiring before she hit sixty. She said she wanted to travel and see all the places she couldn’t escape to while running a successful business.

Her plan then was to leave it to both me and Carrie. I’m not sure what’s changed. Possibly, she saw the lack of talent in

Carrie that I saw from the start. Carrie's been on maternity leave for the past few months, and even before she had the baby, she mainly served as an additional secretary.

I hear Gabby's voice in my head again. Fake it til you make it, Natalie Grace.

"I'll be there," I murmur, sealing my fate.

Chapter Six



Natalie

A knock sounds at my office door, and I about jump out of my chair. I'm a nervous wreck. I'm heading to Teagan's in just a few minutes to discuss our strange arrangement. I've heard of people marrying for similar reasons, and I never understood why they'd do it. But faced with no other options? People get desperate, and desperate people will do some shady things.

I haven't told Gabby yet, wanting to have this meeting done first so I can have answers to the questions I'm sure she'll ask. Hell, I don't even know what to ask, what to expect. What are the rules besides not falling in love and doing nothing more than kissing?

"Do you mind locking up? I have to head out early," Caroline asks.

"No problem. Anything else I can do?"

Please help me stall a little longer. I want to put off seeing Teagan for a while longer. Things will be strange between us, and I don't want that. I liked the friendship we were building.

"No. You're doing plenty as it is. Have a good night. I'll see you in the morning." Her mouth is set in a grim line, and I wonder how much she's hiding her pain. How come in a world full of such diverse people, we still have to hide our

weaknesses? Like if the world sees our scars, we're no longer beautiful to them.

“Night.”

Her silhouette disappears down the hall. I have a hard time looking at Caroline without trying to figure out what type of cancer she has. She hasn't said anything more about her illness since Friday.

Wow, has it really only been just a few days? It seems like a lifetime has passed. Wanting to offer support but not being obvious is a hard line to dance on. I'm at a loss for how to help her, other than small tasks around the office.

My cell phone chirps on my desk, dragging my attention from Caroline.

Teagan: I didn't think to ask, but are steaks okay?

Me: They're perfect.

Dots appear on my screen as if he's typing. A nervous laugh escapes me as I wait. The dots disappear, but no message comes through. Running out of ways to postpone the inevitable, I lock up and drive over. For once, I don't speed. I try to lose myself in the beat of the music pounding through my speakers, the bass so loud my side mirrors vibrate with every thud. I stop by a convenience store for wine and a six-pack of his favorite beer.

My hands shake as I enter my code at the security gate. Parking in front of the house where I usually do, I wipe my sweaty palms on my seat—time to get this over with. I take

one last calming breath before climbing out of my Durango. Nothing's changed. We're still friends, just in the 'it's complicated' category. I can do this. I have to do this for Turnkey Design and for Teagan.

The door opens before I have a chance to knock. Of course, he probably got an alert when I was at the gate. Did he see me clamming up in the car? He's dressed more laid back than I am, wearing board shorts and a plain white tee.

Coming from work with my usual office attire of slacks and a blouse, I wonder if I should have changed before coming. What are the rules for a fake first date? Oh God, is this a date? I'm so overwhelmed right now. His lazy smile eases some of my anxiety.

"Hi," I say lamely.

"Just in time. I'm about ready to throw the steaks on the grill."

He takes the bag of booze and waves me in, and as I pass close to him, I get a waft of deep, spicy cologne. Not the cheap stuff either. With all the delectable notes intertwined, it's the expensive variety. The kind women steal men's shirts for, just to be able to inhale that scent all day long.

Trailing behind him, I put my purse on the coffee table before asking what I can help with. He pulls down an empty wine glass and pours it for me. The sight is so domestic it's almost laughable.

“I got it, but I wouldn’t mind the company on the deck while I grill.”

Nodding woodenly and feeling awkward as shit, I follow him through the patio door. I’ve never felt more like I don’t belong in a house than I do right now. I’ve spent more time alone in his house than with him. I’m silent as Teagan places the meat on the grates. Checking out the hot tub, I run my hand along the dark gray marble rim and glance around the spacious backyard. The property is like his own private oasis. I suppose it’ll be my escape, too. Temporarily anyway.

My body goes rigid when I notice him leaning against the white vinyl siding beside me, only inches away. He gives me a small smile.

“I don’t want this to be weird between us. Nothing’s changed.” His eyes soften as he turns toward me.

“A lot’s changed,” I scoff, feeling the familiar tightness form in my chest.

“We’re still the same people we were last week. Our friendship hasn’t changed, right?” Worry clouds his eyes, and a wrinkle forms above his eyebrows.

“Yes to being the same people, but I don’t know friendship-wise.” Taking a deep breath, I continue, “It’s not you. This whole situation is yanking me out of my comfort zone.” I run my fingernail along my necklace, my hand slightly shaking.

He clasps my hand that’s nervously playing with the chain around my neck, and it’s like an electrical current shoots

through my arm. I suck in a breath.

“Look at me,” he commands in a deep rumble.

“What if I can’t do this?” I rasp, barely meeting his eyes.

“How about this? We’re just you and me when we’re home, but we’re actors acting out scenes when we leave this house. I won’t ever make you do something you’re uncomfortable with. Tell me when you feel like it’s too much, and I’ll do everything I can to fix it. I don’t want you ever to feel trapped.”

Trapped? That’s exactly how I feel right now. Like I’m stuck in some twisted time warp, reliving my past over and over. How will I be able to come home every night to this place and not wonder if my past with Theo will play out again with Teagan?

I swallow around a hard lump in my throat. I hate how fragile sounding my voice is when I ask, “Would you need me to go to your concerts?”

Having to hear his music is one thing, but being at an actual concert nearly paralyzes me with fear. Not the scared-for-my-life kind of fear, but the kind where you know you’re going to disappear down a rabbit hole of depression when you finally drag you’re sorry ass out of there.

I haven’t stepped foot at a concert. Hell, I’ve only gone to the fairgrounds Theo and I frequented once since we broke up, and that’s only because I was craving a deep-fried soft taco as if I’d die without eating it. Gabriella went with me, and we left

before the concert started for the night. I've missed out on so much since I left Theo. The thought is sobering. Look at how much Theo and Zoey stole from me.

Gabriella... what will she think of this? My mind drifts back to our friendship when I first started working at Duke's. It was a rough shift. I had just scrolled through my social media during a lull in customers and came across a picture of Zoey and Theo wrapped around each other smiling for the camera like they didn't just crush my soul. Excusing myself to the small bathroom at the back of the bar, Gabby trailed behind me.

After telling her what happened in between sobs and blowing my nose and the look of horror that flashed across her face, I knew she was the type who'd be incapable of doing such a thing. Maybe I could trust her, at least a little bit. It's lonely moving to a new town without anybody. And I desperately needed somebody to lean on.

"Sugar, look at me." She paused while I dried my tears on another scrap of scratchy paper towels. "Not everybody is meant to stay in your life. Some fly through like a jet, in and out in the blink of an eye, and then there are people like me ready to blow that plane to smithereens to stay beside you. I know a good one when I see one. And you, my dear Natalie, are as golden as they come."

"Thank you," I breathed out.

She wrapped me tightly in a hug. "You'll get through this. We both will get through this."

“Both?”

She sighed. “I just dumped my boyfriend because he stole all the savings I had in the bank. Turns out he had a bigger gambling problem than I thought.”

“Ugh. Why are men this stupid?”

“We could sit here all night for that one. How about this, me and you.” She pointed her finger between us. “No men for a year. Let’s work on us and make them realize what they lost. So wipe them tears away, fix your makeup, and let’s walk out of this bathroom with our heads held high and a smile on our faces.”

I nodded my agreement. “Fake it ‘til we make it.”

“To faking it.” She wiggled her eyebrows and grinned from ear to ear. The double meaning made us both break out in a fit of laughter.

“Natalie?” Teagan’s voice brings me back to the present. Back to what I’m facing. Back to the ultimate faking it by marrying a man I barely know all for the sake of a business deal on both ends: me, Turnkey, and Teagan, to get a greedy, money-hungry woman out of his life.

Every time I think of a concert, I picture Theo dropping to one knee and holding out a coozie he just bought from the merch stand in the back. The light blue beer sleeve had the lyrics to my favorite song, ‘I Love You The Most,’ printed on it. The black velvet ring box was nestled inside. I thought he was just being silly until I saw what was in it. There was no

way we were ready. My eyes close briefly before I look back up at Teagan, who towers above me. Wetness coats my eyes, and I bite my lip to keep the sob inside that's trying to claw its way out. Theo's and Zoey's betrayal cuts deeper than any weapon ever could. A wound that may never heal. There'll always be a jagged, ugly scar as a reminder of my trauma and ultimate betrayal.

His eyes soften before he tugs me against his chest and wraps his arms tightly around my waist. His warmth envelopes me, and his scent is everywhere. He gently brushes the hair out of my face. "I wouldn't ask you to do that. I can't imagine how hard my career is for you right now, with the little bit you've told me. Would I want you there? Hell yeah, I would. But only when and if you're ready."

Resting my head on his shoulder and with my arms around him, I realize this is the part of having a relationship I've missed the most: physical contact. It's incredible what a simple hug can do. How much a nonsexual touch can calm my racing, frantic heartbeat and release a slew of the feel-good hormones. I've never been an over-the-top touchy-feely person, but the contentedness I feel from his embrace makes me think everything will work out the way it's supposed to.

"I'm sorry I spiral that easy. I never used to be this bad." I was once cool as a cucumber. Everything changed the day my whole world was torn apart by the two people I trusted most in my life.

“Don’t be sorry. Let me be the rock that keeps you steady. You can lean on me anytime.” He places a kiss on the crown of my head. “We’ll find our way through this together.”

He can’t say things like that and not have them mean something to me. I’m trying hard to keep my heart locked away in an iron cage. The only way this fake marriage will work is if it stays fake. I know Teagan’s a good man, and he’d be a hell of a catch for any woman, just not me. I’m too relationship-jinxed when it comes to men to even attempt to try again. It wouldn’t be fair to either of us to go down that road. I won’t jeopardize the friendship that’s blooming between us.



Teagan

We just finished a run at our best song, “Country Boys Do It Better”, when Landon speaks up, “If I don’t eat soon, my stomach will turn on me.” We’ve been practicing all morning at my rental house in Arizona.

“Make a list of what you want, and I’ll make a food run.” Thomas tucks his guitar back into his velvet-lined case. A picture of his ex-girlfriend still clipped to a loose piece of fabric, stands out amidst the dark fabric. I only catch a quick glimpse of her long blonde hair before he slams it shut. He says he kept it for motivation to belt out the breakup songs in front of the audience, but I think he’s still pining for her, which brings me to the next thing I have to do.

“Can I tell you something without you judging me?” I hench, rubbing the nape of my neck. Tension is already bunching up my muscles. Thomas freezes halfway through the door but comes back and shuts it behind him with raised eyebrows.

“That depends on what it is.” Jared smirks.

Yeah, he’ll totally judge me. Jared may not be in the band but as our friend and agent he usually hangs out while we practice.

“Come on, man, let’s hear it,” Landon says, not glancing my way as he twirls a drumstick in each hand.

I swallow over the hard lump forming in my throat. Now or never. Shifting in my chair, I spit out, “I asked Natalie to marry me the other day.”

The room falls silent except for the clacking of one of Landon’s drumsticks smacking on the tile floor. The sound reverberates like a cave in the movies, where it continues to echo and echo.

“You did what now?” Landon breaks the sudden tension in the room.

Jared’s eyes are large enough to give off a creepy vibe, he says slowly as if talking to a frightened child. “Bombshell bartender?”

I throw my head back and groan, feeling their eyes burning on me. “Yup. But hear me out. It was for both our benefit.”

“They usually are,” Thomas speaks up. He’s usually the quiet one of our bunch. Unless he’s singing then he’s like a whole different person.

I explain the circumstances surrounding her, and they obviously know about the Harper issue.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Landon tucks the drumsticks into the back pocket of his jeans. “You should keep your dick in your pants.”

“I intend to. We’re just friends, and it’s nothing sexual.” I bristle at the notion that he thinks I’d put us at risk.

“So let me get this straight, you’re going to marry said bombshell, live together in the same house, and you expect not

to fuck her?” Landon crosses his arms over his chest and leans against the wall, a wry smile twisting his lips.

Well, when he puts it like that, it sounds ridiculous. Tugging my shirt collar, I clear the frog that took residence in my throat. “That’s the plan.”

“Do your eyes work?” Jared asks.

“I have 20/20,” I reply dryly.

“Must be your IQ that’s lacking then,” Jared spits out.

“Listen, all I want from you guys is to just be nice to her. She’s been through a lot. I don’t know if she’ll come to any of the concerts, but if she does, I think it’ll be easier if you pretend it’s real.” They’d get a hard ass chewing if they’re mean to her. I won’t put up with that.

“Whatever you say, man. But I’m telling you, if you stick your dick in her and she fucks us over like Harper, we’ll all be sitting down for a very serious conversation,” Thomas says, deadpan.

I nod. “She won’t do that, but I understand.”

She won’t. I can feel that she’s different. Natalie’s a good woman. Speaking of... I haven’t heard from her for most of the day. Now that the air is clear, Thomas runs to the fast-food joint next door to grab lunch, giving me the perfect opportunity to talk to Natalie. Tugging my cell phone out of my pocket, I shoot her a text.

Me: What are you up to tonight?

Natalie: I'm rescuing wine trapped behind a cork.

Me: How noble of you.

Natalie: I thought so, too. The nerve of some people to hold those grapes hostage.

I laugh out loud, not caring about the odd looks the guys throw at me. Some of the stuff that comes out of this woman's mouth. I never know what's coming next. She keeps me on my toes. All that sass is so unexpected coming from a sweet little thing like her.

Me: How dare they?

Natalie: Right! Do you have a concert tonight?

Me: Yeah. Just a couple of hours from now, I got to head out.

After a few minutes, when she doesn't reply, I send her another one.

Me: How are you holding up with everything?

Natalie: It's a lot, but I'm hanging in there. You?

How am I doing, really? I don't want to tell her how much this whole Harper situation draws on my last nerve, but Natalie doesn't deserve to carry my burdens.

Me: Taking it day by day. I can't wait to have the tour over this season.

I've never looked forward to the end of a tour as I have this one. Taking a break in a small town where I can focus on myself and not the city lights and the paparazzi chasing me

everywhere is what's been powering me through the last few shows.

Natalie: Yeah, that must be rough being on the road constantly.

It feels good now that it's out, and I don't feel I have to hide from her. She doesn't look at me differently, and I know she wouldn't be after my money. Unlike the one who I don't like to name. Too afraid if I say her name three times in a row, she'll poof beside me.

What a mess it still is. We haven't heard back from her lawyer since we declined to pay her. I can't believe they actually thought I'd give her that. I know better to think Harper'll give up that easy, but maybe if she thinks I've moved on to Natalie, she'll stop. That's what started all this, to begin with, she didn't want to let me go, well, the money. She could care less about me, the man behind it all. I don't think she even knows my favorite color, to be truthful, she didn't know me, and she didn't even try to.

Even if Natalie and I hadn't played the truth-for-truth game, I think she knows more about me within a few short months than Harper knew in the year and a half we were together.

Chapter Seven



Natalie

I finally gained the courage to tell Gabby what was going on. The whole truth, that is. I took her out for drinks, and we talked while we downed countless cocktails. She's worried for me, but I assured her I'd be fine. It's the ultimate fake it 'til you make it challenge. That's what we nicknamed it. Because I'm sure this will be my ultimate challenge.

Teagan: I'm on my way.

Me: Okay, I'll be ready.

I've paced up and down the narrow hallway of my apartment so many times the carpet is nearly mowed down. I triple-check all my plants to make sure their soil has the right kind of moisture. The second I hear the gravel crunching through my window, I tense.

Teagan's footsteps draw near as I close the door behind me and lock up. When I turn, I notice his dressy black button-up shirt with the sleeves folded up to his elbows, paired with a dark pair of jeans. Black tribal designs vine down his right forearm, and I now know what the skull and guitars were on his left arm. Does he have ink elsewhere? There are no tattoos on my skin. Needles, unfortunately, are a huge fear of mine, and I have a hard enough time keeping my arm out for a blood draw. I know I wouldn't stay still while they drive the pointy tip repeatedly into my skin.

”All set?” He shifts his weight from one foot to the other.

”As ready as I’ll ever be.” I follow behind him while he opens the passenger side door for me, and I climb up, thankful I’m not wearing a shorter dress. I debated what to wear for nearly an hour, trying on several different dresses and blouses, and finally settled on this little dark green mid-calf dress with cap sleeves.

Making our mark as a couple is nerve-wracking, to say the least. He’s taking me ring shopping today to get a feel for what he thinks I’d like for an engagement ring. I already told him I didn’t care but just didn’t want a square one. That’s what Theo’s was. It won’t be a permanent fixture in my life anyway. Why does it matter that much?

The ride to Emory Falls is uneventful, and Teagan makes small talk as he maneuvers the large blue truck like a pro. He pulls up to the curb and holds up a hand, asking me to wait before he jumps out and gets my door.

“Are you trying to make me swoon?” I grin when he closes the door after helping me down.

“Nah. I’m just showing you what a real man is like because I don’t think there’s been many in your life. Shall we?” He holds a hand out for me.

Ouch. He ain’t lying, though. Hesitating for only a second, I intertwine my fingers in his. It feels odd to hold somebody’s hand like this after all this time. I’m all thumbs, and not sure what to do with my fingers. I’m worried I’m squeezing too

much or not enough. Is my palm sticky with sweat? This Georgia sun can be brutal in the summer months.

Within minutes, the feeling of being watched starts to creep in. The hairs on the back of my neck rise, and an uneasiness flows through my veins like ice. I turn my head to try to spot the person or persons watching. They have to be there; I can feel their eyes like a brand on my skin. The heat dances across my shoulder blades. My grip on Teagan's hand tightens.

Teagan pulls my hand up and places a kiss on my knuckles. "Just try to ignore the stares."

I wish I could ignore the feelings that bubbled up when his lips touched my skin. A flood of awareness lights me up. It's been too long since I've been laid. Clearly, I'm missing some vitamin O. That's all this is. My trusty vibrator will have to tend to me when I return home.

"TJ!" a woman shouts from across the street, and my head swivels. I spot a middle-aged woman with short black hair in a cute pixie cut.

Turning, he throws her a wave and a smile before pulling me into Emory's Rings And Things. The little doorbell lets the staff know they have a customer, and an older lady emerges from the back. She beams at Teagan, no doubt recognizing him. That frustrates me because I'm about thirty years younger with a mind sharp as a dagger, and I didn't even know who he really was. Still, it irks me.

"Can I help you?" Her sickly sweet voice coos.

“We’re just browsing right now, but thank you.” To me, he says, “Go ahead, baby. Show me what ones you like.”

He slips into this role much easier than I do. Smiling sweetly at him, I lean over the glass case. Immediately, one catches my eye: a rose gold twist shank set with a large oval diamond in the center and several tiny diamonds along the bands that twist together. It’s a matching engagement ring with a wedding band combined. Pulling my gaze away from it to look at the others, I find none hold the sparkle that one has. It truly is a beautiful piece. Maybe for a real engagement, but not a fake one.

Simple is best. I can’t be attached to a ring I won’t wear for long. How long will we even have to be married, I wonder. Sadly, we haven’t even done our vows, and I’m already thinking about the divorce. What does that say about me? About this sham of a wedding?

A warm hand splays across my lower back, and I lean into it. “Do you want to try any of them on?”

“Sure.” Why the hell not? That’s what we’re here for.

The woman comes over, and I direct her toward the plain rings in the center. They’re all still beautiful and shiny. It doesn’t really matter, anyway. A temporary ring is a temporary ring. I hold in my sigh. She sets a cloth down on the glass counter before pulling out the trays of rings from below. Reaching for one with a round stone, I slide it on my finger. The band is a little big. I try a few of the others and settle for a pear-shaped stone with a white gold band. And it’s already in my size.

Lifting it, I show Teagan. “What do you think of this one?”

“It’s pretty.” His expression seems guarded, like he wants to say something but keeps it to himself.

“Might I suggest a princess cut stone?” The woman reaches into the case and pulls out a shiny little number.

My throat nearly closes up. It resembles the one nestled between my breasts almost to a T. I manage to tell her in a tight voice, “It’s nice, but I don’t want a square one.”

“The square diamonds are in this season.” She clearly isn’t taking the hint.

“My girl deserves the best, something fit for a queen, not a princess,” Teagan tells her, never missing a beat.

My girl. I hold back another sigh. That’s what Theo called me, his girl. Is this how today is going to go? Constant reminders of what should’ve been? After trying on a few other rings, I can’t help but flick my gaze back to the rose gold one. God, I want that one in the worst way. I don’t even own anything rose gold to match it, and it costs far more than I’m willing to allow Teagan to spend on me.

I gently set the rings into the velvet holders and point to three. “I really like these.”

“Good to know.” He winks at me. “Thank you so much for your time, ma’am.”

“My pleasure. Have a great day,” she croons again and beams radiantly at him.

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. Walking through the front door and back on the busy sidewalk, the sounds of the city assault our ears. Muffled voices talking about Teagan and what he was doing in a ring store reach us, and a boyish grin lights up his face. I love his smile.

“Are you ready?”

“For what?” I nearly trip over my own foot as he stops in the middle of the sidewalk, his hand anchoring me in place.

“To give them what they want.” His grip tightens on my side until I feel each finger pressing into my sundress’s thin fabric.

What the hell is he talking about? I stammer, “Um... sure?”

He tugs me into the alley next to the jewelry store and cups my face in his hands. Oh, no. He’s going to kiss me. That’s not what I was saying sure about. My heart thrusts itself against my breastbone as he leans down and softly presses his lips to mine. My hands lift and rest on his pecs. Fluttering my eyelids close, I expect him to open his mouth and actually kiss me, but he doesn’t. He holds us like that momentarily and threads his hands through my hair, the cascading waves shielding our faces from onlookers. As I breathe in through my nose, my breaths quicken, and I can only smell that sultry cologne he’s wearing. It’s everywhere.

Slowly, he pulls his face back, and I open my eyes. He still has his hands in my hair, and my hands are now fisting his button-up shirt. I’m not the only one feeling a mix of emotions right now if the darkening of his hazel eyes is any indication. This may be harder than we both anticipated. Fake, it’s all

fake, I continue to repeat in my mind. I can do this. He places a featherlight kiss on the corner of my mouth, and my knees wobble slightly. Get it together, Natalie!

He twists around and leads me away from the alley without a second glance at me or the building I was only inches away from being pushed up against. Whiplash much?

Once back in the truck, he asks, “How was that?”

“Meh, I’ve had better kisses.” I roll my lips in, trying to hide my smile. I can’t let him know the truth of what it did. It’s better to make a joke of it.

He tilts his head toward me and bursts out laughing, which makes me giggle. “That’s a good one. You are a little firecracker, aren’t you?”

Biting my lip, I can still feel his lips on mine. Even if it was a closed-mouth kiss, I felt more with that than I have in a long while. “If you can’t handle the truth, don’t ask.”

“I meant, did it make you too uncomfortable?” His fingers tap the steering wheel.

Unreasonably moist between the thighs, maybe. I’ll keep that to myself, though. “No.”

“Good.” He slides the truck into gear and pulls out onto Main Street. Onlookers gawk at us as we drive away, many holding cell phones up to capture us. I’m thankful I didn’t run into Theo or Zoey. As far as I know, they both still live in the city. Hell, she probably moved into our old apartment with him as soon as I left.

I should have seen it coming. Now that I look back, there were so many red flags I ignored. They had their own inside jokes. I thought it was just their way of bonding. Come to find out, the joke was on me the whole time. Makes me wonder if he fucked her in our bed.

The dirty bastard.



Teagan

“You’re going to buy her a real ring?” Jared asks, glaring at me from across my kitchen counter as if this is a mistake.

“I’m not gonna give her a fake one if that’s what you’re asking.” He’s the one who suggested a loving girlfriend in the first place.

“When I said you needed a serious relationship. This isn’t what I had in mind.” It’s almost like he read my mind.

“It’s mutually beneficial.” And in the end, none of his business. I know he wants what’s best for the band, and I’m trying to do right by them all.

“Are you going to sign a prenup?” He leans against the counter and crosses his arms across his chest. Puffing it out as if he’d intimidate me.

“I’m not an idiot, Jared. Are you going with me or not?” I snap. I’m tired of him judging me for how I handle Harper. I won’t cave and give her what she’s asking. But marrying another woman? That’s going to wound her in the best of ways. She wants to play hardball, so can I.

I already know which ring I’m buying Natalie. It’s not any of the ones she said ‘she really likes.’ The way her eyes lit up at the rose gold one and how she kept glancing at it even though she thought I couldn’t see. I know that’s the one she wanted, not some run-of-the-mill plain Jane tiny diamond on a simple

band that she implied. And I'll be damned if I don't do everything I can to make her happy. This wedding may not be for the right reasons, but she's going to be my wife.

My wife. That stops me in my tracks. The words hit me like a boulder in the chest, knocking the breath from my lungs.

She'll be treated no less than I would if Natalie were my actual wife. Mother fucker. Kissing her like that was torture. She was so pliant under my hands. If I would've opened my mouth, I know I would've had a hard time stopping. Who knew just pressing your lips to a woman like her could do this much? It's all I've thought about since my lips were on hers. Does she taste sweet like those little candies she always eats?

Natalie's at work, and we already have a plan for tonight. I have a lame-ass proposal written up that I'm going to do in the center of the park in Emory Falls by the water fountain. There's always a hustle and bustle in the city, and Jared will put the bird in a few journalists' ears. That'll ensure it's documented, and they'll have pictures and stories in the next column. We need a win for the band right now, and any good press will help matters.

My stomach's been in knots since we left the jewelry store yesterday. I know we're doing the right thing, but I feel like I'm cheating her out of having a real relationship with somebody who's not me. Maybe she could find the one in the short time she has. Am I being selfish by doing this? The day crawls by; each second feels like minutes, and the minutes turn

into hours. That is, until I pick her up, then time moves far too fast.

When we reach the restaurant's entrance, the host stands to attention in his fine, crisp suit. "The name, please."

"Jameson," I reply.

"Right this way, sir. Millie will seat you."

Natalie and I follow the waitress to a small table by the window. Pulling out her chair, she sits, and I follow suit. After we order their signature wine, the woman disappears.

"Have you ever been here before?" I ask. I know she used to live in Emory Falls, but it's a very large city, almost as large as Northridge, Arizona, where my rental house is. Still, there's a chance she hasn't.

"A long time ago." She doesn't elaborate, and I immediately regret choosing this place by the emotion that clouds her eyes as she scans over the menu.

Our waitress appears at my elbow. "Are you ready to order?"

Natalie nods. "I'll have the grilled salmon and sautéed vegetables."

Millie writes it down, then turns her attention to me. "And you, sir?"

"I'd like the king crab with roasted potatoes."

"Alright, it'll be out shortly," she says curtly.

I wait until she walks a good distance away before asking Natalie, "Did I make a bad call coming here?"

Blue-gray eyes hold mine for a beat. The chattering around us ceases to exist. “The food here is amazing.”

“That’s not what I asked.” I swirl the red wine in my glass before taking a sip. I much prefer beer, but places like this tend only to serve wine or cocktails.

”This place holds memories for me if that’s what you’re asking,” she answers quietly, sipping her glass.

That’s what I thought. My leg bounces beneath the table while I debate my next question. Once it’s out there, I can’t take it back. But I have to know. “Bad ones?”

“We celebrated my exes birthday here. It’s not a bad memory per se.” Her finger traces the grains of the wood on the table.

Shit. I had a feeling with the odd look that crossed her face when I pulled into the parking lot. “Is he the reason you have a no-man ban?”

Natalie swirls her own wine glass and takes a larger swig before setting it back down on the table and nodding.

“We can leave. I’ll take you somewhere else.” I reach across the table and rest my hand over hers. Of all the restaurants I could have picked, I happen on this one? The night I’m proposing. Well, that doesn’t bode well. I chose this place because of the reviews, and the park I’m dropping to one knee in is just down the road.

“No, that’s okay. The food here really is good. I’ll be alright. There’s no way you could’ve known.” She flashes a smile that doesn’t seem genuine.

The waitress returns with our dishes, breaking the moment. Natalie pulls her hand back to clear the small table for our plates. We eat our meals in relative quiet, other than the voices of other diners. My brain's going a million miles per hour wondering what he did that made her swear off men. I won't ask Natalie tonight, but I plan to soon. If we're living together for the foreseeable future, it only makes sense to know what topics to avoid.

We stroll hand in hand from the restaurant and around the park until we reach the water fountain. I love the feel of her dainty hand wrapped in mine. I can barely keep up with our conversation. The blood pulsing is in my ears like a freight train. My palms sweat, and I fight the urge to wipe them on my best pair of blue jeans. She's going to say yes, but the anxiety isn't letting up. I keep telling myself it's not real, but that doesn't make it feel any less like it is. She's wearing a pretty blue dress that stops just above her knees. Her caramel locks cascade in soft waves down to her breasts. Her high heels click on the sidewalk almost to the beat in my veins.

Natalie's been on the receiving end of a proposal before, but I've never done one. I haven't found the one I thought I'd be dropping to one knee for. The ring box has been in my pocket since I picked it up this morning. I didn't want to let it out of my sight. She takes a long, steady breath as I slow my pace.

"Ready?" I whisper.

"Give me your best shot, rockstar." A smile pulls at her lips. She exudes an air of confidence as mine crumbles in a heap at

her feet. We're just acting, I remind myself.

Stopping in front of her, I plaster on the smile that usually does it for the ladies. Her eyes twinkle as she smiles back. Reaching my hand in my right pocket, I free the box and open it simultaneously as I drop down in front of her. Her eyes widen, and she covers her mouth with her hands when she notices the rose gold ring nestled inside the velvet.

A grin nearly splits my face in two. You can't hide from me, sweetheart. I knew which one you actually wanted. I don't know why she wouldn't tell me. That's a question for another day, perhaps.

"Natalie," I start and have to clear my throat. Fuck it feels like I swallowed a bag of sand. "I can't think of anybody else I'd rather share my life with. In the short time we've known each other, it's never been more clear to me that we were made for each other." Tears coat her eyes. I have to finish before I lose the nerve. My voice wavers like a damn teenager as I continue, "You're the yin to my yang, the soft to my strong. I don't want to waste another minute. Natalie, will you marry me?"

Her chest rises and falls rapidly. A small rock digs into my knee, but I'm not about to move until she answers, and I place this ring on her finger. Her gaze leaves my face and lands on the ring. Seconds thrum like a stampede inside my heart, an organ I thought was long dead. But she's awakening something inside of me. The sleeping beast groans low, waiting for the yes to come out of her pretty mouth.

“Yes,” she says breathlessly.

Finally, man, I thought she would make me work for it. It’s hard to think of a proposal without saying I love you in it. I didn’t feel right saying that to her when we both knew it wasn’t true. I’m not a romantic type of guy either, which didn’t help. I can write songs, but proposals, I obviously lack the talent. Tugging the ring out, I slide it on her outstretched finger. Standing up, I place my hands on the sides of her head and lean in. She meets me halfway, and when I feel her open her lips against mine, I don’t hesitate.

Plunging my tongue inside, I take control of the kiss, and her fingers glide through the back of my hair. Natalie tastes sweet, just like the little candies she’s always sucking on. I had a feeling she would. My fingers ache with the need to explore her body, to press her closer to me. A warmth spreads through me as I caress her tongue with my own.

The sounds of the city disappear briefly before roaring back to life with a hiss. Ending the kiss, I pull back slightly, only enough to separate our lips but still close enough that our breaths mingle. She can kiss; I’ll give her that. When I open my eyes, the look in hers is like she’s seeing me for the first time.

I think I just made this arrangement a little harder for us both. Fuck, I still taste her sweetness on my tongue.

“I should probably get you home,” my voice comes out low and gruff, evidence of the desire inside me.

On our walk back to the truck, I remind myself of all the reasons I won't be going inside when I drop her off, even though she's giving me those seductive bedroom eyes. I know that's not what she wanted from the start of this whole charade. And why the hell should it bother me so much? Because I want more than friendship?

Chapter Eight



Natalie

Fuck my life. Today is absolute shit. It's Saturday, and I painted the few remaining walls at Teagan's place. Well, there's one room still to go. Rock music was blaring in the background, and I've sang along to every song so far. They still couldn't make me forget what today is. I was supposed to marry Theo this morning. Having the weight of Teagan's engagement ring on my finger only makes it worse. I requested today off from the bar because I assumed I'd be a crying wreck. I'm still in shambles, but only on the inside. Work would probably be better. It would keep me busy.

I freeze when I come around the corner to my apartment. A man is leaning against the wooden rail to the steps, holding a bouquet of sunflowers. I perk up momentarily, thinking they could be from Teagan, but I dispose of that idea just as quickly. Why would he send me flowers? Even in our weird arrangement. After our short video chat, he sent me a funny meme earlier of a granny drinking wine in jail. But I haven't heard from him since then.

“Are you Natalie Morgan?”

“I am. Who are the flowers from?”

“No clue, I'm just the delivery man. Have a great day.” He all but shoves them into my hands and disappears behind the wheel of one of those energy-efficient smart cars that take up only half a parking space.

Juggling the flowers and digging out my key is a struggle. After opening the door and tossing my purse and house keys on the counter, I set the vase down and let myself enjoy them for a moment. It's a stunning bouquet. The yellow is vibrant among the ferns dotted in between them. Blowing out a long breath, I pull the little envelope out of the plastic pick and tear it open. A white card pokes out, and I try to mentally prepare myself for what I think is coming.

“I still love you,

Theo-”

Just as I thought. He's tried calling me twice in the last month, but I ignored the phone calls and deleted the voicemails without even listening to them. I don't want to hear whatever it is he has to say. He made his own bed when he cheated on me. I dump the water down the sink and toss the flowers, vase, and all into the trash.

Do you know what this day calls for?

Tacos. I don't care if I have to drive twenty minutes to get to the Mexican restaurant in Emory Falls. Tacos are my comfort food. There's nothing a hot, spicy, and crunchy taco won't fix. Not to mention, the restaurant makes killer margaritas, and Theo absolutely hated that place.

Swiping my purse, I head back out into the heat and drive to my favorite seedy place, La Cantina. I vow to ignore what's sitting in my trash can at home and pretend today is just another day. So what if years of planning went into what

should've been my dream wedding? It didn't happen. Just another waste of my time and energy.

After I sit at the bar and shovel my second taco in my mouth, my phone vibrates in my purse. Squeezing my eyes tight while I count to three, I rummage around inside to find it, and then I slide it out slowly as if it'll bite my hand off.

Gabriella: How's it going?

Phew. Just Gabby, not the name I was dreading seeing on my screen.

Me: About what I expected. A shitshow.

Gabriella: I'm so sorry I couldn't get out of work. If you come over to the bar, I'll feed you all the liquor you need to forget it all.

Genevieve is on maternity leave after having her baby boy last week. He's three weeks early, which has left Duke's Tavern a bit short-staffed.

Me: It's okay, you can't control when babies are born! But I might swing by later. I'm getting tacos at the moment.

Gabriella: Without me? Totally jealous. Boss man's watching, I'll TTYL.

When I briefly spoke to Teagan earlier, he hadn't mentioned today, but I know he remembers. I could see it in the sad smile he gave me and the way he kept on with corny jokes to make me laugh. Arriving back at my place, I decide to bury myself in work and grab my laptop and start searching for an

entertainment center for a client. When I drink, I get emotional, and I don't want to cry today. The one margarita I had at the restaurant wasn't enough to loosen the dam. Theo doesn't deserve to get any more from me. He's already taken more than he deserved in the first place.

A noise startles me from my search on the laptop screen. It sounds like somebody's jiggling the front door handle. It's probably some drunk who got lost. Not the first time that's happened. I'm sitting in the small living room on the couch, and I don't have a direct sight to the door. Drawing my attention back to the laptop, I start searching again for the perfect entertainment center. My client's eclectic taste is hard to match.

The jiggling noise continues, and I'm just about to get up to tell them to go away when my door creaks open. I know I locked it. I always do. Someone must've picked it. A chill snakes up my spine.

Well, they chose the wrong house to break into. Carefully setting my laptop down on the cushion, I stand and unplug the lamp on the small table beside me. It's not much but I can't get to my baseball bat I keep in the bedroom. It's a pity, I loved this lamp with its large metal sphere shapes. Maybe they'll hold up. The thing is pretty hefty.

The footsteps sound rushed, like the person is looking for something. Not gonna find much to steal here, buddy. The only thing of value that he could get his hands on would be my laptop and that's right next to me. But then again, I have

several high-dollar pairs of shoes and purses in my closet. Another weakness of mine. Each thunderous step from the intruder reverberates throughout my body like a shockwave. My breaths come out in short fast pants. Closer and closer, I swallow down the panic that settles hard in my throat like a rock that's wedged itself there.

Holding my breath as the person moves toward me, I press myself against the wall next to the archway, feeling the grainy texture of the paint through my thin cami. My phone is too far for me to reach without stepping away from the wall, and he would hear me calling 911. The apartment is silent, save for his footfalls. What I assume is a man, wearing a black ski mask stalks by me and I lunge, swinging the lamp at his head.

“Get the fuck out of my house!” I scream.

I land the mark, but he's a big dude. I had to reach high above my head, so I couldn't put as much force into it as I'd wanted. He yells, twists around, and shoves me hard. My socks slip on the linoleum, and I fall almost in slow motion down until I bash my head off the corner of the coffee table.

Stars dance in my eyes and my sight fades in and out in a blurry heap. A sharp pain radiates down my face, and lightheadedness nearly overwhelms me. Reaching my fingers up into my hair, I feel my head. My hair is wet and sticky. Sure enough, when I pull my hand away, it's bloody.

He hovers above me, his body frozen in shock as if he wasn't expecting me to be home. The only features I can make out are his green eyes and the black mask. I close my eyes, and

he's gone when I open them again. The room fades in and out and a crashing sound comes from the kitchen. Darkness settles in again. Muffled footsteps reach me through the brain fog before the front door slams shut and rattles the few pictures hanging on the walls.

I need to call for help, but I can't seem to focus. I feel dizzy, and I can't keep my eyes open. But even when they're open, everything continues to blur together. I probably have a concussion. Needing to stay conscious, I try to crawl for my phone that I left on the couch, but I don't make it. Everything turns black before my arm can reach it.

"Ma'am. Can you hear me?"

I open my heavy lids and blink in the harsh light. An EMT stands above me, shining a bright light on my face. Pulling my hand up to block the light, I ask, "What happened?"

"You were attacked in your home," a loud booming voice answers as the walls of an ambulance seem to fade in and out of my vision.

Right. The memories start to filter back in. "Did they get him?"

"I'm afraid not, ma'am, but we have officers out there looking for him," somebody says by the double doors in the back of the ambulance. I didn't notice the officer standing there before. He looks young—maybe twenty-five at most. His hair is trimmed neatly and close to his scalp, and his uniform hugs his athletic build.

“You hit your head pretty good.” The female EMT smiles down at me as she tucks her wispy gray hair behind an ear and studies my wound. The name on her black coat reads, Olanza. She has round green eyes that immediately remind me of the man in my home, and my heart rate ticks up. “I’m going to numb it up and put some stitches in, okay?”

Great, not only one needle but two?

She waits for my response. I nod, which makes my head hurt more. Once I’m cleaned and stitched, I give the officers my statement. I never did ask who called the police. When I exit the ambulance, I find my place surrounded by police cars, and officers are in and out of my front door and searching the premises for any evidence.

After refusing to go to the hospital, a female officer with kind brown eyes and inky black hair walks me through to note anything I think is missing. That bastard. He trashed my place and took my laptop after I fell. It has all of my current projects saved on it. Why would somebody steal that? What could they gain from simple designs and pictures? There’s no personal information on it at all, thankfully. The officer pulls out a chair at the kitchen table.

”Do you have friends or family you could stay with until the investigation is over?” she asks softly.

My family lives six hours away, and I’m in no condition to drive that far. My head throbs with every pulse of blood that flows in my veins. I feel on the verge of collapse, between the

stress and exhaustion coupled with the head wound. I wouldn't make it that distance.

“You should go somewhere safe, just in case this was a targeted attack.”

Safe? Targeted attack? Who would be coming after me? The only friend I can think of is Gabby, and I won't risk having that bastard go to her place. The only way I'd feel safe is in a damn fortress. Then it hits me: Teagan's place is fenced, and his alarm system will automatically send the police to that location if a code isn't entered in time. It's the safest place I know.

“I understand,” I tell her.

When the last of the police file out of my apartment, I lock up and climb into my SUV before dialing Teagan's number. “Please pick up.”



Teagan

That was an awesome show. The crowd sang along with most of our songs which is what every band wants. I laugh as I go toward to our backstage room. I see a missed call from Natalie. My face feels like it'll split in two, at least until I listen to the voicemail.

“Teagan... I'm sorry to bother you. You're probably on stage.” Her voice is thick, as if she's crying. Then her breath shudders. A whimper quickly follows. “Just call me back when you get a chance, please.”

Dialing her number, I feel panic ratchet up my spine. It's not like her to call me during a set, let alone leave me a voicemail like that. When she doesn't answer, I glance at the time on my phone. Her call came in about two hours ago. Shit.

I find a notification from my security system of the front door opening an hour and a half ago. I then pull up the app and click on the front door camera. Natalie's face appears; her eyes are red and puffy, and there's a large gash stitched closed across the right side of her forehead. My blood boils, and my fist clenches at my side. What the fuck happened?

Everything inside me tells me to run to her. Every horrible scenario plays through my mind like a damn projector. Was she in a car accident? An abusive ex? Did she fall off a ladder? Was it a guy from the bar putting his grimy hands on her?

Landon asks after coming around the corner, that leads to our backstage room. “What’s wrong?”

No doubt the expression on my face looked alarmed. “It’s Natalie. I’m sorry I have to go.”

“You’re leaving? What am I supposed to tell our fans?” he asks, a hard glint in his eyes.

“I don’t know, tell them it’s a family emergency. Natalie needs me.” Right now, all that matters to me is getting to her and ensuring she’s alright. Everything else can wait.

I run out the back door and into the alley of the venue, while pulling up a ride-share app and requesting a ride to the airport. Pacing, I keep trying to call Natalie until the car shows up. I make several phone calls to to get the fastest flight out. None can get me there quick enough.

Five hours later, I walk through the front door of my home. To say my nerves are shot is an understatement.

I come through the foyer and into the living room. The first rays of sunlight are just barely peeking over the horizon. When I see her curled up in a ball on my couch, the breath whooshes out of my lungs in a rush.

Taking a tentative step closer, I realize she’s asleep. Her phone sits on the floor face down. Grabbing a pillow and blanket from the spare bedroom, I gently cover her small body and leave the pillow next to her, not wanting to disturb her too much. She groans in her sleep before settling back in.

Claiming the chair beside the couch, I watch her snoring softly.

The wound on her head looks even worse now in the morning light. It's surrounded by dark bruising and has some swelling. Should she even be sleeping? I search the web for answers, but everything conflicts with what the other sites say.

Jared: Anything yet?

Me: Natalie's asleep on the couch. But I don't know what happened.

Jared: Try to get some sleep.

Sleep? Yeah, right. Not while all the horrible scenes play out in my brain. Feeling too restless to sit, I decide a strong cup of coffee is in order. Hearing her pained voice and seeing her bruised and cut head, I'm hit with emotions I didn't expect. I know they're stronger than for just a friend. I can't bring myself to feel anything less. As much as I tried not to fall for her, I know I am. Inch by inch, I'm hurtling over a terrifying cliff I've never plunged over. And I'm helpless to stop it from happening.

"Hey," Natalie's scratchy voice is an octave above the coffee machine's whirring.

Twisting around, I take in her disheveled state. Her hair is slightly matted and all over the place. Dry blood is visible under the strands. Dark half-moons sit below her eyes, and a stitched-up gash covers an egg on her forehead. My heart clenches at the sight. I've never seen her like this before, and

it's more than just the wounds bothering her. A haunted look coats her face.

Anger surges through me with an unrelenting force. "Who did this to you?" I growl.

Her eyes widen, and she stammers, "I- I don't know. Somebody broke into my apartment. The police are looking for him."

Shit. The last thing Natalie needs is my anger. She's already scared if her wide eyes are any indication. Breathing in deeply through my nose a few times, I feel my rage simmer down a few notches, and I choke the rest down to deal with later. Right now, she needs a friend, not someone hot-headed and ready to smash the perp's face in.

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart." I carefully wrap my arms around her and pull her against my chest.

"When did you get in?" She snuggles closer and inhales deeply.

"Just a little while ago. I came as quickly as I could. I wish I could've been here faster."

"I'm sorry if I bothered you. I didn't know where to go," she whispers into my shirt, her fist clutching the fabric. "I couldn't stay at my apartment until the police finish their investigation. I called to ask if it was okay to come here."

"Hey." I place my fingers just below her chin and coax her to look at me. "You could never bother me. My door is always open for you. I feel bad that you went through that alone. That

I wasn't here for you." I clench my jaw until I feel the muscles bulging on the sides below my ears start to pulse.

"But you are." She rubs her chin against my chest.

Her small body fits perfectly with mine. The fear of the unknown slowly bleeds away now that she's in my arms. I'm able to take my first full breath since I heard her grief-stricken voicemail. She's okay, and everything else will be fine too. But in order for that to happen, she can't go back to that apartment again. I can't let her fall victim to another assault or worse. Could she have been attacked because of me? Because of who I am?

"After what happened last night, I really think you should move in as soon as possible. You're safe here. Knowing you're exposed to a repeat attack, I don't think I can fly out for the next show in a few days."

She nods. "Okay."

She must be really shaken for her to agree that easily. Every other time I've brought up her moving in, she dodged the question. I know it's a huge step for her.

"Will you go with me to get my stuff?"

I don't miss the tremble in her voice, which kills me. I hate seeing her this scared. "Of course. I won't leave your side."

Her body relaxes against mine, and I hold her for several more seconds before she pulls away to take a shower. In the meantime, I contact the police to make sure we can get her belongings. and learn they finished the investigation in the

apartment, and the perp is still in the wind. The officer assured me that they have their best detectives working on the case.

Natalie emerges thirty minutes later, and we drive to her place to gather her belongings. Taking the keys from her, I unlock the door and walk in first, making sure it's safe. As I move from room to room to ensure nobody is lurking about, the carnage of a home invasion is evident by the furniture and objects tossed about. She goes rigid when she sees the dried blood on the coffee table and linoleum below.

Stepping in front of her to block her view of the blood, I place my palms on both sides of her face and I tell her, "We're the only ones here. You're safe. I won't let anything happen to you. Why don't you start on your bedroom, and I'll tackle this room, okay?"

"Alright."

"And I'll hire a cleaning crew once we pack everything. Then you won't have to come back here."

Natalie nods before disappearing down the narrow hallway. I watch her, knowing that she's carrying a piece of me with her against my will.

We stopped on the way here to grab some totes for packing, so I snag them out of the back of my truck and bring them inside. She doesn't have a lot of belongings, so it shouldn't take too long. It's mainly plants, and most of the furniture stays. I do the living room so she doesn't have to go back in there, but the rest of the rooms we do together. As I throw away the remains of shattered glass, I notice sunflowers and a

vase in the trash can. A florist card sits on top, and I flip it over.

“I still love you,

Theo”

My stomach plummets, and I swear I feel all the color drain from my face. What the fuck? Who the hell is Theo?

Chapter Nine



Natalie

A high-pitched ring makes me jump, and I almost fumble my latte right to the floor. I've been watching Teagan from the window as he helps bring in the last of his new furniture. When he bought the house it had the basic staging furniture, but it wasn't his style, so he donated almost all of it to a women's shelter in Emory Falls.

His shorts hang low and even from this distance, Teagan's muscles flex as he lifts one end of the couch while the delivery man struggles with the other side. Not Teagan, though. Those glorious biceps glisten with sweat from the hot Georgia sun and bulge in the best ways. I really have always been an arm girl. The rest of Teagan's body is hot, but those arms? Phew, I need a fan.

My cell phone rings again. Ugh. Why can't the universe just let me have this one thing? I just want to look. I know I can't touch. Answering the call, I immediately set the paper cup on my nightstand as the sheriff's voice cuts through the fog in my brain.

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch that. What did you say?" I ask him breathlessly. Could it really be true?

He repeats what I thought he said the first time. They caught him, the guy that attacked me. Relief shoots through my whole body and a weight is lifted at just the thought that he's not

going to be lurking around the next street. I can finally breathe easier as if a weight's been lifted off my chest.

“I just thought you should hear it from me. I can't go into details, but he turned himself in,” his deep baritone soothes my fears.

“Thank you so much! And my laptop?” I cross my fingers, hoping for more good luck.

“My pleasure, ma'am. We're still working on finding the laptop but I'm not sure if we'll find it.”

This calls for a celebration. Even if my laptop is still out there, they got him. I wonder who it is. Would I recognize him? All I can remember other than his large size were those piercing green eyes. I see them when I close my eyes at night to go to sleep.

I need to go out, and I know just the girl for the job.

Me: Tacos and dancing?

Gabriella: Yeah, girl. I'm up for that.

After begrudgingly pulling myself away from the window to no longer watch the man candy that is my hot new roommate/fake fiancé, I return to my temporary bedroom and scrounge around until I find a good girl's night outfit. Skinny jeans and a fitted v-neck will have to do. Maybe some extra concealer to hide the ugly bruise on my forehead. Luckily if I part my hair the right way it helps to hide it as well.

After bidding farewell to Teagan in a quick passing-through way so I don't have the opportunity to embarrass myself by

fangirling over all that muscle, I hustle my ass on out of there to pick up Gabriella and hit our favorite spot.

The stench of sweaty bodies permeates the entire room when we get there. Gabby and I are dancing by ourselves and having a great time when I feel a man sidle up behind me. The heat from his body soaks through the thin fabric of my shirt.

The scent of cheap liquor hits me just before he whispers in my ear, “Hey, sweet thing.”

Pivoting, I pull away from him but not before he grasps his hand around my waist and tugs me closer to his body. Pressing my ass into his not-so-subtle hard-on. I continue to squirm away from him, but he won’t release his hold.

“Let me go!” I shout over the dance music pounding through the speakers.

The drunkard doesn’t take the hint so I do the next best thing, I swing. He grunts as I land an elbow into his stomach and he nearly doubles over as he grabs onto his abdomen with his other hand.

Holding up my ring, I inform him with a glare, “My big bad fiance’s using the restroom and if you want to make it through the night, I suggest you back away right now. He’s very possessive.”

He releases me in an instant, his brown eyes huge with fright. “I’m sorry. Walking away now.”

“Good boy.” I giggle at Gabby as we watch him nearly knock another dancer to the floor in his stumbling haste to get

away from us.

Why can't we just go out and have a good time without men thinking we want company? I just want to dance with my friend and forget about everything else going on.

"I need one of those! I can't believe how easy that was," Gabriella comments as she drags me back to the bar for another round of cocktails.

"Being engaged has its perks I guess." I never thought to use it to my advantage like this before, but now that I do... The things I could do.

As I reach for my glass, I hear, "Teagan's not really here. I'd know if he was."

I snap my head in the direction of the female's voice. "Who the hell are you?"

She gives me a coy smile. "You don't recognize me?" At my blank expression, she continues, "I'm Harper."

Great. Just what I needed tonight. I thought she looked familiar. Her hair is a deeper shade of red than in the photos I saw of her. My fingers itch to slap her. What she's doing to Teagan is such bullshit.

"How did you find me?" I ask icily, my fingers pressing into the glass until they nearly go numb from the pressure.

"I read about your little engagement and wanted to come talk to you myself." She orders a drink as well and I try to ignore how pretty she is in person. All that red curly hair, creamy

porcelain skin, and emerald eyes. I can see what drew Teagan to her, she's beautiful. I hate her even more now.

I ignore her. Why would this bitch think I'd want to talk to her about anything?

"You're making a mistake," she breathes.

Taking a slow, steady sip of my drink when all I want to do is chug it, I ask, "And what would my mistake be?" I'm sure I can guess what she thinks it is.

"He's not who you think he is. Teagan's abusive." She has the audacity to rest her palm on my forearm, but I tear it out of her grasp nearly sending her off balance.

"Sounds more like you're a jealous bitch because she got the ring and you didn't." Looking like she's ready for a throwdown, Gabby tosses her long blonde hair over her shoulder as she stands beside me. She would too; she may seem like a sweet southern belle, but get her angry and you better run the other way.

"Teagan wouldn't hurt me. He's not like that," I add, putting an arm around my friend's shoulders to hold her back in case things go south. I don't want to give Harper any more ammo to use against Teagan.

"Can't be you've had sex with him yet then," she implies with an eyebrow raise.

"Why would I say yes to marry somebody I haven't slept with? That's kind of a requirement. I can't be stuck with somebody that sucks in bed." What the heck is she getting at?

“Well, I don’t think he’s been rough with you yet then.” She flags the bartender over as she downs her shot in one gulp.

Rough? Teagan’s a rough lover? Luckily Harper didn’t see my reaction. I’m sure shock was written on my face just like it is on Gabriella’s. Her jaw about hit the bar top and her eyes are bugging out like a damn cartoon character. Shit!

Feigning a grin, I tell her, “Oh he’s an animal alright. My favorite is when he ties me up and fucks me ruthlessly from behind.” My thighs clench together reflexively as I picture it, and her eyes flick down to my legs at the movement. “The last time I was walking funny for nearly three days.” I fan myself with my hand.

Her nostrils flare, and her green eyes take on a hard glint. “Don’t marry him.”

“Why? Is your bed too cold at night? You want him back, don’t you?” I fire my words like bullets straight into her heart. She thinks she can come here and accost me like this? She’s got another thing coming. This bitch has claws.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Harper snarls less than a foot from my face.

Her eyes narrow. Bingo. Jealousy. I lean in closer until our faces are a mere two inches away. I can smell the liquor on her breath as it tickles my face. Pulling my lips up at the corners, I tell her barely above a whisper, “Back off, scarlet princess. He’s mine. Every single hard inch of that body belongs to me. He didn’t want you anymore, and you couldn’t handle it, so

you try to tarnish his name?” I tsk as I waggle my index finger in the air.

Her jaw ticks, and her eyes narrow into slits. She’s silently fuming, but she knows I’m right and that’s even better.

Backing away slightly, I decide to let her off the hook. “It’s okay, you don’t have to answer. Just remember every time you think of him, it’s my name he moans, and the rougher he is, the more I like it.” God I like the sounds of that, more than I care to admit.

“He’ll ruin you. You think you know him so well, but you don’t. He’ll sleep around on you, too.”

She turns on her heel, stalks off across the dance floor, and disappears down the narrow hall leading to the front door. *He’ll sleep around on you, too.* I don’t foresee him being unfaithful even though we aren’t in a typical marriage. But I hate to admit her daggers left their own mark on me. I’m sure she dug into my background and found out about Theo. The internet hides nothing if you know what to look for.



Teagan

Pushing the glass door open, a hostess is already at the podium talking to the couple directly in front of us. Light classical music filters through the speakers, made to look like vases hanging on the walls. Warm white lights are strung throughout the dining area, giving it a romantic glow.

I've noticed every time we're out together, Natalie's head is always on a swivel. I knew my career would be hard for her. It's like she can't relax when we're out in public. I made dinner reservations at a swanky Italian restaurant in Emory Falls. I've never been here before, but they had rave reviews, and this time, I asked Natalie first before booking so we didn't repeat what happened at the seafood place.

"Hello, do you have a reservation?" Her blonde hair is pulled up high in a bun, the hostess beams at me, her smile a little too toothy.

I repress a sigh. "Yes, it's under Jameson."

"Of course." Her eyes squint behind her black wire-rimmed glasses. "There you are. Reagan will show you to your table."

I gently rest my palm on Natalie's lower back. Her skin is warm beneath the soft fabric of the dress. Natalie visibly relaxes every time I put my hand there, as if I'm grounding her in the here and now. I like knowing that I have that effect on her. We walk through the maze of tables and chattering guests.

I love that she wears a different dress each time we go out, but this one? She's like a walking sex commercial. Heads turn as we walk by, and I try my best not to threaten the men ogling her like she's a damn feast. When I picked her up for our date, all I could do for several seconds was just stare, opening, and closing my mouth like a damn fish. No coherent thoughts came to me, like my brain was deprived of oxygen.

Sitting in the far back corner, I pull out Natalie's chair and push it in once she's seated. I wink at her as I come around her other side and sit. This meal is nothing like the night I proposed to her. She's more relaxed, and her eyes sparkle in the lighting. That is when I can keep my wayward eyeballs from looking at her cleavage.

It's not often Natalie displays this much skin, not that the dress is skanky by any means. It's very tasteful, but the bust line is filled to max capacity and that's not even half of it. Seeing her from the back, holy fuck. I've been sporting a semi since I picked her up. Her ass looks too fuckable under that dark fabric, all perfect and rounded. Just enough to dig my fingers into.

"How's work been?" I ask. Natalie went back to working a few days after the break-in. But without her laptop, she had to redo most of it. She's not scheduled to work at Duke's Tavern until next week, though so she could try to get back to speed.

Using the napkin to dab at the corner of her mouth, she shrugs in response. "Slowly getting caught up. Luckily, the

clients I've been working with have been more than understanding with the circumstances.”

“That’s good.” Twirling my fork into the last bit of my Spaghetti a la Carbonara, I take another glance around the room, feeling eyes burning into me. Nobody is openly staring but I know the feeling of being watched all too well.

“How about you? Any new music yet?”

Sweeping my gaze back to the beautiful woman sitting across from me, I shake my head. “No, but the concerts have been going well. Speaking of...” Her eyes flick from her plate back up to mine, and unease shines from them like she knows what I’m about to say. “We have one just a few hours from here on Saturday if you want to come?”

She swallows the forkful of pasta with an audible gulp and washes it down with a sip of white wine. I know she’s said music is hard, and concerts were a rough topic to bring up, but I think I could help heal that wounded part of her. I want to be the one who fixes all the broken pieces for her.

“You don’t have to come, I was just letting—”

“No. I want to. You’ve been supporting me through everything lately.” She scratches at her neck and straightens her posture. “I want to be there for you.”

“Are you sure?”

She nods and raises her eyebrows as if to say duh, that’s what I just said. “Yeah. I’ll be there, TJ.”

TJ seems so foreign on her lips. She's never called me that before. Reaching across the small wooden table, I grasp her hand in mine and give her a light squeeze.

I dare say this is the best "date" we've had so far. After finishing our food with plans to come back here again soon, I leave a hefty tip, and we call it a night. After all, she has to work in the morning.

"I'll be right back." She places a light kiss on my cheek before turning away, and I have all I can do not to let my wandering gaze slip down to her butt.

She plays the part of fiancée better than I could've imagined. At first, she was struggling, but now even I have a hard time telling the difference between real and fake. The lines are getting blurred. I lean against the wall and wait for Natalie by the entrance as she uses the restroom. Casting another glance at the podium, the hostess quickly turns away from me. Usually, I enjoy the attention, but not lately. Sometimes, I miss when I was a nobody.

After a few minutes, Natalie exits the restroom and is walking down the narrow hall when she freezes, her light blue eyes widening. The man walking in the direction of the men's room stands in front of her, unmoving. I watch her mouth try to work around a greeting. Her entire body stands rigid; it looks as if she's not even breathing.

This can't be good. I try to reach Natalie as I stride through the small crowd gathered at the opening to the bathrooms and overhear him asking her, "Did you get the flowers I sent?"

Hmm. The sunflowers she threw away with the note that said he still loves her? So this must be Theo. He needs to remember his place—an ex.

Before she has a chance to answer, I snake my arm around her center and place a kiss on her cheek while I tug her against me, leaving no doubt who she belongs to. Me. And in case the prick doesn't get it, I add, "There you are. Who's your friend, sweetheart?" I fake a smile at him, but my eyes hold a warning.

Theo's jaw clenches as he takes me in. Ah. Just as I suspected, he wants her back. I wonder if he's the one who made her vow off men. I tighten my grip on her, and she leans in, nearly melting against me. Perfectly played, sweetheart. Was it his eyes I felt on us earlier, watching from afar and waiting for me to let my guard down? For her to be alone? My jaw hardens.

"This is Theo," Natalie says in a shaky voice, confirming my suspicion that this is, indeed, sunflower man.

His eyes drift down her body. He doesn't even try to hide the fact that he's undressing her in his mind. The form-fitting dress she chose hugs her curves beautifully but puts all her assets out there for the world to see. The deep v-neck shows enough cleavage to make me want to bury my face in it, and the way the fabric hugs that ass? A primal surge goes through me at the thought of him seeing her naked, even if it was before me. She's mine now.

Without missing a beat, I hold my hand out to him. “Hi, Theo. I’m her fiance, Teagan. It’s so nice to meet you.” I exude a calm I’m far from feeling. The low hum of my voice is laced with a threat any smart man would pick up on.

He takes my hand in a pathetic handshake, and I squeeze his extra hard, feeling his knuckles grind together in my palm. His eyes flick to mine. “You too.”

Pulling his hand back, he flexes his fingers a few times. Fucking pansy. He stands a few inches shorter than I, and there’s hardly any meat on his bones. What the hell did she see in this fool? Natalie’s tense beneath my palm and won’t look at me; she’s uncomfortable, and I hate it.

“I’m sorry to cut this reunion short, my dear, but the wedding planner is waiting for us.” Looking back at him, I say sheepishly. “We were already late for dinner because I couldn’t keep my hands to myself.” An ear-to-ear grin spreads across my face, leaving no doubt what we supposedly did. Why not dig the blade even deeper? He’s the dumbass who let her go, and by her reaction to him, probably the one who hurt her the most.

“Teagan,” she groans, and my smile widens even more.

Sunflower guy’s face falls as a blush creeps up from Natalie’s chest and neck. Even if we didn’t do anything, her blushing like a schoolgirl makes her look even guiltier. Way to play right into it, baby. Let him think I fucked you in every which way I wanted to.

“I’ll see you around, Natalie.” He stalks off and smacks his palm on the door as he pushes it open to enter the bathroom.

Once he’s gone, I steer her out onto the sidewalk, and she spins around on those death-defying stilettos. “Did you really have to say that?”

I raise my eyebrows. “As your man, you expect me to stand there and do nothing while he strips your clothes off in his mind?” I ask in a harsh voice. Even if we’re not really engaged, I’ll be damned if I stand by and allow that shit to happen right in front of me.

“What, is this some dick-measuring contest?” She tosses her head back, looking up to the sky, and lets out another groan of frustration.

I scoff. “Not a chance. I’d win by a mile.” And I’d be more than happy to prove it to that weasel-dicked man. How can that sorry excuse for a man hold power over such a strong-willed woman like Natalie? I just don’t get it. She’s in a league of her own, much higher than he or I deserve. She’s a fucking goddess.

Her frown turns to a smirk before nodding. Moonlight twinkles in her eyes. “Yeah, probably. Let’s just say he wasn’t gifted in that area.”

“Should we go tell him?” I laugh as I grab her hand and start tugging her back toward the restaurant’s front door. Her heels click on the sidewalk behind me at a rushed pace to keep up with my long strides.

Playfully slapping me on the shoulder, she denies me my fun. “No!” she huffs. “Are you always this challenging?”

“Always and forever, baby.” I bring her hand to my face and kiss each of her knuckles. Her breath halts in her chest, and I can’t tell if her reaction is real or if it’s for anybody who could be watching our exchange.

Chapter Ten



Natalie

Guitar strumming drifts down the hallway to the last room I have yet to paint. I try to drown out the sounds of Teagan practicing his music without having to blast mine, but I can't. My phone's volume only goes so loud. The edgy riff brings me right back to that night. The lights overhead, the dress shirt Theo was wearing, and the smell of the smoke machines tingling my nose hairs.

Breathe in, breathe out. I'm not there; I'm painting a client's house, Teagan's house. Where I now live. It's just a coincidence that this shade of gray resembles Theo's button-up from that night. Maybe that's why I saved this room for last. Maybe it was my own mind's way of sparing me. But it's just another spare bedroom of many here. Teagan's deep timbre singing a soft cadence makes me groan in frustration. I walk quickly to the pale blue room just down the hall that is now mine and swipe my headphones off the nightstand.

Plugging one into each ear, I pull up the music app on my phone and select the hardest rock playlist I have. I even have it labeled "fuck my life." Once the beat begins to hammer against my eardrums, my shoulders relax slightly as I disappear back into the room I was finishing. This is the final coat, and the house will be finished, well, for painting anyway.

I'm still waiting for a few things to come in. A local artist is building a custom table shaped like a guitar to be used in the

foyer as well as a large elk skull on a wooden backdrop of an artist's rendition of a flag made from wood-burning art. I can't wait to see it, and I think Teagan will absolutely love it.

There's something calming about the monotony of dragging the paint roller up and down, covering up what we don't like, or giving a new appearance to a worn exterior, almost like makeup. You can have the shittiest day, but you slap enough concealer on and nobody will know if you're hide your scowl, that is. Some days are harder to hide the hurt than others. Today is one of those days.

Teagan is heading out in a few hours to prepare for his concert tomorrow night. The one I told him I'd go to. That's not helping my headspace at the moment. I hardly slept at all last night, thinking about all the emotions I've tried to choke down, but that event will most likely bring them all to the surface.

The look on Theo's face when Teagan implied we were late because of sexual escapades was priceless. As if he really couldn't believe I would be able to move on from him- I haven't really, but he doesn't need to know that. The rest of the world thinks I'm engaged and will be happily married within a month. A whirlwind romance, the tabloids are calling it. Oh, it's been a whirlwind, alright.

Shit. I slap my forehead. Picking out a dress just got added to my never-ending mental to-do list. I'll do that on Monday after work. What kind of dress would Teagan like? As I coat the walls, I plan the wedding in my head. It's short notice, so

not much will go into preparing the ceremony and we're having it at a resort, which will help organize everything. But at least thinking of everything that needs to be done will keep my mind focused on something else.

As I come out of the room a few hours later, my ears are ringing from the loud music that pulsed in my ear buds. I decide to use the closest restroom of four. Why do people really need so bathrooms anyway? Teagan has his own attached to his bedroom, and there's one right next to mine. Then there are two additional half baths, one on each end of the gigantic house.

After finishing in the bathroom, I step into the hall and slam into a wall of muscle. "Ah!"

"Sorry, I was coming down to see if you wanted to take a break?" His corded arms catch me before I trip. His hands are like live wire wherever they touch, Damn. I can not be attracted to this man.

"Oh. Do I get breaks now, Mr. Jameson?" I ask, fluttering my eyelashes and smiling coyly.

His eyes heat before he blinks it away. Damn. I only meant it as a joke, but seeing his reaction makes me want to do it even more. That look on that bad-boy face is stunning. His stubble has grown in more but doesn't hide the sharpness of his jawline. The dark t-shirt with his band's logo is stretched tight through his broad shoulders and chest. I fight the urge to run my hands down the front of him. My fingertips ache to feel his skin beneath them.

He swallows thickly before he says in a gravelly voice, “I got you a latte and those cinnamon rolls you like so much.”

“Oooh. You had me at cinnamon rolls!” I exclaim.

I duck under his arm and bolt to the kitchen, my bare feet slapping against the tile until I come to a stop at the archway. His loud, booming laughter follows me. Those damn cinnamon rolls will kill me at some point, but at least it’ll be a sweet way to go. I swear each one I eat adds another pound to my ass. Sure enough, sitting on the table is a box from the cafe in town, complete with two plates, a latte and a coffee beside it.

“You know that’s how they’ll abduct you, right?” He’s wearing that lazy, lopsided grin I adore.

“What?”

“Some stranger will leave you a latte and a cinnamon roll on a picnic table to lure you in. And then bam. You’re gone.” Teagan’s hands clap together.

I think for a minute. He’s got a point. “Maybe.”

Teagan folds all six foot plus of him into the chair opposite me and takes one for himself. The hint of desire I thought I saw earlier is nowhere to be found. Did I imagine the heat in his eyes, the way he looked at me like he maybe wanted to be more than friends? Avoiding his gaze, I tear a piece of the roll off and swirl it in the icing that dripped off them and onto the plate.

“Thank you,” I murmur.

“You’re welcome.”

“Mmmm. These are so freaking good,” I groan as I take a bite.

Teagan smirks and bites into his own. “They are pretty good.”

Washing it down with the latte, which he had made exactly the way I like, I pin my gaze on him. “How did you know how I like my latte’s?”

“They attach a slip to each cup, and I’ve seen nearly a dozen since you’ve been here. It’s not hard to memorize a few lines.” He takes a pull off his coffee like it’s no big deal.

Of course, he could memorize a string of words; he’s a damn musician for crying out loud. “Do you always remember everything?”

“Only the important things.”

“And lattes are important?” I lean back in my chair, studying him for any hint of him hiding something from me.

“To you, they are. As your husband, I should care about what’s important to you, right?” His eyebrows bunch together, and a thoughtful expression coats his face.

My *husband*. That’ll take some getting used to. Only a month to go, and I feel like we’ve barely scratched the surface of getting to know each other.

”Yes, I suppose you’re right. How do you like your coffee?” I take another sip of my piping-hot latte.

“Dark roast, two cream, two sugar.” He holds his cup in the air for cheers, and I tap mine against it.

“Good to know.”

“Truth for truth?” he asks after swallowing a swig of hot liquid. This was the only way I opened up to him initially as my client, albeit a stubborn one. But it worked.

“Why not? Sounds like we should know more about the other.” Clearly, he’s more observant than I am. If we’re going to be sharing a home for who knows how long, we have to know the basics at least.

”Favorite animal?”

”Cat, you?”

He scoffs. “Dog.”

Of course, it would be the opposite. “Favorite food?”

“Steak. How about yours?” Teagan holds up a finger. ”Wait, let me guess, tacos?”

I shrug. “Guilty as charged.”

We go on question for question, covering the most mundane details until both his coffee and my latte are long gone. I knew there was so much more underneath that tough guy persona he shows the world. The more he lets me in, the more I know I’m in deep trouble with this ungodly attractive man sitting across from me.

We disperse from the table, me to finish that room with the worst shade of gray known to man and Teagan to pack for his

upcoming string of concerts. I don't see how he does that all the time. He's usually only home Monday through Wednesday of each week. Sometimes less than that. At least with both of us working so much, there aren't many awkward moments like hey, what's for dinner? Either he grills, or I pick up takeout on my way home. I've never been much of a cook.

The nights I'm alone, I usually find myself on the back deck enjoying the peace and quiet or even relaxing in the hot tub. There could be much worse places to live.



Teagan

I'm antsy as all hell. I can't sit still. I've been pacing the small room like a madman for the last half hour, memorizing every little detail of the room. The dark blue walls with vanity tables lining one side, a lounge area in the center with couches and coffee tables, then the opposite side where my band mates sit on wingback chairs, staring at me. The guys are getting pissed off. There's no reason for me to be keyed up like this; I've performed on stage countless times. The only difference is Natalie's supposed to be here tonight. It's two hours before showtime, and I thought she'd be here by now. I refuse to call her or text her to see where she is. I won't be that man.

Hudson, the band's security guard, enters our backstage room empty-handed. He's been instructed to watch for Natalie. "Is she here yet?"

He sighs loudly. "Same answer as the last three times you've asked. When Natalie gets here, I'll bring her directly back here. I won't pass go and collect my two hundred dollars."

Fuck it, I'm sending her a text. I don't care if I look desperate. She's my fiancée, kind of.

"Smile for the camera." I lift my phone up to snap a picture of Hudson.

"Why?" He eyes me warily.

“So Natalie knows who to look for.” And so I have a reason to text her. Ever since the attack at her apartment, I get uneasy when I’m not with her or know where she is. My mind drifts off to all the worst-case scenarios. I know they have the guy responsible, but what if there’s more of them? What if he’s part of something bigger? What if that was just the tip of the iceberg coming for her?

“The things I go through for this band.” He flashes a fake smile that straddles the border of being creepy.

“Can you maybe try a smile that doesn’t look like you belong on the sex offender registry?” I throw out there as I look pointedly at his face. The guys behind me burst into laughter.

“Screw you, TJ. This is just my face. It’s not meant to smile. The only purpose it serves you is to make sure no little shits think they can get close to you. It’s what you want in a bodyguard, not the friendly neighborhood man that rescues kittens from trees.”

“Sure thing, man.” I snap several pictures and choose the most normal-looking. I love busting his balls, and he makes it so easy.

Me: When you get here, look for this guy. His name is Hudson. He’ll take you backstage.

Her reply is almost instant.

Natalie: Okay. I’m almost there. I have to check in to the hotel first, and I’ll be over.

Me: No need to get a room. You can stay with me.

I hit send before realizing what I wrote. The hotel room has one bed and an uncomfortable pull-out loveseat. I tell myself it's for appearances; we can't be a couple that's engaged and have separate rooms. That would draw unwanted attention. Yup. That's what I'm sticking to. Not that I want her closer to me.

The minutes tick by, and still no reply from her. Not even the little bubbles on the screen show me she's typing a response. She's driving, so maybe she has spotty service.

“Did you hear me, TJ?”

“What?” I snap at Landon.

“I asked if you needed anything. I'm doing a store run.” He puts his hands in his pockets and leans against the wall with a scowl.

There's still over an hour before the opening duo is set to go on stage. My shoulders fall when I realize how snippy I sounded. “No. Sorry.”

“It's okay, man. She'll be here; give her time.”

“I know.” They don't realize how important this is to me, her being here for a show. She'll finally see all of me. I feel like a damn teenager again, wanting to show off for the pretty girl in class.

My phone buzzes beside me, and I all but dive for it. Her name appears on the screen, and with my breath held, I swipe across the device.

Natalie: If you say so.

”She’s got you wrapped around her finger with that ring, doesn’t she?” Jared comments, pulling out another chair from the table beside me to sit on.

“No. I’m just worried something else will happen to her.” I hate the unknowns. She’ll never be truly safe because of my line of work.

“Is that why you almost bit Landon’s head off then, or when it looked like you were having a stroke when you grabbed for your phone? I thought you were going to fall and land on your face.” Jared’s knee bounces up and down while waiting for me to answer.

How can I explain what it’s like for me right now? I made a deal with this woman for both our sakes, but it’s turning into much more than I bargained for. How everything is mashing together, and I’m having a hard time telling the difference between the fake emotions I project when I’m with her and the ones that sit just below the skin. Not to mention everything is on the line if my reputation takes more hits. It feels like the world is resting solely on my shoulders, and I’m struggling to hold up the weight of it all.

”I just have a lot on my mind right now, Jared. I’m sorry if I’ve been short with you guys lately.” I gestured with my hand to all the band equipment off to my right. “I can’t lose everything,” I say quietly.

“I know. I’m trying my damndest to make sure you don’t.” Jared slaps his hand down on my shoulder. “We’ll come out on

the other side of this.”

God, I hope so. I don't know what I'd do if the band doesn't make it. I'm nothing without my music. It's been the biggest part of my life for far too long. Until now, it's been a crutch, a bandaid, something I can pour myself into without fear. Now, it's like an executioner waiting to deliver my fate. Whether I can continue to be a musician or not. But which way will the decision sway? Where will the hypothetical blade land?

Reaching beside me, I snag my guitar, rest it across my legs, and strum a melody. The way my fingers brush over the coarse strings brings a sort of release that only my guitar can provide. Ignoring my best friend's prying eyes, I concentrate on the notes flowing out of me. Closing my eyes, I play what I feel. One of these days, the words will come to me. We've each had a hand in writing all of our songs. Every one of them is an original piece. But lately? I can't find the words, only the chords.

Sometimes, you don't get to know all the answers right away. Sometimes, they come to you when you least expect it. I know the words will find me when I'm ready. Until then, this wordless song will live on, keeping me going, giving me hope for a future.

Chapter Eleven



Natalie

Driving into the venue and finding a place to park is ridiculous. There are cars everywhere. Following the event worker's directions, I pull into a parking lot a freaking half mile away. This place is packed like a damn sardine can. I shouldn't have taken that last-minute project for Caroline that made me late, but I felt guilty because she doesn't ask for much, so when she says she's not feeling up to the task, I take care of it. Glancing at my phone's screen again, I check the photo Teagan sent me. My cowgirl boots get a layer of mud caked to the bottom as I try to sidestep most of the real muddy spots.

I decided to go for a simple outfit: boots, skinny jeans, and a pink and gray flannel shirt tucked into the front. I figured blending in might make me feel better than I do. Scuffing my boots on the grass, I'm able to get most of the muck off of them. My hands tremble as I walk to the signed backstage area and spot the man from the picture. There's a huge crowd off to the left of the stage area waiting to be let in to find their seats.

"Natalie, it's great to finally meet you. I'm Hudson," the big burly guy with a forced smile says.

I know, man, I'm faking my smile too. The ultimate faking it challenge is really testing my limits. Today will be the biggest test of the facade. My knees wobble as I stand there debating whether I have time to pull a runaway fiancée move.

“Nice to meet you too,” I murmur in a tight voice that wavers only slightly.

“Ah! That’s her! That’s Teagan’s fiancée.”

I freeze. Oh god. Not yet. I’m so not ready for this today. Or, if I’m being honest, maybe ever.

“She’s so pretty.”

I squeeze my eyes together, hoping to drown out their high-pitched voices. My heartbeat thuds just beneath my skin, and a shudder snakes up my back.

“Let me see!”

“Hi! Natalie!”

“Let’s get you out of here before they try to mob you,” he says, face solemn, as he steps aside and holds a hand out for me to pass through.

My eyes widen, and I stammer, “They’ll- they’ll do that?”

“Shit, no, I’m sorry I was trying to crack a joke, you look stressed.”

I blow out a breath. “That obvious?”

”I’m afraid so.”

I wasn’t prepared to be immediately recognized. I don’t know what I’m supposed to say or do in these situations, so instead, I just smile and wave to the scantily clad women. Then again, they’re pretty much wearing the same clothing I wear to work at the bar, just with a cowgirl hat. This is the first

time Teagan and I have been anywhere other than the surrounding cities of Hickory Valley together.

My anxiety is at an all-time high with the memories that flood back to me of all the concerts Theo and I went to. The security guard opens a side door and ushers me inside and down a long, dark hallway. Voices and instruments assault my ears. Coming to a navy blue door with a large yellow star, he raps his knuckles three times. I've never been backstage before. It's so dark and gloomy.

Thomas is the one who answers. I recognize his face from a video chat last week.

"Yo, TJ. Your girl's here," he calls over his shoulder before stepping back.

There it is again, *your girl*. My pulse quickens when my gaze lands on Teagan. I don't have the heart to tell Teagan how much I hate that phrase. He's dressed in dark denim jeans paired with a charcoal gray button-up. The sleeves are rolled up past his elbows, showing his strong forearms and the ink that dusts his skin. A black ballcap is pulled down over his short hair. Ever since he kissed me, it's all I can think about when I look at him, how it felt when his tongue slid into my mouth. The taste of him mixed with his smell is one hell of a one-two punch.

"Hey, you." Teagan's eyes crinkle at the sides with his smile.

"Hey, yourself," I answer as he tugs me in for an embrace. I don't care if it's all for show, I enjoy being in his arms, and crap does his cologne do things to me. Would he notice if I

stole his bottle to spray my pillow? Would that be crossing our imaginary lines? What are our lines? The only rule we made was don't fall in love.

“Thank god you're here. This one's been miserable all day.” Landon hooks a thumb toward Teagan, making him scowl. “What? It's true. Now she's here, and you're all smiles, but all we've gotten most of the day is a broody dick.”

“I'm glad you're here.” He nuzzles his face into my hair. His warm breath tickles my neck, and I wiggle away slightly.

“Me too. I'm sorry, I meant to get here sooner, but I had a last-minute client I had to help.” A tiny portion of tension bleeds out of me from being in his arms.

“That's okay.”

“Just think, once you're married, you won't need to decorate rich people's houses. You can come on tour with us and be one of our groupies,” Landon interjects.

Teagan tenses, and I feel bad for the position this puts us all in. Gently untangling myself from Teagan, I turn toward Landon. They need to know where I stand. I won't have them thinking I'm using Teagan like his ex clearly did. I refuse to be compared to that greedy little bitch.

“Okay, listen here, buddy. I don't care who I'm married to, I've worked my ass off to get to where I am, and I don't plan on stopping anytime soon. I'm not one of your concert bunnies who'll fall at your feet and follow you like a love-sick puppy. I'm a hardworking, independent woman, and I don't need any

man to take care of me.” Once I finished my rant, I apologize to Teagan, but he’s laughing too hard at the expression on his friend’s face. I don’t think he heard me.

Once Landon wipes the shock from his face, he tells Teagan, “I like her, and you’re keeping that one, TJ.”

“Why do you think I put a ring on it.” Teagan smiles down at me, and my stomach does that weird flip like I’m on a roller coaster.

“I think I’m in love,” Thomas says, clutching at his chest as he feigns falling over.

“Don’t even think about it,” Teagan growls, pulling me against his side with a protective arm around my waist.

A smile that’s not fake finds itself stretching my lips apart. I think I really like his friends. They’d fit in with mine well. Gabby would have a field day messing with them.

“You okay?” With concerned eyes, he tugs me over to a chair and kneels in front of me.

“I think so,” I say in a tight voice that betrays my words.

“Music can either destroy you, or it can heal you. The outcome depends on the power you give it.” He lightly glides the tops of his fingers down the side of my face. “What power are you going to give it?”

“I want to heal,” I whisper.

“Good girl.” Teagan presses his lips against my forehead in a feather-light kiss. “Now remember that. You have the power,

not the music.”

“We’re almost up, ladies!” Jared bellows, making me flinch. This whole entire situation has me jumpy and on edge.

Teagan’s nostrils flare. “Are you sure you still want to watch from the side?”

He gave me the option of that or a front row seat when I agreed to come. I don’t think I can handle being in the crowd right now. At least back here, if I fall apart, I can hide, but out there? No, the cameras would zoom in on my mental breakdown. The world thrives on drama, after all.

I nod. “Yeah.”

“Jared will be with you if you need anything at all.” His eyes hold mine for another minute, waiting to see if I change my mind.

Once he seems satisfied that I’m fine, he turns away, and like a whirlwind, everything happens so fast. First, we’re ushered down that dark, creepy hallway lined by guards, and next, the band is strapping on their guitars, standing beside the opening to the elevated stage.

Teagan rushes up to me, plants a quick closed-mouth kiss on my lips, and says, “For good luck,” before taking off on stage to an ear-piercing group of screams and whistles, and I’m left speechless.

Watching him perform from the side of the stage is like nothing I’ve ever experienced. I’ve heard him singing on the radio and in his office, but hearing it in person, like the whole

ordeal? His voice is a deep timbre that turns at times into a raspy bedroom growl and makes you squeeze your thighs together on certain notes. I'd know. That's what I'm doing back here while trying to be inconspicuous.

Why does he have to be this sexy? Why couldn't I find an average guy to fake marry? Or one who doesn't have a nasty ex-girlfriend like Harper?

I had to wipe tears from my eyes during their first song when they brought that little boy up on stage with them. I knew their band did that, but watching it play out made me feel everything. I couldn't stop the urge to cry and probably ruined my makeup. There's a softness to him and his bandmates you wouldn't think would be there. They look like a mix of rock star meets country boy charm. Seeing Teagan interact with that little boy sent an unfamiliar ache skittering through my chest.

Teagan works the crowd like a pro. Sliding his guitar to his back, he strolls the catwalk in between the sections of seats in the front. Of course, nobody is actually sitting down in them, but they're all standing and waving, blowing kisses and shy smiles. He shakes a few hands as he goes, and when a woman reaches up and grabs his ass, a white-hot surge of jealousy pumps through me. He shakes his head at her and wags his finger, but it doesn't stop her from grinning. She's not the only one who tries, either. Luckily, Teagan is able to dodge most of the other hands.

Is this what it's always like for him? It's not so different from dealing with the handsy drunks at the bar. And here, I

thought women had more class than that. I'm disappointed in them.

"This is the last song," Jared, Teagan's friend, tells me. He's also been standing off to the side, watching the performance. There were several times I thought he was watching me, too. Maybe he's worried for Teagan. After what happened with his last girlfriend, I can't blame the guy for being wary of me. I was afraid to ask Teagan if they know our engagement is fake.

I nod my head toward Jared without meeting his eyes. *Don't let the music destroy you.* So far, so good. I've shed only a few tears. I've never seen Teagan look this happy before. Not that he's unhappy any other time but he just has a glow around him tonight. He belongs on that stage. I can't believe his ex is trying to screw this up for him. Women can be such catty bitches. If I had any doubts before about going through with this fake marriage, they're gone now. I refuse to let her take this from him. Whatever I do, I won't let that trash win.

Stay with me. His words from earlier echo in my mind. I know he only meant it in the share-a-room sense, not the share-a-bed sense. But still, the thought of being that close to him makes desire pool low in my belly. I'm trying really hard to stick to our rule of not falling in love, but he's making it awfully hard on me. He's a better man than I gave him credit for. Maybe too good for my weak heart to say no to.

The song ends, and the crowd goes wild as the band members bow and blow kisses to them. Jogging backstage, Teagan beelines for me and lifts me up, spinning me around in

a circle as I squeal like a little girl. My legs instinctually wrap around his waist, and my arms circle around his neck. Face to face with mere inches separating us, my breath catches.

Staring into his fierce eyes, I can't help but feel like he's holding back too. If only I could make the first move. His hazel eyes darken with lust. It feels natural to lean down and press my lips to his, but then my stupid brain reminds me that he's not really mine. This all has an expiration date to it. The ending is already set in place. If we do more than we already have, it'll hurt more in the end. I don't think I can handle more pain.

He must come to the same conclusion because his radiant smile slips. "What'd you think?"

"You were amazing!" Beaming, I tell him, "You all were. Thank you for inviting me." I squeeze my arms around him tighter. Maybe concerts won't be as hard to attend as I thought previously.

"Anytime you want to come to one, even if you want to watch from the crowd. I can make it happen." He can't hide the boyish glee on his face. I love seeing him this way. How can anybody with a heart that beats want to ruin this for him?

How can I say no to that? I laugh. "Well, I'm a busy, independent lady. I'll have to pencil you in."

"You better. I'd love for you to come to more events with me." He searches my face.

"Really?" I ask, not wanting to sound too hopeful.

“Yeah.” He leans in and brushes his nose back and forth against mine.

I let out a haggard breath. I want to kiss him so badly. I know it’s wrong, but I can’t continue to fight this attraction I have for him. I’m powerless when it comes to Teagan.

“Please,” I whimper.

“Please, what?” he asks quietly, our foreheads touching.

Kiss me.

I can’t say it, though. Awareness shoots through me like a rocket when I feel his growing erection against my sensitive apex. My eyes snap to his, and desire is barely cloaked on his face. He does want me. I wait with bated breath for him to do something, anything. I try so hard not to squirm against him, but it’s like my body has a mind of its own and starts to rock against him. Craving that delicious friction.

“Stop wiggling,” he warns.

I swallow thickly, silently begging my body to listen to him. But holy hell, she desperately wants him. Is it because we can’t that I feel a need this strongly? That I want to rip his clothes off right here and not think twice about the repercussions?

“I should get back there for the VIP guests,” he says hoarsely.

“Okay. I’ll be here when you’re ready to go,” I tell him in a husky whisper. Space is good. We need to put some air between our bodies.

He shakes his head. “Oh no. You’re coming with me.”

“What?” I shriek. I didn’t sign up for this. I can’t be held accountable for my actions if women start touching him in front of me again. I’ve never been violent before but now I can’t help but think of all the ways to hurt them. The gruesome images are both equal parts appalling and appealing.

“You’ll be fine.” He chuckles, not knowing my impending rupture is just millimeters away from an explosion of epic proportions.

Horny, jealous me is not a good combination. He’s pulling emotions out of me I’ve never felt before. I’ve never thought of harming another woman over a man, but some twisted fantasies danced in my mind as I watched them reach for him.

He still hasn’t put me down. Feeling his rock-hard erection, I fight the urge to grind against him. It’s been too long since I’ve had sex. And let’s face it, vibrators and dildos will only get you so far. I need a man that can throw me around and give me a good fucking. And this man right here? I bet he could fulfill all my dirty desires. I repress the moan that begs to come out at the thought of him being a rough lover. All the men before him were far too vanilla. The sex was boring and repetitive. I need more spice. God, I need Teagan.

“Will you?”

Will I what? Oh, right, he wants me to go backstage with him while he entertains his VIPs.

“I almost blew a gasket when that woman grabbed your ass. I don’t think it’s a good idea for me to be back there.” My lips flatten into a frown as I picture it again. Is his backside as firm as it looks in those jeans? I bet it’s as toned as the rest of him. My fingers twitch as I smother the urge to find out.

His lips pull up into a smirk before his pink tongue darts out and licks his lips. “Are you jealous, sweetheart?”

Heat surges up my chest and my neck and flows into my face. “Jealous that she got to bases I haven’t been able to with you? Yes,” I answer honestly.

He gently releases his hold on me, allowing me to slide down the front of him, but keeps an arm around my lower back. “It’s much more controlled back there. They’re told ahead of time what they’re allowed to do.” He meets my gaze, his eyes still dark with lust. My thighs clench in anticipation. “Touching me isn’t allowed.”

Thank the heavens. The ladies better abide by it, or a side of me I’ve never seen will tear its way out of me. “Good. What do I do?”

“Just follow my lead.”

“I don’t want to make it awkward for you.”

“You won’t. Just pretend they’re your clients. No biggie.”

“This is your thing. I don’t mind waiting out here.” Backing away slowly, I’m worried I may be arrested for assault tonight.

“Sweetheart, I want you with me.” A vulnerability that I’ve never seen crosses his features and all but seals my fate.

It scares me how much he affects me. How is he able to ensnare me like this with only a few simple words strung together?



Teagan

My heart is pounding a steady rhythm in my chest. I wasn't thinking clearly when I told Natalie to stay with me. She's always lured me in like a siren, but tonight? Holy shit. I can't believe I got a chubby holding her. It would be so easy to bury myself in her. Man, I want to. That would put us both in a position we agreed not to be in. Not saying that her pussy is so magical I'd fall in love with her, but I'm afraid I already have feelings that could quickly morph into more. As it is, I feel more for her than I have any other woman.

My grip tightens on the steering wheel as I pull into the parking lot of the vast seven story building. I cast a glance at Natalie in the passenger seat. The streetlight shines through the window and illuminates her face as she chews on her lip.

"Is this the hotel?" Natalie asks, turning her head to watch the building as we drive by.

We both have careers that take up most of our free time. A real relationship between us would be too hard to maintain. She wasn't lying when she said she worked her ass off. She hardly ever has a day off between interior decorating and working at the bar. I'm either performing, traveling to perform, or working on new music. I'm only checking a box she needs for her boss. Once we both get what we need, it'll be over. Thoughts of us ending send a pang through my chest. I'm not ready to let her go.

“Yes.”

Natalie’s been quiet since we left the venue, up until now. I drove her Durango instead of riding in the tour bus with the guys. The hotel wasn’t far from the fairgrounds. Maybe she’s just tired. She did work today. Sliding my key card in the slot, I let her in first. I already have a bottle of her favorite Moscato chilling in the fridge. It was the first thing I thought to do when I knew she was coming.

She avoids looking at the bed as I wheel her small pink luggage into the room. “Thank you.”

Strolling to the mini fridge, I pull out her bottle and pour her a glass, gaining me a smile. I snag myself a cold beer before coming over to where she stands.

“You remembered.” She takes the glass from me, our fingers brushing slightly, and fire skirts across my skin.

I remember everything you say or do. Instead, I say, “I know you like it as a nightcap most nights.”

I also know how hard it was for her to be at a concert again. I won’t say that, though. I’m not sure how well she’s actually holding it together. It looked like she was ready to fall apart backstage before we performed, and I could’ve sworn I saw the remnants of tears after I came off the stage.

“That I do.” She smirks.

“I’ll sleep here. You can have the bed.” I toss the extra pillow and sheet from the closet onto the loveseat.

She scoffs. “Don’t be ridiculous. The bed is big enough for both of us.”

I look at her. I don’t want to voice all the dirty things I could do to her in that bed. That I want to do to her in that bed.

“What, you don’t think you can keep your hands off me?” She smiles coyly over her glass. The flirty bartender making an appearance.

“Don’t flatter yourself, I was just trying to be a gentleman.” Who am I kidding? All I’ve thought about since the concert was running my hands all over that sexy body of hers.

She smirks. Natalie knows the truth. How could she not feel my hard on when I picked her up after the concert. I still can’t believe that happened, but then again, Jared has it right, bombshell bartender. What sane man can hold her and not sport a woody?

“Touchee.” She glances at the bed, and her body goes rigid as she tucks her hair behind her ear. ”Do you have a shirt I can borrow?”

“Uh. Sure. Why do you need a shirt?”

Her gaze flicks across the room, landing everywhere but on me. “I don’t have anything to sleep in.”

“Oh, you forgot to pack something?” I just brought her small luggage into the room. She must have something in there. Maybe she just wants to wear one of mine. I like the thought of that more than I should. There’s just something about a

woman wearing a man's shirt that does it for me. All that feminine softness wrapped up in an overly big shirt.

Her cheeks flush a pretty shade of pink. "Well, I wasn't expecting to share a room." At my confused expression, she groans, and the pink dusting her face turns a deep shade of crimson. "I don't usually sleep in anything, Teagan."

"Oh." *Oh damn.* A naked Natalie sleeping next to me paints a stunning picture. A woman comfortable enough in her skin to sleep nude is hot as hell. My voice turns hoarse. "I'll get that shirt."

Digging through the small drawer, I pull out a gray cotton t-shirt. Is she even going to be wearing underwear? Reaching back in, I grab a dark blue tee that's a bit longer. If I was a onesie type of man, which I'm not- that's what I'd give her. No chance of it riding up and showing more of that sun-kissed skin.

Sleep proves to be hard to come by after we finally hit the sheets. All I can think of is how close she is and how good it felt to hold her earlier. Finally, sleep decides to put me out of my misery, and darkness settles all around me. No more thoughts of Natalie to torture me with.

I wake up snaked all around Natalie's small body, her back pressed tightly against my chest. Taking a deep breath and inhaling the soft scent of her shampoo, I freeze. My right hand is up her shirt—my shirt—and her left breast fills my palm. Her small nipple is pebbled and brushes against my skin with every one of her breaths.

My hard cock is firm against her ass. My boxer briefs and her thin-ass underwear are the only things separating us. Shit. And here I told her not to flatter herself last night, and then I'm practically molesting her while she sleeps. Her deep, steady breathing tells me she hasn't woken up, and is unaware of the line I just blew out of the water.

Good job, TJ. Way to make this nearly unbearable. I try to free my hand gently, but she pushes herself against it while arching her back and pressing her ass against my rigid length. A quiet, breathy moan fills the space, and my eyes cross at the sensation of her body grinding against mine as she squirms. I hiss in response. Fuck, fuck, fuck!

I all but yank my hand back while simultaneously flinging myself onto my back and putting some space between us. She stirs but falls back into a deep sleep. What the hell just happened? My chest heaves in several ragged breaths while I try to calm my racing heart. Everywhere our bodies touched still feels like it's on fire, as if she branded me with her flesh. A reminder of everything we can't be.

That moan, though. Holy hell, I'm going to hear that every time I look at her. That's just great, I'll be sporting a wood whenever I'm near her. I guess it'll be football stats to the rescue, the only proven method I've found to stall an erection.

Chapter Twelve



Natalie

A soft tapping awakens me. My eyelids flutter open. Morning light filters through the side of the drapes. Thoughts filter in about last night. I felt Teagan tug me in close to him while he was sleeping and I let him. I even let him trail his hand up my shirt to cup my breast in his palm. It felt so good to be held, I'm only partly ashamed I allowed it. He was fast asleep and wasn't aware of his actions and once I settled my own pulse down I slept better than I have in months. What does that say about me? So much for not needing a man. It seems only another man can dull the haunting dreams of another.

Being that close to Teagan lent itself to a pulsing ache in between my thighs. I can't remember a time when I've been this needy before. Squeezing my thighs together tightly, I roll onto my back and find the other side of the bed empty. Disappointment shoots through me until I hear the shower running in the bathroom. That must've been the noise that woke me up. I grab my phone off the nightstand. It's still early, just barely eight. We didn't get back to the hotel until nearly one in the morning.

Closing my eyes, I still feel his body pressed against mine, the taste of his lips, his hand gently squeezing my hip, my breast, my throat. I never thought that could be a turn on but hot damn. My own fingers slide down my smooth stomach and

dip below my panties. I'm soaking wet. A soft moan falls from my lips as my finger touches the sensitive nub. I begin working myself faster, harder. The moans are a struggle to keep quiet. It's been too long since I've had an orgasm, even longer since I've had one that came from a man. I don't think I can face Teagan with so much pulsing need thrumming in my veins. I'm liable to jump his bones the moment he comes out here. And we can't have that happening. We agreed, no sex.

My orgasm builds fast, I'm so close. I pretend it's his hand on me, then his mouth, with that skilled tongue of his. God, it feels so good. A noise startles me and my eyes fly open. Teagan stands just outside the bathroom door, his dark eyes trained on me and where my hand is below the covers. My pulse races and my breaths come in quicker now that I've been caught. Heat dances across my skin and inflames my face. He stands there as if frozen in time, his own breaths are shallow as his nostrils flare. Our eyes are locked together.

"Don't stop on my account," his deep voice is hoarser than I've ever heard.

"Teagan, I..."

"I said, don't stop. Be a good girl and finish," he commands.

Good girl? That's the second time in so many days he's said that to me. I never understood how women like that but being on the other end? I just want to please him and hear him say it again. I want to be his good girl. I want him to please me too.

Slowly, I tuck my fingers back under the waistband of my underwear, never breaking eye contact. I've never been into

exhibitionism, but something about him watching me do this makes it that much more intense. My body is extremely sensitive this morning, probably due to how I fell asleep last night. Another quiet moan slips out and he closes his eyes before opening them and pinning me with the heat of his gaze.

“Take the blanket off so I can see your pretty pussy,” he murmurs.

Pausing my movements, I flip the blankets back as he stalks closer but stops at the foot of the bed. I continue caressing my sensitive nub as I look at Teagan. He’s wearing dark denim jeans and a white shirt that stretches tightly across his muscled shoulders and chest. I wish he would climb in bed and finish it for me, but something tells me he won’t.

“Mmm. You’re so fucking perfect,” he groans as he stares at what’s laid out for him in the bed.

“Teagan. I. Want. You,” I say in between pants. I’m almost there. The tingling is already starting to build again in my toes.

His jaw clenches, and his hands tighten into fists at his sides. I don’t ever recall a time when a man radiating so much from his body that it was a palpable heady force. It’s nearly suffocating. Too much and not enough at the same time. I need him, more than the blood pulsing in my veins.

“Please,” I beg him in a voice I don’t recognize.

A muscle feathers in his jaw, and he swallows, his throat moving slowly. “I can’t.”

A whimper leaves me. I'm completely bared to him, and he still won't touch me. I know he wants me, too. I felt it last night. More than once. I carry on in spite of him to show him what he's missing. It's his loss. If he won't take me right here in this bed, I'll make sure this will be something that is branded in his mind. My pussy clenches around an aching emptiness, desperate to feel his rigid length inside me, and another whimper escapes.

“Oh fuck!” I cry out as my orgasm shoots through me like a lightning bolt. My limbs pulse, and my thighs shake. Teagan's still standing in the same spot as if his feet are cemented to the beige carpet, watching me as I struggle to catch my breath. His eyelids are hooded, and as my eyes travel lower, there's a large bulge in his pants, and I lick my lips, wanting to taste him.

Embarrassment grips me now that the aftershocks have slowed. My already overheated skin grows hotter underneath his blazing eyes. “Say something.”

“That was the hottest fucking thing I've ever seen,” he groans and closes his eyes. I swear I can see his erection still growing from here. Every corded muscle from his hands to his shoulder is wound so tight as if one small movement from him and he'll detonate.

“You could've joined me,” I bait him as the shy feeling subsides now that I know he enjoyed the show.

His entire body tenses as I come to stand beside him. “That's not what this is, Natalie.”

Even though the words hurt, they're true. "Right. Well, I'm going to take a shower."

I saunter past him with an extra bounce in my step, grabbing my clothes and locking myself inside the bathroom.

I stare at the reflection looking back at me, and a giggle breaks free. "What the hell did you just do?" I whisper to myself as another laugh bubbles up. I don't know who this new Natalie is but I kind of like her.

Checkmate, Teagan.



Teagan

After seeing Natalie like that, I couldn't get away from her fast enough, I've never had a war like that take place inside my body. I wanted to go to her, I wanted to be the one that brought her over the edge... But I couldn't. As muddy as this relationship is starting to get, we need to stand our ground with that. But the sounds she made... fuck. Strip clubs and porn don't have shit on her. I nearly came just by watching her please herself. How does she have such a hold over me? How can this one tiny brunette shred my will to nothing but scraps?

This jam session with the guys is much needed after that. I can get lost in the music. Lyrics are a musician's way of saying all those brutally terrifying thoughts pounding through his head, such as my feelings about little Miss Natalie. She makes me feel things no other woman ever has. And that fucking terrifies me. There we go. There should be a song about how terrifying the female species is. I think it would hit well with the men.

I don't know how much longer I can hold on to this notion that we can't sleep together. Every day seems like a new obstacle course to get through. How will I make it through the day without attacking my fiancée? That's one of the first things that pops into my mind on days that I'm home. Speaking of, I head back to Georgia the day after tomorrow.

She's been radio silent since she left the hotel immediately after her shower, saying she had to work. That was this morning. The band is on the way to our next gig in Colorado, so today is just a traveling day for us. It makes the perfect time to practice and try out some new stuff. We're all trapped on this bus anyway; we might as well make use of our time.

Every time I close my eyes for even a second, I picture her spread out for me on that bed. Her own fingers bringing her pleasure. The intoxicating scent of her arousal lingered in that room long after she left, and I swear it burned itself into my nostrils. I inhale deeply. Yep. Still there.

"You alright, TJ?" Landon, my drummer asks. "You look like you're out in left field."

You have no idea where my mind is at. All the ways this morning could've played out if I'd gone to her like she asked. How I could've made her feel ecstasy. How I wish she would've screamed my name instead of a curse word.

"Long night," I mumble. Their answering snickers bring a scowl to my face. "Got something to say?"

"Nope." Thomas snorts and adjusts the strap over his chest.

"How'd that hotel room treat you?" Jared leans back on the sofa, covering his laugh with a fake cough. He just can't help himself can he?

"Fuck you!" I bark.

"Well, gentleman, I'd say it's a safe bet he didn't get laid with his sparkly attitude this morning," Landon states the

obvious, making the other two laugh out loud.

”Did she sleep in the same bed as you?” Thomas asks with raised eyebrows, and his lips are pulled tightly together to hold back his grin.

Great, now he’s in on it too? Leveling him with a glare, I bite out the question, “Are you done yet?”

“Shit man. Let me guess, you woke up to her all snuggled up on your chest, and the big broody TJ melted under her touch?” Jared quips.

“No.” Try the other way around asshole. No matter how much they pry, I’m not admitting to what I did, nor how she took care of herself after. “I’m not talking about her.”

“She turned you down, didn’t she? Got one look at what you’re packing, and she was like, nope, I want the drummer. I bet he’s packing a really big one. I should look her up.” Landon begins scrolling through his phone as if he’d have her phone number programmed in there. Who knows, maybe he does. He’s a twisted son of a bitch.

”You stay the fuck away from her, she’s mine.” I jump up into Landon’s face, surprising all of us. The room falls silent save for the sounds of the tires on the asphalt below us. He doesn’t move, and our eyes stay locked on one another’s.

“Possessive much?” Jared interjects, breaking the stare-down between Landon and me.

I run my hands through my hair and tug on the ends until it stings. “I don’t know what the hell is happening to me,” I

admit quietly.

Jared sighs loudly. "Look, I don't want to pretend I know what you're going through with this whole fake dating thing. But I saw the way she looked at you as she watched you sing last night. You can't fake that shit. Natalie looks at you like you're her whole world."

"No, she doesn't." She can't. It was all for show. They should know that.

"I saw it too," Thomas admits with a nod.

"She's falling for you, TJ." Even Landon sees this shit? Usually, he's only about screwing around, nothing else.

I work a swallow down a throat that's turned as dry as the Sahara. "She can't be."

"Does it have to be fake?" Jared asks with a confused look on his face.

I've asked myself this question as well. Unfortunately, the answer is yes.

"She's not ready, and neither am I." I take a haggard breath, not wanting to discuss much of Natalie's issues with others. "I don't know what happened to her and she won't tell me, but I think her ex left her broken."

"Nobody's ever truly broken. Think of her like a mosaic. All those shattered pieces of glass come together in the most beautiful of ways. Never the same again, but sometimes things are meant to be broken to find the glue that puts them back together. You could be her glue, Teagan."

I let Thomas's words sink in. When he puts it that way, I want to be what puts her back together again, but I don't think I'm capable of being what she needs. I have my own trust issues when it comes to women. Knowing she wouldn't be with me for money, it would always be in the back of my mind that she was only with me because of my name.

"When did you turn wise, Thomas?" I ask, smirking.

"I've been doing a lot of self-reflection lately." He turns away from us and takes a hefty drink from his water bottle before setting it on the floor beside him.

That wipes the growing grin off my face. I knew he'd been hurting since his latest breakup, but he never mentioned it. I didn't think it was that bad.

"Another go?" Thomas holds his hands up as if we need to hurry up and get back to work. Like, we literally don't have all day.

I'll let him have this out. I strum a few chords as my answer. There's been too much talk of our feelings already. I need to get Natalie out of my head, and the only way to do that is to play my guitar and let the lyrics take hold of me. A task made far more difficult with the new pinup poster tacked to the front of my brain.

The bus bumps along the road, and we practice until the driver pulls to a stop just outside a promising-looking pizza joint. Just in time, my fingertips are numb from playing for so long without a reprieve. It seems no matter how hard I strum the chords, Natalie won't leave my mind.

Chapter Thirteen



Natalie

What a long day. The only thing that got me through today was knowing there's a steamy hot tub and a chilled glass of wine calling my name. Most of my clients are pretty easy to deal with, but this one? Every change that I suggest, she shoots down. If she doesn't like anything I put in front of her, maybe she should decorate her own damn house then.

Dropping my purse on the counter, I head to my room to change into my bikini. Filling my glass with my favorite Moscato, I walk toward the back patio. After I tug the cover off the hot tub and lower myself inside the nearly scalding water, it takes a few minutes for my body to adjust to the temperature. Sipping my wine and leaning my head back against the edge, I feel the worries from the day slipping away inch by inch into the steam hovering above.

The sun is just starting to set in the distance, painting the sky a beautiful pinkish hue. The birds are the only sound I've heard for the past thirty minutes until I hear rustling from inside. Teagan must be home. Right, it's only Monday, ugh. This week will be brutal, for sure. I'm not ready to see his face after what transpired at the hotel last week. We've barely talked, and I know it's because of what I did.

The sliding door behind me opens, and his footsteps slap on the vinyl slats that make up the deck.

“Hey,” his deep voice cuts through the bird song.

Turning my head, I can't help but notice he's in a pair of gray swim trunks, and the skin that's showing is mouth-watering. His large biceps and pecs leading down to the hard edges of his abs with a small smattering of hair leading to... exactly where I shouldn't be thinking of. I have a few more months of my pact with Gabriella. Then I can get laid. He's already proven that he won't get sexual with me. I was laid out before him, and he was able to resist me. Not my most girl-power moment, but the evidence was in his pants regardless.

He's been avoiding me like I've got the plague ever since. Even though he came home for a few days in between concerts, he mainly stayed in his office playing his guitar for the short while I was here in between my own jobs. I hate to admit it but I've missed him and that makes me even more angry with myself.

“Hi. I didn't think you'd be home tonight. I'm sorry, I can go.” I stand, and the water sloshes back and forth. Probably not a good idea for me to be wearing such little clothing around him. I might have a round two with myself right here just to test him. Now, there's a thought.

“Why would I want you to leave?” Teagan sets his own towel next to mine and places his beer on the rim before turning to face me. There are dark patches under his eyes, as if he hasn't been sleeping well either.

“I don't know, just thought you'd want to be alone.”

You know, since you've avoided me at all costs for the past week. His eyes catch the ring swinging on my necklace as I sit back down. Shit. He's never seen it, I've always worn shirts that hide it. I was thinking he wouldn't be home until tomorrow. It's a subject I've been meaning to talk to him about, just in case, but I haven't found the right time.

“What is that?” he snaps, pointing at my chest.

I wrap my hand around the diamond ring, the pointy bits jabbing into my palm. “It's not what you think.”

“You're wearing my ring on your finger while you have another man's ring around your neck? Whose is it?” he practically growls the last three words.

I've never seen this side of him before. I'm stunned into silence. Could Harper be right about his anger, at least? I know he'd never lay a hand on me, and I'm not scared of him, but the set of his jaw and the glint in his eyes is downright murderous as if he'd slay the one who gave me the ring.

“Do you have any idea what that could do to us?” The words shouted so loud they hung in the air as if they were their own entity. Thick and heavy and even more hurtful than he probably thought they'd be.

And there it is, the root of his anger. “Yeah, that's all you care about is your perfect image.” I shake my head as rage fills my chest. “You wouldn't understand.”

“Then enlighten me. Who the fuck does it belong to, Natalie?” he asks in a low voice, his fingers grasping the sides

of the hot tub as the muscles on his forearms flex.

Swallowing down the anxiety threatening to choke me, I sputter, “It was my engagement ring from my ex. I keep it as a reminder not to fall for another man again.” I can’t look at him. He’s part of the reason I need this reminder so much lately.

He sighs, and the water splashes around as he scrubs at his face. “We’re not all evil bastards, you know.”

“I know that,” I snap before whispering, “But I won’t survive heartbreak like that again. Every time I have even an inkling of wanting a relationship the weight and sharp edges remind me of what it feels like to lose everything I ever cared about.” Standing up and stepping out I yank my towel off the chair and storm inside before I crumble.

“Wait, don’t go—”

I dart for the safety of my bedroom, careful of slipping on the tile floors with my wet feet. Shutting the door behind me and sitting on a small area rug in my bedroom, I wrap the towel around me as the tears begin to leak out. Why is this so hard? It’s been nearly a year, and the pain still crushes me. It ebbs and flows like a wave of torment and despair that won’t let me go. It’s always trying to drown me in it. Pulling me down deeper and deeper into the abyss.

There’s a knock at the door, and I huff out a curse word. Pulling the towel even tighter around my huddled body I croak, “Go away.”

“Baby, I’m sorry. I don’t know what he did to make you feel this much pain, but I wish I could take it all away. I want you to be happy, and you don’t deserve to be stuck in a marriage you don’t want.” He pauses, and it sounds as if he rests his head against the door. “You can stay as long as you want, but don’t feel obligated to marry me. Good night, Natalie.”

What? “No. Wait.” I scramble up and whip the door open. “I just need space when it comes to this. Please don’t push me to take it off. I need it.” The words rasp roughly across my throat. I clutch the offending jewelry in my fingers, squeezing as tightly as I can. “Nobody ever sees it, and I keep it hidden. Gabriella’s the only one who knows about it.”

He softens before me and brushes the wet hair out of my face. “What did he do?”

Shaking my head, I tell him with new tears falling, “I can’t.” I won’t tell him what seeing my fiancée and best friend betray me did. How it utterly wrecked me and left me a broken mess whose too afraid to ever love again. Who thinks she’s undeserving of love. Who still doesn’t understand what she did so wrong to deserve that.

Tugging me into his open arms, he holds me close, and I feel that barrier I erect when it comes to men slowly slipping from my grasp. He’s making it so hard not to fall for him. Even in his anger, the desire he has for me was barely contained. He wants me maybe as much as I want him, and he’s holding back. He’s stronger than I am.

“When I saw it... I don’t know. I thought you were with somebody else.” His breath fans across the shell of my ear.

I tense. After what I’ve been through, I’d never put somebody in that place, even a fake fiancé. “We may not have spoken more than the one rule out loud, but I thought that one was crystal clear. I’m not dating anyone, and I won’t be for as long as we’re... whatever we are.”

“Same.” He nods in agreement.

“When it comes to him, I just need you to leave it alone. That’s a wound I don’t think will ever heal.” My lower lip trembles as I try to keep from crying.

His rough hands rub from the small of my back to between my shoulder blades and back again. “Then let me help you.”

“How? Date me for real?” The lack of clothing we’re wearing, and his warm body pressed against me makes it hard to concentrate. Being in his arms feels like coming home, as if it’s where I’m meant to be. It’s beautiful and awful at the same time. A tragic love story not given the chance to bloom in this volatile climate we call life.

His hand stills. “If that’s what it takes.”

He uses the same phrase I said to him not so long ago. Funny how not more than a week ago I asked him to join me in bed, and he refused. “I care about you, Teagan, I do. But I can’t take that risk.” Sex is one thing, but real dating? I can’t go there.

“What if you’re wrong about me?” he says barely above a whisper, I could hardly hear him over the loud thudding in my chest and ears.

That’s what I’m afraid of. I know the rumors of what he did to his ex are false. I can’t believe I even entertained that idea earlier. “I never said you were a bad guy. I’d be the one with the broken heart at the end.”

“And if this was all supposed to happen?” His hand caresses my back again, and I shiver.

“You mean like fate?”

He nods.

“Okay, Romeo, I think you’ve had one too many.” I pat his chest. “Love isn’t in the cards for us.”

“Why are you so jaded?” He doesn’t sound bitter, just tired and concerned.

“Fate is just a twisted bitch hell-bent on fucking us all over in the end.” Unfortunately, some more than others. I’ve left a string of men in my wake, all of them hurt me in one way or another.



Teagan

What a clusterfuck. I didn't realize how much planning went into a simple wedding. Natalie and her mom are running the show, and I'm just sitting back, watching the magic happen. Hard to imagine in less than eighteen hours, I'll be a married man. Not the wedding I thought I'd have, for sure. But marrying Natalie? I wouldn't get that lucky to find another good one like her, even if it is a farce. My cell phone buzzes in my pocket. Tugging it out, I grit my teeth while sending the call to voicemail. Harper's got some nerve calling me today of all days.

It's sad to think that we'll most likely be divorced within a year, but I hope we can at least stay friends. I want more with her, but we made a deal. Neither of us can fall in love. We both are already married to our jobs and don't have the time to actually put into a relationship. It's a means to an end. I have to keep reminding myself of that. Once she inherits the company and Harper isn't able to come after my money, our marriage will be null and void.

Why did we even bother with an actual wedding? We should've just gone to the courthouse. Oh, right. That would be too suspicious. Have to make this shit public. I have all I can do to keep my hands off her now. That honeymoon in Jamaica will be hell if it's any indication of the last time we shared a bed.

At least the honeymoon's over a month away. I had to wait until the tour was over for this season. Natalie's been quieter and more distant from me since the night I saw her old engagement ring around her neck, almost like a shell of herself.

"Can I talk to you?" Natalie's brother Ethan asks, straightening the cuff of his button-up shirt.

"Of course." I follow him out of the ballroom into the empty hallway and down to another smaller conference room.

He shuts the door. Here we go. I knew something would be coming from him. He's been glaring at me all night. Ethan flexes his muscles. He may be a big dude, but I grew up on the wrong side of the tracks. I know how to handle myself if it comes to it.

"What's the deal with you and Nat?" He asks as he turns toward me and pins me with a questioning gaze.

I bristle at his tone. "What do you mean?"

"I know my sister, and this isn't what she would've wanted."

"Care to elaborate on that?"

"This half-ass wedding you're giving her for one, and for two, I didn't even know about you until a month ago. What do you want from her?" His glare shoots daggers into me.

"First off, she's chosen almost everything for the wedding besides the food we decided on together. And so what if you didn't know about me before? I'm here now, and what I want from her is to be my wife." My voice comes out harsher than I

intend. I'm trying to keep my cool, but I've been walking on eggshells all damn day. My nerves are frazzled to the point of no return.

My wife. That's going to take some getting used to. She deserves so much more than this, I agree. I can't blame him for being angry with me. If I had a sister, I'd do the same.

"Something's not right here, and I'm going to figure it out. Did she even show you her binder?"

"What binder?" What the hell is he rambling about?

"That alone tells me everything I need to know. You don't know a damn thing about her, do you?" He takes a step closer to me.

"I know enough," I snap. "What the fuck does a binder have to do with this?"

He scoffs and shakes his head. "Dude, she's had her wedding planned out since she was thirteen. Everything from the dress, the flowers, the food, even the damn venue. Pictures were cut out of magazines and glued to card stock with little bubbles of words next to them. And this?" He turns his head and takes in the room. "Is nothing like what she wanted."

Oh fuck. It's like a bucket of ice water is dumped over me. I took all that away from her by doing this. Everything she's ever wanted. No wonder he's pissed. "I didn't know." I feel like a total jerk.

"I'm only gonna say this once, so you better listen up. I don't care how much money you have or your fancy lawyers;

you hurt my baby sister, and there's nothing that will stop me from ruining you. Nothing.”

His eyes darken as he presses his finger into my sternum, and I fight the urge to grab ahold of his hand and teach him just who he's messing with, but I won't do that to Natalie. He can play it his way, and if it comes to blows, I will defend myself. I won't stand here and let him hit me, I'm just not wired that way.

“Ethan!” The door swings open, and Natalie stalks inside and comes between us. Her eyes widen in disbelief. “What the hell are you doing?” she asks her brother.

“Doing what's best for you because clearly, you're not thinking things through here.” He throws a hand in my direction.

That son of a bitch. “That's enough. Your issue's with me, not her.” I step forward, but she places her palm on my chest, a pleading look in her eyes, which stops me from grabbing ahold of her brother.

Ethan looks me up and down, then steps closer as well. “Oh yeah, big guy? What are you gonna do?”

Natalie puts her hand on her brother as well and pushes us both back. “Stop!” she shouts. The room falls into a dead silence. “Teagan, can you give us a minute, please?” Natalie asks quietly, staring at the floor.

I nod and stroke her cheek with my knuckles. “I'll be right out there if you need me.”

Walking out the door, I purposefully leave it cracked and disappear around the corner. Needing to be close in case things get out of hand, I lean against the wall and toss my head back. How did I fuck this up so badly for her? I thought I was doing her a favor. Turns out I'm just the thief stealing her happily ever after.

“You need to leave him alone.” Her voice carries down the corridor, sterner than I've ever heard come out of her, even when she barked at Tony not to touch her.

“I know you! And this-this half-ass wedding isn't you. What's gotten into you? You've had your dream wedding planned for nearly ten years, and you're what just giving up on all that? For him?”

“People change. I've changed.” Her voice is tinted with exhaustion.

“I don't believe that. He made you change!” Ethan's voice raises at her.

I fight the urge to run back in there.

“Fairytale weddings are unobtainable; there's no knight in shining armor waiting to carry me off on a goddamn horse. I grew up. What do you think coming home to surprise my fiance and finding him fucking my best friend on my kitchen table did to me? All my dreams went out the fucking window that day!” she shouts. “I couldn't even live in the city I loved anymore because everything reminded me of him.” Her voice cracks.

Damn, she never told me that. No wonder she doesn't want to have a relationship with anybody for a while. Her admission makes my own chest feel tight with remorse for her. What the hell kind of man would do that to her? One not deserving of her, that's for damn sure. It had to be wiry little sunflower shit from the restaurant.

"I know you, baby girl. You've always worn your heart on your sleeve. You've just gotten good about hiding your feelings, but your eyes can't lie. Something is going on here. You're troubled. Why?"

"Please just let it be, Ethan." Her voice cracks again, and then she sniffs. I have all I can do to keep my feet planted where they are. Fuck this hurts.

"I can't. Do you even love him?"

Holding my breath until she answers is agony. I've been falling for her, and at times, I think she is too. Fake emotions and real emotions blend together until I can't tell one from the other. But after what just came out of her mouth, how can I compete with that? It seems she doesn't believe in happily ever afters anymore, and I don't blame her. I thought what Harper did was bad, well, that's a drop in the bucket compared to Natalie's heartache. Her fiancé and her best friend? No wonder she's so jaded.

At her silence, Ethan urges, "Answer the question."

I slam my eyes shut and squeeze my fists together until my short nails make scarlet crescents into the skin of my palm. She needs to deal with him on her own because if I go in there,

his face will meet the overly polished floor below him. If he continues to push her, I'm not sure how long I'll last staying out here.

"I don't know," she croaks.

She doesn't know if she loves me or not. That's not a no. Maybe she's feeling the same conflicted emotions as I am. Torn between what we think is right and what we want because I want her with every beat of my heart.

"That's not good enough," he snaps.

My jaw hardens. He needs to back off now. My foot takes a step toward the door without conscious thought. My heel making a dark scuff mark on the glossy finish.

"Teagan's a good man. He makes me happy and treats me like a queen. I'd think you'd want that." Her voice is harsh.

"Of course I want that. Why are you marrying him if you don't love him? That's what I can't wrap my head around."

"I never said I didn't love him."

I freeze. My lungs cannot expand, and my pulse thunders in my ears. Does she? I strain to hear her next words. Echoes from the other guests float down the narrow corridor. Natalie's niece squeals with delight, undoubtedly still playing with Dustin, my nephew.

"You didn't say you did," he points out.

"It's complicated." She pauses. "Do you trust me?"

"You know I do."

“Then trust that I know what I’m doing. You can either respect my wishes or leave. Either way, I’m marrying Teagan tomorrow. But I’d rather have my only sibling supporting me.”

The silence is deafening. He finally answers, “Okay.”

Her heels clack on the tile coming toward me. I dart to the end so she doesn’t know I was eavesdropping, not that they were quiet. When she’s ready to tell me about her ex, she will.

The clacking stops, and I hold my breath for what else she could say. “One more thing. Don’t you *ever* threaten my husband again.”

I don’t hear his answer as she comes through the door and notices me, a frown on her face. I wrap my arms around her as soon as she’s close. She inhales deeply, placing her arms around my neck.

“Natalie, I’m so sorry.” More sorry than she could ever know. I tuck my face into her hair.

“Don’t apologize. He was in the wrong, not you.”

I pull back slightly. “He’s only looking out for you. That’s what a good brother does.”

Her eyebrows draw together. “But he’s wrong about you.”

“Hey, Nat, I gotta ask, do you—”

The ballroom doors bust open. “Natalie? Oh good, there you are. We need you inside, dear, and you too, Teagan.”

Natalie puts a finger up, telling her mom to wait. “What were you saying?”

“It’s okay. We’ll talk later.” I don’t want an audience. I’ll give her one last chance to stop this wedding if that’s what she wants.

Chapter Fourteen



Natalie

Oh my god, it's really happening. I'm set to walk down our makeshift aisle in the hotel courtyard in an hour. I haven't seen Teagan since a little while after he and Ethan had that little spat in the conference room yesterday. Gabby and my mom forced me to do a bachelorette party last night, which really only consisted of going to the spa and then cocktails by the pool.

"Are you alright, honey?" Wrinkles form around my mother's light blue-gray eyes, which I inherited.

"I'm fine. I just need a little me time, okay."

Deep breaths. In and out. I haven't had a moment alone since yesterday morning. Yesterday mom showed up and made sure I was with her during the night and not Teagan. She wanted to make sure "the love birds didn't break the cardinal rule of seeing each other on the eve of their wedding."

My mom pats my arm before quietly exiting the dressing room. Gabby comes to stand beside me and rests her palm on my bare back. Her hand is warm against my skin that is dewy from a cold sweat that broke out moments ago.

"Are you sure about this?" She lowers her voice and purses her lips. She's the only person I've told who knows the whole scope of my relationship with Teagan.

Am I sure? Hell no. I have no idea what I'm doing at this moment. I nod silently.

"I'll be in the guest room if you need me."

"Thanks, Gabby." I lean my head against her arm before she turns away.

Once she leaves, I drop down into the nearest chair, a velvet tufted chaise and stare at my wedding dress hanging off the bathroom door. My surroundings turn blurry. Putting my head in my hands, I'm careful not to mess up my makeup or my half-up half-down hairdo as I take several deep breaths trying to will away the tears. I feel like I can't breathe. The walls are closing in around me. I break out into another cold sweat. What am I doing?

All the what-ifs flood my brain until it's overloaded with all the worst possible scenarios playing out in vivid detail. The simplest, tripping and falling in front of all the guests seated outside, the worst? Teagan completely wrecking my life. Am I making a huge mistake marrying him?

Knocking draws my attention from the floor. I gently pat my eyes with a tissue from the box beside me.

"Yeah?" I ask and cringe at how hoarse my voice came out.

"It's me. Can I come in?" Teagan's voice travels through the thin wood of the door. Of all the people to be on the other side, of course, it would be him.

"It's bad luck to see each other before..." I couldn't even say it. It's not even real.

“Are you decent?” he asks.

“I’m wearing clothes if that’s what you’re asking.” I roll my eyes and shake my head.

Not the dress I’m supposed to be in, though. I haven’t been able to bring myself to put it on. I lied when I said I had changed. I still want a big wedding. I still want to be in love. I still want to feel like the most precious thing in the world to somebody. But that’s not fair to Teagan; we made a deal. I can’t back out now.

The soft click of the door is followed by my drop-dead gorgeous soon-to-be husband. His dress shoes are muffled by the carpet. As my gaze travels the length of him I almost wish I hadn’t looked at all. His black tuxedo is fitted to his muscular frame, and the only pop of color is the emerald tie around his neck. Green always brings out the dark green flecks of his eyes. My mouth waters. Does he really have to look that good in a suit? He looks like he could grace the cover of Vogue magazine.

“You’re beautiful.” He gazes down to where I’m sitting on the chaise. The smooth fabric is soft as butter against my bare legs where my sleep shorts stop.

“We’re not supposed to see each other,” I repeat, unable to look away from his eyes that are brimming with lust and something else I can’t place.

“That’s an old wives tail. Besides, you’re not in your dress yet, and I don’t think that really applies to us.” He searches my face. “Tell me, what’s going on?”

“It’s just... It’s a lot.” I turn away from him, feeling the tears building again and not wanting him to see how much I’m torn apart at this moment.

“Hey.” Teagan kneels in front of me and tugs my chin until I look at him. “You don’t have to do this.”

Sniffing, I say, “I don’t want to let you down.”

He gives me a sad smile as he sits beside me on the small piece of furniture. Teagan wraps his arm around my waist and leans into me. “Sweetheart, you could never let me down.”

“It just feels so real,” I whisper. Not just the wedding but the feelings I have for him. But we made our rules clear in the beginning. This wasn’t supposed to happen. He was just supposed to stay my friend, and friends don’t feel this way about each other. God, I’m such a freaking wreck inside.

Taking my hand in his, he admits, “It feels real to me, too.”

My stomach does that weird flip again, and I tilt my head to look at him. “It does?”

He shrugs. “How could it not?”

I think I’m falling in love with you. The words are there, but I can’t say them out loud. I can’t open myself up for heartbreak again. I don’t think I’d survive losing him. But I’ll still lose him in the end, anyway. I trail my fingers down the lapels of his suit coat. My skin glides down the smooth satin-like fabric.

“I like you in a tux.” He grins, which only makes the wetness rimming my eyes grow.

His smile slips. “Why didn’t you tell me about your wedding binder?” he asks softly, resting his forehead on mine, his breath mixing with my own.

Of course, Ethan would tell him that. I throw my hands up in the air. “Because it doesn’t matter. This isn’t even real.” A tear leaks out of my eye as I admit my biggest regret.

He reaches a hand up and gently swipes the tear away with his thumb. “I would’ve given you that wedding had I known.”

Why does he have to say things like that? Doesn’t he realize I’m trying desperately not to love him? Failing, but trying so damn hard. “But why?”

“Even though we’re getting married for untraditional reasons, you’ll still be my wife and be treated as such.” He clears his throat as uncertainty dances across his features. “I care about you and want to see you happy no matter where this road leads us.”

Another tear blazes a trail down my cheek. “Why do you have to be such a good man?”

“Um. Thanks?” His eyebrows draw down.

“I’m just saying it’s just my luck to find a good one, and we’re both so relationship-damaged that it would never work.”

He winces slightly before replying, “This is your last chance to bail.” He laughs, lightening the mood, and tugs gently on my ringlets that took forever to set.

Penelope will be pissed if he messes up all her hard work. My hair is naturally wavy and doesn’t like to hold a curl no

matter what I try with it, besides the ends. The fact they've held up this long surprises me.

"It's a good thing I don't back down from challenges," I shoot back with my own frail grin.

"Are you saying I'm a challenge?" he scoffs.

I sigh dramatically. "All men are."

"Ditto, love." His eyes flick to mine. He's never called me that before. "I guess it's a good thing I'll have you to keep me in line then."

"As if I could keep you in line?" I laugh with him, which eases some of the tension that's been expanding inside my chest like a water balloon. He's always been able to make me laugh, no matter how bad my mood is.

"There's that smile." He looks down at his watch and swallows thickly. "It's almost show time. I'll leave you to finish dressing, and I'll be downstairs waiting for you. Take all the time you need, okay?" He stands and starts for the door.

"Wait." I dash up and hug him, tucking my face into his hard chest. "Thank you."

His grip tightens around me. "For what?"

The list is endless, but I settle on the most important one.

"For being who I needed today."

"Always and forever," he promises before placing a chaste kiss on the crown of my head.

Once I let go of him, he disappears through the door, and it shuts with only a whisper of wind.

Always and forever, if only it were that easy. I don't know who my forever belongs to, but I can only hope they're half as patient and understanding as Teagan's been, and he doesn't even know the reason I'm so messed up.

I whisper to myself, "Take today by the horns and ride that bitch like you own her."

Once dressed, makeup tidied, and surrounded by my bridal party, IE my parents, niece, and Gabby. I didn't see the sense in having the usual bridesmaids as well. The standard processional music plays from large speakers placed behind the small gathering. Each beat wracks my nerves up even higher. My palms sweat as one by one it's down to just my father and I.

"Ready?"

"Yes." No. I'm really not. I wanted to wear a stunning pair of Louboutin pumps, but I settled for the same design in sandal form. Maybe someday. You know when I have a wedding for the right reasons. At least focusing on my shoes helps me to forget the rest.

Before I know it, I hear gasps in the crowd and realize I came around the small corner already. I've been so focused on watching the glimmer of the Swarovski crystals on my shoe straps dancing in the sunlight I wasn't paying attention to where we were. My eyes land on Teagan. His gaze holds mine prisoner. Dear god, my throat nearly closes up.

I thought he looked handsome upstairs. Out here in the light? He's absolutely ravishing with his dark hair shining. I watch as his Adam's apple visibly moves up and down. He licks his lips, lighting a fire between my thighs. I've wanted him before, but nothing like this. He looks like he wants to devour me, and I'd be a fool not to let him.

Each step takes me closer and closer to the small wooden archway covered in white roses. Each carefully placed foot on the narrow red fabric brings me toward Teagan. Now that I'm standing before him, everything feels heavy. The layers of the dress are nearly suffocating. The sunlight beaming down on us, stifling. My desire for him, nearly engulfing me in flames.

"You're stunning," his voice comes out a low, scratchy rumble.

I bite my bottom lip before smiling. "Well, you look ravishing."

"I might have to keep this old thing then." He flashes that superstar smile and wiggles his eyebrows, making me giggle.

The marriage officiant rambles on, and I follow Teagan's lead, not really listening. I can't think straight with him like this in front of me. His eyes never once leave mine. I jump when he grabs my hand to slide the ring on. Relax, he mouths to me and flashes a smile. I untie his ring from the pillow his nephew holds out and slide it on his finger.

"I now present you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride."

Teagan slides me a cocky grin and reaches his hands up on each side of my neck, his palms are warm against my clammy skin. On autopilot, I do the same. He's just going to fake kiss me again like he's done before, anyway. My heart is hammering a frantic beat as he slowly lowers his lips over mine. When his tongue licks at the seam of my mouth, I open for him, desperate for more. His tongue darts in and claims mine in a panty-melting kiss. His grip tightens on me as he pulls me against him and still doesn't stop kissing me.

Ignoring the whistles and clapping, he continues devouring my mouth in a searing kiss. Heats build in my core, and my nipples pebble in the thin material around my bust. Not having contact with a man like this in so long is overpowering. Moaning quietly into his mouth as he presses his erection into my hip bone, I can't get enough of him. He slows the kiss down and pulls away slightly before placing a featherlight kiss on my cheek. No man before him has ever kissed me like that. It's safe to say that mouth of his is good for more than just singing.



Teagan

I thought we'd never get away from our families. I don't know why I'm rushing. It's not like I'm going to have sex with Natalie. I want to badly. That would cross a line I couldn't walk back from. Man, that woman can kiss. It makes me wonder what else she can do with that mouth of hers. What I wouldn't do to have those pink pouty lips wrapped around my cock.

Fuck. Don't think about that. Just drive. Driving, I can handle. I look over at her in the passenger seat, wearing that white dress, her hair so perfect I want to tug on all those curls and smear that pink lipstick. Yeah. That, not so much. The image of her on her knees before me, taking my whole rigid length inside that hot mouth, gives me a semi that this penguin suit doesn't allow room for. Leaning back in my seat, I try my best to adjust myself without drawing attention to it.

I surprised her with a few days away at Sandy Acres Resort, a luxury hotel on the coast. They only had a single king bed left. It should be big enough to keep my distance. It better be. I can't risk waking up the way I have before, with her pressed against me in the best of ways, feeling the soft, delicate skin of her breast in my palm. And those moans... Then her finishing herself later in front of me. Definitely not helping my hard-on situation at all.

Risking a glance in her direction, I see she's relaxed back into her seat and doesn't notice the mental war waging on my side of the truck. Football statistics to the rescue. The Arizona Sunhawks's players' stat sheets filter through my brain. Nichols looks like he'll be a promising quarterback this year. He's still green, but he's got a fire in him. Thompson, though, they should've cut. He's a shoddy coach at best. Maybe he'd be good in high school or even college if he were lucky enough to score an amazing assistant, but pro? No way. They could do so much better. Slowly, I feel the pressure ease in my pants. My old go-to still works to ease my blue balls.

"This place is gorgeous." Natalie's voice breaks through the music playing in the background.

I make sure only to play rock when she's with me. As much as she tries to hide it, I've caught flashes of sadness in her eyes when hearing me play. She's gotten better, but it'll take time. She's barely spoken the entire ride here. She swivels, taking in the grand hourglass-shaped metal statue in the center of the courtyard and the mounds of colorful flowers that surround it.

"I thought you'd like it." Pulling the truck up to the front entrance, a valet driver greets us and offers to park for us. I decline to have somebody bring our luggage in, it's only the two suitcases, surely we can manage. Climbing out and opening her door, I stroll to the front doors to check us in. She follows dutifully beside me.

While I wait for the employee to pull up my information, I throw her a wink and a lazy smile. She offers me a shy one

before twisting her wedding band again. She's done that several times since we left the reception. The rose gold compliments her light skin tone flawlessly. I'm hyper-aware of her presence just inches away from my side. Once we get the keys, we head toward the elevators. The suite we're in is on the top floor overlooking the ocean. The only reason it was available is because they had a last-minute cancellation.

The elevator stops with a loud ding, and we clamor inside the packed elevator. Her shoulder brushes against my arm, sending ripples of energy through me. Sunhawks's defensive linebacker, Dominique, is a force to be reckoned with; he's nicknamed the tank for good reason. After each stop lets people off, we slide away from each other inch by inch. It must be we both need the space.

I whistle when I open the door to our suite, and the suite boasts pure luxury. As I open the balcony door and step outside, the ocean breeze floats through the billowy curtains behind me. It's been years since I've been able to go to the ocean. The last time was when Thomas, Jared, Landon, and I went deep-sea fishing. We caught loads of fish and had a blast, but there's just something to be said about a sandy beach with waves crashing just below your room.

"Who packed my luggage?" Natalie calls from the bedroom.

"Your mom, why?"

She lets out a frustrated grumble. "I'm gonna need to go get more clothes."

"Why, what's wrong with what she packed?"

A noise thumps from inside. “Maybe you should come take a look.”

I walk into the obscenely large bedroom, Natalie has her luggage open on the bed, and it looks like a *Victoria's Secret* vomited all over the place. Wow, the mother-in-law has racey taste. I cover my grin by biting down on my knuckle. As much as I'd love to see my sexy-as-sin wife wearing any range of clothing or lack of that's scattered all over, that would complicate things, to say the least. I know I wouldn't be able to stop myself from grabbing her and tossing her on that bed.

“Unless you want me to wear these?” she whispers, a hopeful look on her beautiful face.

My eyes snap to hers. God, I want to say yes more than anything. I haven't wanted a woman like this in a long time. “It's not a good idea,” I say instead.

She's made it clear that she wants to have sex with me, but that's all. I'm trying my best to abide by her wishes from the beginning when she said she didn't want to do more than kiss.

Natalie saunters over until she's only inches from me, still wearing her wedding dress, but she ditched the heels as soon as we came in. She nips my earlobe, sending a shockwave to my groin. “After that kiss we shared, I think we'd be very good together.”

I couldn't help myself earlier, needing to taste her again. Groaning, I say, “That would make this even harder.”

“I plan to make it harder.” Her hot breath tickles the shell of my ear as she places an open mouth kiss on my throat and trails her hands up my chest.

My palms grip her waist, and I push her back until she’s up against the wall. My thigh slides in between her legs that automatically part for me. Her dress hikes up to her waist. I grab both of her wrists and pull them over her head in one quick motion, pinning her to the wall with all six foot three of me.

Her breath hitches, and her blue eyes blaze. Her little pink tongue pokes out and wets her lips. My nostrils flare as desire cascades through me like a raging river.

”Do you like playing with fire?” I tighten my grip on her wrists.

”I’d let the flames engulf me,” Natalie pants as she pushes her heat against me.

She doesn’t even try to hide her arousal. My body heats and tingles everywhere we touch, from my hands down to my knees. I lean in and run my nose from the side of her face, trailing down her neck and to her collarbone, where I gently bite her skin. A surprised moan escapes her as she rubs her center against my thigh. The scent of her alluring perfume is all over me, on my tux, in my nose, ingrained into my brain. God damn, florally coconut shit. It’s like a damn pheromone luring me in.

“You smell sweet enough to eat.” A low growl escapes from my throat.

She gasps. “Then what are you waiting for?”

Her eyes darken when her heated gaze falls to my mouth, and her lips part. Natalie slides her hand down my chest slowly until she grips my hardened length sandwiched between our bodies, and a deep guttural sound claws through my lips. My cock pulses in her hand, pressing painfully against the zipper of my pants. I’ve never been this hard in my life.

My lips crash down on hers in a searing kiss. The taste of her alone is enough to keep me coming back for more. She’s like a drug I’m addicted to. Pulling back slightly, Natalie sinks her teeth into my bottom lip, and everything comes alive within me. She softens the sting with a gentle lick of her tongue before I plunder her mouth again.

She writhes on my leg as she strokes me through the fabric, soft at first and then rougher the closer she gets to climaxing. My hands spear into her hair, and one comes around to the nape of her neck, tugging her even closer to me while I push her harder against the wall.

“Oh god, Teagan,” she moans into my mouth, continuing to take pleasure from the friction of her hot pussy against my thigh.

If we keep this up, I’ll come right here, just like this. But I can’t stop. I explore every inch of her mouth like it’s the last thing I’ll ever taste. My forbidden fruit laid out on a platter, offering herself to me.

A shrill ring cuts through my pleasure-induced haze. Breaking away from her lips, I throw my head back and try to steady the haggard breaths sawing in and out of my lungs. It's like all the oxygen got sucked out of the entire room. I struggle to suck air in, to think clearly.

"Ignore it," she croons, placing open-mouthed kisses on my neck and then gently nipping my jaw. She continues to grip me in long, steady strokes.

Looking back down at her, I realize her chest and face are rosy with a blush. Her wet arousal dampened my pants where she was riding my leg. The room comes into focus again, the sounds all crash into me like a freight train, and I rub my fingers through my hair before pulling away and gently tugging her dress back in place. Her eyebrows draw together as she struggles for her own breath.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. I shouldn't have done that." I step back to put some much-needed space between us.

Hurt flashes across her features as I turn away to grab my cell phone off the nightstand.

"What?" I bark into the phone. If they hadn't interrupted us, we probably wouldn't have stopped. I don't know if I should be pissed at them or thankful.

Natalie scurries away without looking at me. She fists her tiny bathing suit and disappears into the bathroom. Damn, I fucked that up like there's no tomorrow. How am I going to fix that now?

“I just wanted to forewarn you. My contacts at the Daily News outlet just informed me they’re running your wedding story alongside another.”

“Spit it out, Jared!” I look over my shoulder, but Natalie’s still in the bathroom.

“Harper’s saying she visited Natalie a couple of weeks ago to warn her about you and that Natalie was covered in bruises.”

“That’s bullshit,” I bellow as I pace the the carpeted floor.

“They have pictures of Harper and Natalie squaring off in a Mexican bar. I’m working on getting the footage.”

A door squeaks, and I look up as Natalie sneaks out the door wrapped in a towel without a single word or glance my way. No doubt she’s heading to the pool or the beach. It’s probably for the best to put some space between us to let that fire burn down. The feel of her nearly coming undone on me was like nothing I’d ever felt before. There’s something inherently sexy about a woman taking what she wants and not being ashamed of it. And Natalie? When she comes, it’s like the whole world shakes on its axis.

Wait what? Natalie and Harper in the same place at the same time? “What do you mean? Natalie never said anything to me about that.”

“Do you think Natalie would sit down with a journalist and tell her side?” He sighs, no doubt irritated this situation just won’t go away as expected.

“I’m sure she would, but she shouldn’t have to. I don’t want her involved in this shit.” What have I gotten her into? Did Harper track her down? A Mexican restaurant is too much of a coincidence. That’s Natalie’s favorite place.

“I don’t think Harper’s just going to go away like we’d hoped. You may have married Natalie for nothing.”

“It wasn’t for nothing,” I snap, my anger rising to an all-time high. Nothing I ever do with Natalie is for nothing.

“Okay, I see it’s a bad time right now. Give me a call when you return home, and we’ll come up with a plan.”

“Yep.”

Hanging up the phone, I quickly strip off my tuxedo, dress in my swim trunks, and head out back to where the pool resides. I spot Natalie in her teal bikini, sitting on a beach chair and applying sunblock to her legs. Making my way through the maze of lounge chairs and kids running amuck, I place my towel on the white chair beside her.

“Here, let me get that.” I hold my hand out for the bottle of lotion that she was trying and failing to rub into her back.

“Thanks,” she whispers and lays flat on the lounge chair. “So much for happy wife, happy life.”

“Are you unhappy?”

She jumps at my words. I don’t think she realized she said her last words out loud. “That obvious?”

“What will it take to make you happy?” I question as I squeeze a dollop of lotion into my hand before working it onto her back. Her skin goosebumps underneath my fingers.

She traces the paisley pattern on her beach towel with her finger. “I want you to make love to me.”

“Anything but that baby.” I had a feeling she’d say that. I lost control upstairs, I can’t do that again.

“And why’s that?” She shrugs her shoulders. “We’re married, for Christ’s sake.”

“The only way this works is if it’s fake. If we get tangled in the sheets, things get muddy.”

“It’s just sex.” Her eyes only met mine for a second, but that was long enough to see she’d been crying. Ah, hell. I continue to gently rub the lotion into her back, and she shivers again under my touch.

“I wish we met under different circumstances,” I mumble.

“Me too,” she says with a sob that nearly guts me.

“I’m sorry.” Those two words can’t possibly tell her how much sorrow I feel for making her upset. For not being the man she should be marrying. “You deserve so much more than I can give you.”

She doesn’t reply or look at me again. Natalie just lies there on her stomach in the sun, and I try like hell to stop staring at her long enough to figure out how this is going to work between us. We can’t keep going like this, both sexually

frustrated and wanting each other. There's only so much denying her I can take before I cave in.

After lying silent for what seems like hours, I notice her skin pebbling with goosebumps that have nothing to do with me touching her.

“Natalie,” I say quietly. But she doesn't respond.

Her deep breaths make me believe she fell asleep. Now that the sun is setting, a chill is rolling in. The soft breeze blowing on us from the sea is heavily scented with salt. I take the towel I've been using as a makeshift pillow and drape it over her body to keep her warm, and I tug my lounge chair closer to her before lying on my side. If the only comfort I can provide for her tonight is shielding her body from the elements, by god, I will lay here until my whole body is numb.

Chapter Fifteen



Natalie

I jolt awake by loud island music blasting nearby. My eyelids fly open and immediately meet Teagan's dark gaze. Our passionate moment from upstairs plays over and over as I take him in. He's closer to me now than he was before I fell asleep, his body no more than a foot away from mine.

"Hey," I say groggily just before yawning.

"Welcome back, sleepyhead." His expression is guarded as he searches my face. No doubt seeing the remnants of my puffy red eyes.

I'm not ashamed to admit I was crying while pretending to sleep for a while. But the sky has since turned dark. I stretch my arms above my head and stifle another yawn. "How long was I passed out for?"

"I'm not sure, I think 2-3 hours."

"I'm sorry for falling asleep." It felt like I literally just closed my eyes.

"Don't be, clearly, you needed the rest."

Obviously, I did. I haven't been sleeping well for a while now. The only night of decent sleep I've gotten in the last several months was when I was wrapped in his arms. Shaking my head to clear those thoughts, I twist, and that's when I notice his beach towel covering my body, and I look at him.

“When the sun went down, it got cold and you had goosebumps. I tried to block as much wind off of you as I could. I didn’t want to wake you.” His voice turns pained as he shifts to look at the beach.

“Thanks,” I breathe, looking back to the waves crashing on the shoreline. The passion from earlier still burns in my veins, but so does the pain.

The little hut close to the water’s edge has lanterns hanging from several hooks and casts a warm glow on the sea. That’s where the music is coming from. It’s a little bar with several tourists sitting on the bar stools drinking out of what looks to be coconuts with colorful little umbrellas poking out the top.

“About earlier—” he begins but I cut him off.

“I know we agreed not to have sex. It won’t happen again.” There’s only so many times a woman can get rejected before she gives up trying. It hasn’t slipped past my notice that other than while he was sleeping, he hasn’t touched me with his hands. Never in the spots I desperately crave.

He sighs. “I just don’t want to hurt you. I know you’ve been through a lot and you said yourself it’s not in the cards for us.”

“I know.” Why am I such a pessimist when it comes to the opposite sex? Besides the obvious, I know not all men are like Theo or the other exes in my past.

“What do you say we go find some grub and watch a movie?” His tone turns from sad and dejected to hopeful.

“Sure.” What else is there to do on your wedding night besides eat and watch movies? No sex for these newlyweds.

I hold in my sigh and eye roll. It doesn't seem appropriate right now. Maybe I'll laugh about this someday but right now? It hurts like hell. I've never been turned down by a man like that before. He's obviously throwing off mixed signals to me, kissing me one moment and not the next. Pushing me up against the wall and ravaging me only to break away when I was close to climaxing. He was hard and he wanted me. I felt it. There's got to be more than just him not wanting to hurt me.

Teagan is true to his word, we order food at the beachside grill a little farther down the sand than the bar and stroll back to our room both carrying our own issues like a ball and chain. If he didn't take that phone call how far would he have gone with me? I guess I'll never know. That man has a will as strong as iron. As much as his body wants me his mind doesn't. That shouldn't bother me as much as it does, but it stings. I've never felt a rejection as painful as this one. And I'm literally forced to live with it, every day for I don't even know how long.

Crap. As we walk back into the room and I see all that lingerie still spread across the bed, I realize I never did end up going out to get clothes. The only garment that even covers half my breasts will likely not hold up to a night of tossing and turning that I'm sure is in store for me after the events of today.

“Can I borrow a shirt?” I’m unable to hide the uncertainty in my voice as I gather up the tiny bits of fabric and roughly shove them back into the luggage, taking my frustrations out on the unsuspecting baby dolls and thongs. I must say some of these would look really good on me. Too bad they’re all going to waste.

“Yeah, of course.” Teagan unzips his carry-on piece and pulls out a familiar navy shirt and tosses it to me.

Snatching it out of the air I grab the more modest pair of underwear in there. His shirts are long enough they come to mid-thigh. There’s nothing I can do about it tonight. I spotted some cute Bermuda shorts and t-shirts in the gift shop when we arrived but it’s long past closing time.

“Hey, Natalie?”

I freeze halfway to the bathroom and turn to face him. “Yeah?”

“What happened at La Cantina with Harper?” He grabs his own shirt and pulls it over his head, covering all that lean muscle I’d love nothing else than to drag my nails over.

Shit. I never told him about that having been so wrapped up in everything else. “Nothing. I dealt with it. Why?”

”She’s saying she went to warn you about me and you had bruises. I’m assuming from the attack at your apartment?”

My pulse jackhammers in my chest, replaying everything that happened that night. What is she playing at? “Yeah, that’s correct. Your point?”

His face falls and he twists the hem of his shirt between his fingers. “That was a couple weeks ago, why didn’t you tell me?”

“I can take care of myself, Teagan, I don’t need a man to fight my battles,” I snap. I’m more than aware of his ability to make problems go away but this was personal.

“That’s not what I meant.” Teagan takes a step closer to me and I back away, bumping the nightstand with the backs of my legs. He grimaces and hangs his head.

I can’t let him touch me. I’m so close to falling apart. The rejection from earlier still hurts like hell. He needs to figure out his own shit. He can kiss me and press his erection against me when it suits him, and I’m supposed to just go with it when he won’t even touch me? No. I’m done with this game. He can continue to fake kiss me for the world to see, but behind closed doors, he can’t. I won’t let him.

“Do you believe what she’s saying about me? That I’d hit you?” His voice comes out strained, as if his words are slicing at his throat.

I know Teagan wouldn’t lay a hand on me. “No. Why would you think that?”

He gestures with his hand to where I stood after I backed away from him. Oh, I guess I see why now.

”That’s not why I moved away.” I can’t tell him what his touch does to me. How each time we kiss, it’s not enough. I

want more. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I didn’t think it mattered.”

“My ex accosts you while you’re out with your friends, and you don’t think that would matter to me?” He sits on the bed and crosses his arms over his chest.

My eyes finally meet his, and there’s more hurt than anger there. I feel bad for snapping at him. “Look, I don’t know what you want from me, Teagan. You knew this wasn’t going to be easy for me.”

“But you’re my wife.” Teagan swallows hard, and his gaze falls to the floor. “You should be able to talk to me about these things.”

“As we’ve already established, I’m only your fake wife, just a temporary placeholder,” I whisper, fighting my voice from breaking.

“Come on, Natalie. You know you’re more to me than that.” His own voice cracks.

Before I become over-emotional, I turn away and lock myself in the bathroom. I strip off my bathing suit and toss it under the sink. Sliding on the new clothes, I stare at myself in the mirror. Maybe if I looked more like Harper, he’d sleep with me. Maybe when he’s with me, he’s actually thinking about her. And he doesn’t want me at all. That would explain his reactions to me.

I shouldn’t think like that, but I can’t help it. It’s gotta be something to do with me. After I pull out all the bobby pins,

the tightness that's been on my scalp all day lessens. I wash my face and brush my teeth before walking back out to face a night of being stuck in the same bed as my gorgeous, untouchable husband and vowing to keep all my emotions locked away for the rest of the time we're here.

It is beachfront after all. Sipping on fruity drinks on a sandy beach is a perfect escape from this room and I plan to spend as little time as necessary in here, where the memories of our passion still linger.



Teagan

Knock knock.

It must be the room service I ordered earlier. We grabbed a burger downstairs but I wanted to order a fruit platter for us while we watched a movie. If I have something like food to distract me, I won't be thinking about running my hands all over Natalie's body and kissing her again. With each kiss we share, I'm more desperate. I almost listened to her earlier and just ignored my phone. I can't allow that to happen. She's trusting me to take care of her and those were her wishes in the beginning. I won't break that vow to her as much as it kills me.

I open the door to a hotel worker, who pushes a small metal cart through the open doorway.

"Is here okay, sir?"

"Yes, that's fine, thank you." Pain still lingers in my voice from what Natalie said about only being my fake wife. How do I expect her to react when I can't seem to make up my mind about what I'm doing with her?

"You're welcome, and when finished just place the cart in the hallway, and one of our staff will collect it."

I nod to him as he backs out, and my eyes land on Natalie, who wears a confused look as she steps out of the bathroom wearing just my t-shirt. The hem comes down to the mid-point

between her knees and waist. Wow. The sight of her in my shirt with her long caramel locks framing her face and swirling down to the top of her breasts steals the breath from my lungs. While she was in there, she must've pulled all the pins holding her hair back.

“I got us some fruit.” Damn, that sounded lame. I sit on the edge of the bed.

She walks past me, settles into the other side of the bed, and to my happiness, gets underneath the blanket. I won't have to look at those long tan legs then. Flipping through the channels, she stops on the guide, and we both watch the little rectangles move up on the screen at an annoyingly slow pace. It's too quiet in here. We need to find a movie. And soon. My gaze bounces between the screen and watching her facial reactions. She doesn't hide much, from the wrinkling of the nose to the raising of the eyebrows, she's not impressed with the selection. Finally, her eyes light up, and a smile pulls at the corner of her mouth.

“Ooh. They have, *The Dutchess*. It's one of my favorites.” She bites her lower lip, and I'm forced to look away from her.

“Put it on.” I stand and slide the tray across the middle of the bed.

“It's a Rom-com, though.” Her face holds a look of do you know what you're getting yourself into?

How am I not surprised, Mrs. wedding binder? “That's fine.”

“Are you sure?” she offers me another chance to turn her down.

I give her a pointed look. “I said to put it on, didn’t I?”

She shrugs and types in the correct channel, and leans over to grab a chunk of honeydew melon from the tray I strategically placed between us.

“Oh my god, this is so good.” She takes the melon into her mouth, and I have to close my eyes at the sight. That mouth. The things I want to do to that mouth of hers.

I keep peeking at her throughout the movie and smirking to myself. As much as she acts like a jaded woman who doesn’t believe in love, her eyes are glued to the screen as if the actors hold the keys to her happiness. As much as she’s built a wall around her heart, there’s still a woman inside who wants to be loved like Amelia, the dutchess in the movie. Her broad smile when the male main character proposes in the cheesiest way makes me wonder if what she told her brother was a lie.

Whoever proposes to Natalie better be more cheesy than this dude to win her over. His better be over the top with cheddar. Oh my god, what the hell is happening to me, cheese puns?

Once again, I’m reminded that I took her dream wedding away from her without even knowing. The next guy better do right by her. The next guy... Fuck that hurts thinking there’s going to be somebody to take my place and give her the happy ending, I couldn’t.

She swipes a tear away but makes it look like she's just tucking her hair back the way women do when they don't want to draw attention to it. Ethan was right about that. She does wear her heart on her sleeve. I don't know if they were happy tears or tears of regret. I sigh as I reach down and snake a cube of cantaloupe from the tray.

Watching the movie in silence isn't as awkward as I thought it'd be. At least until it's over and it's time to turn out the lights. After pushing the cart outside our door as he instructed, I turn off the overly bright lights and come around my side of the bed. Laying down and shimmying the covers up and over her shoulders, she turns away from me. Probably anticipating me taking my shirt off that I threw on when we came back up.

Yanking my shirt over my head, I climb under the comforter and ensure plenty of room is between us. Once I'm settled, Natalie turns toward me.

"Good night, hubby," she says the way they did in that mushy-as-hell movie we just watched.

Screw it. I finish off the sentence with, "Good night, wifey," just like the man she was swooning over.

A grin is plastered on her face. I love that smile of hers, the real one that is. I laugh, and her answering giggle makes everything else that went wrong today feel a little less tragic. As if just for this one moment in time, our world isn't spinning out of our control. As if our wants and needs aren't polar opposites. If only we lived in a world where this could work.

Natalie rolls onto her side, her back facing me again. I have a feeling no matter how far she distances herself from me on the bed, I know where I'm going to be, somehow, someway curled all around her small frame when I wake up in the morning. I lie awake for a while, staring at the ceiling before exhaustion finally wins, and my body gives up the fight.

A weight is settled across my legs and stomach. I blink in the early strips of daylight streaming through the curtains. Turning my head slightly, I get a mouthful of hair. What the hell?

Gently brushing it off my face and out of the scruff of my beard that started growing in, I realize what that weight is. Natalie. She's on my side of the bed with a leg thrown over my thighs and an arm snaked over my stomach. Her head rests against my shoulder. Ah, at least I didn't cross the invisible center line this time. She gets bonus points, unlike me. At least she isn't groping me while I'm asleep as I've done to her.

I breathe in her signature sultry scent and try to enjoy the feel of a woman's comfort. It's been so long since I've laid with a woman like this or had a woman that wanted to cuddle, I should say. I don't dare move. Her thighs are as silky smooth as I thought they'd be, and I fight the urge to run my hands up and down their length.

What would happen if we really made a go of this relationship? Is it really that far-fetched? We're both consenting adults who admit we work too much, but maybe we could make that work for us. This season's tour will be ending in just over a month, and I'll have a couple of months

where I'm not on the road. Maybe that would be the perfect time to give our marriage a fair shot. What have we got to lose? All I know is waking up beside her like this is exactly what I want to do from now until our future demands we can't.

If that movie is any indication, I have a lot to make up for to get her to decide to try a real relationship with me. I'm not an asshole, I can be sweet, but that dude was a straight-up toothache. Is that what Natalie wants from a man? I need to prove to her that I won't break her heart like her ex did. That I'll treasure her and love her the way she deserves. I should've done right by her from the beginning. I'm an idiot for thinking this could ever be a fake anything. I knew from the moment I met her she was special.

My mind keeps drifting to the flowers, and an uneasiness spreads through me at the thought of her ex fiancé trying to come back into her life. Or any ex, for that matter. She deserves the world, and as my wife, no matter how temporary, I'll give her everything she needs. She'll want for nothing, I'll make damn sure of that.

Chapter Sixteen



Natalie

It's only been a few days since our "post-wedding getaway," but I've never felt more removed from reality than I do now. After the awkward wake-up of me cuddled next to Teagan, I put a pillow between us to keep me on my side, and it worked. At least for my body, it did. My mind continued to wander over to him. There was no more kissing or touching, and he's been acting a little strange since then. But I guess so have I.

Spending the next few days lounging by the water and sipping on fruity drinks helped to ease the sting. And now I'm here, at a damn news studio doing something I really didn't feel up to doing.

The harsh lighting is overly bright. Funny, these sets look so different when you're at home watching on a screen. All you see is just the stage they want you to see, not all the lighting and camera equipment off to the side or even the dozens of people milling about all with a job to do. It's organized chaos at best.

"I think we'll start with the light questions and make our way to the harder ones," Kennedy says as she directs me to take a seat on the beige armchair beside her.

"Okay," I answer after taking a slow deep breath. This is really happening. I'm going on live TV. Don't freak out. I was never one to enjoy being the center of attention and I cringed

every time I had to read aloud to the class or present something. My voice always trembled and I misspoke several words.

A balding man in a crisp navy suit standing in front of us counts down with his fingers. “You’re live in 3, 2, 1.”

“Hello, this is Kennedy from Daily News bringing you an interview from Teagan Jameson’s newlywed, Natalie.”

Wow her fake bubbly voice grates on my nerves. I never really watched her show before but I caught pieces of it here and there. It’s like nails on a chalkboard.

“Hello,” I say quietly and wave my hand. I hate this crap. The only reason why I agreed to do this was because of Teagan. He owes me, big time.

She sighs. “Ah, Teagan Jameson, what a dreamy husband.”

“He is.” I smile. That’s not a lie. There are far worse-looking men to be tied to.

“Tell me about how you two met.” She clasps her hands with long pink fingernails on top of her notebook that sits on her lap.

“Well, I work at a bar part-time on the weekends and he came in with his real estate agent. Next thing I know Teagan hired Turnkey Design to decorate the interior of his new house, which is where I’m the assistant manager. We became fast friends that turned into more. And well, the rest is history.” I tuck my waves behind my ear to cover the nervous tremble of my fingers. It’s mostly the truth.

The smile, stretching across her plump red lips, is as fake as I'm sure her breasts are. I'm not a mean person but I know she's only out for a story to push her own agenda.

“And did you know he was in the Frayed Outlaws when you met?” Her lip twitches slightly.

What the hell? This wasn't on the list of questions she forwarded to me. “Not at first, but before we started dating, he told me.”

This woman's a shark, and she thinks I'm an easy meal. Well, I hate to break it to her, but I can be a lethal predator too.

“Did that sway your decision to date him?” She taps her pen on the notebook.

What. The. Fuck. “Uh, no. It doesn't change who he is.”

“But he lied to you?” She tilts her head as her eyes bore into me.

I narrow my eyes at her. What game is she playing? “No, he didn't. Teagan's never lied to me.”

“Hmm. He just didn't tell you who he was.”

I'm not liking where this interview is going and I'm having everything I can do to not reach across the mere two feet separating us and throat-punch this bitch on national television. What the hell is Teagan turning me into?

“What does that have to do with this interview?” I ask with a sharp tone, my fingers digging into my palms to keep them from acting out on their own.

“I’m just trying to get a feel for your relationship after other information about the claims has surfaced.” She beams a smile at me.

Just bringing up the allegations against him makes fury simmer in my veins. “There it is. You’re trying to paint Teagan in a bad light. Well, here’s a news flash for you: he’s a good man, and Harper’s just a-”

“Cut to break,” she rushes out.

“What the fuck was that?” I snap. “You can say what you want, but if you think you’re not going to like what I say, you censor it?”

“I can’t have you going on a rant in front of my fans.” She shakes her hair and fans out several strands in front of her shoulder.

My whole entire body tenses in anticipation. What did she expect me to say? “No, but you can make Teagan out to be the bad guy and sleep well at the end of the day?”

“It’s just business, nothing personal.”

“Yeah, I bet. Somebody’s reputation is getting drug through the mud and you don’t care?” I pin my narrowed eyes on her. Deep inhale, slow exhale.

“They pay me not to care.” She looks down at her nails as if this is just a normal conversation.

Of course, they do. But somehow, I doubt that matters at the end of the day. “If this is how your interview is gonna be, I’m out of here. I’ll go to someone else.”

She puts her hands up in defense and shakes her head violently. “No need for that. We can continue. We’ll stay on safer topics.”

“If you don’t want me saying things like that, why did you go off script?”

“New questions were brought to me after I sent that list to you. It happens all the time, you just gotta go with it.”

“And you thought it was a good idea to put me on the spot?” How the hell do people deal with this crap all the time. Teagan better not expect me to do this often.

“I underestimated you. I was told you were a wild card, but I didn’t believe it.”

Hmm. A wild card? Who the hell told her that? Harper? Just her name brings back what happened at the hotel and the hurt I suffered at thinking I didn’t compare to her. “I refuse to sit here while you bash him. He didn’t do what Harper is saying he did. I know, without a doubt. He’d never harm a woman.”

“Break’s almost over,” the cameraman shouts.

“Shall we?”

“Don’t push me, or you won’t like what comes out of my mouth,” I warn her, my teeth grinding enough to hurt my jaw.

“Understood.” Her eyes flick to somebody off to the side and she gives them a brief nod.

“3, 2, 1.”

“I’m sorry about that, we seem to be having some technical difficulties. Back to the interview. Mrs. Jameson, there’s been allegations against your husband about abusing his ex, are you aware of them?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Has Teagan ever assaulted you?”

“Never. He’s never once laid a hand on me or any other woman.”

“We saw the headlines last week that Harper Mitchell visited you in hopes of warning you of Teagan’s temper, and you had bruises, is that true?”

“I have never been harmed or bruised by Teagan. Harper was at the same bar I was celebrating with a friend, and she warned me. However, the only bruise I had was on my forehead, and that was from when I was a victim of a home invasion, which happened before Harper accosted me at the Mexican restaurant. My friend and I were celebrating that the suspect was in police custody.”

“Teagan’s been in several altercations in the past, is it safe to say he has anger problems?”

“No, he doesn’t,” I scoff. Only jealousy, but I can relate to that.

“What about the fights he’s been in with other men?” Her beady eyes lock on mine.

“How long ago were those?” I ask back. Yet again, this question wasn’t on my copy. How can I be prepared when

she's just tossing this crap out there.

“Oh, I'm not sure.” She makes a thing about looking down at her notebook and scrolling through her handwritten notes. “I don't see dates here.”

I'm sure you don't. “I think it's safe to say we've all done stupid stuff in our past. I got into a fight in high school as well. That doesn't make me a violent or angry person currently, does it?” At least not what the public sees. What goes on in my head is my own twisted fantasies.

Her jaw clenches, not liking the turn of words. “No, I guess it doesn't.”

“Teagan is a kind and loving husband, and he'd do anything for me.” Besides, sleep with me. ”My only complaint is that we don't see each other as often as I'd like, as we both have demanding careers. We make it work, though.” Far truer than I care to admit.

“I think it's safe to say that there are two sides to every story.” Kennedy turns her head and looks directly into the camera lens.

“I agree, but you also have to look at what one side has to gain with these allegations. And what the other could lose.” I copy her and raise my eyebrows, silently begging her fans to understand that.

The muscle in her jaw ticks. “We at Daily News thank you for your time, Mrs. Jameson.” She nods at me and glances at the cameraman.

“Anytime.” I smile sweetly to the camera as I think of putting a bullseye on her forehead for my next dartboard. I could throw darts into her perfectly bitchy little face all day long.



Teagan

“There it is. You’re trying to paint Teagan in a bad light. Well, here’s a news flash for you: he’s a good man, and Harper’s just a-”

“Cut to break.”

Man, I wish they didn’t cut to break. I would’ve given my left nut to know what was being said behind that camera now. Natalie has a feisty side when she’s agitated, and this journalist is clearly getting under her skin. Living with her off and on for the past several weeks, I’ve picked up on her body language. The tightness in her jaw, that fake Barbie-like smile she wears when she’s pissed but doesn’t want to show her cards. Oh yeah, Kennedy is probably getting her ass handed to her by my girl right now.

Watching her fight for me, for us, makes what I’m about to do that much more right. I don’t care if it was all supposed to be fake, I can’t hold back from her anymore. I need her. I want her. I love her, and it terrifies me. A verse has been playing non-stop in my head since our wedding day. I’m not sure what the title will be yet. Either *Her Song*, or *The Missing Piece Of Me*. What do I know, though? It has to come out. It’s not often that a song fights to break free from me this hard. The last one was our number-one hit, *Country Boys Do It Better*. The ladies really loved that one, and the crowd always goes wild at the first notes.

Once I tug the notebook from my nightstand drawer, I scribble the words across the paper. Writing them down almost feverishly, I'm afraid they'll disappear. That's how it goes, though. One moment, the lyrics are there. The next, gone. Poof. Like they were never there at all. This woman is going to make me break all my own rules. We shouldn't get involved more than we already are. I should just let it lie where it is, but I can't. Not when I finally found the missing piece I've been searching for all this time. It took watching her walk down that aisle to know how much she means to me, and when I hurt her at the hotel, everything in me begs to make it right.

And after our long weekend on the coast? She may say that it would've been just sex, but looking into her eyes, I finally see what the guys told me all along. She is falling for me, against all odds. And that in itself scares me.

The broadcast goes live again, and I laugh. Natalie looks like she's about to explode, and all it will take is for Kennedy to say the wrong thing. I shouldn't find humor in the position I've put Natalie in, but maybe the world needs to see that anger to believe the damage that Harper's done to my life.

Once the interview is over, my phone rings a high-pitched chirp.

Natalie: I expect cinnamon rolls and tacos the next time you're in town.

Laughing, I debate on what to reply.

Me: Consider them a never-ending supply. You did good, sweetheart.

Natalie: Please tell me this isn't going to be a normal thing I have to do.

Me: I hope not, I'm not sure you'd look good in prisoner orange.

I hit send as I imagined what her response could be. A chuckle escapes me at the thought of my sweet little firecracker going to jail.

Natalie: I have plenty of money set aside. I'd get a good lawyer and be able to go to the posh ones where I could wear normal clothes.

Smiling a wicked smile, I could just see it all play out. Her going all batshit crazy on Kennedy, or Harper, for that matter. I haven't seen the footage yet, but I've seen pictures from the night Harper dared to track Natalie down. There was a gleam in Natalie's eyes that practically begged Harper to swing at her first.

Me: You seem like you've put some thought into this.

It shouldn't turn me on as much as it does.

Natalie: I blame you. You're a bad influence on me.

Me: I'll be home in a few days, take you out for Mexican food, and even pick the cinnamon rolls up on my way through town.

Natalie: Don't forget.

Damn, she's a feisty one. Operation I pick you is on. I'm going to propose to Natalie the way I should have in the

beginning. I'm going to top that cheesy ass proposal from her favorite movie. Because this time, my heart is on the line for real. No matter what happens next, I have to try to make her mine in every way I can.

Chapter Seventeen



Natalie

Once I tug on my high-waisted skinny jeans and a light pink crop top, I rush out the front door. I overslept. Again. I never sleep this late, but that mattress is like sleeping on a cloud. I've never had a bed that comfortable. When this is over, I might have to beg TJ to keep it. When it's over... I don't want it to be over. I broke my own rules and fell for him. So much for staying friends.

The way he looks at me sometimes, just, I don't know, makes me think he's not entirely faking this relationship either. He can't hide wanting to fuck me, at least. Even though he refuses to. I'm still bitter about that, but who could blame me. I mean come on, look at him, he's like total sex god material. At least each time he's turned me down, he did it easy-ish.

After tossing my tote purse on the passenger seat, I fire up my Durango. Ugh, there's several reporters camped out in front of the gate at the end of the driveway. They've been going through sprees where they sit outside the gate or bombard me when I get out of my car at work. Just before the gate, I throw the vehicle in park, and get out, already irritated that I'm running late.

Teagan was true to his word with Taco's and cinnamon rolls. He took me out last week and just the other day. He also keeps a hidden stash of the pastries in the freezer just in case. If I

didn't know any better, I'd swear he's trying to fatten me up like a Christmas ham.

“Do you mind moving over so I can get through? I have to go to work,” I tell the pretty one with the long blonde hair. She's roughly about my height and build.

I always try to be as nice as I can be to them; they're trying to do their job, also. You catch more flies with honey, like my mama always said. Thankfully, Teagan's away with the band right now or there'd be more reporters out here.

“Natalie? Are you Natalie Jameson?”

“Yes, I am, but I don't have time for an interview or whatever you're asking for. I'm already running behind schedule.” I'm vaguely aware of the cameraman inching closer. I clench my fists. Reign it in, girl. Put a damn leash on your beast before shit gets really bad.

“Have you seen the most recent articles surrounding Teagan?” She pushes on.

After we got married, even more stories circled about how Teagan supposedly beat me as well. I sat down with a journalist a week after we got married. It's been nearly two weeks of this shit with them camping outside the fence begging me to tell them all the ways he 'hurt' me as if I would be covering for domestic abuse. That's a hard line for me, just like cheating. You get one chance, you screw that up, you're done, and I'm out.

“No. I have to go, please.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice a guy draping himself on the gate as if I'm going to have to pry him from the bars and snap my hand up. "Do you mind?"

It's one thing if they keep their distance but the way he keeps weaseling his way closer makes me want to snap. I don't like people that close to me and this guy is so close he could probably show them the pores in my skin.

"Are you aware Teagan was with Harper last night?" A different reporter's delicate light brown eyebrows raise in question.

My gaze snaps to hers. "No, he wasn't," I scoff. He wouldn't do that.

"I assure you he was. Look." She holds her cell phone out in front of me, and clear as day there's a candid picture. Harper has her arms wrapped around Teagan's neck as he leans down and kisses her. It's an embrace full of passion, not hate. The picture below it must've been taken right after, his lips pull up at the corner in a sexy grin. He wouldn't look like that if she caught him off guard, he'd be pushing her away.

The reporter, if you can call her that, scrolls down, and there are a few more photos of them walking down the street, his arm wrapped around her waist. The way he does with me. I didn't hear from him last night, either. My text went unanswered. I assumed he was busy. Yeah, busy with her.

Not again. I can't go through this again.

My throat goes dry and threatens to close up. Betrayal lances through me like a lightning bolt. My eyes burn as I try to think of why he'd do this. I know we're not really together, but for him to do this is unacceptable. Especially after how he acted when he saw my ex's ring around my neck.

My breath grows shallow the longer I stare at her screen. It's like a train wreck I can't look away from. In the pictures, Teagan gazes down at her lovingly and without a care in the world. Like he wasn't just holding me, kissing me, and nearly making love to me on our post-wedding getaway. The images blur as tears fill my eyes.

"There's gotta be a misunderstanding. Move so I can leave, or I'm calling the police." My voice wavers as I try to hold myself together.

They want for me to fall apart in front of their cameras for their next story. Well, news to them, I won't give them that. The asshole with the camera edges past the others, and I react without thinking, jumping forward, shoving my hand into his lens and pushing back as I yell, "Back the fuck off."

I don't care if they move or not, I'll plow through them. I have to get out of here. Hopping into my vehicle, I slam the door shut, and the tears begin to fall as the gate silently opens. Once the gate closes, I shove my foot on the Hemi's gas, squealing my tires as I go. The damn lets go, and I have all I can do to see the road through the watery haze.

I arrive in the office's parking lot shortly, and I'm thankful Caroline's car isn't here. My phone starts tinging with

incoming messages. After sliding my thumb across the screen, a smorgabord of images of Teagan and Harper pop up. More and more messages come through, and I let out a sob. Not wanting to chance him picking up his phone, I type out a quick text.

Me: How could you do this to me? I thought we weren't seeing other people. You won't have sex with me, but you'll fuck your ex? Now I know the real reason why you wouldn't sleep with me was because you were going back to her. We're fucking done.

After sending Teagan the message, I put my cell on Do Not Disturb. I knew she was the reason he wouldn't touch me, deep down, I fucking knew it. And yet, I chose to ignore the red flags, I chose to hope for the best and look where that got me. And after everything she's done to him?

Taking a few minutes to compose myself before I get out, I act like my world isn't burning to the ground. That my heart isn't shattering yet again, somehow this deceit feels worse than with Theo. How is that even possible?

Even the ones you care about most in this world will let you down. A lesson I learned the hard way yet again. At least this time, I still have my best friend. Fake it till you make it is getting a whole new meaning today.



Teagan

My phone ringing with several messages awakens me. I scrub a hand over my face. What a long night last night was. I didn't have a concert, but me and the guys are trying to put the finishing touches on the song I'm writing for Natalie. They were here at my rental until the early hours of the morning. It's not hard to figure out the lyrics are about her. It's part of the proposal plan. She deserves a grand gesture, and that's what I'm doing.

Ring. Ring. Ring. Jesus Christ. Can't they just let me sleep in?

It's Jared. Swiping my thumb across, I answer gruffly, "What?"

"What the fuck were you doing last night?" he bites the question out.

"Excuse me?" I rub my eyes, willing them to adjust to the morning light.

"Answer the question, TJ." His voice is hard and unforgiving.

"What are you, my babysitter?"

"No. But I'm the one always cleaning up your messes, so tell me, were you with a certain redhead you're supposed to keep your distance from?" Disappointment is evident in his tone.

"Um. No. I was with the band working on new music."

“Can you prove it?”

It’s as if I’m dumped into an ice bath. “Why?”

Dread builds heavily in my stomach. What the hell did Harper claim this time? I didn’t touch her. I haven’t seen her in person in months. Not since she pulled her pity-me bullshit. I’m starting to think I need to invest in a damn twenty-four-hour body cam with live feed.

He sighs loudly into the phone. “Check the messages I sent you.”

I pull the phone back, set it on speaker, and scroll through my messages. There have to be at least a dozen from different people. Finding Jared’s and clicking on it, I nearly vomit. That fucking bitch. Pictures of us kissing from several months ago when we were dating are on the links Jared sent me. The articles say I’ve been cheating on Natalie with her. Fuck! This can’t be happening. I run a hand through my hair.

“These are old; I haven’t been anywhere near her. I have to tell Natalie before she finds out like this.”

“Too late. Watch the next video,” he snaps.

I click play and witness Natalie’s heart break in front of the camera. The unmistakable doubt in her voice when she argues it’s a misunderstanding. She really thinks I cheated on her. My chest feels like somebody flayed it open with a dagger. My poor, sweet Natalie. Baby, I didn’t do this.

“Do whatever you have to do to fix this. I want Harper out of my life, fucking pay her off if you have to.”

When I read the next message, my heart plummets to the floor. I hang up on Jared without another word. Natalie's words are burned into my brain like a hot iron, sharp and unrelenting.

Natalie: How could you do this to me? I thought we weren't seeing other people. You won't have sex with me, but you'll fuck your ex? Now I know the real reason why you wouldn't sleep with me was because you were going back to her. We're fucking done.

I call her, but it goes straight to voicemail. Hanging up, I try again—same thing. My fist clenches until the stubs of my fingernails dig into my palm. “Come on, Natalie, answer your damn phone.”

After several tries, I leave her a voicemail. “It's not real, Natalie. Those are old pictures from when we were together. I promise you. I wasn't with her. Baby, call me back, please.”

Me: Please call me back so I can explain. The pictures are old, it wasn't real.

My phone continues to ring with new messages and alerts. Pictures of me with Harper on one side and pictures of Natalie and me with a tear in between us on the other.

I keep trying to get a hold of Natalie, but after leaving several pleading voicemails, her answering service replies, “We're sorry, but the person you are trying to reach has a voicemail box that's full. Please try again later.”

“Son of a bitch!” I shout, tossing my cell phone on the table. Rage and pain so fierce and strong nearly consume me as I swipe my arms across the kitchen table, knocking the papers, a vase of flowers, and the notebook that holds the lyrics that I’ve been pouring over endlessly, to the tile. The vase shatters and sends shards of glass skittering across the floor as a puddle of water slowly edges its way to the papers. Let it ruin them. The lyrics won’t do me any good now.

A growl of pain roils up my throat and I grip the lip of the table and flip it over, sending the wood crashing into the wall behind it. It still fucking hurts. I pound my fists into the wall that separates the kitchen from the dining room. Blow after punishing blow, I slam my knuckles into the sheetrock and two-by-fours hidden behind.

I’m not sure how many times I struck the wall before I collapsed to my knees. I only have myself to blame for hurting Natalie. I underestimated Harper and her vengeance, and my girl had to pay the price. She never told me herself, but I know what ended her last relationship: infidelity. Of course, Harper would find that out and use it to her advantage. She knew how to utterly destroy Natalie. It took me far too long to break down some of Natalie’s walls, and now I’m sure she’ll build a fortress around her heart.

I gently pick up the notebook that drips with water. It’s salvageable, but is our relationship? Will she ever be able to see the truth in my eyes without her past clouding her vision? When I glance down, I find my hands are a bloody mess. The knuckles of at least four fingers are split open and leaking

blood down my hand to puddle on the floor. It's oddly cathartic watching the blood splatter down to the white flooring.

The rest of the morning is wasted negotiating an NDA with Harper's lawyer for a hefty half a million. She's done now. She got what she wanted, and she's out of my life. If only I could get Natalie to answer my calls or texts. I even call her work, Turnkey Design, but the secretary explains she out for the day. It's too early for Natalie to be at the bar, either. That's even if she's working today. She's probably a wreck. From the alarm's notification system, I know she hasn't returned home.

The next flight home isn't available until later tonight, but the band is supposed to perform an hour from Northridge. I pull my truck into the parking lot and pull around the back of the concert venue where the staff parking is. I can't perform tonight; I need to see Natalie. I have to make this right.

Bass booming through the half-open door usually makes me thrilled, but not today. Right now, it's just a reminder that my career is causing her nothing but pain. I never should've involved her. I never should've asked her to marry me—not to fix our problems anyway. I should have been upfront with her about everything instead of locking it all away as if she couldn't handle the thought of me falling for her. When in reality, it was me who was too scared to give her a chance.

I hurry down the hallway to the backstage area and spot Landon and Thomas warming up.

"I'm sorry, I can't go on tonight. Natalie needs me."

Thomas's eyes narrow as he takes in my form. "No."

"What?"

"I said no. If you leave us hanging, you're out of the band. The circumstances are shitty, and I feel bad for Natalie, but we can't let our fans down for this. They're counting on us to go out there and give them one hell of a show, and that's what we're gonna do. This is what you signed up for when we created this band. The fans come first."

"But she's fucking hurting and won't answer me," I yell. The video of her breaking down keeps replaying in my mind. My gaze lands on Landon, and my body tenses.

"I'm with Thomas on this one. Natalie will still be there at the end of the weekend. She'll understand, just give her time. In the meantime, let Jared handle Harper."

I hate that what they're saying is right. Hundreds of hardworking people have paid for a ticket to see us, and I can't tank my career as much as I want to fix what I have with Natalie. She'll understand. She has to.

Chapter Eighteen



Natalie

I spend most of the morning zoning out to head-banging rock music as I repaint the walls of a client's house. They've already moved into a new home in a different state. It's our job to stage this one to sell for top dollar. Working isn't helping me get my mind of Teagan. Every time I close my eyes, I see that picture of them kissing. He's only kissed me like that three times, and that was when he proposed, our wedding, and then that night when things got really hot between us. Is it because of Harper he pulled away from me? Has he been seeing her this whole time behind my back? What is he even doing with me then?

I should've never fallen for him. I knew it was temporary, and yet it still hurts like hell. I've kept my phone on Do Not Disturb. I know he was probably still sleeping when I sent the message, and I hope it woke him up. I hope he spends all day stewing as I have been. I'm so stupid. And here I thought something was growing between us.

How could I be so fucking stupid? How did I allow another man to hurt me this badly? I'm definitely going to swear off men now. I guess my trusty toys back home will have to do the trick from now on. Not like Teagan ever touched me there anyway, but he didn't have to touch me for me to be able to come for him.

I wonder how many times he's gone back to her place. Or has she been going to his concerts all along, knowing they were too painful for me to go to? I don't want to go to his house tonight. I'd love to get a hotel, but I'd never get privacy there, especially since media outlets are camped out in front of our place—his place. I gave up my apartment when I moved in with him.

I don't get it. Why would he act like this if he's so concerned with his image? Especially with her. It doesn't make any sense. But then again he's a man, does half of what they do make sense?

Damn, it hurts. It feels like my heart is bleeding out shards of glass with every pump. How can he do this to me? He may not know what I went through with Theo, but he knows I was broken, and he practically did the same thing. Only this time, the pain is nearly too much to bear.

A new round of sobs wrack my body. I drop the brush into the paint tray before I make a mess of the room. Shuddering, I drop to the floor and pull my knees to my chest. Every single wail or tear scrapes their way from my body.

I slowly slide the wedding band and engagement ring off my finger and twist them in the light before setting them on the floor. Reaching behind my neck, I unclasp the necklace that holds Theo's ring. As if I needed more of a reminder of the men who hurt me. Looping the small chain through the rings Teagan gave me, they're added to the weight that now settles like a suffocating collar around my throat. Even though I

haven't worn Teagan's rings for long, my finger feels achingly bare without them.

Maybe once there's nothing left of me but a shell of a person, I can continue on with my life. Just shut off my emotions altogether. No amount of temporary happiness is worth being shattered like this. After sitting on the hardwood floor and crying until my butt goes numb, I picked myself back up and straightened my crown. I don't need Teagan, even though my body and mind say I do. Life goes on, and the hurt will fade... eventually. I'm done for today, I can't keep pretending everything is okay. Cleaning up the supplies and locking up, I drive to Gabby's. She's not working tonight, and she'll be able to provide a distraction for me.

"Ah hell, sugar," she says as she opens her front door and lets me in.

I burst into tears yet again as she wrapped me in a tight hug, so much for fixing my crown. Her hands rub up and down my back, and once my wracking sobs quiet, she leads me to the couch. Flopping down into it, I tell her everything, although it seems like she already knew. Fucking paparazzi. I'll never speak to the reporters again. They can all go to hell if they aired my breakdown. Why wouldn't they, though? That's their job to show the world every last horrible detail of being a human. No matter the destruction it causes the victims. There is absolutely no privacy among the famous—their spouses and family included.

“Sometimes you have to hit rock bottom before you can celebrate the small wins,” her small voice seems too loud in the livingroom.

“There’s nothing to celebrate,” I say flatly.

“Not yet, but there will be. I promise, as much as it hurts right now, you’ll heal. And when you do, the small good things that happen to you will be magnified because you know how bad it can be.”

“Quite the cheerleader you are,” I scoff and rub the outsides of my arms.

“I wasn’t done yet,” she says in a motherly tone, raises her eyebrows, and splays her hand across her hip. ”And only then will you realize that Teagan never deserved you at all. Why’s that, you ask?” She taps her pointer finger on her chin as if she’s actually thinking about her answer. “Because you’re a goddamn goddess, and goddesses don’t settle for men who can’t provide what you need. No matter how much money he has, the gifts he gives you, that ridiculously sized house he has, if he can’t give you the most precious gift of all, his heart, he never should’ve had yours. Because he never earned it in the first place, babe.”

“Thank you.”

She offers me a sad smile. “You know what this calls for?”

“Tacos?” The thought of going back out in public is overwhelming. But what better way to forget about the heartache than with endless tacos and a large glass of

margarita? I doubt we'll see any reporters in that dive bar/Mexican restaurant. I'm sure it has several health code violations to go along with it, maybe that's its charm.

“And margaritas,” she finishes.

Three margaritas in, and I'm feeling only slightly better. The other patrons give us a wide berth. We're the only two seated on this half of the bar. Is this what's become of my life? Binging on tacos and alcohol in a seedy bar to hide from everyone and everything? Gabby keeps chattering and ordering shot after shot to go with our other drinks.

“More tacos?” The gentleman behind the bar asks. I think his name is Rico.

“How about some nachos?” My words slur together, and a giggle breaks free.

“Sure thing, senorita.” He winks and flashes me a seductive smile.

“Now that's one man I wouldn't mind being under.” Gabby fans herself with her hand. “Light bulb!”

“Oh boy, what now?” I ask warily. Her ‘light bulb’ moments tend to scare me.

“Maybe we should take him home, I bet he could handle both of us at once.” She giggles and presses her shot glass to her lips before tipping it back.

As soon as the words leave her mouth, Rico comes around the corner with our nachos. “Sorry ladies, as much fun as I think that would be, I'm spoken for.”

Gabby pouts. “Oh darn, the good ones always are.”

“At least some men still believe in monogamy and not cheating on their spouses,” I mumble, taking a large scoop of nacho cheese with my chip.

Rico’s knowing gaze lands on me. ”Whoever was dumb enough to do you wrong will be the one to suffer the consequences. You, on the other hand, are free to be with whoever you want.”

Yeah, if only it were that simple. A couple more drinks in, and the room begins to spin; the people around me turn fuzzy. But I no longer hurt deep inside; everything’s numb, and it feels so good.

Gabby calls a cab to drive us back to her apartment. I’ll bring her back to the restaurant in the morning to pick up her car. Right now, I just want to enjoy the temporary bliss of not giving a fuck, because, as of this moment, there’s no fucks to give.



Teagan

When I push the front door open of the bar, several patrons glare at me. I see the news has traveled here already.

Natalie still hasn't answered my text or called me back, and her phone goes straight to voicemail. It's been three days since I got that message from her. She hasn't been home either. Not a single perimeter alarm has gone off on my cell. As soon as the plane landed, I headed straight to the bar. She won't be able to ignore me here.

I don't see Natalie anywhere, though, but her friend Gabriella is standing at the bar, cracking open a beer for the man seated in front of her before pouring a shot for another.

"Where's my wife?" I demand.

"She's busy and doesn't have time for your bullshit. If you came here to start something, walk right back out that door before I call the police." She slams the nearly empty liquor bottle on the bar top and glares at me.

I spot Natalie coming through the double swinging doors and delivering a stack of plates to a table not far from me. A fake grin is plastered on her face. I stalk toward her, and a man, I don't recognize, steps away from his table and puts himself between us, blocking her view of me. My blood simmers. Who the hell does he think he is?

“Mind your fucking business, and step away from my wife,” I snarl at the local. He’s almost my height and built like a fighter. But I don’t care, I haven’t come all this way to not see her. If I have to drop this prick to the ground to do that, I will.

Natalie peers around the local in front of her, but I can’t read her expression from the bar’s dim lighting.

“No.” His voice drips with menace while he puffs his chest.

“Oh, I’m your wife again? Didn’t seem that way when you were banging Harper. Excuse me if I can’t keep track,” she snaps.

“Natalie, please. If you’d just let me explain, it wasn’t real. Those were old pictures,” I plead with her.

“Right. I’m sure that’s what guys like you say. If you wanted an open marriage, all you had to do was say so. There’s a few men I’d like to try out, too. And I’m sure they’d actually put out.”

Natalie stalks away from me and heads behind the bar. I bypass the diner, who must have decided by the look on my face, to let me go. No doubt, he didn’t want to end up on the floor. I didn’t expect to hear her talk about wanting to sleep with other men. She’s not wearing her ring, either. Well, on her hand, at least, it’s bare. She probably added both rings to her necklace beside her douche of an ex’s engagement ring.

I wanted to leave the day the news outlets put me in her ‘I hate men’ column. I couldn’t do that to the guys, though or my fans. It nearly killed me not to run to Natalie. I drank myself

into a drunken stupor every night. That was the only thing that took the edge off the ache in my chest.

I sit down on one of the empty stools lining the bar. “Can you just give me five minutes?”

“No. I’m working.” She slams down a liquor bottle after pouring some in a shot glass for the woman seated beside me. Amber liquid splashes out the top and lands on the counter.

“When’s your break?” I cross my arms across my chest to keep myself from grabbing her and throwing her over my shoulder. I’m not above dragging her out of here caveman style if that’s what it takes.

“Not taking one.” She slides an open beer bottle down to a gentleman a few seats down from me.

I’m aware there are cell phones pointed at me and videotaping our exchange. I don’t care if they want to watch me gravel; they can. I have nothing left to lose. The only thing I care about in this world is standing three feet from me but might as well be three thousand.

“I need to talk to you,” I plead.

“And I need to work. You’re making a scene,” she hisses and finally faces me; her eyes are puffy and bloodshot.

It’s like a gut punch: the instant lightheadedness, the ground beneath me feels shaky. My fingers dig into the wooden bar top to keep me steady.

“Then let me talk to you in private? Please Natalie,” I beg.

“Because I got privacy when I found out you were cheating on me? Reporters have followed me everywhere, demanding answers to questions I don’t even have. You need to leave. We’re fucking done, Teagan.” Her voice cracks. “Get the fuck out of my bar.”

“I love you, Natalie.”

She gasps.

I’ve never said those words to her, but they’re the truth. I pictured telling her a hundred times, but never like this. “All those pictures were old, and I can prove it.”

“That’s low even for you. Please just go,” she whispers. Tears glitter in her eyes.

I hate that I’m the reason she feels like this. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Then I guess I am.” She storms through the swinging doors and into the kitchen. I ignore the several glares from the customers at the bar. They can paint me as the villain all they want, I’ve grown used to it. In the end it’s only one person’s opinion I care about: Natalie’s.

“Real smooth cowboy.” Gabriella slides me a beer.

“I swear, I didn’t do what they’re saying. I wouldn’t do that to her.” I know how much finding her fiancée screwing her best friend fucked her up. I haven’t even considered touching a woman other than her in months. Real married or not.

“Sure you didn’t.”

Her hateful gaze lingers on my face and then drops to my bruised hands while I pick at the label on the glass bottle. The swinging doors draw my attention, but it's only another waitress. Several minutes pass and still no sign of Natalie. Duke comes through next with a scowl across his face. His eyes meet mine and he holds it until a customer grabs his attention. I'm waiting for him to throw me out. If he does, I'll wait outside until she gets off shift.

"Listen, I know everything, and I mean everything." Gabriella raises her eyebrows. "For a while you made Natalie real happy after Theo, and if there's a chance what the media is saying is complete bullshit..."

"I haven't touched another woman since I met Natalie, I swear on my life."

She casts her glance behind her to the doors leading into the kitchen. "Then you better fix it. She wasn't even this much of a wreck after Theo cheated on her, and she was with him for years."

Theo, I knew it. That was him at the restaurant, I saw it in her face. I should've gone back and pummeled that fucking weasel-dicked man like I wanted to.

"How can I fix it when she won't let me explain?"

"Prove it. Actions speak louder than words, cowboy."

Several minutes later my security system alerts me to the front door opening. The video on the app shows it's Natalie. Shit, she must have left while I've been sitting here like an

idiot. That's why Duke didn't kick me out, he was buying her time while she snuck out the back. I slap a twenty down on the bar and bolt out the front door. Firing up the rental truck I got at the airport, I hammer the throttle all the way to the house. I'm too late by the time I pull into the yard; her car is already gone. Opening the app again, I scan for any clues to where she went.

I slam my palm into the steering wheel when I watch her walk out the front door with an overnight bag strung over her shoulder. When I dial her number, her phone goes straight to voicemail. There's no point in me leaving a message she won't listen to.

The next person I call, I swore I'd never talk to again. Nothing can make a man fall harder to his knees than a woman who holds his heart within her grasp.

"Yo, TJ. It's been a long time," Levi answers after only two rings.

"It has." I squeeze the steering wheel in my fist.

"You too good for us back home now that you're a big star?" he drawls.

"I knew this was a mistake—"

"Wait. What's going on?" he asks.

Sighing and pinching the bridge of my nose, I answer the truth, "Everything went to shit, man." I stare at my house that no longer feels like a home to me, at least not without Natalie living there.

“I’ve seen the news. I think you only have yourself to blame.”

“It’s not true. Harper staged it. Those pictures are six months old.”

“So what do you need, my friend?”

“Are you still able to find things others can’t?”

“Don’t doubt my skills. I can crack pretty much anything.”

I sigh. “I need a location.”

“I can do that. Got a phone number?”

I rattle off Natalie’s digits. This better work.

“I’ll call you back shortly.”

Rain begins falling from the dark clouds overhead. It seems I’ve even pissed off Mother Nature. My keys jingle in my hand as I jog up to the door.

Growing up, Levi and I used to be best friends. We got into some trouble back in the day, and when threatened with juvie, I straightened my act out. He didn’t. Because I was trying to make it as a young country singer, I couldn’t afford to start down the wrong road. We’ve kept in touch here and there, but not recently. Harper didn’t like him at all. I’m starting to think my life would’ve been better if I kicked her to the curb way back then instead of him.

While I wait for the location, I search the house for a note or anything she could’ve left. I doubt she’d leave anything behind, though. Cautiously, I push her bedroom door open.

Nothing looks amiss besides a nightstand drawer slightly ajar. I pull it open all the way. There's, um, toys in there. Amid the vast selection, there's a folded piece of paper. When I unfold it, I realize it's a copy of our engagement article from the local newspaper. In bold red ink, the words, 'I warned you to stay away from him. All's fair in love and war' is written below the image of me and Natalie. It's Harper's writing.

The shrill sound of my ringtone cuts through my stunned silence. "Yeah?"

"She's at the Brooklyn Banks Motel in Andover."

"You're the best. Thank you."

"Yeah, well, remember that when I need a favor."

"Anything." If this works, I'll give him whatever he wants.

"Go get her."

You don't have to tell me twice. The motel isn't far and is in the opposite direction as Emory Falls. I rush from the house and jump in the truck. Pressing hard on the accelerator the entire trip, I try to think of a way to get her to listen to me. But I don't know how if she won't even talk to me.

At the motel, I stroll up to the clerk at the check-in desk and act as if nothing's wrong. "Hello, my wife checked us in earlier, and there's supposed to be a key here for me."

"Sure thing. What name is it under?"

"Natalie Jameson, or it's probably under Morgan. We just got married last month, and we're still waiting for her new ID

to come in.”

She smiles at me. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks.” I fake a smile I don’t feel. Obviously, this person hasn’t seen the headlines, or I doubt they’d be so forthcoming. She’d probably press that little button hidden underneath the counter that alerts the police.

Her gaze scrolls down the screen as she types a few things into the computer. “Ah, here she is, room 106. Just drive around to the back.”

”Great, thank you.” I snag the keycard from her and nearly run back out to the rental I took from the airport. She’s so close. The rain is pounding down even harder, the windshield wipers can barely keep up.

My stomach’s in my throat. I don’t have a choice; I need her to talk to me. She needs to hear the truth.

It’s too quiet up here, other than the rain that has just started to lose its power. As I stop at her door, the only sounds that greet me are muffled voices from the television in the room next to hers. I knock gently. Her feet pad toward the door. I fight the urge to look up at the peephole. I’m sure she’ll be checking it.

“How did you find me?” she asks, her voice raw.

Called that one. As if she’d just open it without checking, she’s not an idiot. I’m the only one fitting of that title. “Let me in, Natalie.”

“I didn’t sign up for this.”

I refuse to let myself into the hotel room with the key the concierge gave me. Natalie needs to be the one to open the door. She has to let me back into her heart.

“I know.” I swallow. “I swear to you those pictures are from six months ago. I wasn’t with her. I’d never do that to you.”

What if she won’t open the door and let me prove to her it was all staged? I can’t walk away from her.

Chapter Nineteen



Natalie

Flipping through the channels on the television as I wait for my order to arrive, I stop on a random commercial. The guides on the motel's menu are hardly ever accurate, and I just need something to fill the silence. My hands shake as I pour a glass from the wine bottle I grabbed from home—no, his home. As of right now, I'm homeless. I have plenty of money in the bank. I can stay in this motel until I find a place.

“The lead vocalist of the genre-blending country band Frayed Outlaws was photographed out on the town with his ex-girlfriend just weeks after saying I do to his wife Natalie. Trouble in paradise already?”

Fuck. There's no getting away from the scandal. Can this get any worse?

I lunge across the room, trying to get to the remote before the newscaster says anymore. I don't look at the screen as I press the power button. Welp. I guess that's not happening. The rain rattling against the windows will have to be enough. During my most stressful or overwhelming times, I use a sound app with the soothing sounds of rain or thunder. I hope it can be enough to calm the storm raging inside of me now.

A light knock raps on my door.

“Wow. That was quick,” I mumble.

I ordered delivery service, but they said it'd be close to an hour. I didn't order much, just the necessities like wine, chocolate, ice cream, and popcorn. My typical emotional eating stuff. I didn't even think to grab my plants—they'll be okay for a few days. I won't be going back there again until he leaves for his weekend shows. I don't want to see Teagan, it hurts too much. It's bad enough I see his face every time I close my eyes.

Carrying my glass of Moscato with me, I close one eye, press my other one up to the little peephole, and freeze. It's Teagan. Isn't it just my kind of karma? Can it get any better?

"How did you find me?" My voice is raw from all the crying and screaming I've done these last few days.

"Let me in, Natalie."

"I didn't sign up for this." I take a large gulp of wine that's not doing anything to calm my nerves.

"I know." He pauses. "I swear to you those pictures are from six months ago. I wasn't with her. I'd never do that to you."

I want to believe him, but I just can't. Caroline will just have to understand. I tried. If she wants to leave the business to her niece, then fine. It's not worth going through this. I don't have the energy to piece my broken heart back together again. This time, no amount of glue can repair the damage, I'll always carry the betrayal on my sleeve and the hidden scars on my heart. I'll never, ever be able to trust another man again.

“Please baby, open the door.” His voice comes out hoarse as if he too has been crying.

“Just go, Teagan,” I plead. I can’t take the little cracks in his voice as if he’s hurting just as bad. He did this, not me. He’s the one who shattered us.

“I can’t. I broke our rule.” A soft rustling sounds as if he’s leaning against the door. “I love you, and I’m not walking away.”

The hole in my chest tears open wider as if I could hurt any more than I already do. Those three little words are only meant to shove the blade in even deeper. “Don’t say that. It’s not true.”

“It is. I’ve been trying to fight it for a while, but—”

“Stop!” I press my fist to my chest. I slide down the door with a thump until I’m seated with my knees pulled up to me. A sob rips through me, and tears stream down my face.

The tears won’t stop coming, and I have to fight to suck in each breath over my haggard cries, making me cough at the sudden intrusion of oxygen. After several minutes of taking deep breaths with my head hung in between my knees, the tears slowly start to fade.

We sit silently for so long that I think he finally took the hint and left. I sniff and wipe the remnants of my tears on my work tank top, which smells like stale beer. I finish the rest of my glass and set it aside when I hear the deep rumble from the

other side of the door. I flinch at the realization that he is still there.

“This song’s for you.” Teagan clears his throat.

“Baby, can we start over? I’d be the man you need. Yeah, I’d be the man you want. We could fall together the way it should’ve been all along. Here I am singing this song for you and leaving it all on the line. Praying I’m not too late to make this right.”

His voice cracks, and he sniffs on the other side. I’ve never heard this song before. He continues to sing in an achingly painful voice. Every note makes me hurt even more, making the crack in my heart spread tenfold.

“Auburn hair and sky-blue eyes pulling me in over my head. I’m drowning, baby I’m drowning. Throw me a lifeline. It was never meant to happen like this. Nah. We both made a promise I couldn’t keep. The moment my lips touched yours, my doubt was erased. You could never be replaced.”

What is this? I swipe at my eyes as more tears build and trickle down. “Please stop.”

“All we have is a paper and a ring.
But I’d do anything to keep you by
my side, even leave this all behind.
My life was meaningless until I
found you. My love for you is tearing
me up inside because you’re more
than just my bride. You’re my queen,
my future, my everything, the
missing piece of me.”

No. It can’t be. He wrote a song about us. What the hell am I supposed to do now?

Music can either destroy you, or it can heal you. The outcomes depends on the power you give it. What power will you give it? I want to heal. Damn it all to hell. “I want to heal,” I rasp.

Pulling myself up to stand, I hesitate briefly before unlatching the security chain. I wipe my face before opening the door.

His usually bright eyes are dull, and tears coat his eyelids and cheeks. Rainwater drips from the tips of his hair as it continues to batter his back, drenching his shirt. My pulse drums against my breastbone like a jackhammer, thump, thump, thump. A strangled breath of air leaves my throat in a rush.

Gaze never wavering from mine, he pauses before stepping into the room and kicking the door closed behind him. Tugging me into his chest, he wraps his strong arms around

me, and I melt into him. I don't care that he's wet, and I'm supposed to be pissed off at him. He tightens his grip on me as if he's afraid I'll wiggle free, but little does he know I don't have any fight left in me.

"I like that song," I murmur against his neck. It feels right when I'm in his arms; even hurting this badly, he still feels like home. His spicy cologne, tinged with the scent of rain drifts around me.

"Good, because I wrote it." His grip tightens around me, and he places a soft kiss on my temple.

"You did?"

He nods.

I have to know if my heart that's skipping a beat in my chest is warranted. It sounded too much like our story for it to be a coincidence. "When?"

"It's not finished yet. But I've been working on the lyrics for the past month. The guys and I took a run at it last week." His eyes search my face, from my hairline to my chin. I feel his gaze on my skin like the softest caress.

A month? That was just after our wedding. "Is the song real?"

"If you're asking if the lyrics came from my heart, they did." He lets out a deep breath, his face is guarded. "We record all of our sessions, and we were working on this song the night I was supposedly with her. Can I show it to you?"

I nod, not trusting my voice. My heart's always believed Teagan, but not my head. I can't go on blind faith this time. I need to see proof that he wasn't with her that night.

Teagan slides his cell phone out from his back pocket. Tapping a few things into it, he hands it over to me. "Go sit. I'll pour you another glass."

I give him a weak smile as I lower myself to the edge of the bed. Moment of truth, one big inhale, a slow, shaky exhale, and I press play. The date and time are shown in the bottom corner. It was an hour before the photos were said to be taken. I know because every detail of those pictures is burned into my brain, right down to what they were both wearing. Teagan a dark blue button down with dark wash jeans, and Harper, a hunter green cocktail dress. On the screen, he tries out similar variations to the song he just sang and strums the guitar. Drums pound out a beat for the lyrics, and Thomas, the other guitarist plays softly.

In the video, Teagan groans and throws his head back.

"What's your problem, man?" Landon says, drum stick in hand.

Teagan sets a refilled wine glass in my hand. "You can fast forward this part."

"Do you have something to hide?" I pause the video. I hate how I feel like I can't trust anything that comes from a man. But I've been deceived too many times.

“No,” he says calmly, shaking his head. ”They just cleaned up their mouths in front of you. Behind the scenes, they’re a bunch of dirty fuckers.”

I shrug. It can’t be any worse than I’ve heard in the past, not to mention the sleazeballs we serve at Duke’s. Ugh, the things I’ve overheard make me question the patrons who frequent Duke’s.

“Fine, suit yourself.” He pours himself a glass and sits beside me, watching over my shoulder with a smirk.

Narrowing my eyes, I unpause the video.

“It sounds stupid,” Teagan says.

“Because it is stupid. You’re a dumbass for thinking you could have a wife like that and not get feelings. Hell, even a fucking robot would sprout a heart for her.”

Teagan tugs at his hair. “I know. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“You were thinking about getting yourself some of that sweet pussy. Hmmm. She must taste like straight-up sugar.”

My free hand covers my mouth. Oh my God. I’ll never be able to look at Landon the same again. Teagan fights his grin beside me. He did give me a warning, but I didn’t heed it.

“Don’t fucking talk about my wife like that.” Teagan throws a half-full water bottle at him and hits him hard on the shoulder, making the other guy wince.

“Well, I’m just saying if you won’t bang her, I will. Mama’s got needs, you know?”

Teagan growls, “If you put your filthy hands on her, I’ll break ‘em. Every goddamn finger, and make you choke on them. I’m starting to regret telling you fucks about it. Let’s just try again.”

The remainder of the video shows the guys trying to pair the lyrics with a beat and alternating verses. I speed up the video until the end, and he told the truth. Teagan was with them until two hours after the quoted time he was with Harper. He was also there when I sent him the text he never answered. I watched as he dug out his phone and grinned but then got distracted by his band mates.

“I also have this.” Teagan takes his phone from me and scrolls through his emails, showing me the same exact series of pictures printed in a tabloid several months ago. The time is the same in both pictures, past and present, but not the date, so they must’ve altered the date on them before republishing them.

“I’m sorry I didn’t believe you.” I rest my head on his shoulder, feeling the heartbreak slowly ease in my chest.

I played right into her hand. *All is fair in love and war*, her warning that I found scrawled across the picture of our engagement that was left on my SUV that night she tracked me down at the bar. She must’ve been planning this for some time, then. My words, I slung as weapons into her, were turned

and used against me by making me think he was with her, warming her bed at night.

He rests a hand on my hip, and tells me, “Given what you went through with your ex, I don’t blame you for thinking the worst. I’ll never cheat on you or lie to you like Theo. I’m not like that. I feel guilty every day that I wasn’t upfront with you about my career from the beginning, but I’ve never once lied to you.”

Wait what? How does he know Theo cheated on me? I never told him anything about my relationship with him other than the music part. But then again, it seems Harper found out, too. “How do you know about Theo cheating on me?”

“The night before we got married. I was waiting in the hall when they two of you starting yelling. I couldn’t help but overhear.”

My body tenses as I try to recall everything I said that night. Oh no. I told Ethan I didn’t know if I loved Teagan or not. So he’s known about my feelings since then? Is that why he kept refusing to touch me or sleep with me?

“Aren’t you tired of hurting?” he asks gently.

My shoulders slump forward as I whisper, “God, yes, I am.”

“Then let me do what he wasn’t man enough for. Let me take care of you the way you deserve to be. I want to be your husband for real. No more fake anything.”

His words reverberate through my head and my heart. I want that too, but not if I’ll have to constantly question his loyalty.

The thought of possibly going through this again is nearly paralyzing.

“I wanna make this work between us. I want it to be real, but I’m scared. Is this how it’s always going to be?” Leaning my side into his, I tuck my head between his shoulder and chin. We fit together perfectly as if we were carved from the same stone. Maybe it was fate after all.

“You mean people like Harper trying to break us up?”

“Yeah.”

“The thing you must remember with many entertainment news outlets is that they’re always looking for a story that will grab headlines. Most of the time, they spin what they think will sell. Right or wrong, they don’t care who they hurt. The same goes for some people. It comes down to greed. I paid Harper off and forced her to sign an NDA. She won’t be a problem anymore.”

I let that sink in without replying. He shouldn’t have to pay people to stop harassing us.

He shifts on the bed so he can face me. “I can’t sleep; hell, I can’t even function when we’re not okay. I’d rather only survive five years with you by my side than be able to live a hundred without you.” He trails his fingers back and forth along my jawline. “Every word in that song is how I feel about you. I’d give up singing to make this work. I’ll do whatever you need me to do. I just can’t walk away from you. That I won’t do.”

Shaking my head, I tell him, “I’d never ask you to give up the band.”

“I know. But look at what it’s done to us already. I don’t have crap for free time during tours either.” He sighs, and his gaze sweeps across the carpet.

“We’ll figure it out.” I place my hand in his. “But I won’t let you give up singing. I’ll quit the bar and change my schedule to make time for us, and I’ll come to your shows when I can.”

Our eyes lock as if we’re both coming to terms with everything that was just said. He squeezes my hand three times in quick little bursts.

“Are we really doing this? Like an actual couple?” He grins and wiggles his eyebrows suggestively.

“Yeah, I think we are.” The odd sensation of falling tumbles around in my stomach.

He lets out a breath. “Finally.”

He places his hands at the base of my neck and tugs me roughly forward until my lips meet his. His hot tongue pushes forward and deepens the kiss. Twisting around, I press my hands to his pecs and push him back on the bed before settling myself on top of him. With our lips locked, his hands roam up my sides and gently squeeze my breasts.

Slipping my hands up his shirt, I rest my palms on his chest, feeling his heartbeat thunder below, and grind myself against him. He groans and cups my ass pressing me harder into his growing erection. Sitting up, he rips my tank top over my head

and unclasps my bra, flinging it to the floor. His hungry gaze roams over me briefly before sucking a nipple into his mouth and lightly nipping it.

Rubbing myself on his length creates delicious friction, but not enough. He groans and flips me below him in one swift move. Teagan trails wet kisses from my neck to my collarbone, circles both breasts, and continues lower to my stomach. The combination between his swirling tongue and featherlight kisses is maddening. He fists my yoga pants and tugs them down my thighs until I'm only in a lacey blue thong. He rubs his nose over the thin lace and inhales deeply, sending a puddle of desire into my belly.

Knock, knock, knock.

I let out a frustrated groan. Seriously? Of all times to be disturbed. It's always the worst possible moment. Teagan lifts his head, and his eyes, darkened with lust, hold mine, silently letting me know that it doesn't matter who's on the other side; it won't change what's going on between us. Nothing will ever come between us again.

"It must be the delivery service; I ordered a little while ago," I say breathlessly between pants.

"Stay here." He stands and tosses the blanket over me to cover up my nakedness. Opening the door, he pulls the bags from the worker and closes the door quickly. "Now, where were we?"

He sets them down and saunters back toward the bed, where I've tossed the blanket to the ground and lay almost

completely bared for him.

“Wait, there’s ice cream in there.” I point at the bag.

Half-laughing, he turns, fumbles with the bag, and shoves the carton into the freezer.

Teagan then turns his focus on me as he pulls his shirt over his head, revealing a toned and muscular body. Next, he unbuttons the top button of his jeans, his dark eyes on mine as he lowers his zipper and kicks his pants and boxer briefs to the floor. His cock springs free. His large, rigid length is impressive and intimidating at the same time. I both crave it and worry it won’t fit.

He pounces on me, making me shriek before laughing. The laughter dries up in my throat as he lowers himself between my thighs. Kissing my inner knee up to my apex and back down the other side, I’m practically shaking with need by the time he takes my panties in his teeth and pulls them down.

The wicked gleam in his eyes as he settles his wide shoulders between my legs is like a predator. Teagan takes a long, languid lick up my center.

“Oh fuck,” I cry out as he circles my sensitive nub with his hot tongue. My hips buck of their own accord, and he grasps my thighs with rough hands.

“Stay still, or I’ll stop,” he commands, his voice dripping with sin.

He takes his time bringing me to the edge and then letting my pending climax slowly wane before doing it again. By the

fifth time, I can't take anymore. "Please," I say between haggard breaths. "I need. To come."

"I got you, baby." He coats his fingers in my wetness before sliding two fingers into me.

Clenching around him, I'm so close. When his his fingers press against my front wall and he rubs his tongue over my clit, my orgasm builds fast and hard.

"Shit. Teagan!" I cry out as my climax pulsates through me, and my extremities tingle. Aftershocks of pleasure ripple like an ocean I want to drown in. My pussy clenches around his fingers.

"Hmm." With hooded eyes, he sucks his fingers into his mouth, and I swear I can still feel his mouth on me. "The taste of your desire will be my sweetest addiction."

He strokes his hard cock a few times. I lick my lips and twist from under him, having every intention of taking him into my mouth.

He taps my nose and smiles. "Not this time. I need to be in you. Are you on birth control?"

"IUD." Amazingly, I could even get that out. "Lay down."

With a grin, he rolls back into the pillows that are spread haphazardly around from my head thrashing back and forth from my orgasm. Climbing on top of him, I center myself and slowly take him in, inch by glorious inch. He groans as he stretches me almost painfully. I still as my walls accommodate

to his size. I haven't had sex in about nine months, and he's larger than anyone I've been with before.

"You're so tight," he mumbles, the muscles in his neck straining.

I begin moving slowly, taking him from base to tip, over and over again. The stinging pain eases. Teagan tweaks my nipples as I ride him harder before he's finally had enough and flips us over.

"I'm sorry, I'll make the sweetest love to you after. But right now? I just really need to fuck you, Natalie."

"Then fuck me already, Teagan," I moan as he pushes in deeper.

He hikes one of my legs over his shoulder and begins pistoning his hips, relentlessly pounding into me. The bed rattles against the wall, and I swear to god they're gonna come banging on our door any minute now. At this angle, he's able to hit that spot that very few men know about, and my toes curl as I try to fist the sheets.

My pussy contracts around him as another orgasm builds. One of his hands holds my hip in place, and the other caresses my breast before moving down to my clit.

"Come on, baby."

"Teagan! Fuck I'm so close," I whimper.

My back arches as he strums my sensitive bud like one of the strings on his guitar. Oh god. My release ripples through me, and I scream his name, not caring who can hear us. My

loud moans continue to echo through the room as he continues to hit that spot with expert accuracy.

“Fuck Natalie, I’m going to come,” he moans.

His hot spray spurts inside me as he continues pistoning his hips and riding through both our orgasms. He stops moving and kisses me tenderly when my body trembles from the aftermath. After gently rolling off me, he grabs a wet washcloth and cleans off our mixed arousal.

Teagan turns off the motel’s light, climbs back in bed, pulls me into his chest, and covers us with the blanket. I’m totally spent. My heavy eyelids fight to stay open.

“Good night, wifey,” Teagan says and kisses my forehead.

“Good night, hubby,” I whisper into the night.



Teagan

”Teagan...”

I flick my eyes open, and I’m surrounded by darkness. It takes a few minutes for my vision to adjust.

“Teagan... hmmm.” The sound of Natalie moaning my name as she squirms in her sleep beside me brings a grin to my face.

The blanket is pooled around her waist, and her nipples, the perfect shade of light pink, are hardened and begging for my attention. Leaning over, I suck the one closest to me into my mouth and caress the other breast with my hand. Her squirming stills before her hand skims over my side, and her nails bite into my skin above my shoulder blade.

“Hmmm. What are you doing?” she asks, her voice husky from sleep.

Letting go of her nipple with a pop, I inform her, “I do believe I promised my wife I’d make love to her.”

“I remember that too.” Natalie leans forward and slants her lips over mine.

When I trail my fingers down her side to cup her ass, her skin pebbles with goosebumps. I deepen the kiss and slide closer to her, needing to feel her weight pressed against me. She pulls her face back and nips at my bottom lip, and I let out a groan before I take her mouth more urgently. Natalie’s hands

roam over my stomach, then my chest and finally come to rest on my biceps.

A fire burns inside of me at how much I need this woman. Continuing to devour every inch of her mouth, I angle our bodies to settle my own between her thighs, holding most of my weight off her with my knees and an arm, I continue to glide my hand over her soft curves until my fingers dance at her slick entrance.

“Wait,” she murmurs against my lips.

I halt my movements, pulling my face away just slightly. “What’s wrong?”

”There’s something I need to tell you.” Her breath fans across my lips.

Uncertainty reels her ugly head in my brain. Last night was perfect, well, not the beginning, but the ending was. Could she be regretting what we did, or worse, that she wanted to try a real marriage with me?

“What is it?” I wait with bated breath for her answer.

Natalie swallows as she gazes at me with vulnerability shining in her doe eyes. Sliding her hand on the side of my neck, she flicks her gaze to my mouth before locking eyes with me once more.

“I love you, Teagan,” she breathes. “I think I’ve always loved you, but I was too scared to admit it. Since that first night in the bar, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you.

And I know now that what I had with Theo wasn't real love, but this? This is so much more than four simple letters."

Tucking my finger under her chin, I tug her face up to mine and place a soft kiss on her lips.

"I love you, Natalie." I rub my nose gently back and forth over hers. "Before you came into my life, I never knew what it felt like to love somebody. To be willing to sacrifice everything for one person because I can't take the hole inside my chest when we're apart. I think my heart knew it was yours the first time you caught me staring at you from across that crowded bar." I smirk. "I was a goner before you first spoke to me."

Natalie drags my hand from her chin and places it palm down over her heart. "You feel that?"

Her heart thumps a steady but fast rhythm beneath my hand. I nod.

"It beats for you. Only you."

Leaning down, I take her mouth in a searing kiss before leaving a trail of wet kisses from her ear to her neck, then her chest and stomach, careful to avoid the sensitive areas. I want to make this night last forever. Her hands fist my short hair as her breaths grow shallow.

"I need you, Teagan," she whimpers.

"I know, sweetheart. I need you too." I run my fingers over her folds, and she bucks against my hand.

Toying with her sensitive nub, I rub the tip of my cock in her juices and coat the rest of my shaft before slowly sliding in. Her back arches against the bed, and her teeth bite down on her plump lower lip. Her pussy clenches around me, making me grit my teeth.

Pulling back out to the tip, I piston back in, going achingly slow, and her answering moan is everything I need to hear. This isn't going to be about racing to the finish line. I meant what I said about making love to her. I will draw this out for as long as I can because the feeling of being inside her is utter bliss.

This right here? A woman's love is what kingdoms fall for. This woman has the power to bring me to my knees and shatter me into a million pieces, but I would gladly take that risk for her. This is a one-in-a-billion kind of love.

She pulls my face to hers and plunges her tongue inside as she runs her hands through my hair and kneads my scalp with her fingertips. My tongue dances with hers until we're both panting with our need to come. My pace is still nice and slow, feeling every little detail as her body trembles beneath me. I make sure to hit that hidden g spot on every stroke.

"Oh, god. Teagan!" Natalie cries out, her walls spasming around my dick.

"Hold it," I command her, because if she comes, I know I'll be right behind her, and I'm not done with her yet. I don't think I'll ever be done with her.

”I- I can’t.” Her muscles clench harder. Her face scrunches up as she tries to keep her orgasm at bay.

“Oh, fuck,” I groan, breaking out in a cold sweat as my balls draw up, desperately trying to hold my own release back.

My lips meet hers in a savage kiss that steals my breath away, and I swallow her moans as she contains my grunts. Her pussy contracts as she cries out my name. I pump two more times before my own release slams into me like an explosion. Cursing, I continue to ride it out as waves of sensations ripple through me. Natalie’s nails claw at my back as I continue to rub against her swollen slit with each thrust.

Collapsing on my back, I drag Natalie on top of my chest. I’m still deep inside her, and we’re both still pulsing and spasming. Brushing her sweat-soaked hair to the side, I kiss her forehead. We lie there for several minutes until our breathing settles.

Operation I pick you is back on. I don’t care if it’s cheesy and everybody laughs at my expense. I have my woman lying in my arms, sated on my chest, and there’s no place I’d rather be. My name may still have a dark stain on it. But I have her, and that’s all I need. Everything else comes second to Natalie.

I’ll be the husband she deserves. It’s going to take patience from both of us to make this marriage work, but I’m willing to do whatever it takes to make her happy.

Harper got what she wanted in the end, mostly. Money can’t buy happiness, and she’s a miserable bitch. So, good luck on

that front. But I'm the real winner in the end because I got my happily ever after.

Chapter Twenty



Natalie

One month later...

Teagan's keys jingle in his hand as we stroll hand in hand up the steps from the garage leading into our house. There's been a smile plastered on his face all day. Things have been going so well this last month. I can't believe I fell for that bitch's trap. After being with Teagan nearly every waking moment outside of work, I miss him terribly when he has to leave as if he takes a part of me with him when he goes.

Caroline is slowly showing me everything I need to know to run the business, and I cut my hours back at the bar. I only work at Duke's on Wednesday nights now. Teagan offered to perform either just him or with his band every Wednesday so we could still be close. I think it's more along the lines of so he can keep the other men away. I've caught him glaring at a few patrons who got too close to me. His band has brought in more business for Duke's, and it's packed like sardines every night they sing. It's like they're Hickory Valley's own personal band. The other guys have even talked about moving here too.

The alarm beeps a warning before he types in his digits. Tossing my purse on the counter, I start to walk away, but Teagan wraps his arms around my waist and leans in for a kiss. His band isn't touring for a few months, so he's all mine. We leave in a few days for our *real* honeymoon in Jamaica, and

I'm beyond excited. A cabana over the ocean, with just Teagan and me for seven days, sounds like pure heaven.

When he pulls away, Teagan's top teeth sink into his bottom lip, and a mischievous glimmer shines in his hazel eyes. He says in a husky voice, "Why don't you pour us a glass of wine and meet me on the back deck."

What is he up to? The last time he acted shady, he surprised me with a large wooden gazebo on our back lawn. Although the lawn is huge, we don't need any more furniture.

"Sure, I'll be right out," I say warily.

He gives me another peck on the lips before moving away with his swagger-like walk. Gosh, he has one fine ass, especially in those jeans he's wearing. They're my favorite. I hear the back door slide open and closed, and I sigh. This beautiful, stubborn man has shown me a side of him that not many get to witness. Underneath all that tough exterior is a man who cares deeply about the people in his life.

After grabbing some wine, I slip through the back door. There are white Christmas lights dangling under the gazebo that weren't there before. The back lawn is dark, so the lighting immediately draws attention to it. Teagan stands in the center of the wooden structure with his black guitar strapped to the front of him. A nervous expression crosses his face and his eyebrows draw down like they do when he's worried.

"What's going on TJ?" I ask, setting the two glasses down on the patio table and slowly walking toward him, not

knowing what to expect. I mean, obviously, this whole thing was planned.

He begins strumming the strings, and the familiar melody hits me. It's the song he wrote for me. The same song that pieced together my broken heart. A sheen of tears coats my eyes when his lopsided grin pulls up on the sides of his mouth. I stop at the base of the stairs to the gazebo and stare up at him.

“Baby, can we start over? I'd be the man you need. Yeah, I'd be the man you want. We could fall together the way it should've been all along. Here I am singing this song for you and leaving it all on the line. I pray I'm not too late to make this right.”

My breath catches in my throat. His voice is silky soft and wraps around me the way his arms do. Like nothing can ever hurt me while I'm there. As if my own insecurities no longer exist.

“Auburn hair and sky-blue eyes pulling me in over my head. I'm drowning, baby, I'm drowning. Throw me a lifeline. It was never meant to happen like this. Nah. We both made a promise I couldn't keep.

The moment my lips touched yours,
my doubt was erased. You could
never be replaced.”

The familiar lyrics bring me back to that night when I was so close to losing him. More like walking away from him. My chest constricts. I think how different my life would be had I not opened that motel room door. How both our lives could have been destroyed by one hateful person.

“All we have is a paper and a ring.
But I’d do anything to keep you by
my side, even leave this all behind.
My life was meaningless until I
found you. My love for you is tearing
me up inside because you’re more
than just my bride. You’re my queen,
my future, my everything, the
missing piece of me.”

I scrape my teeth across my top lip to try to keep it together. My knees feel weak, almost as if the earth below me is quaking.

“If I have to sing this song to you
every night for you to believe me, I
will. Baby, I will. I’ll continue until
my vocal cords are frayed and my
fingers bleed. By the end of every
night, you’ll know I need you more
than my next breath. When I saw you

walk down that aisle, everything clicked into place. I'm right where I'm supposed to be."

I need you more than I need my next breath. I feel the same. When he's off on his tour, I'm only half of who I am. He's the missing piece of me.

"I can't promise there won't be people wanting to ruin what we have or take from us. But what I can promise you is that every breath my lungs take, every beat of my heart will be for you. Baby, just you. I finally found my missing piece, and I won't ever let you go. I promise you always and forever."

I'm speechless. I don't know what to say. My throat burns with unshed tears. Swiping his tongue across his lips, he steps down the stairs to stand directly in front of me.

I love it when he sings. There's no doubt about that, even when it's painful. He slides his guitar to his back and drops to one knee in front of me. He pulls out a small black velvet box, and I look at him, confused. We're already married; his rings are already on my finger.

His fingers tremble as he cracks the small contraption open, and there's a small blue guitar pick nestled inside with the words I pick you, always and forever. I cover my mouth with my right hand. Tears pool in my eyes.

His throat works a swallow as he reaches for my hand. “I should’ve done it this way from the start. Even though we’re already married, I didn’t give you the proposal you deserved. Natalie Grace Jameson, will you be my always and forever for real this time?”

My throat is closing up. I nod as my vision swims in the tears. “Yes.”

He bolts up, wraps his arms around me, and lifts me up. My legs instinctively go around him as he peppers me with kisses. The sounds of clapping and whistling surround us as our closest friends emerge from the darkened corners of our lawn. I never noticed them before.

“I love you so much, Teagan.” Gently, I rub my nose across his several times before kissing him one last time.

He sets me on the stone half-wall and brushes the tears from under my eyelid. “More than tacos?”

I press my finger to my lips and look up to the starry sky as if thinking hard about it before nodding and saying, “Tacos don’t have anything on you.”

“Good, because we’re going to crack out that wedding binder of yours, and I’m going to give you the wedding of your dreams.” He grins, running his hands up and down the bare skin of my calves from my dress, riding up slightly.

“You already did. You were my dream wedding.” I didn’t know it at the time, but he was everything I was looking for

but didn't see. Teagan is and will forever be my knight in shining armor.

“Darn. I was looking forward to horses stealing us away on the beach.” He makes a sad face and puckers his bottom lip out.

I giggle. “If you insist.”

“Oh, Mrs. Jameson, I insist on a lot of things.” He nips at my neck. Being called Mrs. Jameson will never lose its appeal, especially by Teagan. “But I will be giving you that wedding if it's the last thing I do.”

We let each other go long enough to hug our friends before settling into the wooden loveseat by the firepit. Gabriella returns with a large bowl of popcorn after disappearing momentarily.

“Hey, get your own,” she squeals as Landon reaches for her bowl.

“Give me some popcorn, woman,” he bellows into the quiet night.

“Excuse me?” She puts her free hand on her waist.

“You heard me. Give. It. Now.”

“It's like that now, is it? If you want popcorn, you need to sit like a good little drummer,” Gabby says in a sultry voice, letting a sexy smile grace her lips.

Amazingly, Landon does sit on the grass with his legs crossed, and the crowd bursts into laughs as Gabby tosses

pieces of popcorn in the air for him to try to catch with his mouth open. He only gets about a third of the pieces into his mouth, but it doesn't stop him from trying.

I'm the happiest I've ever been, surrounded by the ones closest to my heart.

"That's a good boy." She pats his head, and he snatches the bowl from her, setting it behind him. Holding Gabriella by the wrist, Landon pulls her down, pins her to the grass, and kisses her. Right. On. The. Lips.

"Ummm. What the hell is happening?" I whisper to Teagan while the two on the ground continue to ravage each other in front of us.

He shrugs but wears a smirk on his handsome face.

"Did you know about this?" I point between the two, who finally break apart and start laughing.

"Well, Nat. It turns out you're not the only one who broke our pact." She leans her head on Landon's shoulder and sighs contentedly.

The rest of our friends have similar shocked faces. I reel at the idea of Landon, the band's so-called playboy, being with my friend. But that conversation can wait for another day. For tonight, I want to celebrate the fact that Teagan made such a sweet and meaningful proposal. His song is the epitome of what music can do.

It healed me..

The end for now: be on the lookout for Landon and Gabriella's story soon, in *Falling For The Drummer*.

Can't wait to read about Teagan and Natalie's "Wedding Redo?" Read it here:
<https://dl.bookfunnel.com/kssxfquchf>

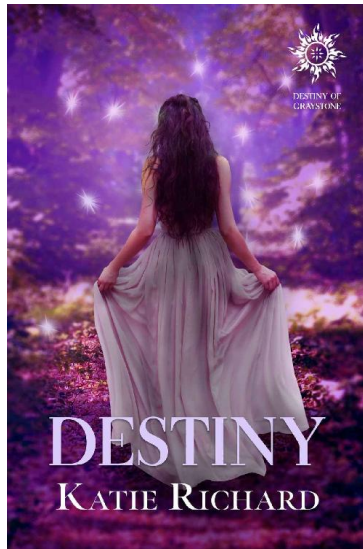
I want to thank my husband and kids, first of all, without their support, there literally would be no books... I spend countless hours working a “real job” to come home and spend more hours writing, editing, marketing and engaging with readers. Writing has always been a dream of mine and if it weren't for them I wouldn't be able to do it all.

A huge shout-out goes out to my ARC team, old and new, who have stuck by me through my most recent book or have been with me since the first one. I love hearing how much my stories have affected you and I'm thankful you're on this roller coaster ride with me! Having such an amazing team to help get the word out about my books is a massive help.

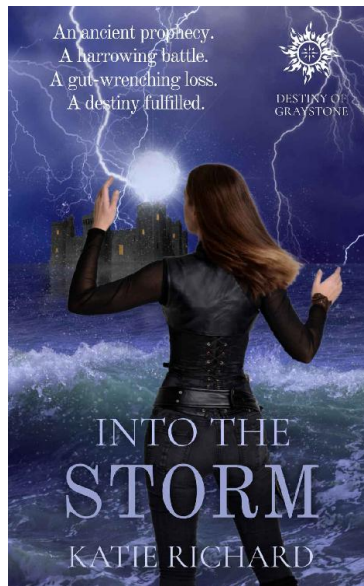
For my readers, thank you for taking a chance on a newer author like myself. I truly hope you enjoyed reading Natalie and Teagan's story and it would mean so much to me if you could share your review of *More Than Our Fake Vows* on Goodreads and the retailer website!



*An emotional roller coaster romantic
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*The second novel in the Destiny Of
Graystone series, a young adult
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Katie lives in Vermont with her husband and their children. When she's not working or spending time with her family, she enjoys getting lost in a good book. Her favorite hobby is gardening, whether it's edible or decorative. In her opinion, one can never have too many flowers! She may have a slight addiction to creating things in Canva and Procreate. Visit <http://www.katierichard.com> for more information and be sure to sign up for her newsletter to stay informed.