

MURDEROUS
CREW

Memories
OVER
Material

OVERTURE

Rhapsody Book 3

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overture

A Murderous Crows Enemies-to-Lovers Rockstar
Romance

Rhapsody
Book Three

amy booker



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OVERTURE

By

Amy Booker

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This novel is a work of fiction in which all events and characters in this book are the product of the author's crazy imagination. Locations may be familiar but are most likely twisted for artistic expression. Any resemblance to actual people is really freaking cool but entirely (usually) coincidental. While I did attend law school, I am not a lawyer, and nothing I write should be taken as legal advice. I take a lot of liberties with my dramatic license since it took me years to pass the written test. Also, if I reference a medical condition, I might have experience with it, so please know nothing in the world conforms to a single interpretation of reality. Everyone is afflicted and reacts to things differently, even with the same diagnosis.

eBook ISBN: 979-8-9865651-8-7

Published by Renaissance Publishing Limited, Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio

www.amybookerauthor.com



author's note

If you've read my previous books, you'll know the chapter names are all song titles. Music has been an integral part of my life and always sets the mood for my writing. Whether it's the overall energy of a song, the lyrics, or even the title, that tone carries through into my written words on the page. The playlist and a link can be found at the back of each book, or you can find them on my website: www.amybookerauthor.com.

dedication

*For the Wendys waiting for their Lost Boys to grow up.
Sometimes, they actually do.*

prologue

...

Bad Habits

Cooper

“We can’t keep doing this, Coop.” Our band manager, Mackenzie, tosses her phone onto the coffee table between us. The headline that glares up at me works in tandem with my pounding headache to remind me of last night’s events. The music tabloids have apparently chosen me as their latest whipping boy. It’s not that big of a deal. Not to me, anyway.

“Doing what, Mac? Reading lies on the internet?” I scoff at the idea. “That’s all there is on there. Nobody believes any of that shit.”

She leans forward and rests her elbows on her knees, flattening me with a stare. “That would be awesome news if there wasn’t *photographic evidence plastered all over the place*.” Her head drops into her hands, and she sighs heavily, her shoulders sagging and her long purple hair curtaining her pretty face. We’d be in serious trouble if we all didn’t think of Mac like a sister.

I jump up from the couch and start pacing, feeling the metaphorical cage bars closing in around me. I knew they would come eventually. I just didn’t expect it so soon. Murderous Crows is just starting to make a name for ourselves, and so far, it hasn’t been the most positive. First, with our drummer Andy’s death from drunk driving, then our singer Jake getting falsely accused and arrested for it, and most recently, I’ve been hounded whenever I go out or have a good time. I can’t blink without some idiot taking it the wrong way and turning it into something it’s not. And all that doesn’t even include the bullshit our former merchandise chick, Nyx, is selling to the tabloids. I sure hope she’s enjoying her joy ride straight to hell.

“Have you been able to get hold of Nyx yet? Find out why she’s selling made-up stories?”

Mac peeks up at me between her fingers and arches a skeptical brow. “Made up?”

I roll my eyes. “Okay, okay. *Exaggerated*. You know what I mean.”

“No. I think she blocked me.” She snatches her phone off the table, rapping a nail on the blank screen while holding it out to me. “Nyx has nothing to do with *this*. She didn’t force you to make out with two girls in the women’s bathroom of the Rainbow last night. And I hope they were of legal age.”

Hazy memories of how the evening ended float around my brain, but I’m not dumb enough to smile about it in front of Mac. She’d have my head. “I forgot to card them. My bad.”

“This is serious Cooper. Your reputation affects all of us connected with you. I don’t know what is so hard about that concept. What you do in public has consequences, and not just for you.”

“Oh, so I’m making *you* look bad? Is that the problem?”

“Yes, actually. You are, and it is.” She stands up and crosses her arms over her chest. I’m in trouble now. *Shit*. “Murderous Crows aren’t nobody anymore, Cooper. People are watching and forming opinions whether we like it or not. And we have higher-ups we answer to now, too. Blackmore Records isn’t going to put up with their name getting dragged behind your stupid ass for much longer. So, either clean up your act or try to balance it out.”

I start pacing again. This sucks. I mean, *this fucking sucks*. I am not one to be told what to do under any circumstances, and this sure as hell feels like I am. I have never taken orders well, if at all, and I’m not sure I’m so inclined as to start now. If I had feathers, they’d be ruffled all the hell up.

Running my hands through my hair, my brain feels like all cylinders are misfiring. I should probably do something to clean up this mess. Mac isn’t totally wrong about that. Maybe I could donate to a charity or do some community service, though the idea of volunteering makes me cringe.

Maybe I could call some of our contacts at the record label for advice. They’d probably suggest some bullshit like rehab or anger management classes. As if I have a real problem. I just like to party and have fun. Is that such a crime?

Something in my brain clicks as my thoughts run through tangents. Ryan Crawford, the lead singer and guitarist of Indigo King, a band we’ve worked with in the past, talked to me about a music mentorship program he was a part of last year. He thought I’d be interested in doing something like that. At

the time, I didn't think much of it because what the hell do I know about teaching or mentoring anybody? Zilch. But...maybe it would get Mac and the label off my back for a while. Some good press to balance shit out, like she said.

A mentorship program might be a good compromise, I muse. I could pretend to mentor some lucky fan for a few weeks in return for good PR. The kid would be thrilled just to hang out with a rockstar like me. Right?

Easy enough.

Except it's not that easy. Not really. Not for me. No matter how much I try to force the bad-boy rockstar ego thing, it doesn't fit. It feels all wrong. I know I pull it off because the evidence is right there on the screen, staring back at me, but it's hollow. Would mentoring someone else make any difference? Change anything? It might be worth a shot.

"Ryan told me about a guitar mentorship he did a little while ago--"

"The Rhapsody Foundation!" Mac snaps her fingers, and her face lights up, her entire demeanor changing. "Of course. It's perfect. You have to do it. Great idea." She claps her hands, grabs her purse off the couch, and heads toward the door to leave. I'm extremely caught off guard at the suddenness of her exit. We were in the middle of a fucking conversation. Or at least I thought we were.

"Mac, where are you--"

"I'll get all the info and text you later, okay? Bye!"

And with that, she's gone.

I don't think I've even had time to blink.

What the actual fuck just happened?

one

...

Limits

Sloane

“You’re never going to believe this,” my assistant and best friend, Fiona, says from the doorway to my office. She sounds excited, which is strange for her. She’s usually as emotional as a marble statue.

I glance up from my laptop, where I’ve been busy working on grant applications for the Rhapsody Foundation mentorship program I run. “Try me,” I grumble. With some of the shit I’ve dealt with at the center, nothing surprises me anymore.

She slides into the room and takes the chair across from my desk, still reading something on her phone. “You must have your notifications off. We just got an email from the Board of Directors. It’s been announced who our secret new music mentor is.”

“What do you mean, ‘*been announced?*’ We always have a say in the incoming mentors since we keep track of what programs have the most need.” I already don’t like the sound of this. It’s not like the Board to interfere in how I run things here. My friend Barry, who is on the Board especially. He always works with me on these things.

Fiona shrugs her shoulders to meet her sharply cut black bob. “It’s only for the advanced guitar program. It says here, ‘*In collaboration with Blackmore Records, the Rhapsody Foundation is pleased to announce our new advanced guitar mentor for the spring session will be none other than acclaimed lead guitarist Cooper Davies from the chart-topping band Murderous Crows.*’” She glances up at me, her green eyes wide.

I drop my forehead onto my keyboard, not caring if I erased the entire proposal I’ve been working on. This cannot be happening.

“Please tell me you’re joking.” I peek over my screen. “Am I being recorded right now for some stupid reality show?”

“Sorry, no.” She tilts her head, her bob now lopsided and her lower lip jutting out in a fake pout. “What’s wrong with Cooper Davies? He’s freaking hot.”

She’s not wrong there. He is a bit of a Rock God, with toned muscles, a chiseled jaw, strong shoulders, and that gorgeous red hair; he’s just plain old sexy. But, to be fair, hot guys like him are a dime a dozen in L.A. It takes more than a strong jawline and six-pack to turn my head. Plus, with the recent news reports about his drug and sex scandals, I’m surprised the Board wants him associated with Rhapsody.

“Do they not read the gossip rags? Or any social media, for that matter? How could they possibly think this is good for us?” My mind starts racing with ideas of how badly this could go. “We might lose donors over this if we’re associated with him. What the hell are they thinking?” I glance at my screen and grant application, wondering if I should even bother finishing it. We most likely will be turned down now. I slam the lid shut in frustration. The more I think about it, the worse it feels. This could be disastrous.

“That’s the interesting part.”

“Wait, there’s more?” *Good God, not more.*

“*Blackmore Records is also making a significant donation to the Rhapsody Foundation to continue its valiant mission of introducing music to L.A.’s vulnerable inner-city youth.*”

“Oh, I’m sure that’s just a coincidence,” I mutter with heavy sarcasm. This is unbelievable.

Fiona shuts her phone off and stares at me, a dark eyebrow lifting in question. “So, what are you going to do?”

I stare right back. “That was a press release, wasn’t it?” The knot in my stomach tightens as it dawns on me how horrible this will be.

“Yep. It sure was.”

“Well then, there isn’t much I can do, is there?”

“Nope.”

I nod, letting the reality of it settle in. We’ve had star mentors before, but it’s typically been hush-hush since they were volunteering out of the goodness of their hearts. Like Ryan Crawford last year. *This* is very different. This is clearly a rep clean-up attempt. We’ve had a few of those, too, and they haven’t ended well.

“This is all just a publicity stunt for Blackmore and Murderous Crows. Chances are, he’ll show up for one or two sessions, then the paparazzi will get bored and go away, and so will he.” In the back of my mind, I doubt he even lasts that long. Guys like him don’t do charity.

“But then, what will we do for a guitar mentor?” The crease between Fiona’s brows deepens with concern, making me more uneasy. This is not what I wanted to be dealing with today.

I sigh. The thought of asking someone to be relegated to a backup mentor rubs me the wrong way, just like it will for whoever we ask. We have a few people who don’t mind filling in occasionally, but not for an entire session. And if Cooper only shows up for one or two classes, that will leave weeks with nobody to teach the kids.

“Do a standard reach out to our regular subs and see what everyone’s availability is. If we have to, we’ll rotate through everybody as best we can to finish the spring session.” I raise the lid to my laptop again, hardening my resolve to get more grant money so we don’t have to go through things like this. I’ve been pushing to permanently hire at least one advanced guitar teacher but keep getting denied because of budget restraints. “My concern is only for the students. They need stability, even if it’s just from a music teacher after school. Publicity stunts like this that only try to improve the image of some off-the-rails rockstar are not what we’re here for. Famous or not, he’s going to learn *that* real quick.”

“Oh boy,” Fiona says. She’s got a wicked grin spreading on her face. “I know that look. Cooper Davies is about to have a rude awakening.”

I wave her off and glare at her as she gets up to leave, but I also can’t help the twitch of my lips at her words about Cooper. I’m not a hard ass, but I do care about my students. The kids that come to Rhapsody are usually from broken homes with only one adult in their lives, and that person isn’t always a parent either. It’s not uncommon for them to have nobody take an interest in their hobbies or even care what happens to them. They rely on the programs here to escape for a little while and lose themselves in cultivating a passion.

I’ve been the Music Director here for only four years, and my former connections in the industry got me this job in the first place, so I know how the publicity machine works. I am well aware of how it uses programs like ours to try to buff and polish images of people who can’t handle the fame and then throw money at the messes they leave behind in their wake. The entire

music industry is only interested in keeping their cash cows producing, no matter what it does to the artist. And once they get what they need from you, they spit you out.

Murderous Crows, specifically Cooper Davies, is just the latest cog in that machine, getting ground and churned until there's nothing left. He's still at the beginning of that cycle, so he gets special treatment for now. He gets the kid gloves.

That will not be happening here. Not on my watch.

So, bring it, Cooper Davies. I'm ready for you.

She pauses in the doorway, and I can't tell if she's nervous or afraid when she says, "I almost forgot, your mother called...again."

I don't respond. My mother can take a long walk off a short pier, as far as I'm concerned. I haven't had anything to say to her in over four years.

I'm not about to start now.

two

...

Teenagers

Cooper

Sitting in the waiting room at the Rhapsody Foundation is a bit like being outside a principal's office in school as some sort of punishment is about to be handed out. Something I'm unfortunately very familiar with. Seeing the kids come and go as they sign up for various music lessons sends a warmth running through me as I remember the beginning of my own journey as a guitarist. My teacher, however, was just a random guy I knew down the road from our apartment building in Vegas. I could pay with stolen weed from my older brother Tim. The dude wasn't even that good, but he was passionate about music, and I got the basics. The rest I figured out on my own. I could have used a mentorship program like this.

My thoughts are interrupted as a teenage kid, around sixteen or seventeen, approaches. He's wearing an old Guns 'n Roses t-shirt, and I cringe, wondering if he knows who they are or if it was just on sale at Hot Topic.

As he speaks, he shakes his long, dark hair out of his eyes. "Aren't you the guitarist for Murderous Crows?"

"Maybe. Who's asking?" I smirk. I'm still getting used to being recognized, but I love messing with people like this.

He turns red, suddenly not so confident he knows who I am. I almost feel bad. "My name's Ethan."

I hold a hand out for him to shake, giving him a wide smile. I actually *do* feel bad. "Well, Ethan, you're spot on. I'm Cooper. Nice to meet you."

Shaking my hand, he deflates with relief. "You too. Are you going to be a mentor here?"

"That's the plan," I nod. "Do you play? You've got the rockstar look

down.”

The flush is back in his cheeks, but he puffs his chest out a little. False bravado if ever I’ve seen it. He’s definitely trying to impress me. This poor kid. “Yeah. I play.”

“Well, that’s why I’m here. But, if you’re in my class, I’ll only teach you on one condition.”

His eyes grow wide. “Oh? What’s that?”

“For me to believe you really want to learn and you’re not a poser, you have to tell me your favorite Murderous Crows song.”

Surprisingly, he doesn’t hesitate. “No problem. *Fear Factor.*”

I jerk back, shocked at his choice. “Nice. That’s one of my favorites, too.” I thought for sure he’d pull one of our few satellite radio hits out of his ass to try to impress me. Instead, he picked one of our most aggressive songs and one that’s not so well known. Teaching this kid could be interesting. “Can you play it?”

His eyes immediately drop to the floor. The insecurity is back with a vengeance, and my heart twists a little at seeing it. “A little. I learned some of it last session but didn’t get very far.”

I know Ryan Crawford was the mentor last session, so I try to hide that I’m fanboying over the fact he knows my song enough to teach it to someone else. “Well, that’s definitely something we can work on. It’s a fun song to play.”

“Hey Ethan, I’m glad to see you’re signing up again,” a smoky female voice says behind me. Ethan looks up in that direction, and his face transforms into a look I know all too well. He’s crushing hard in a way only a teenage boy can.

When I turn to check out the owner of the voice and object of his affection, I see why he’s so love-struck. Whoever this woman is, I’d sign up for whatever she teaches right along with him.

“Hi, Ms. Castle,” Ethan croaks as he tries to lower the pitch of his voice. I’d crack up, but I don’t want to embarrass him. I’ve been there, and man, it’s painful. “Yeah, and now that I know Cooper is going to be teaching, I’m super stoked.” He waves my way, and this gorgeous woman, Ms. Castle, finally looks at me, her dark eyes piercing straight through my soul.

Everything about her is beautiful and dark: hair, eyes, skin, clothes, mood. If I didn’t know better, I’d guess she doesn’t particularly like me. But that can’t possibly be true. She just met me.

“Well, we’ll see how it goes,” she says cryptically. Pointing to the open door behind her, she addresses me. “Mr. Davies? Come on in.” The smile plastered on her face is so damn fake I’m surprised it doesn’t splinter.

“See you soon, Ethan,” I say as I head into her office. I can’t help but notice her smile falter as I pass her by. Something about that makes my shoulders tighten. I’m getting a severely negative vibe from this woman, and I don’t understand it.

After she says goodbye to Ethan, she closes the door and rounds her desk, taking a seat. Her enthralling perfume follows in her wake, leaving me a bit dizzy. I realize she hasn’t formally invited me to sit, so I hesitate, unsure what to do. The ‘principal’s office’ tide rolls back in with full force.

She throws me a bone and indicates the chair across from her desk. “Please, have a seat, Mr. Davies.”

“Call me Cooper,” I say, relieved to have some direction in this suddenly awkward situation. “And thanks for having me.”

She plants her elbows on her desk and steepled her fingertips, fixing her gaze on me again. “Mr. Davies, I’m extremely busy since we’re in the middle of registration, so I’ll get right to the point. I had no say in your placement as a mentor here at Rhapsody, and to be perfectly honest with you, I would not have voted for it. But, here we are.” She sighs disappointedly at that fact and continues. “I am well aware this is a publicity stunt of some kind, and you’ll most likely only show up for the first few classes until the press get bored, or your scandals blow over, whichever comes first. So, let’s not start this relationship under any delusions, okay? We both know exactly what this is.”

“Excuse me?” I’m sure I didn’t hear her correctly.

“Don’t pretend you’re not being forced here to clean up your image by your record label. Though I will admit, their donation is appreciated.”

“Wait, what donation?” *What the fuck is she talking about?*

She ignores the question and goes on. “The thing is, Mr. Davies, unlike you, I care about the kids that come to Rhapsody. Not only do I try to make this a safe space for them to explore their creativity, I want them to have a semblance of stability when they come here. That means having mentors who will show up every class, not once or twice, and then bail when they lose interest.”

I lean back in my chair and cross my arms, letting her continue her rant. She’s not allowing me to speak, so there’s no point trying to interrupt her. She’s kind of cute when she’s angry, so I don’t mind the show so much.

“So, if that’s your plan, let’s get it out in the open now so I can arrange ahead for your replacement. Because believe it or not, some people want to help these kids out of the goodness of their hearts and from a real sense of wanting to give back.”

You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.

“Are you done?” I ask, my tone flat. I’m trying to contain my anger at her assumptions.

She doesn’t flinch and ever so slightly nods her head. “I am.”

“Good, Because there are a few things I would like to say.” I lean forward and hold her gaze right back so she can see I’m telling the truth. “First of all, I don’t know anything about a donation, and it sure as fuck wasn’t in exchange for my being here. This leads to my second point. It was an offhand suggestion for me to be here, and I agreed because I think programs like this are important. Third, this has nothing to do with any press bullshit. And finally, I have every intention of showing up for the entire session, not just a few classes.”

It’s her turn to lean back and cross her arms. She throws in an arched brow for good measure. “Is that so?”

I scrub a hand down my face in frustration. This woman seems to have already formed an opinion about me, and it’s pissing me off. While, sure, I’ve fucked up more than my fair share, especially after Andy died, not everything on the internet written about me is true. While I don’t bother reading the bullshit that gets said about me, I’d guarantee at least ninety percent of the stories are complete lies.

“What is your problem with me?” I ask. She doesn’t know me from Adam, and I don’t appreciate the judgment.

“My problem is I know your type, Mr. Davies.”

“Cooper,” I correct. *Again.* “And what type is that?”

“You’ve gotten used to getting your way because you’re a famous rockstar now, right? Nobody says ‘no’ to you anymore, and you’ve grown to like it a little too much. So much so that you expect it.”

“Actually--”

“That’s not going to fly here, Mr. Davies.”

“Cooper.”

“We don’t work that way. We’re all here for the kids. Not to make it *look* to the outside world like we give a shit. We actually do.”

“What makes you think I don’t give a shit? You don’t even fucking know

me.”

Her mouth tightens, and her eyes narrow as she goes in for the kill. I can feel it coming. “Do I need to rattle off specific examples of why your reputation precedes you? How professional you really are? How suitable you are as a mentor for vulnerable youth? It only took a quick internet search to find a few.” She starts counting off on her fingers. “Let’s see, there’s your last stunt in Vegas of streaking at Newton’s Resort that nobody will soon forget. The two girls with the drugs and...um... photos in Amsterdam not long ago? Remember those? And since you’ve been in L.A., my God, the Sunset Strip hasn’t seen the likes of you since the eighties--”

That’s enough. I stand up and pound a fist on her desk, making her jump and her eyes widen.

Damn it. Not my intention.

“Sorry,” I mutter, but then gather myself, using the momentum to get my point across. “You are making an awful lot of assumptions for someone who just met me two fucking minutes ago. You don’t know a god-damned thing about me. And you certainly don’t know why I’m here.”

The air of skepticism hasn’t left her. In fact, I’d swear she looks even more dubious. I don’t know what the hell I did to piss this chick off, but the ice running through her veins is freezing me out. And I don’t know why, but it’s bothering the shit out of me.

It makes zero sense, but I want her to like me.

I have a feeling that’s never going to happen.

She stands up and continues to hold my gaze, never wavering. “Well then, Mr. Davies, prove me wrong.”

This woman, I swear to God...

I clench my jaw so tightly I swear I can feel a back tooth cracking. “It’s Cooper,” I growl. Turning on my heel, I leave before she can say another condescending word.

Fuck this.

three

...

Mad Woman

Sloane

“So, what did he smell like? I can’t believe he came here on my day off.” Fiona has been bugging me for details on my meeting with Cooper Davies for the last fifteen minutes as we go over the registrations of this session’s mentees.

“What did he *smell* like? Are you serious?” I shake my head. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her this animated, and it’s throwing me off.

“Well, yeah,” she shrugs. “I imagine he smells like a combination of sex and muscles and just like a *man*, you know? Maybe throw in an exotic rainforest or a snow-capped mountain for good measure. Ooh, *sandalwood*. He’s got to have sandalwood in there somewhere.”

I cast a dubious glare at her. She’s seriously lost it. “And, what exactly do muscles smell like?”

She clenches her fists and shuts her eyes tightly with an exaggerated shiver. “I don’t know. But I bet it’s what *he* smells like.”

I can’t help but laugh at her. “Can we get back to the task at hand, please? I want to make sure every kid has a spot in their preferred class.”

“Ever since word got out Cooper is mentoring one of the guitar sessions, registration has sky-rocketed. I think we’re up to like twenty-five kids overall now. That’s got to be a record or something.”

Nodding in agreement, I have to confess, “That’s true. I just hope the ones in his class aren’t disappointed when he vanishes after a few lessons.”

Fiona tilts her head at me, a questioning look in her eyes. “Why are you so sure he’s going to bail on the kids?”

I shrug a shoulder. “Because that’s what guys like him do. Get what they

want, get bored, and get gone. It's a tale as old as rock 'n roll itself. It's not like he's reinventing the wheel here. We need to make sure we're prepared for when those wheels fall off. We can only control what we can control."

She shakes her head disdainfully. "Who hurt you? And I mean besides your family. They don't count for this."

My eyes snap up to hers, trying to read whether she's serious with that question. I can't tell, but I still cringe a little. "You know perfectly well who hurt me."

"I know, I know. But Trevor was a long time ago, and you've dated plenty of guys since him. You can't assume that all musicians are assholes out to hurt you. It's no way to live your life. Faith in people isn't always a bad thing."

"You make it sound as if being prepared for the worst is a bad thing. It's not. It's being practical." I scoop up another mentee registration from the pile on my desk and start reading. Fiona knows full well what my family did to make me so protective. And what my ex-boyfriend Trevor did to reinforce it. She's one of the few that does. "And this isn't about me at all. It's about protecting the kids who depend on us."

"Sloane, the kids who come here are pretty used to getting the short end of the stick. I'm sure they'd be able to adapt if anything happened." She says it as if it's some well-known fact or piece of trivia.

"And that's precisely why I don't want to disappoint them. I hate the thought of some egotistical nightmare coming in here and promising these kids the world, pretending to be their friend and to care, only to ghost them the next day. It makes me sick."

"Sloane?"

"For him to stand right there and tell me to my face he intends to stay for the whole session is laughable. I mean, come on."

"Sloane."

"What do I look like? Do I look stupid? Do I have the word 'gullible' written on my forehead or something? Tell me."

"Sloane!" Fiona's voice finally pulls me out of my tunnel vision, and I see I've been pacing the floor during my rant. I didn't realize I'd stood up, let alone started walking around.

Cooper Davies is getting under my skin. I don't like it.

"Sorry," I say, falling back into my desk chair.

A wicked smile starts to play on Fiona's lips, and I don't like that either.

“He’s getting to you, isn’t he?” She wags a knowing finger at me.

“No. He’s not.”

“Yes, he is. I’ve never seen you so out of sorts in the years I’ve known you. It looks to me like you may have just met your match with this particular rockstar, and the session hasn’t even started yet. You guys are in trouble.”

“Well, you’re not wrong there. *He* has met his match. I’m not falling for the rockstar bullshit, which won’t be a problem since I give him two weeks tops. After that, Mr. Murderous Crows will fly the coop, mark my words.”

Fiona’s evil smile is back. “Okay...words, marked.”



AFTER FIONA LEAVES MY OFFICE, I CALL MY FRIEND AND CHAIRMAN OF THE Board of the Rhapsody Foundation, Barry Sparks. He answers with his usual genteel southern drawl.

“Sloane darling, to what do I owe the honor of hearing your glorious voice?”

“Barry, sweetheart, you’re killing me here.” I purr right back at him, leaning into the sarcasm. Conversations with Barry are always fun. “I have a feeling you know exactly why I’m calling.”

His slight chuckle on the other end tells me that’s true. We’ve known each other too long.

“Don’t tell me the resident bad boy is already up to no good. Classes haven’t even started yet. And I bet Georgie it would be at least two weeks before it imploded.”

I roll my eyes, even though he can’t see me. “Interesting, I had the same timeline in mind. But no, nothing yet. My question is, why him? And why now? And why the hell didn’t you tell me?” If anything, that last question is what hurts the most. Barry and I go way back, ever since he was my original producer years ago. He knows how much this program means to me, especially as a former artist myself. I thought we trusted each other. He is one of the few people I trust in the music industry.

“Oh, you know how it is in this town. We are all distilled down to back scratchers at the end of the day.” His voice is apologetic. “My old friend Eliza at Blackmore asked us to do this, and who knows, there may be

something we need from Blackmore someday.”

I sigh, shoulders slumping. The entanglements of the industry never change. “I am well aware of how things work, but I usually have a say in who teaches here.” I do my best to keep the hurt out of my voice. “My toes are feeling a little bruised.”

“There was absolutely nothing nefarious in the arrangement, I promise. And I thought a high-profile name like Cooper’s could actually help us with funding. That’s all, I swear. It wasn’t personal.”

I know he’s telling the truth. We share the same passion for nurturing young talent. He is just as committed to the Rhapsody Foundation as I am and wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize the program.

“And you didn’t tell me because...?” I understand the situation, but I’m not letting him get out of this conversation without answering that question. I thought we had better communication than this.

“How much pacing of the floor and yelling have you done to poor Fiona since you heard the news, hmm?” he asks.

Damn it. He knows me too well.

“That’s beside the point, Barry. You really need to talk to me about stuff like this.”

“I promise to consult you on all future placements that drop in my lap, okay? I’m sorry, songbird. Consider it a one-time slip.”

The old nickname makes me smile. “Apology accepted, maestro. Fine. I guess I’ll deal with it. So what is your bet with Georgie?” I’m curious what he would wager with his husband on something like this. “Tell me it’s something good, at least.”

“Nothing drastic. Just breakfast in bed.”

“That’s it? Your bets are usually higher stakes. You’re slipping in your old age, Barry.”

“Oh, no, honey. It’s breakfast in bed in *Paris*.”

“Touché.”

four

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Chemical

Cooper

Whoever has put the jackhammer to my skull can kindly fuck all the way off. Or maybe not so kindly. My head is killing me, and I swear the sun is playing tricks with physics to purposely shine in my eyes through the minuscule gap between the curtains.

Jesus.

I met up with a few of the other members of Murderous Crows, Logan, our bassist, Skyler, our drummer and Logan's fiancée, and Remy, our rhythm guitarist, last night for some drinks and to see some of our friends in other bands play. It turned into a night of bar hopping down Sunset, and somehow, I made it home safe, sound, and in bed. By the level of pain coursing through my head, I had a great time. I swear, once Remy starts with the shots, it's game over for everyone.

Carefully lifting my head to avoid the sun, I glance down and see I'm on top of the sheets, still dressed, and my shoes are on. I guess I should be lucky I'm not in some random chick's bed. Sad to say, that's happened a few too many times lately. It's hard to tell right now, but I hope the worst I did last night was drink too much. I'll need to get a recap from Remy.

"Rise and shine, Dickhead."

Speak of the devil, and he doth appear.

"Fuck off, Remy," I groan, sitting up gingerly. The world tilts slightly, and a wave of nausea rolls through me. I grip the edge of the mattress to hold on for dear life and somehow keep it together.

"Mac wants you to call her as soon as you wake up." He's leaning in the doorway to my room in the house we're still sharing, and he doesn't look

hungover at all. *Asshole.*

A message like this from Mac can't be good. She is great. A fantastic manager. But she's good at it because she's all business all the time, which is really fucking annoying right now. I'm not in any mood or condition to be yelled at like a child, as I'm pretty sure she's about to, because I have a feeling she wants to "talk" about whatever I did last night.

While sure, ninety percent of what's on the internet isn't true, there is that pesky ten percent that is. I need to know what that ten percent of last night is.

"How bad is it?" I ask, squinting at him while scratching at the stubble on my jaw. I'm trying to wrack my brain to remember what I did last night that might warrant a reaction this morning. Sometimes, if I've done something wild or off the wall, it can take a few days to show up in the press. But now, we are getting more popular. Shit is much closer to the proverbial fan it's about to spin into.

Remy scoffs at me. "Dude, are you for real?"

That gets my attention. I look straight at him. The scowl on his face tells me he is not happy. *Fuck.* "What do you mean? For real about what?" A knot that's been forming in my stomach tightens.

"See for yourself. Pull up the *Blindsided* website. That'll give you an idea of what Mackenzie wants to talk to you about." He looks disgusted.

I don't get it. He was with me last night.

"Weren't you there? You were the one buying shots. Why do I need to look at a damn website? Just tell me what happened." I raise my voice, and it's a terrible idea. It echoes in the blood rushing through my skull, banging on the walls as it goes. *I need to take something for this headache.*

"You disappeared around midnight, man. We were going from the Whisky to the Rainbow, and you took off with some chicks to fuck knows where, then stumbled in around five."

I glance at the clock. It's almost one o'clock in the afternoon. *Shit.*

Grabbing my phone, I ignore the missed calls and texts and navigate to the *Blindsided* website. All the while, I'm holding my breath because fuck if I even remember what I did with those chicks last night. This is not how I want to find out either.

Not only do I see what everyone is upset about, it's the top fucking story.

DAVIES HAS AN APPETITE FOR DESTRUCTION

'It seems being home sweet home hasn't curbed the disturbing behavior of Murderous Crows guitarist Cooper Davies. Reports from late last night have him being forcefully removed from the Viper Room by the club's bouncers, who had enough of his antics. Photos and video taken by eagle-eyed patrons show Davies heckling the band on stage and drunkenly hitting on just about everyone in the club, then attempting to get into an altercation with a bartender who cut him off. Apparently, the incident in Amsterdam not long ago wasn't the peak of his troubles, as this behavior clearly shows someone who is solidly unhinged. Recent continued reports from the band's former merchandise assistant, Nyx, paint a rather bleak picture of the guitarist and his history of drug and alcohol abuse. According to her, he was a regular customer.

Is this simply a toxic trait or something more? Should fans worry about this reckless behavior? Is he heading down the same path as their late drummer, Andy Young, who died so tragically due to substance abuse? We can only hope this isn't a red flag of more to come. Requests for comment from the guitarist and Blackmore Records have gone unanswered as of publication.'

“Yeah...you're not going to want to look out the window either,” Remy says, a bit sheepishly but mostly annoyed.

I'm still studying the pictures that have been posted. It's me in the photos, but I don't remember any of the stuff I'm doing in them. Hell, I don't remember any of it.

“Did you hear me?” he repeats, louder this time.

“What? Yeah. I heard you.” Then it hits me what he said. “Why don't I want to look out the window?” I think I might be sick after all. I can feel myself turning green.

“Paparazzi.”

I drop my head into my hands. This is not good. I don't bother looking at the front yard. Not only because I don't need to see the photographers to know they're there, but it's too damned bright outside.

“Are they allowed to be out there like that?” I ask. “There has to be some kind of law that says they can't camp on our front lawn.”

Remy glowers. He's irritated now. Great. “Hang on a sec. Let me go check my law textbooks that I don't have because *I'm not a fucking lawyer.*”

His rising voice reverberates in my ears. “For fuck’s sake, man. You could have just said you didn’t fucking know. Jesus.”

“Yeah, well, you could just, oh, I don’t know, stop fucking up in public and embarrassing yourself and the rest of us.”

“Oh, do I embarrass you? Really, Remy? That’s your issue? Since when do you give a fuck what other people think?” This high road he’s jumped on is littered with potholes. He parties just as much as I do.

All expression leaves him, and he steps into the room. His fists are clenched, and I can sense either anger or frustration radiating off him. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Remy this upset at me before. He leans down with his face inches from mine, his eyes pierce through me, and it’s hard to hold his gaze.

Through gritted teeth, he says, “Do you honestly think this is about being embarrassed? Or what anyone thinks? Do you think that? Because if you do, you are seriously fucked in the head.”

I’m almost afraid to talk since he’s so tightly wound, but now he’s contradicting himself. “Then what?”

He pokes his index finger into my chest roughly and repeatedly in time with his words. He’s lucky I’m so hungover, or he’d be laid flat. “Because. We. Don’t. Want. To. Lose. Anyone. Else.” He straightens, still staring at me with a determination and emotion I’ve not seen in him. It’s almost desperate, and something inside me cracks at seeing it in him. I hate it. “Do you not get that? You’ve got to get your shit together, man. I mean, sure, we all partied before Andy died, but you’ve gone off the rails since then, dude.”

“Fuck off. I’m not off the rails.” I dismiss that idea right away. “I’m just blowing off steam. Besides, you were there right along with me last night, so you’re not one to talk.”

“Yeah, I was there while it was fun. Before you took off, and get this – I can tell you exactly what I did all night and who I did it with.” He shakes his head and turns to leave. “And, oh yeah, this part will be fucking nuts to you - *I don’t have to read a damn gossip tabloid to find out what the fuck I did.*” He slams the door shut behind him as he leaves but yells, “Call Mac, fuckhead.”

His words hit me straight in the chest. I did fuck up. I have been fucking up. Maybe he’s right, and I am off the rails. But it’s just partying. We all do it.

Don’t we? Maybe we don’t.

Maybe I'm the last idiot who hasn't learned their lesson yet. Or, maybe I want to forget about shit once in a while. It's not every day. Hell, it's not always once a week, either. It's just how I am. It's *who* I am. I've always been this way.

It's not a problem. I'm just having fun.

But am I really? Or am I trying to numb my self-loathing? I know Remy means well with his tough love, but it cuts deep. Why can't I seem to allow myself to be happy or successful? Why do I always self-sabotage like this?

What does any of this fucking matter?

The only reason it's even a topic of conversation is because we're getting sort of famous. Before now, nobody gave a rat's ass what I did in my spare time, who I did it with, or how fucked up I was at the time. I was perfectly content with that arrangement. All of a sudden, my personal life is open to public consumption, and everyone has a fucking opinion about it.

It's total bullshit.

My jumbled thoughts instantly boomerang to Sloane Castle. I just played right into her bad perception of me and proved her right about my image. *Fuck.*

That triggers something in my brain.

I glance at the time on my phone. It's just after one o'clock. A heavy sense of dread tumbles over me, and the nausea returns.

Fuck me.

I'm supposed to be at the Rhapsody Foundation in a half hour to go over the advanced guitar program with Sloane.

The Foundation is technically a half hour away, but that's being optimistic.

I am so screwed. And Mackenzie is going to fucking kill me.

If Sloane doesn't kill me first.

five

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Enemies

Cooper

An hour later, I walk into the Foundation, and the woman behind the reception desk nearly jumps out of her seat, her sharp haircut swaying.

“You’re Cooper Davies,” she announces as if this might be news to me. As her face reddens, she digs a deeper hole. “Damn, you’re even hotter in person.” Before I can respond, she catches herself and switches gears drastically, turning deadly serious. “You’re late.”

It’s my turn to redden, knowing I’m already fucking this whole mentoring thing up, and it hasn’t even begun yet. This is not how I wanted to start this, especially with Sloane’s negative opinion firmly in place to begin with.

“Yeah, sorry about that...”

“I’m Fiona. Sloane’s assistant.” She glances over her shoulder toward the closed office door behind her. “She’s not happy, just an FYI. You might want to prepare yourself.”

I can feel my throat tighten in anticipation of the reception I’m going to get from Sloane. I knew it would be bad, but Fiona’s warning only makes it worse.

“Noted. Thanks,” I nod, smiling.

She glances down at her desk phone, biting on a nail nervously. “It looks like she’s on a call. Have a seat, and I’ll tell her you’re... here.”

I can sense the unspoken word, ‘finally,’ in her tone, but I don’t argue as I find a chair to wait.

A full half hour later, the door to Sloane’s office opens, and she saunters out, handing a stack of files to Fiona. She sees me out of the corner of her eye and turns as if surprised by my appearance. I can’t tell if it’s an act or not.

She could totally be fucking with me, pretending to be shocked. She knows damn well we had an appointment. Yes, I'm fucking late for said appointment, but this is a stretch.

"Mr. Davies," she says, putting her hands on her hips, "how kind of you to join us." Her brows draw down in disappointment, and I'm right back at the principal's office again.

I get up from my seat, wiping my sweaty palms on the front of my jeans. "Ms. Castle," I nod. "Apologies for being late. I--"

"Let me give you a quick heads up about something, Mr. Davies," she steps up to me, and though I tower over her, it feels as though she's meeting me eye to eye as she pushes her shoulders back. "My time is valuable. We're only given so many hours a day, and I prefer to spend mine with people who can appreciate that fact. Believe me, I wouldn't think about wasting a minute of your time."

I can tell by how she says this she means she wouldn't spend a minute longer with me than she had to. I really don't know why this woman hates me so much.

"I'm trying to apologize--"

"Don't bother. I'm already working to find your replacement. You can go." Crossing her arms over her chest, she nods at the exit.

"But, Sloane--" Fiona even tries to get a word in, but Sloane just raises a hand without looking back at her, never taking her angry gaze from me.

It's only now I realize we're making a scene and have attracted an audience as people from other offices and kids from the hallway peek in to see what's happening.

Fuck.

I can already hear Mac and the rest of the band yelling at me to get my shit together.

"Yeah, no. I'm not going anywhere," I say, pushing past Sloane and heading into her office, where I sit in one of the chairs. I can be just as fucking stubborn as she can, so if she wants to play? Let's play.

The door to the office slams behind me, and she falls gracefully into her desk chair and starts intently typing on her laptop.

"What is your problem with me?" I ask. "I tried to apologize for being late, but you've had it out for me from day one. What gives?"

She types a little more, then turns the laptop around, and I'm face to face with the *Blindsided* article and photos from last night splashed on the screen.

I cringe. This is not good.

“What gives?” she snarls incredulously, pointing at her laptop. “This. This is what gives.”

“Look, I can explain.”

“Oh, really? Please do.” She crosses her arms again and leans back in her chair.

Fucking hell. What the fuck am I saying? How do I explain any of that article?

I rake my hands through my hair, then down my face, scratching at the stubble on my chin. “Okay, maybe I can’t explain it, but it’s not like it happens all the time. It was a one-off night, just blowing off some steam.” I shrug, knowing how lame I sound.

She arches an eyebrow and leans forward, scrolling to the bottom of the web page.

“A one-off?” She points to a list of links to other articles about me. “Do I need to click any of these to see what ‘one-off nights’ look like in your book?” She turns the laptop back to face her. “Let’s see, what do we have here... ‘Cooper Davies, the Latest Rocker to Reign on Sunset (and not in a good way).’ Or this one: ‘Rock Guitarist Leaves His Mark on His Fans.’ That one’s interesting. Pretty girl. I didn’t realize hickeys were still a thing... and the placement...you’re quite the artist.”

“Look. I fucked up, alright? It doesn’t mean I’m going to be a bad mentor to these kids. Who I am in my private life has nothing to do with this.” My head is starting to pound again. I am not up for this right now.

“Who you are in private?” The smirk on her lips is so derisive it cuts. “Does that mean this isn’t the real you in front of me now? Do you have a persona for every occasion? Will there be another one for the students? I can’t wait to meet that one.” She leans forward with mocking enthusiasm.

“What? No. You’re twisting my words.”

“Mr. Davies--”

“Cooper.”

“Mr. Davies, please believe me when I say I couldn’t care less what you do in your private life. What I do care about are the kids who come here to learn music. And I care about the reputation of this program and organization that I have worked very hard to raise from the ashes of oblivion. And I won’t have any of it tarnished by a spoiled rockstar looking for his next headline.”

That does it. I jump out of my seat, carefully resting my fists on her desk

and leaning closer, only a few inches away from her face.

She doesn't flinch.

The problem is now that I've gotten this close, and our eyes are searching each other's, I don't remember what the hell I was about to say. Shit, I don't even remember what we're fighting about. My only thought is about her dark eyes and how I could get lost in them if I let myself.

We're both nearly panting from being so emotional, and I can sense our breaths intermingling in the small space between us. It's all I can do not to close the inches and take her mouth with mine. The idea is suddenly all-consuming.

And where the fuck did that come from?

Yes, I think Sloane is attractive. I'd have to be dead not to. But acting on it? Not in my realm of possibilities. We are oil and water, fire and ice, anything opposite of something else – that's us. I know Sloane's type – the control freak who has to have everything their way, and that doesn't mesh with me.

At all.

Then why am I still thinking about this?

six

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Why Are You So Cold?

Sloane

The expression on Cooper's face changes, going blank, and I can't interpret what's going on with him. His eyes are still fiery but different somehow. Like a switch went off behind the scenes. But before I can say anything, he speaks up.

"You're wrong about me, and I'm going to prove it to you. I'll see you on Monday, Ms. Castle."

And he's gone.

What the hell just happened?

For a minute, I could have sworn he was going to kiss me, of all things. He would have gotten a surprise punch in the gut if he tried, or at the very least, a slap in the face. Cooper Davies is certainly not my type, so any thoughts about that need to jump out of my brain straight to their death.

Go ahead, thoughts. Go...

"What was all that about?" Fiona pulls me out of my head into the present, thank God.

"Huh?" I pretend to be straightening my desk, trying to kick out the thoughts of Cooper's ice-blue gaze so close and intense that it penetrated my soul. "What was what about?"

"Cooper left in a mad rush. Did you guys work things out?" She tentatively sits in the chair across from me, obviously avoiding making sudden movements. It's a wise move on her part.

I shrug and wave dismissively. "Nothing has changed as far as I'm concerned. Keep working on the list of backups like we talked about." I say, staring at my now-open office door Cooper just stormed out of.

'I'll see you on Monday, Ms. Castle.'

Will he show up on Monday like he said? Or regularly? Can I trust him not to flake on the kids here? Not likely. People like him don't change. Not overnight, at least. So, I don't see him changing in the next three days before the session starts. The kids were so excited when they heard he was the mentor, though...

"Sloane?"

"Hmm?"

"You're humming. I know what that means. You're in your head and down a rabbit hole. Come back to me, girl."

That makes me laugh. Fiona does know me pretty well by now. I do tend to internalize everything as I process it. And the humming? I've always done that when deep in thought. It's a habit I can't break. Actually, it's not a habit. It's just a part of who I am. I've even had to take tests in different classrooms as a kid because it would disturb my classmates. I can control it if I focus, but if I get distracted, forget it.

"I'm fine, Fiona. Don't worry about me." I sit back and open my laptop, ready to get back to work and try my best to forget those piercing blue eyes.



ON MONDAY MORNING, I ARRIVE AT THE CENTER EARLY TO TAKE SOME personal time in the piano studio, where I'll teach my one-on-one songwriting sessions with students. I like to play a little before the day starts and get my mind working and in the right headspace for creating music. The room's ambiance is made for getting lost in a song, with low perimeter lighting, acoustic panels on the walls to absorb the sound, and a grand piano in the middle.

I stare at the blank page in my songwriting journal, pencil poised but no words coming. I used to be able to fill pages effortlessly, melodies and lyrics practically spilling out of me. After years of creative drought, I still struggle to recapture that natural flow. I keep hoping inspiration will strike and knock me out of this funk, but nothing works.

I glance around the cozy piano room that's become my sanctuary. This space represents everything I've worked so hard to build: a place for kids to

nurture their musical passions, untouched by industry corruption. Just like my own passions ignited here in L.A. at eighteen when I played in small cafes and bars. I was a girl with a piano and a song who would play anywhere for anyone, willing to share myself with the world.

Word spread about this *'fresh new talent,'* my raw honesty and lyrical prowess. I got noticed by Barry, a producer at a label, eager to mold me into a star. My parents, former musicians themselves, became my managers. It happened so fast - the album deal, the whirlwind promotion, my song on the radio. It was intoxicating.

But something shifted when it came time to record my album. The label wanted a different sound, more pop, more processed. They got rid of Barry and brought in new producers. My real artistry felt diluted and contorted. Things got ugly when I pushed back, refusing to become their manufactured puppet.

The label threatened to drop me, to shelve my songs. They held the rights to my work, after all. My parents advised me to comply and to play the game. In the end, they negotiated a deal to let me out of the contract, but the music I had poured my soul into for years was gone, owned by heartless executives.

And it was all done behind my back.

I had been used. Betrayed by those closest to me. I vowed never again, and I haven't talked to my parents since. The pain motivated me to work with Barry to build Rhapsody, a place protected from industry corruption. I could nurture real artistry here. But still, my own musical spirit feels bruised and afraid. A shadow of what it once was.

Will I ever reclaim the joy that's been stolen from me? My creativity? My passion?

Sitting on the bench, I try to clear my mind of the racing thoughts about my past. They just compound with the questions about Cooper that plagued me all weekend: whether he will show up today, will any of the mentors show up? Will the kids? Will this be a complete disaster? Is all of this in vain?

I slide my fingers along the cool ivory keys, letting their smoothness clear away my anxiety as I play nothing in particular. I just let the notes take me where they want to go. As they're struck, the vibration of the piano strings reverberates subtly back into my fingertips until a distinct melody takes shape in my mind and the air around me.

Even with my eyes closed, it's almost as if I can visualize the notes as

they fill the room with sound. I start humming harmonies to what has to be the chorus, feeling the power of the song form and take shape in my hands. Glimpses of words and phrases slide in and out of my thoughts, suggesting possible lyrics that are just out of reach. Still elusive.

It's melancholy. Somber. Mournful. But not sad. It's a list of wishes gone unfulfilled. An emotion unrequited. But not lonely. It dances on a delicate line of emotions and chaos, and my soul instantly loves it.

I stop playing to grab my phone to record it so I don't forget it, and I am startled to see a silhouette in the doorway out of the corner of my eye. But as quickly as it's there, it's gone when I turn to see it head-on. Did I imagine it?

"Hello?" I call out. Maybe it was a student who was early and didn't want to interrupt me, or they didn't want to get caught listening. It wouldn't be the first time that happened. As I rush to the doorway and peek into the hall, I don't see anyone or hear any footsteps walking away. I must have imagined it.

My skin prickles as if caressed by a cool breeze, and a shiver snakes its way down my spine. Whether it's a good or bad sign is still to be seen.

"Hey, Ms. Castle," a girl's voice calls as a teenager with long mouse-brown hair rounds the corner. I can't help but jump a little in surprise at her sudden appearance.

It's just Penny, one of my students. I scold myself for being so jumpy today. These kids don't need to see my anxiety. They need confidence and encouragement.

"Oh, my gosh, Penny, you startled me." I have no idea why I'm so on edge all of a sudden, but I don't like it.

"I'm soooo sorry, Ms. Castle," her gaze drops to the floor. Confidence is not Penny's strong suit. "I didn't mean to scare you."

I instantly feel bad for making *her* feel bad. "Forget about it. I wasn't scared!" I wrap an arm over her shoulder and lead her into the practice room for her lesson. "Are you ready to write some mind-blowing music?"

Her cheeks redden as she answers, "Let's do it."

It's amazing how fragile the psyche of artists can be. The slightest inference of negativity can ruin someone's entire day or kill their confidence for weeks. It can take Herculean effort to rebuild pride in one's work after the most minor critique. To say artists wear their hearts on their sleeves is putting it mildly.

And, oh yeah, I'm one of them too.

seven

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Believer

Cooper

“What are you doing up?” Remy asks as I walk into the kitchen Monday morning for a cup of coffee.

I look at him quizzically. “What are you talking about? Why wouldn’t I be up?”

“But...it’s before noon.”

“Fuck you.” I grab a coffee mug from the cabinet and hit the brew button on the coffeemaker. I’m not in the mood for Remy’s sarcastic bullshit today. This is the first day of the mentoring sessions at Rhapsody, and I don’t want to give any fuel to the bonfire of hate Sloane Castle is stoking for me by being late. Much to Remy’s chagrin, I didn’t even go out last night.

“You are taking this mentoring gig seriously then, huh?”

I turn back to face him. “Yeah, I am. Why do you seem so surprised?” Remy and I have always gotten along. With any group, people naturally gravitate to certain other people, and Remy and I don’t have to try too hard with each other. With Remy, I can just be. I don’t stress like with sensitive Jake, worried I’ll say the wrong thing. And I don’t have to coddle ego like with Logan before Skyler mellowed him out. The dynamic is changing slowly, shifting in a way it hasn’t before. Since Andy’s death, we’ve dealt with it in our own ways and are responding to each other differently now.

Like Remy’s reaction to my interest in the mentoring program, before Andy’s death, it would have just been a thing that I did and maybe talked about, maybe not. But nobody would really ask. That wasn’t who we were as a group. We used to just be a bunch of guys who liked to jam, write songs, and then party. Now, we’re making conscious choices about how we interact

with each other and genuinely asking personal questions.

We care.

I'm not used to it yet.

Remy shrugs. "It just doesn't seem like something you'd be into, that's all."

"Really? Why not?" I take a sip of the hot coffee, relishing its burn as it travels down my throat. "I'm not a complete dick, you know."

"Oh, I know," he holds his hands up defensively. "I didn't think teaching was your thing. You always bite my head off when I ask for input while we're writing..."

"I do not," I scoff.

He shrugs again and gets up from the table, tossing the dregs of his coffee into the sink and rinsing his cup. "If you say so, man."

I don't like where this went at all. "Dude, what are you talking about? Seriously."

"Forget I said anything," he says, pulling open the back door. "Really. Forget it. Have fun in school, Mr. Davies." He flashes a bright smile and leaves.

What the hell was that all about? Am I a dick to Remy while we're writing?

I need to do even more soul-searching than I have already this past weekend about where I am, how I got here, and where I want to go. On Friday, I drove up to Ojai to a cabin owned by Blackmore Records and sometimes used for writing music. Luckily, it wasn't being used and was absolutely perfect for getting my head back on somewhat straight. But after what Remy said, maybe I'm not done with the self-reflection. Maybe some work still needs to be done.

But that waltz will have to wait for a different ball to get dealt with. I need to make sure I'm not late for my first day at the Rhapsody Foundation. I'm determined to show Sloane I'm taking this seriously, no matter what I have to do. Something about her lights a fire under my ass to be better for some reason. I'm not sure I entirely like it, but I at least like the motivation it gives me. Now, if she can see the effort I'm making, maybe it will make a difference in her attitude towards me.

Yeah, like that's going to happen. *Not.*



WHEN I ARRIVE AT THE CENTER EARLY, FIONA GREETES ME WITH AN OVERLY broad smile.

“Cooper! You came...” she looks around nervously. I assume she’s looking for Sloane.

“Of course I did. Today’s the first day of the session, right? Am I late? Too early?” I glance in all directions, taking in the people milling about in the hallways.

“No, no. You’re fine. You’re fine. You’re early.” She blushes and fumbles with the papers and files on her desk, clearly awkward, though I have no clue why. If I didn’t know better, I’d think she was flirting, but I don’t think Fiona is the flirting type. “Here is the list of your students for today and your schedule. These are their files with their progress notes from the last session. It was a prerequisite to join the advanced lessons this session.”

I take the stack from her. I wasn’t expecting all of this information. I had no idea what to expect since Sloane never deigned to tell me in our previous meetings since she thought I would bail at the first opportunity.

“Cool, thanks,” I say, picking up my guitar case and heading out of the main office. “Which room is mine?”

“All of the advanced classes are at the end of the hall. You’re in room 12A. Last room on the left across from the piano studio.”

I nod my thanks and head to my assigned room, weaving through mentees and their instruments, keeping my head down to avoid being conspicuous. Being six foot five with dark red hair and all the tattoos sometimes makes that impossible, but I make it to the room without interruption.

Inside the room, running through scales, is Ethan, the kid I met the other day in the office. He’s flying over the fretboard of his acoustic guitar. Each stroke of the strings is crisp and clean, and not a single mistake note-wise. Then he hits some power chord riffs to show off. It sounds pretty good. His technique, however, sucks ass.

“Not bad,” I say, nodding, setting the files on a nearby table, and laying my case on top to get my guitar out. “But you’re going to tire yourself out by the fourth song.”

“Why do you say that?” he asks, a note of defiance in his voice. Good. I like that he’s proud of his playing. It’s a hard thing to come by, especially at his age.

“Well, a couple of reasons,” I say, sitting across from him and resting my guitar on my knee to demonstrate. “First, if you keep playing with your whole arm like that, only bending at the elbow, your right bicep will be huge, and you’ll be slightly lopsided.” He at least chuckles. “Try using your wrist instead, which leads to my second point: your alternate picking is uneven. When you use your whole arm, the down stroke is much more pronounced than the upstroke, which makes everything unbalanced. If you use your wrist, you’ll have more even pressure on the strings. And you won’t tire as easily.”

I copy the scales and chords he played, showing how I keep my arm steady and only move my wrist. He studies me and repositions himself to try it out. It’s awkward initially, and he misses a few notes, but it’s not horrible.

“It’s harder than it looks,” he says, his face reddening.

I pat him on the shoulder, trying to encourage him. Change is always hard. “Only at first. You’ve probably played that way for a long time, right?” He nods. “Well, it’s time to get rid of bad habits now because later on? Forget it.”

“I guess.”

“Look, even though I’m here to mentor you, far be it from me to tell you *how* to play your guitar, you know? There are a ton of great guitar players out there with shit technique, right?”

He laughs a little and nods.

“Shit. Are we allowed to swear in here?” I glance back over my shoulder at the door to make sure the language police aren’t hovering around. That’s the last thing I need.

“I won’t tell if you won’t.”

“Okay, deal.” We bump fists to solidify our pact. “Then get back to your fucking scales, man. And try to throw in some minor pentatonics along with those majors. You’re boring me to death.”

His head snaps up to me, concern all over his face. “Really?”

Shit. This kid is sensitive. I might need to be more careful with what I say in these classes. I forget these kids are here to escape whatever’s happening in their regular lives. Ethan might not take any criticism well. He might even think everything I say is personal. I need to watch that.

I grin. “No, I’m fucking with you. But do try some minors. Do you know

those modes?”

We get lost in the different modes of pentatonic scales, and before long, another student is knocking on the door for their own lesson. Ethan packs up his gear with a promise to practice hard before our next lesson.

As I walk him out and open the door to let in the next student, I glance across the hall, and my gaze lands on Sloane Castle in the doorway across from me. We both freeze as if seeing the other person was completely out of the realm of possibilities. My feet root to the floor. The world narrows to just her. For a heartbeat, everything else fades away except her. For a split second, I can swear there's a glimmer of something in her stare, something that is happy to see me and makes my chest tighten. Of course, I'm hallucinating. Of that, I'm incredibly confident because she doesn't acknowledge my existence before ushering her next student inside and shutting the door to her classroom. Not even a nod of recognition. It was as if she didn't see me at all.

Of course, I didn't do anything either. I just stood there like a fucking idiot. But what the hell was I supposed to do? Smile? The woman hates my guts; why would I smile at her?

“You okay, Cooper?” Ethan asks, glancing between me and Sloane's closed door. “She really hates you, huh?” His question is tinged with satisfaction, but he looks almost concerned.

“Yeah, she's not my biggest fan,” I agree, rubbing at the stubble on my chin absently.

“That's okay, I am,” a girl with long brown hair beside Ethan says quietly. She's the student who just left Sloane's room, but I'd hardly noticed her before she spoke. She quickly moves as if to grab Ethan's hand for comfort after saying something brave but stops herself awkwardly before making contact.

I flash her my patented smile saved for fans and the press. “Why thank you, ma'am. I appreciate that.” Turning back into my classroom, I give them a wave goodbye and make a mental note to make sure I come to the doorway in between every class.

Little does Sloane Castle know I enjoy nothing more than getting under the skin of a pretty woman. As a matter of fact, it's my specialty.

As I close the door, my eyes automatically drift across the hall. Sloane's door is shut, and I feel an inexplicable pull to be near her again.

What is it about this woman that captivates me so completely? She's

beautiful, but I've been with plenty of hot girls before. No, it's more than that. Her fire and passion for this place and these kids draw me like a magnet.

When our eyes met earlier, however brief, it was electric. I saw a spark there. I know it. Did she feel it, too? Is there a flicker of attraction under all her disdain for me?

I scoff at myself. *Wishful thinking, Cooper. Get your head on straight. She hates your guts, remember?* Though I can't deny how satisfying it is to ruffle her feathers. Maybe if I keep chipping away at that icy exterior, I'll find a warm heart hidden somewhere inside.

As much as Sloane infuriates me, she also intrigues me. I want to unravel the mystery of this woman. Study all her layers like reading an epic novel. I have to know what made her so untrusting and cynical. There's a story there, and I aim to uncover it.

There's an irresistible satisfaction in getting someone to open up, to let you in. It's a high like no other. And I sense Sloane Castle could become an addiction if I let her. The trick is getting them to open up without doing the same.

I need to proceed with caution...but oh... *how I love a challenge.*

eight

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Good to be Alive

Sloane

On the second day of the session, I find a cup of coffee from a nearby café on the floor in front of the piano studio door. I pick it up and inspect it. On the side is written ‘SOY WHITE MOCHA.’ It’s my usual order from the café nearby. I wrack my brain, figuring out who might have left this for me. My thoughts go to Fiona since she’s gotten me coffee before. But leaving it at my door isn’t her style. Plus, I just saw her in the office, and she said nothing about it.

Then I hear someone playing guitar scales behind me in the room across the hall. Cooper’s room. My stomach tightens at the thought of him buying me coffee, trying to butter me up and get on my good side.

My affections can’t be bought.

I practically stomp across the hall to tell him as much and give him a piece of my mind, but stop short in the doorway when I see only Ethan in the room. His gaze raises to meet mine, and his face reddens.

“Oh, hey, Ethan. How are you? I didn’t expect to find you here,” I smile awkwardly and catch myself so as not to sound too crazy because I’m feeling a bit out of it thinking about the prospect of Cooper buying me coffee. “I mean, this early. I didn’t expect you this early.”

His brow furrows slightly in confusion at my rambling, and I don’t blame him.

“I’m not that early,” he shrugs and clears his throat. “Cooper just went to the restroom and should be back soon.”

“Oh,” I say, turning to leave before this gets more awkward. “I just wanted to thank him for the coffee.” I raise my cup to prove that was why I

crossed the hall in the first place and no other reason. It's a lie but a reasonable excuse. Can you tell him for me?"

Ethan's face turns unreadable, almost as if he's angry now. I don't understand why he would be upset about that, but I don't stop to ask him about it as I hear the door to the men's room down the hall squeak open.

Not waiting for Ethan to respond, I hurry across the hall before I can be caught near Cooper's room. I think I make it without being seen, but I can't be sure. I'm not going to check and give him a reason to expect me to visit his room regularly because that will not happen.



THE FOLLOWING WEEK, THE COFFEE AT THE DOOR OF THE PIANO STUDIO continues, and I sigh at the thought of having to thank Cooper. It feels like admitting defeat somehow. Plus, it's making me acknowledge that he's shown up and on time for each class. It's only been two weeks, so it still seems a little premature to start patting him on the back for doing the bare minimum of showing up, but it is impressing me for some reason.

I honestly didn't think he would last this long.

During these two weeks, there haven't been any new tabloid stories about him making a fool of himself at some club, either. In fact, there haven't even been stories about him mentoring here, which is odd. If a reputation clean-up was the goal, which is what I thought this was, undoubtedly, that clean-up would need to happen in public. So why it hasn't happened yet is a mystery.

I'm daydreaming about Cooper when Penny comes in for her class. She's usually quietly cheerful, but today, her demeanor is dark, and I feel a negative energy radiate from her. Oddly, I catch her glare at my coffee cup briefly, which only confuses me more.

"Is everything okay, Penny? You seem a little out of sorts today. Did something happen?"

She freezes in place as if caught in headlights and almost looks scared, but her voice is stern. "What? No. I'm fine. I'm fine." Fumbling with her backpack, she pulls out her songwriting notebook and sits at the piano. "Why would you ask that?"

I'm surprised by her sudden movements and mood shift. Something is

definitely wrong with Penny, but I can't force her to tell me what it is. I think she has a huge crush on somebody, but I don't know who, and I'm unsure of their status. Maybe something happened between them recently, and she got her heart broken. Emotions at her age tend to be larger than reality, and everything is life or death, so the slightest problem can feel like the end of the world. The most negligible hurt is devastating.

I decide not to press her on it, mainly because it's not my business, but also because I don't want to open any wounds either. I think Penny knows me well enough that she knows she can talk to me if needed. Being my first student a few years ago, I've had the privilege of watching her talent blossom and bloom. She plays several instruments and is proficient in them all. She's in several classes each session and is even in Cooper's class right after mine.

She was made for music. Like me, she uses it as an escape and release. Sometimes, things are just easier to express when it's in the form of a song. Its structure and melody hide the story's personal truth and instead, share the emotion behind it with the listener. It becomes a shared experience rather than a testimony. That makes it a little less frightening and easier to put out into the world.

We worked on her song's structure and basic melody during the first couple of weeks. Today, we're going to dive into the lyrics. Maybe that will give me an idea of what's happening with her. The homework was to come in today with some thoughts on a theme or starter lyrics we can work with, so hopefully, I'll start to get some answers.

"Right. Let's jump in," I say, closing the door to the studio. As it starts to swing shut, I catch Cooper in the hallway, glancing my way. Our eyes meet for a split second, and goosebumps erupt on my skin, making me shiver. I quickly finish closing the door before the smile about to spread on my lips has a chance to make itself known to anyone.

What the hell is wrong with me? I can't be smiling at Cooper Davies.

I can't like him at all.

nine

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Night to Remember

Cooper

Penny is always my last class of the day, which is refreshing because she's also my most talented student. Even surpassing Ethan. She's working on her own composition that she's also writing with Sloane's help during this session. We've had to shift gears several times as the song often changes in her writing classes.

Today is the first day I'm getting a glimpse at the lyrics so far. I'm pretty sure these will change, too, as the song takes shape. Lyrics aren't typically a part of my writing process since Jake takes care of that part, but I do take them into consideration. The words of a song can sometimes set the tone for the melody, but it can also work in reverse. There have been many times that I'll write a melody, and Jake will take it and run with it. It's a symbiotic relationship, and every song is different.

In writing our next album, we've been working with Jude Lockwood, bass player for Indigo King, and using his home studio for our brainstorming sessions. It feels different this time with Skyler, now our permanent drummer, but it's also different because we're all clear-headed. We're not all hungover trying to cobble notes and words together to form a song.

We're now writing with a purpose, not just to fuck around. The songs have a deeper meaning now, too, with Andy gone, and it's cathartic to work through those feelings, whether we consciously realize we're doing it or not. And Jude has been incredibly supportive and able to keep the mood light when it feels like it's about to bottom out. He knows how to crack a lighthearted joke or say the right thing to get us back on track, but he doesn't interfere with our process. It's been amazing so far.

So, hearing Penny's song from where it started to where it is now in such a short time is beyond impressive. She truly is gifted. I wonder how much of the improvement is Sloane's influence.

After meeting Sloane for the first time, I did an internet search of her and found what amounted to an interesting story. She was an up-and-coming singer-songwriter who seemed to have a massive career in front of her, making quite a name for herself. Her songs climbed the indie-alternative charts before she was signed to a record deal.

However, things seemed to have gone south once she signed that deal. No reasons were given, but her online music disappeared like it never existed. She never released another song, and the label even sued her for breach of the recording contract. It was settled out of court, but details of the suit or its result have been sealed. Neither Sloane nor the record label has discussed it publicly, and questions have been asked. They just gave the same 'no comment' reply when broached with the topic. Eventually, the press got bored with it and stopped asking. But even now, if Sloane is asked about it in interviews for the Rhapsody Foundation, she decisively shuts the question down.

I'm dying to know what happened.

It's not just idle curiosity, either. Something in me needs to understand what fractured her trust and hardened her so completely. If I can unravel the secrets of her past, maybe I can solve the puzzle that is her.

I have this urge to be the one to break through those walls she's constructed. To be the one she finally opens up to and confides in. The thought of earning that kind of intimacy with someone so closed off is intoxicating.

I also get that I'm the last person Sloane would tell that story to.

"Cooper? Here's a first draft of the lyrics if you want to look at them." Penny's eyes are eager and hopeful, so I take her notebook from her, noticing the two different sets of handwriting in the notations in the margins of the pages. Somehow, I can tell which writing is Sloane's, and I run my thumb over the ink imprints of her words, trying to get a sense of her through osmosis for some reason. As if the handwriting can give me some insight into the person behind it.

I blink a few times, clearing my stray thoughts, and focus on the words.

In the twilight of my world, lost in a sea of dreams,

I hide my heart behind a veil of silent, tortured screams,
My love for you is a secret, a sacred timeless art,
I paint all of my emotions on the hidden canvas of my heart.

But you're the distant star that I can't ever reach,
My feelings crash like waves upon a faraway beach,
I watch you from the shadows with a silent, aching plea,
You're the one who holds my soul but doesn't even see.

(Chorus)

I'm a poet in the night, my heart forever alone,
A captive bird sings its secret song, in love but still just one,
In this realm of foolish love, I wear my broken crown,
A bittersweet, timeless tale where my heart remains
spellbound.

(Verse 2)

I carve your name in whispers on the pages of my soul,
A misspent love, unspoken, makes my heartache for you
whole,
With each sigh and every breath, I craft this lonely song,
Of a love that's never said, but in silence, still feels strong.

(Chorus)

I'm a poet in the night, my heart forever alone,
A captive bird sings its secret song, in love but still just one,
In this realm of foolish love, I wear my broken crown,
A bittersweet, timeless tale where my heart remains
spellbound.

(Bridge)

There is a beauty in my sorrow, and in the tears I hide,
In the way I love you from afar, where my heart resides,
For in the depths of lonely love, I can find my grace,
My shattered feelings hold me in a haunting, cold embrace.

(Verse 3)

As the seasons change and time begins to flow,
I know this love will never bloom, and it will never grow,
But I'm a dreamer in the dark, my words a gentle breeze,
In the world of unvoiced cares, I find my inner peace.

Wow. The words are powerful, but the phrasing knocks me out. I sit across from Penny, rereading as I move.

"You wrote this?" I ask, still somehow amazed at this girl's talent, even though she's already proven herself.

As I glance up from the notebook, I catch her furiously blushing and avoiding my gaze. "Well, Sloane is helping a lot..."

"I'm sure she is, but Penny, these lyrics are fantastic. Why don't you show me what changes you've made to the music with words now in the mix."

Her blush deepens even further somehow, and she tries to hide behind her hair. "Okay..."

"And, can you sing along as you play? I'd love to hear it all together."

Now she looks like she's about to faint, all that reddening and blushing draining completely.

Shit. In my excitement over the song, I've spooked her.

"I don't know..." She clutches her guitar nervously, her knuckles turning pale.

"Don't worry about it," I say, trying to backtrack and make her more comfortable. "I can read along as you play. Just announce the sections if you can, like 'Verse' or 'Chorus,' okay?" I make my expression as encouraging as possible. The last thing I want to do is inadvertently discourage her fantastic creativity. "I'll try to transcribe what you're playing too."

"Okay," she says, releasing her death grip on her guitar and tucking her hair behind her ears as she takes a deep breath. "It has a four-bar intro and then goes into the first verse."

"Got it," I nod, pulling out a blank page of sheet music and finding a pencil to make notations of what she's playing as she plays. "Whenever you're ready."

She looks at the page warily but then steels herself and starts playing.

The first time she plays it through, I'm so busy reading along and writing down what notes I can catch at the same time that I hardly pay attention to the

song as a whole.

“That was dumb of me,” I say, looking at the mess I made of the notations while trying to do everything at once. Transcription has never been my strong suit, but this further proves that point.

“What was dumb?”

“Focusing on so many things at one time. Or, at least, trying to. I ended up not focusing on anything.

“I can play it again if you want.”

“Okay, but let’s do it section by section this time. We’ll start with your intro and verses, cool?”

She nods with an excited smile I can’t help but mirror back to her. She’s really got something special with this song, and I want nothing more than to help her make it the best it can be.

As she plays through, I stop her in the middle of the verse. “Wait. Let’s put some separation between the verse sections. Not a bridge, but more of a break down, to give it a little more flavor. Otherwise, they kind of run together like one big verse, you know what I mean?”

Biting her lip, she nods slightly, unsure. “I think so.”

“Here. Let me show you.” I grab my guitar and play out my idea for her. The grin I get in response is incandescent. I can almost see the lightbulb go off in her brain at the possibilities this might open for the song.

“That changes everything.”

“Well, not everything...” I shrug, trying to stay humble, even though I know the entire mood of the song just shifted for the better. “Play it again a few more times. Add your own finesse to it. Make it yours.”

She does, and somehow, in a few minutes, finds a way to improve it more. This girl is a genius.

“Sloane’s going to love this,” she says as she starts packing her gear at the end of the lesson.

“Oh yeah? Do you think so? Why’s that?” I try to hide my extreme interest in her statement, but I’m not sure I’m pulling it off. I’m not great at covering my emotions.

Penny shrugs a little, smiling to herself. “I don’t know. She just will. I think this is something she would do if she were writing the song.”

“What makes you say that?” I turn to face her, my interest now apparent and intense.

Her demeanor shifts, and she closes herself off as she realizes she let her

guard down for a second. I hate to see the pride and happiness disappear so quickly like that. And I hate thinking I may have said something to cause it. Is it because I want to learn something about Sloane? I'm not sure I got a jealous vibe from Penny, but I guess anything's possible with teenage girls. I have no clue what makes them tick. Never did.

"Because her writing is perfection. I can only dream about writing songs like her. She's so good at it."

"Penny. This is your song. All we're doing is guiding you and making suggestions. Ultimately, what you do with any of them is up to you. This is all you. And it's great. Don't forget that."

The blush is back in full force as she backs away toward the door, but all she says is, "See you Monday," as she gives a slight wave before heading down the hall.

I stand in the doorway and watch her go, eventually turning my attention to Sloane's room across the hall. Surprisingly, she's there watching Penny leave as well. After our first-day clash, she's made a point not to meet me in the hallway between classes. She looks different today than usual. Jeans and heeled boots, but instead of a blouse like she usually wears, she's wearing a t-shirt with a leather vest. It suits her immensely, this casual, no-frills version of Sloane.

She must notice me studying her as her body stiffens under my intense gaze. I can't help it. When Sloane Castle is in my vicinity, all rational thought runs away from me. I try to pull myself together and salvage the situation while I still have her in sight.

"Penny's song is freaking amazing, by the way. Nice work," I say, trying to keep her engaged somehow and hoping I don't look or sound too pathetic.

A smile that lights up her entire face spreads as she says, "It's all Penny. I'm just along for the ride with that talent."

I nod in understanding and agreement. "She's definitely got that. Hopefully, our work on it today doesn't mess it up too much for you."

"What did you change?" There's interest in the question but also wariness, as if she's afraid I ruined the song.

I put my hands up and grin. "Really, it's a small thing. And you can change it back if you hate it."

"What did you do?" A perfect eyebrow arches in concern, and I feel my chest tighten at the thought of disappointing her.

What the fuck is this now? Why do I care about disappointing Sloane?

“I just added a small break down between verses, that’s all.” Now I back up a little into the doorway of my classroom. Preparing to shut the door between us if she goes on the attack. “Like I said, though, you can always put it back the way--”

“No, no,” she says, her face pensive as though she’s considering the change in her head, mentally playing the song with the new addition. Slowly, a smile returns to the surface, and I feel myself release the breath caught in my throat. “If it’s how I’m picturing it, it’s an interesting change. I’d need to hear it first, though.”

“I can play it for you if you want,” I suggest, half-hoping she turns me down. I’m not sure I like how I’m feeling about Sloane right now. She’s done nothing for me to like, but somehow, I still find myself thinking about her when I shouldn’t. And I definitely still look for her after every class. I’m starting to question if it’s really to piss her off like I initially intended or something more now.

For a minute, it looks like she might take me up on my offer. But then some mental parkour must happen because several emotions run through her before she says, “No thanks. I’ll wait for Penny to show me. She might change her mind about it over the weekend, and she probably shouldn’t hear we just talked about her song without her.”

While disappointed by the rejection, I can’t deny that her reasons are valid. It is Penny’s song, and it’s not for me to play for anyone without her. It was stupid of me to suggest it in the first place.

This is why I don’t mentor people. I suck at it.

“You’re right,” I say, feeling ten sides awkward. I give her a half-hearted wave. “Have a good weekend, Sloane.”

“You too, Cooper,” she replies as she heads into her room.

She said my name. My first name. Not, ‘*Mr. Davies.*’

She said my fucking name.

ten

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Love is a Battlefield

Sloane

During the third week of the session, I like to hold meetings with the mentors to get status reports and see if any changes or improvements can be made. It's an excellent time to get a feel for how things are going for everyone and head off any issues before they become full-blown problems. Every mentor was sent an email from Fiona with the time and place for the meetings.

Cooper Davies is now twenty minutes late for his.

Nobody else has had an issue with their appointments, and absolutely no one was a complete no-show.

Until Cooper.

Of course, he's the one who has to be a problem, the one who has to be an asshole and think rules don't apply to him. Of course, it's him. I'm neither surprised nor disappointed. I can't be disappointed because I never expected him to show up in the first place. What I will be surprised about is if he comes in on Monday now that he's jumped the tracks. Apparently, he's gotten what he needed from the program and doesn't feel the need to participate any further.

After a few more minutes, I head out to the reception area. "Fiona, let's start contacting the subs we discussed for advanced guitar."

"Wait, why?" I hear Cooper's voice and look up to see him saunter in as if the world should stop since he's here now.

Fiona looks back and forth between us, anticipating the showdown she knows is about to happen.

"Because, Mr. Davies, it's obvious you are working on your own

schedule, and we can't function as a program if everyone isn't using the same clock." I cross my arms over my chest to emphasize my point. Bullshit like this can't stand.

He looks thoroughly confused. I'll give him that much. But it's not enough to persuade me into thinking he actually is. Guys like him are great actors when they need to play the martyr.

"What the fuck are you talking about? My own schedule? I'm five fucking minutes early, *Ms. Castle*."

The clapback at using his formal name isn't lost on me, but I ignore it for now.

"Your meeting was scheduled for a half hour ago. I've waited for you, and now I won't be doing that any longer." I wave my hands at him dismissively for him to leave. I've had enough of this guy. Never mind that my knees seem to lose strength whenever he's around. I discount that as purely a physical reaction to an attractive man. It doesn't mean anything. "Don't worry. We've had subs lined up the entire time, waiting in the wings for this inevitability. Thanks for your time thus far. You're free to go."

The anger creeping up his face is slow but so intense I can feel it in my bones before he says a single word. A mad Cooper Davies is not something I want to be directed at me. *Holy shit*.

He pulls his phone out of his pocket, navigates to something, and then holds it out for me. Reluctantly, with my hands shaking slightly, I take his phone and look at the screen. On it is the email from Fiona with the appointment, and sure enough, it says our meeting is five minutes from now.

That doesn't make any sense. I checked the schedule repeatedly while waiting for him to show up, just to make sure I wasn't crazy and he was late.

I turn to Fiona and show her the phone. "Can you make any sense out of this?"

"Let me see," she says, her brows furrowing as she reads the email. "This isn't right. Look, it's on the schedule for 4:30." She turns her laptop for both of us to see her calendar of appointments for today, showing the 'correct' time. "Maybe I accidentally typed the wrong time by mistake? I double-checked everyone's email before I sent them, though, so I don't know how this could have happened."

It's not like Fiona to make this kind of mistake. Sure, it's an easy one to make, especially with the number of appointments she needed to schedule, but this is something she would have caught. Fiona is nothing if not a

perfectionist. And from the doubt in her eyes, I don't know what to think.

"Do you think this is something you could have overlooked somehow?" I ask, taking the phone back and handing it over to Cooper. I'll need to deal with him shortly, but I need to figure this out first.

I can tell she's still upset. Fiona does not like making mistakes. She launches in-depth investigations into what went wrong, where, and how to avoid repeating the same mistake. Sometimes, I think she does that to see if she really did make a mistake. And sometimes she's right, and the fault is someone else's. She has to check to give herself peace of mind.

"Wait a minute, let me see that again," she says, tearing the phone away from Cooper.

"It's a simple mistake, don't worry about it. No harm, no foul," he says, shoving his fists into the front pockets of his jeans, as earnest as the day is long.

Jesus. The forgiving side of Cooper is even more attractive than any other I've seen so far.

"No, no," Fiona says, sitting at her desk and typing furiously on her keyboard. She stares at the screen for a long minute, scrolling on her mouse slowly and deliberately.

Cooper and I share a glance and a shrug, unsure of what we should be doing now. This seems like as good of a time as any to apologize, so I mouth the word 'Sorry' to him as I meet his eyes.

God damn, those eyes.

His lips twitch into a crooked smile that almost looks smug, but he controls it and gives a quick nod of his head as if he understands everything. *Oh, if only he did.*

I don't know why, but suddenly, I think he would understand why I am the way I am. He would get it.

But, and this is the big obstacle, could he change it?

No. Too much has happened for me to change now. I don't think anyone can pierce the barricade firmly set in place around my heart. Especially not someone like Cooper.

We stand here eyeing each other curiously, obvious ruminations happening in our brains about the other person but not vocalizing anything. It feels safe to do this openly with someone else in the room. Fiona is our buffer if we need one.

Cooper starts rubbing at the alluring scruff on his chin, the muscles of his

bare forearms flexing with the movement. My eyes are magnetically drawn to the tattoos adorning his skin as they shapeshift with each stretch and contraction. It's hypnotizing.

"A-ha! I knew it!" Fiona shouts as she bangs a fist on her desk, scaring the shit out of both of us. We jump at the sudden outburst, not ready for the interruption to our investigations of each other.

"What?" I ask. "What did you know?"

She motions us both to look at her screen, so we lean in, and Cooper lightly lays a hand on my back as he does. It takes every ounce of strength to control myself and not shudder at that lightest of touches like I really, really want to. I have to force myself not to inhale his cologne as it wafts past me and focus my undivided attention on whatever Fiona says.

"See this?" She points the mouse to her outgoing mailbox on the day she mailed out the appointment invites. As she scrolls to the bottom of the list, she highlights the email to Cooper. "Look at the time this shows as sent. Eight o'clock at night. I did *not* send any of these emails after five o'clock, see?" She goes back to the mailbox of sent messages, and sure enough, all of them show earlier times.

"I did think it kind of odd you'd send something like that so late in the day," Cooper adds, confirming the strangeness of the event.

"Okay, so what are we suggesting here? Some sort of glitch in the mail system not only held onto the email and sent it later, but also changed the contents on its own? That's not likely."

"No. Somebody fucked with my outgoing email," Fiona says, scowling grimly. "That's what happened." The sight of her angry now puts my nerves on edge. There's been too much anger floating around today.

"Can we get someone from IT to look into it?" I ask, trying to think of solutions or explanations but coming up short.

"You mean Carl?" She asks, rolling her eyes. "Carl is our IT."

A picture of the young guy, barely out of high school, who keeps our internet and Wi-Fi up and running and occasionally adds things to our website pops into my head.

We're never going to get to the bottom of this.

"Okay, let's ask Carl if he can look into it then." I glance between the two of them. "For now, let's just set it aside as an accidental miscommunication and move on. Cool?"

We all look at each other, shrugging and nodding like the whole part

about me blowing up at Cooper was no big deal.

But to me, it was a big deal. I was downright mean to him, and I'm not a mean person. I said some horrible things out of anger I never should have said.

To anyone.

And I regret it.

I can't shake the regret churning inside as we awkwardly move on. I've been short with Cooper before, but this felt different. The accusations I spewed at him came from a darker place. A place inside myself that I don't like.

I glance at Cooper, taking in the intensity of those ice-blue eyes. Maybe thoughts of him sparked an irrational fear of being betrayed again. Of being hurt by someone I'm starting to...

No. I slam the brakes on that thought. I am not 'starting to' anything with Cooper Davies. We have a professional relationship, period. So where is this coming from?

The truth stares back at me as I meet his gaze again. I've kept Cooper at arm's length because I feel things I shouldn't when he's around. He ignites a flame in me I've long since extinguished. I lash out at him because it's easier to be angry than to accept how he makes me feel.

I need to stop assuming the worst in him. And maybe start looking at the root of my own issues. My heart has been locked away for so long I'd forgotten it could still feel anything at all. But the way he looks at me...it almost makes me believe again.

Almost.

elevén

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Lifeless Stars

Cooper

I sit across from Sloane in her office, hyper-aware that we're completely alone. The ticking clock and hum of the mini-fridge emphasize the stillness. While I've been here before, I take in the musical trappings surrounding her - the stacks of songwriting books, and the photos on the walls. This space suits her, I realize. It's an intimate glimpse at the real Sloane.

My eyes drift back to her. She's stunning, even in her prim blouses and pencil skirts. I imagine peeling them away, unleashing the passionate woman I have a feeling is underneath.

I shift in my chair, suddenly feeling too big for it. She clasps her hands tightly, and I wonder if she feels this magnetic pull between us, too. Does it take all her restraint not to give in?

"So, about my reaction earlier..." she begins. Her smooth voice washes over me like honey. All I can think about is closing the distance between us, capturing her lips with mine, learning her curves...

I force the thoughts away. *Get a grip, Cooper.* I try to focus on our conversation, and on maintaining professionalism. But with her so close, it takes all my willpower not to unravel right here.

To have her, even once, would be worth any consequence. But I know she's off limits. For now, anyway. Still...a guy can dream.

"Sloane. Stop apologizing. It's not a big deal."

"But it is a big deal. I shouldn't have said--"

"No," I interrupt, grabbing one of her hands and forcing her to meet my gaze from across her desk. "It's not. And don't worry, I totally get it. I'm the reckless rockstar who only cares about himself, blah blah blah, insert cliché

here. I understand where you're coming from."

"That's not what--"

"Nope." I shake my head, shooting down whatever she was about to say again. "I've earned some mistrust, some doubt. I fully accept that. But hopefully, I've proven over the last three weeks that I am committed to Rhapsody and this program. I might even be doing some good with the kids. Who the hell knows."

She studies me silently for a minute, her face unreadable as she opens a file. "Well, according to your students, you are doing exactly that. Everybody loves you." She glances up and meets my gaze for a fraction of a second before shifting her attention to the file.

That temporary connection feels like a bridge of some sort. An opportunity opening up for me where I never thought there would be one. Could Sloane have an interest in me after all? How crazy would that be?

"Everybody?" I ask, a smirk growing beyond my control. I can't help but be cheeky in awkward moments like this, and my first line of defense is always humor and innuendo. Would she even admit it if she did like me? I doubt it.

A bright pink colors her dark cheeks, and god damn if it isn't the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I'm about to get lost in the act of simply staring at her when the realization that we're still holding hands dawns on me. I quickly release hers and sit back in my chair, forcing my features to be neutral. I doubt I pull it off, but she goes on as if I didn't just say and do that, thank god.

"We poll every student about their mentors, and you got high marks from almost everyone."

That makes me pull up. "Wait. *Almost* everyone? Who's got issues with me?" Not that I doubt someone would have a problem, but this is the first I'm hearing about it. I would think something would have been brought to my attention before now. At least, I hope it would.

"I can't tell you the student's name for privacy and potential retaliation reasons, but--"

"Whoa. Wait a sec. Do you honestly think I would retaliate against a student who complained about me? Do you think I'm that big of an asshole?"

She stares at me for a second too long before answering. "No, of course not. We do this for all students and mentors to encourage positive interactions in the classroom and out. Students need to feel safe in expressing themselves

honestly. Especially these kids who don't always have that kind of safety at home. It's important to me here."

I realize then that the second she took to respond was to consider her words, not that she doubted my honor. I then take some time to think about what she's said. She's right, of course. These kids don't have much, so they need to cling to what safety they have here. Far be it from me to upset that delicate balance.

I nod in agreement. "You're right. I'm sorry. I just got a little defensive. Is there any feedback you *can* give me about the problem so I can fix it?"

Her smile is back, and it's of approval this time. I don't know why, but having her approval for something made my day.

I'm so fucking screwed.

She skims the file one more time and says, "Well, this student would like a little more focus on the song they want to learn and not so much on 'stupid form practice.'"

I instantly know who it is.

Ethan.

That little shit.

I nod solemnly in silence as if taking in the grand wisdom of the suggestion. Which, of course, is total bullshit. He's not going to learn anything if he doesn't master the fucking basics first. It's been interesting how our relationship has changed over these three weeks. What started as a fan wanting to learn his favorite band's song has morphed into a disgruntled teenager, crabby because he's not getting his way.

This isn't the first time I've thought about this. I've felt it shift over time, so hearing it from Sloane isn't as big of a shock as it could have been. I've suspected it all along.

"Okay, so here's my question. Since I've never been a mentor before, I might be fucking up the whole thing."

"I wouldn't go that far."

"Thanks. So, what if Eth—the student is wrong?" I catch myself from saying Ethan's full name, but I can tell by the slight flash in Sloane's eyes that she knows that I know. "What if they really do need to work on their form more than learning my stupid song?"

"Is their form that bad? Or are you maybe being a bit stringent?" She cocks her head thoughtfully at me. "It's possible you're both right and wrong simultaneously, no?"

I carefully consider Ethan's technique and application to the song. Am I being too hard on him? Is he right?

I shake my head when I get to my internal answer. "Nope. Not possible. He, I mean, they, whoever they are, need to work on their form, or else this is all just to teach someone to be a mimic. I don't think that's in the mission statement of this place, is it?"

She cracks a slight smile and nods. "It is not."

"Then I'm going to keep doing what I'm doing. The kid can hate me all they want, but I'm here to make them a better guitar player, not a better Murderous Crows cover band."

I shiver internally at the thought. I'd never considered we'd have bands covering our songs. In the scheme of things, we just wrote them. There's no way someone else would want to learn all of them already. But, I guess stranger things have happened.

And usually to us.

"Well then, Cooper, I support your decision to keep the status quo." She stands, indicating our meeting is now over.

I don't want it to be over. She just said my name again, and the sound of it passing her lips is like a balm for my troubled soul. I want to hear her say it over and over again in every way imaginable.

My thoughts head directly south without passing Go or collecting two hundred dollars, and I stand along with her, not sure what to do with my hands suddenly. I'm starting to act like Ethan around her now, too. Fantastic.

"So we ran kind of late with the time mixup and stuff. Would you want to maybe, possibly, I don't know, go and grab something to eat? Or a drink, maybe?" She immediately looks like a deer caught in headlights. *Fuck*. "Or, you know what? Forget I asked. Nevermind. That was inappropriate of me to even consider, right? Just.. never mind. Cool? Cool." The words stumble out of my mouth, and I couldn't stop them if I tried, which I am doing. I'm trying not to word vomit all over her, but I can't stop once I start.

I turn and almost run out of her office before she can utter a single syllable of rejection in my general direction. I don't need to hear it. I can see it plainly on her face. And now I'm going to need to act like this never happened going forward, which will be impossible.

What the fuck was I thinking? Sloane has made it plenty clear she can't stand me. Pursuing anything beyond a professional relationship is pointless.

Or is it?

I pause, struck by an unexpected thought. Do I want more from her than just the physical connection? Underneath the sarcastic barbs and icy glares, I've glimpsed her passion for this place, and her care for the students. She tries hard to hide it, but there's a warmth to Sloane that draws me in.

I want to know that woman under the armor. The one who creates beauty through music and gives these kids confidence. Who stands up for what's right. The Sloane she doesn't let anyone see.

Could it become something real between us? I've never had that - it was always just casual flings and hookups. No connections, no emotion. It's easier. But Sloane makes me imagine that a relationship might be worthwhile for the first time.

I laugh bitterly at myself. Who am I kidding? She'd never fall for a reckless mess like me. Would she? No, I can't let myself go down that road.

Forget it, Cooper.

Maybe I should just quit. That would solve everything. Ethan would jump for joy if I did, so there's that, at least.

God damn, I fucked this all up.



“DUDE, THAT’S PROBABLY ENOUGH, DON’T YOU THINK?” REMY ASKS, FOR, I think, a third time. I don’t know. I’ve lost count.

“No, Dad. I don’t.” I grab my beer and down it, determined to drink away the humiliation of asking Sloane out. What the hell made me think she’d ever say yes? And why would I even ask in the first place? “Let’s go somewhere else. This bar makes me sad.”

He laughs at me but follows as I head back onto the Strip.

“I’m not relationship material, and I know it,” I announce as we walk to another bar. “Still, the way she looks at me sometimes...I swear it’s like she sees past the rockstar bullshit, you know?”

“Who the hell are you talking about?”

“I told you. The scary girl of my dreams.” I glance around, suddenly worried she’s right behind me, hearing everything I’m saying about her. She’s not.

“That sounds more like a nightmare, dude.” He laughs, and I don’t like

that he's laughing at this stuff. It's serious business. It's important.

Maybe I should shut the fuck up.

People are starting to stare, and I don't like it.

Inside the next bar, I chug another beer, craving the numbness. I need to stop. No more thinking about her smile, her passion, the way she cares about people. Cares about me, even when I fuck up. I don't deserve someone like that.

I motion for another shot and throw it back quick. The alcohol burns away thoughts of holding her, kissing her perfect lips. Of what we could build together.

No, the only thing I know how to build is a reputation for being a fucking disaster. I'm a goddamn train wreck. Too broken to love someone that deeply, that beautifully. Too toxic to risk poisoning her spirit.

The booze blurs the bar around me as I accept this simple fact - I'm no good for her. No matter how I may feel, she deserves better than the disaster that is me. Always will.



AFTER A NIGHT WHERE I APPARENTLY DRANK EVERYTHING I COULD TO FORGET about Sloane Castle, I wake up to the biggest hangover of my life and another *Blindsided* story about me. The new tabloid story is just further evidence that I destroy everything good in my path.

Fucking hell.

BACK IN THE SADDLE AGAIN

Cooper Davies is back to his old rockstar antics, even amid his newly reformed reputation recently as a guitar mentor for the Rhapsody Foundation music program for underprivileged kids of L.A. It seems his being a positive influence only goes so far. As these photos show from last night, Davies let loose his wild side again while cruising the Sunset Strip, openly drinking and getting into occasional brawls with bystanders on the sidewalk before being hustled along by his bandmate and apparent partner-in-crime for the evening, Remy

Matthews. His rhythm guitarist could only do so much to keep the cameras away as Cooper made his way from one bar to another, causing chaos everywhere he went.

Our cameras followed him the entire night and caught him in compromising positions we couldn't even print. Needless to say, this reckless tiger can't seem to change his stripes, no matter how hard he tries. But is he really trying? Candy-coated reputation boosts, like his job at Rhapsody, don't fool this reporter who has seen his type come and go over the years. It's mostly a 'go.' Rockers like him are a dime a dozen in L.A.. Hopefully, Murderous Crows will act sooner rather than later before he pulls the entire band down with him in his alcohol-fueled descent. They are better than this. At least, they should be by now after the recent tragic death of their late drummer, Andy Young. Their lead guitarist still hasn't learned anything from it.

What the actual fuck? Who the hell wrote this? Now, they've gone too far. Now, it's getting personal.

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Smoke

Sloane

After spending most of the weekend fending off angry board members about the *Blindsided* article on Cooper, it's almost a relief to come into the Foundation on Monday morning. My responses to their concerns were a mix of half support for Cooper being a great mentor and half 'I told you so.' The Board chose him without my input to be the featured mentor this session, so I reminded them I had nothing to do with it, and if anything bad happened because of it, it was their fault, not mine. Needless to say, they weren't happy with me either.

Barry especially got a piece of my mind. I don't care who pays for their breakfast in Paris. This program and these kids are my priority. They should be his, too.

When I get to the piano studio to prep for Penny's songwriting class, I'm surprised to find yet another coffee waiting for me in front of the door. It is as if nothing happened over the weekend, and things are status quo. Outside having Ethan pass on a message, I've still yet to thank Cooper for the coffees, though I've been meaning to.

Today's as good a day as any, and I want to talk to him about the article, too. I need to let him know about the Board's change in attitude after the bad publicity. The sound of a guitar is clear from across the hall, so I quietly approach the room, just out of sight, so I can listen for a few moments before going in and interrupting.

"Okay, that was good, but you're bending the string on the wrong note. It's like this." It's Cooper talking and then playing a section of a song perfectly.

Is he working with Ethan this early? It's at least a good half hour before classes are supposed to start. I lean on the wall just to the side of the doorway to listen and *barely* peek into the room to watch.

He and Ethan are sitting facing each other with guitars on their laps, extreme focus on both of their faces. Ethan, in particular, seems incredibly determined to master the song.

It looks as though Cooper has taken the student feedback seriously and is working on the piece more, not the 'stupid form practice' as requested by Ethan. Even though I never said it was his complaint, he immediately knew who it was. I'm glad to see he took the request to heart. It shows me he gets it's not all about him. Sometimes, we need to bend for these kids.

I sip the still-hot coffee and watch for a few more minutes. I think I have some time before Penny shows up for her class.

Cooper runs a hand through his hair as he listens to Ethan struggle with a particular section of the song, but instead of getting frustrated, he's encouraging and offers productive and positive feedback. It's a side I don't think I've ever seen of him. A side I honestly didn't know he had.

He's usually cocky and overly confident, straddling the egotistical line. Always the tough guy. The rockstar. The bad boy who doesn't give a fuck about anything or anyone and is always in control.

This is different. This is real. He's relatable, fallible, vulnerable, and sincere. *Caring*. This is the genuine Cooper Davies, and I have to say I like it.

I *shouldn't* like it.

What the hell, Sloane?

I need to remind myself that while this version could be near perfection, the one in Saturday morning's *Blindsided* article is also true. They aren't mutually exclusive. He has faults, and they're big and loud, self-destructive, and public.

I force the thoughts away. I can't consider a relationship with Cooper. My own track record is abysmal. After what my parents put me through, I swore off getting close to anyone in the music industry again.

My parents were supposed to protect me, but instead, they sold my songs and sold me out. Collateral damage in their thirst for fame and fortune. The people I should have been able to trust the most betrayed me in the worst way.

They profited from my passion and left me broken and barely able to create music. It completely shattered my ability to trust anyone.

I haven't let anyone get too close since. At first glance, Cooper seems just like them - an ego-driven musician unable to commit. I know it's unfair to compare them, but the fear is too ingrained now.

And there's the industry itself - toxic and soul-crushing. It chews people up and spits them out. I've seen what it can do firsthand. Even if Cooper is different, that world would find a way to destroy what we might have.

With that history, how could I open myself up again? I'd be a fool to think it would be different this time. I need to protect myself and stay detached, no matter how tempting it is.

Cooper Davies is off-limits.

For both our sakes.



BY THE END OF THE DAY, I MISS MY OPPORTUNITY TO TALK TO COOPER ABOUT the article but watch as he leaves the building and is instantly swarmed by reporters who have apparently been lying in wait in the parking lot. My first instinct is to dash outside and assist, but I restrain myself. My curiosity about how he handles this is bigger than my need to get involved.

“First of all, you guys really need to get off private Foundation property. Your First Amendment rights don't supersede trespassing laws.” He completely ignores the barrage of questions being hurled at him and is somehow able to physically fend off the cameras in his face without hurting anyone. “Second, leave the Foundation out of it. Whatever the fuck I do outside of here shouldn't reflect on this place at all. Got it? Not a fucking word.”

The press around him doesn't acknowledge that they've heard him.

But I have.

I push through the front door and head straight to the throng of people surrounding Cooper. When I'm just about next to him, the reporters notice and start throwing questions at me, turning their cameras and microphones in my direction. Cooper looks at me angrily at first, as though I'm doing something wrong, but then it turns into concern. He might be afraid of what I'm about to say about him.

“My name is Sloane Castle. I'm the Director at the Rhapsody Foundation

and have been for the last four years. During that time, we have never had a mentor as dedicated or involved in the process as Cooper Davies has been. With him as our featured mentor this session, we've had the highest enrollment in the program's history and the most positive feedback from the students ever. His work here has been nothing short of amazing, and we value his expertise. What he does off the clock and away from the Foundation is none of our business, and to be frank, it isn't yours either. We support Cooper's work here and will have no further comment. In exchange for this public statement, I ask that you please vacate the premises immediately as it is private property, and you are, in fact, trespassing. Have a good rest of your day."

For some reason, I grab Cooper's hand and lead him back to the building, and I don't know why. He was attempting to leave, and I just pulled him back in after publicly announcing my support for him.

As we enter the lobby, Cooper squeezes my hand, and I realize only then that we are still connected. The palm of his hand is warm, and the callouses on his fingertips from his guitar playing tickle as they brush against my skin.

"Thanks for that," he says quietly, and when I look at him, still not letting go, his bright blue eyes are full of gratitude. My breath catches at the emotion swirling in those azure depths. Something about it both breaks and melts me at the same time. The intensity of our stares is powerful, almost crushing with its weight.

I unconsciously squeeze his hand back. "You're welcome."

"Did you mean any of it? What you said out there?" The doubt now consuming him breaks my heart. It's as if he can't believe somebody would say something nice about him. What a horrible way to live, constantly questioning people's motives.

But then, don't I do that as well? And haven't I given him reason to question me?

"I did," I say, closing the distance and tilting my head to look him in the eyes. I'm not sure exactly what I'm doing, but it feels right. It's almost as if our clashing and butting heads were pushing us together this whole time, culminating in this moment. The sparks that have been igniting between us have a new perspective. New context.

He glances down at my mouth, and I can see the need in him that mirrors my own. My heart starts to speed up as he grabs my other hand. I begin to prepare myself mentally and physically for the inevitable kiss that's

barrelling toward us. He starts to bend toward me, and I fight the urge to reach up around his neck to pull him closer.

As he leans in, all my previous doubts and fears vanish. In this moment, none of the past matters. The draw between us is too powerful to resist. I want to kiss Cooper more than I've ever wanted anything.

Consequences be damned, I'm tired of holding back. Tired of letting fear run my life. He makes me feel alive again, awakens parts of me I thought were gone forever. I want to embrace that feeling, embrace him, with no reservations.

Just as our lips are about to meet, he stops. My heart sinks as he pulls away, regret etched on his face.

"Jesus, Sloane. This is fucked up," he says.

His words hit me like a slap. Of course, he's come to his senses while I was ready to throw all logic away. I'm such a fool. He doesn't want this - doesn't want me - like I thought. I completely misread the situation and made a complete idiot of myself.

After everything I said about keeping things professional, here I am, throwing myself at him. No wonder he's backing off. Cooper must think I'm fucking pathetic. Another lonely and desperate chick, starving for affection. Just like every other girl that he comes across daily.

God, this is humiliating. I need to regain my composure and pretend this never happened. He's right, it's fucked up. I don't know what came over me, but it will never happen again. From now on, I keep my distance. It's safer that way, anyway.

I get it.

I just fucked up. Of course, I did.

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Follow You

Cooper

What fucked up parallel universe have I unknowingly stepped into where Sloane Castle is defending me to the press, holding my hand in public, and now looks thoroughly disappointed we're not kissing right now? When did this become my life? I thought for sure when she turned my invitation down on Friday, it meant she had no interest, but maybe I was wrong. Maybe there is some interest there.

I can't figure out why, but this timing is weird. Yes, she just defended me to the press. I don't want her to think I'm only kissing her because of that. Like it's a bargain made between us. I don't want our first kiss to be some sort of transaction.

"You have no idea how much I want to kiss you right now, Sloane," I say, gently squeezing her elegant fingers. "No fucking clue."

Her mood lightens slightly, and curiosity sparks in her eyes. "Oh really? How much exactly?"

She steps closer, leaving barely an inch between us. I can feel her body heat mixing with mine and smell her enticing perfume as it lures me deeper.

She's not fighting fair. Not fair at all.

Somehow, I find restraint. From where, I have no fucking clue, but it must have been hiding somewhere. I take a step back, reluctantly let go of her hands, and do everything I can to not close the distance again when her disappointment reappears.

"A lot, Sloane." I shove my hands into my pockets so I can't pull her to me like I want so desperately to. "I don't know how I'm stopping myself right now, honestly."

“Why?” she asks, her voice still edged with disappointment. “Why are you stopping yourself? Did I do something wrong?”

My mouth drops open. How the fuck could she ever think this is because of her? Something she did? What the hell?

“Are you joking right now? This has nothing to do with you.”

And now she looks offended. *Fuck*

“Okay, I guess...” Her eyes drop to the ground, and now I’ve embarrassed her.

“I’m trying *not* to fuck anything up, and here I am fucking everything up. I’m sorry.” I grab her hands again and take a small step closer, careful not to get too close. *Remember dickhead, you’re trying not to fuck this up.* “Listen, Sloane. I would love nothing more than to kiss you thoroughly right here and right now in front of everyone, including the press outside. But that would be disastrous. For you. For Rhapsody. For the kids.”

“What are you talking about?” She steps closer, but I mirror her and add that space between us. The confusion now clouding her face is devastating. “Why?”

I fucking hate this.

I fucking hate everything about this.

But this is the reality I know.

“Well, you may or may not have seen the stories about me in the press recently. I’m not exactly known as a good guy. And I’m definitely not the person someone like you should get involved with. Even though it kills me to say that. For once in my life, I’m not being selfish.”

And I don’t know why, either. If it were anybody else, I’d have zero second thoughts about getting what I wanted from them. But with Sloane, I don’t want to *get* anything. I want to *give*. And the best thing I can give her right now is freedom from any sort of relationship with me. All it would do is harm her and the Foundation. And that’s the last thing I’d ever want.

“So, *now* you want to be a stand-up guy?” she scoffs as if not believing it. “Every other day on the calendar sauntered on by, and you decided to pick today, to pick *me* as your relationship line in the sand.”

“Sloane, you’re twisting my words...”

“No. I get it, Cooper,” she says, stepping away from me. The hurt on her face is splintering something inside me I didn’t realize was there. *My heart.* “Just forget all of this, okay? Tomorrow, we’ll go back to butting heads and clashing tempers. There’s no reason to ever imagine we could be more than

that, right? My bad for even considering it. Go on, and feel free to keep doing your bad boy 'rockstar' thing. I will certainly not get in your way."

She turns to head into her office.

"Sloane, wait. Please," I start to follow her but stop when she doesn't react at all to my plea. She is as hard-headed as they come, and there's no way to convince her of anything she doesn't want to be convinced about.

Great. In my attempt to do the right thing and not fuck things up, I've gone ahead and fucked everything up anyway.

Way to go 'rockstar.'

Dickhead.



THE FOLLOWING DAY, I FIND ETHAN IN THE CLASSROOM EARLY AS USUAL, BUT he doesn't glance up at me or acknowledge my presence. He keeps playing as if I'm not in the room.

"Hey Ethan, how's it going? The song is sounding good." I pull out my case from behind the table and grab my guitar, taking my usual position in a chair across from him.

He still doesn't respond.

"Yo, Ethan. What's up, man? Why are you ignoring me all of a sudden?" Worry that something is terribly wrong with him starts snaking along my nerves. Did something happen at home? He hasn't mentioned his home life too much, but I've not asked either. This is supposed to be an escape from all that.

He finally stops playing and glares up at me. "What's up?"

"What's up? I've been trying to get your attention for the last five minutes. That sounded great."

Something shifts behind his eyes, but I can't figure out what it is because his demeanor hasn't changed. I think it was a little bit of pride peeking through from the compliment, but he's still defensive and angry, though, for the life of me, I have no idea why.

Instead of responding, he jumps in and starts playing the song again from the beginning. I join and play Remy's rhythm guitar parts with him this time. Unfortunately, it throws Ethan off.

Frustrated, he sets his guitar aside roughly and heads out of the room.

“Ethan. Sorry man, I just thought I’d accompany you...”

“Yeah, well, maybe you’re just a fucking bad teacher.”

Ouch. That was unnecessary. I think.

“Dude. What’s going on with you?”

“It’s fine. Whatever. I’m just going to the fucking bathroom,” he snaps without glancing back.

“Alrighty then...” I say, setting my own guitar on the table next to me.

While waiting for Ethan to return, I start going through my case. I haven’t actually looked at the contents in a long time, even though it goes practically everywhere I do. The guitar itself is the one I learned on years ago. It’s not fancy, but I always treat it like it is. It’s gotten me through some hard times. I’ve been keeping it here since I’m here so much, and I don’t use it while writing.

The first thing I find in one of the pockets is a picture of me and my brother Tim, flanking my mother at the entrance to Six Flags from one of our few family vacations. It looks like I’m around ten years old, and Tim is about fourteen or so. The stupid grins on our faces make us look so innocent. Or maybe naïve would be a better word. Dumb is more like it. Back then, we didn’t know how evil the world was and how easy it would be to walk along that side of the ethical and moral street. We certainly didn’t know what that evil would do to us or how it would shape us as people. Now our mom is somewhere in Indiana, we think, and Tim’s been in and out of rehab about a dozen times now.

That slippery slope took us straight to the bottom.

Murderous Crows saved me from a lot of shit I’d probably be into right now. However, it didn’t save all of us.

I find an early picture of us playing at the Raven in Vegas for one of our first shows. We were barely legal to drink, but boy, did we. The photo is typical everything. Andy going nuts on the drums, his hair wild. Jake is on the mic, leaning into the crowd with his hand out to connect with people. Logan smiling like a wolf after dinner. Remy focused intently on the fretboard of his guitar. And me, foot raised on an amp, showing off a run of some kind, I’m sure.

We absolutely thought we were the shit.

“What are you smiling about?” Ethan asks from next to me. I didn’t hear him come back into the room. He seems to have recovered from his outburst.

It's hard to keep up with his emotions sometimes. He can be a bit all over the place.

"Oh, just some pictures I found," I say, holding up the Murderous Crows one for him to see. "It feels like this was a lifetime ago."

He takes it from me and studies it intensely, his own smile taking shape. "Holy shit, this is awesome. Any chance I could have this?"

His request surprises me. Why would he want it? The thought of somebody else holding onto this memory bothers the shit out of me. This moment in time is *my* memory, not his. And I'm not inclined to share it with anyone yet.

I reach over and take the picture from him carefully, and for a second, he almost doesn't let go of it. "Nah, man. This one is personal. I'm going to keep it. At least for now."

A few minutes later, when we're deep into our lesson, he surprises me again by asking, "So, are you and Ms. Castle a thing now?"

I can't help my shocked reaction to the question. "What? Why would you ask that?"

He studies me as if looking for a weakness in my defenses or a hint of a lie in my reaction. "Aren't you, though? It's all over the news."

"Are you being serious right now? Why would they say something like that?" I hadn't taken the time to check the internet before coming to the Foundation. I didn't go out last night, so there shouldn't be any stories about me. I completely forgot about Sloane's impromptu press conference on my behalf.

He reaches for his phone, and I go for mine. He's quicker and holds his up for me to see the screen. Sure enough, there's a picture of Sloane and me holding hands as we walked back into the building yesterday.

"Shit," I say, burying my face in my hands.

"So, that's a yes then?" He's being awfully persistent with this line of questioning.

"What? No. It's nothing like that. But that's what the press does and why you shouldn't believe everything you see online. The media takes an innocent truth and turns it into something scandalous. *God damn it.*"

"Oh, okay. Cool." He seems relieved we're not a 'thing,' as he called it. Why would that be? I mean, I get that he's got a crush on Sloane. Every teenage guy most likely does. But there's something behind Ethan's eyes that makes me uneasy for some reason. Maybe I could rationalize it if I could put

my finger on it.

fourteen

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Talk to a Friend

Sloane

We make it through the next week without running into each other, somehow timing our coming and going to avoid the other person. Where it's impossible, we do our best to ignore the other person. Well, that's what I've been doing, anyway. Who knows if he's ignoring me or not. I'm not looking, so I can't tell.

On Friday morning, my lesson with Penny starts out fine, but in the middle of the class, she bursts into tears out of nowhere.

"Penny, my goodness, what happened? Why are you so upset?" I put an arm over her shoulders as I sit beside her on the piano bench. She starts to shake as she sobs into her hands, trying to hide her face. I've never seen her like this before.

"Have you ever been in love with somebody who doesn't even know you exist?" she asks between snuffles.

Where the hell did that come from?

"I'm pretty sure everyone has, why?" I start rubbing her back to calm her down with no clue where this is going. Her question makes me think her crush might be on Cooper, and it's beginning to take its toll on her. "Is there something you want to talk about?"

"How did you deal with it? Like, how did you go on knowing they'd never feel the same way about you? How do I stop caring about them?"

"Oh, wow," I say. That's a lot to unpack. I can physically feel her heartbreak, though. Teenage love is the absolute worst. Even more so if it's one-sided like Penny's is. This poor girl. "That's hard to say. Everyone deals with it differently."

If only it was that simple. I want to tell her it gets easier, but I'd be lying. Even now, I replay each encounter - the charged glances, the electric touches with Cooper. Moments I did nothing about. Wishing I'd been braver at the time. And still hoping for a different outcome between us.

The dull ache never entirely goes away when it's real. You simply learn to live with it. I want to warn her not to be like me, tortured by roads not taken and words left unsaid. Tell her to speak up before it's too late. But I stay silent, not wanting to project my regrets onto her.

"I know. I'm sorry for asking. It's just--" she hesitates, reluctant to go on.

"It's just what?"

"It hurts." Her red-rimmed eyes are so sad. It breaks my heart to see her like this.

"Oh, I know, honey," I say, squeezing her shoulders tighter and starting to rock back and forth. "It gets easier. Eventually. You probably can't imagine it now, but it gets better. Actually, this is where your songwriting can help. Writing a song has to come from a place of truth. Sometimes, pain, like the kind you're going through, can be the best fuel for creativity. I mean, come on, look at Taylor Swift. A gazillion number-one songs about love gone wrong can't be a fluke."

She laughs reluctantly, wiping at her eyes. "I guess."

"C'mon. Let's finish reworking the bridge on your masterpiece and take our minds off all this stuff, okay?" I need to deflect, derail, and decompress the situation. It's obvious she has a massive crush on Cooper. Hell, I don't blame her. Apparently, I do, too, so this unrequited lovesong is only getting more and more personal.

For both of us.



AFTER FINISHING MY ALLOTTED TIME WITH PENNY FOR THE DAY, I TAKE A minute to consider her earlier outburst. Actually, it's all I could think about for the rest of our class. I've been in her shoes before, a huge fan of a musician, and so much so you think you have genuine feelings for them. It's the first and best kind of love, mainly because it's so impossible. It only feeds the imagination about such an unreachable dream.

But Penny's situation is a bit different. She sees Cooper in person almost every day. That means it's not so impossible in her mind. That could be dangerous. Emotions that big that aren't returned can knock someone off balance, and the hurt involved could be devastating.

I need to talk to Cooper about it.

My next class is about to start, so I hurry across the hall and knock on his open door. He's getting ready for his next lesson, but when he sees me at the door, there's a little surprise, but he doesn't give away any other emotion as he approaches.

"What is it? Is there something you need to talk to me about?" He's all business and matter of fact, still with no emotion.

"Actually, yes, there is something I'd like to talk to you about. Any chance you could meet me for coffee after classes?" I try to make the invitation as casual and nonchalant as possible to not seem too eager to spend time with him. After our last interaction, the last thing I want to do is show interest, even though I'm still highly interested.

"Any chance of getting a preview of the topic?" He asks, his brow furrowing. Damn. Still no emotion. He's good at that.

I debate how much to tell him now, but the issue is solved for me as his next student pushes past into the room.

"No preview, but it involves you."

At least this gets an arched brow, so I've caught his attention.

After studying me briefly, he nods. "I can meet you."

"Good. Be at the cafe down the street at 4:30." I head back to my classroom, knowing he is watching me. My hips just happen to sway a little bit more as I walk.

And that, is what you are missing.



THE REST OF THE DAY DRAGS BY UNTIL IT'S TIME TO MEET WITH COOPER, AND when I get to the cafe, he's already there and waiting with coffee for both of us. He looks so relaxed in his tight t-shirt and expertly ripped jeans. His auburn hair flopped at just the right angle across his forehead. He really is too good-looking. Who knew there was such a thing?

“Oh wow. Thanks for the coffee,” I say, sliding into the seat across from Cooper. “Remind me to get the next round since you bought these.”

“Oh no, I insist. What kind of gentleman would I be if I didn’t treat a lady properly?” He flashes me a roguish grin that makes my heart skip.

“Well, aren’t you charming today,” I reply, matching his teasing tone. “Should I be suspicious of this new gentlemanly Cooper?”

“Maybe you bring it out in me,” he says, his grin growing. “Or maybe I’ve always been this dashing, and you’re just now noticing.”

I dramatically place the back of my hand against my forehead. “Be still my heart! Is it possible the Cooper Davies has a soft side?”

He clutches his chest in mock offense. “You wound me, Sloane! I happen to have a very manly and rugged soft side.”

“Is that so? Guess I’ll have to see more of it before casting judgment.” I take a lingering sip of coffee, holding his gaze.

“Lucky for you, I’m happy to provide exhibits A through Z of my many layers.” His eyes glint playfully at me over the rim of his cup.

Our banter flows so naturally, like we’ve done this forever. It feels comfortable yet crackles with undeniable chemistry. I haven’t flirted like this in ages.

Maybe I’m rusty or out of practice, but Cooper makes it easy. The give and take of our witty repartee is deliciously fun. For a blissful moment, my worries fade away, and there is only the two of us connecting. I ignore the voice in my head, screaming that he’s so good at flirting because he does it all the time.

“I’ve been meaning to thank you for all the coffees you leave every morning, but it keeps slipping my mind. So, thank you. It’s been nice to come into work with a coffee waiting for me before my day starts.”

His dark brows pull together in confusion, and his smile falters. “What are you talking about?”

I stare at him for a second but then laugh it off. I see what he’s doing. He’s a good actor. “Oh, stop it. You don’t have to be modest. Really. I appreciate the thoughtfulness of it. You can admit it.” I tap playfully on his forearm, a little in jest but mostly to have an excuse to touch him briefly. I’ve been longing to do just that all day.

His confusion deepens, and my heart nearly stops.

“Sloane, believe me, I have no problem taking credit for someone else’s good deeds, but I just can’t do that with you. I swear, it’s not me buying you

coffee.”

I pull my hand away from him sharply, now just as confused.

“Well, if it’s not you, then who?” I shake my head in disbelief. I’d have sworn on a stack of bibles it was Cooper leaving the coffee.

He shrugs, rubbing his chin and causing me to focus on his mouth. *Damn it.* “I thought maybe it was an arrangement between you and Fiona, so I never questioned it. Maybe I should have. I only looked at one of the coffees out of curiosity to see what kind you drank, hence your coffee order today.” He points at my steaming mug of white mocha.

“Oh, okay.” I completely fail at my attempt to keep the disappointment out of my voice. “I guess I’ll have to look into who else it might be.”

Cooper nods thoughtfully, but he’s failing at hiding his jealousy, so we’re both terrible actors.

Interesting.

“Anyway. What I wanted to talk to you about, or *who* is Penny.”

His face lights up a bit at her name. That’s interesting, too.

“Oh? Fantastic song you two are writing, by the way. She’s got a lot of talent.”

I nod in agreement. “She does. But she also has something else.”

He squints at me dubiously. “What else?”

“A crush on you.”

He jerks back in his chair. “What? No. No way. Uh uh.”

“I swear. The poor girl broke down in the middle of class today crying because she’s so in love with you.”

Cooper leans forward on his elbows on top of the table. “Sloane, I’m serious. It’s not me she has a crush on. It’s Ethan.”

That makes me sit back in my seat. Could he be right? Did I get the object of her affection wrong? I play reruns in my head of their interactions, looking for clues to support Cooper’s theory. She does seem to hang on to Ethan’s every word, but I just thought they were friends. I see now it’s much more than that.

“Holy shit. You’re right. It is Ethan.”

“Think about the lyrics in the song she’s writing. It’s all him.” He takes a smug sip of his coffee.

I mentally run through the lyrics we’ve been working on, and while at first, sure, they could have applied to Cooper, it makes complete sense they’re about her feelings for him.

“Oh my gosh. How could I have missed it?” Something still nags at the back of my mind, however. “Well, I hope he realizes it soon and puts her out of her misery.”

His smirk deepens, and he gets a devious gleam in his eye. “Not likely...Because she’s not the only one with a crush.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ethan has a crush on *you*.”

“No. Really? How did I completely miss that?”

He shrugs with a laugh. “Well, obviously, you’ve been too busy ogling me to pay attention to anyone else. The poor kid can’t catch a break.”

“Did he say something to you about it?”

“Not in so many words, but it doesn’t take a detective to figure out he’s got it bad for you.”

I drop my face into my hands. What a freaking mess. “Oh my god. This is all so crazy.”

He raises his hands. “Hey, at least I’m free from the weird Bermuda Triangle you all got going on, thank god.”

In that, he’s wrong, but I bite my tongue before I say something stupid and get myself hurt again. I learned my lesson the other day, making myself vulnerable to him just to get shot down. I know better now.

But it’s still hard to ignore my attraction to him now that I’m getting to know him. He’s almost impossible not to like.

“True, true. So what will you do with all of your freedom this weekend? Should I shut off my internet access just to be safe?” The question comes out before I can filter my words. I shouldn’t care what Cooper does with his free time. I have nothing to do with it, after all.

The crooked smile on his lips is like a bullet straight to my heart.

“Honestly, I was going to ask what *you’re* doing this weekend.” He starts playing with his coffee cup.

“Oh? Why’s that? If you haven’t noticed, I’m not too keen to have my name in the media. The other day was a one-off breach of protocol.”

He nods solemnly. “Ah, I see. Well, I was going to invite you to our show tomorrow night at the Roxy. We’re testing out new material. I thought you might like to come. If you want. If you’re not busy, that is. You don’t have to, obviously.”

I can’t help the laugh that escapes me at his charming nervousness. It’s so out of character for him to be awkward. That’s one word I would never

associate with ‘Rock God’ Cooper Davies of Murderous Crows, but here we are. Downright awkward. And as I think about it, he’s been like this with me a few times now.

I can’t lie. I love it.

I almost jump at the invitation but stop myself. I need to be careful. And I need to remember what happened between us earlier in the week. And on top of that, what Cooper did last weekend to get into the press again. Do I want to be in proximity to that? Especially after the suggestive article that we’re a couple? Wouldn’t my being there only fuel that flame?

“Oh,” I say slowly, trying to come up with an answer that’s true and not too evasive, but why I care about hurting his feelings is beyond me. “I don’t know, Cooper. I’ll have to see. I have a lot going on this weekend.” *A whole lot of nothing but laundry, more like.*

He deflates slightly but nods his understanding. “It’s cool. No worries. I just thought I’d ask since it’s new songs. Would’ve liked the opinion of a songwriting expert, you know.” He manages a slight smile that grabs my heart and crushes it right then and there. “If you find yourself free like I said, it’s at the Roxy Theatre tomorrow night at eight o’clock. I’ll leave your name on the list just in case you can make it. And, plus one...if you want to bring someone. But no pressure. Cool?”

He gets up to leave, and I want to jump across the table and pull him back to his chair so we can talk more. I’m not ready to part yet. It’s been almost an hour, but I’d swear it was only a heartbeat, and it’s not enough. I want more.

“Okay,” is all I can get out before he gives me a slight salute, lowers his sunglasses over his beautiful eyes, and heads out the door of the café.

I was just invited to a secret Murderous Crows show. Personally. By the lead guitarist.

The fangirl in me is going utterly bonkers at the chance.

The Foundation Director in me wants to call Barry to start an emergency Board meeting to solicit a vote against my going to the show.

I don’t think I’ll listen to the Foundation Director. Besides, it’s the weekend.

I’m officially off the clock.

It’s a secret show. What could go wrong?

fifteen

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Mess Like Me

Cooper

As we prep for the show on Saturday afternoon in Jude's basement studio, my mind can't let the idea of Sloane possibly being in the audience go. In my entire history of playing live, I have never been this anxious about a potential spectator of one of our shows. Whenever I think about it, though, I picture her hesitation when I asked, and it actually calms me down. She won't come. There's no way she'd be seen at one of our shows. One of *my* shows.

And she'd be totally right.

Why would I want to inflict my horrible reputation on someone as good as her? And why on earth would she ever voluntarily put herself closer to my circle of scandal? She's not dumb. Not by a long shot. She knows better than to get involved with me in any way outside of the mentoring program.

Yes, she defended me to the press, but that was more to cover the ass of the Foundation. I get that. For a millisecond, having someone like her have my back felt nice. But then the reality of it all crashed over me, and I remembered my place.

I have to keep remembering my place.

"Hey. Cooper. Pay attention, man." Jake's voice pulls me out of my downward spiral.

"Huh? What's up?"

"We're going over the setlist. What do you think about how much old material we play tonight? Alternate or sprinkle?"

"I say sprinkles!" Jude's stepdaughter, Charlie, chimes in as she hops from one foot to the other, her red curly hair bouncing. She's a bit of a

firecracker.

We all laugh at her exuberance, but I agree with her.

“I vote sprinkles, too,” I give her a quick wink. “Alternating might be too much, and I think it might interfere with what we’re trying to do.”

“Fair point,” Jude says, scooping Charlie up and onto his lap in an obviously practiced maneuver. “Leave your most well-known and well-liked songs for the end, so you give the crowd something to anticipate during the show and also leave them satisfied.”

“So, *Dark Legacies* for the very end?” Jake asks all of us, and we nod in agreement.

The topic of conversation shifts again to something else, and I lose myself in my thoughts again, considering how Sloane would react to each of our songs if she showed up and whether she’d even like any of them at all. We’ve never actually talked about my band or our music. Does she even like rock? From what I know of her, which isn’t much, she was a pop music singer, not really into heavier stuff like ours.

“Ground control to Major Tom,” Logan’s voice pulls me out of my head this time. “Dude, where are you today? Because it’s certainly not here with us.”

I glance around at everyone, talking and playing. Jake, Remy, and Jude have their heads together over a notebook, rearranging songs for the setlist. Skyler’s behind her drum kit with Charlie, teaching her to hit the high hat. The fierce concentration on that little girl’s face is adorable. And Logan’s staring at me expectantly, waiting for me to talk.

But what the fuck do I say?

“C’mon. Let’s take a walk,” Logan says, standing and leaning his bass against an amp before pushing through the heavy soundproofed door and heading up the stairs.

I glance around to see if his leaving bothered anyone, but it doesn’t look like anybody even noticed him go, so I follow him up to the roof terrace.

He shields the flame of his lighter as he lights a cigarette and checks for something or someone over his shoulder.

“I thought you quit,” I say, pacing the length of the house, taking in the lush green foliage and perfectly manicured backyard. It’s like a tropical oasis in the middle of Santa Monica. And that’s not even the best part. From here, there’s a clear view of the ocean and the Pier not too far away. It’s beautiful.

“I did,” he says, not entirely hiding his smirk. “I quit every night. But,

then I wake up.”

I roll my eyes at him. He’s changed a lot since getting engaged to Skyler, and all for the better. I’m sure quitting smoking will happen sooner rather than later.

“So, how do you think the show’s going to go tonight?” I ask.

He nods from side to side while flicking the ash from his cigarette. “I don’t know, man. That’s the thing with playing new songs, right? Who knows if anyone’s going to like them, you know? It’s always a risk. And since when do we get to do secret shows to test our songs? How cool is this? Before, we would just play our new stuff and hope for the best, right?” He eyes me curiously. “Why do you seem nervous? You’re *never* nervous or anxious about shows. You live for playing live.”

Shit. He’s noticed. Of course, he has.

I shrug it off, focusing on the distant ocean and lowering sun. “I’m not nervous.”

Logan puts his cigarette out in a nearby ashtray and stands beside me, leaning on the rooftop’s metal railing.

“You’re a shit liar,” he says. “What is it? Or, *who* is it?”

God damn it.

“Fine,” I mutter, shaking my head. “I invited Sloane to the show tonight.”

“Sloane Castle? Your boss from that mentor program you’re in?” he chuckles. “Wow, man.”

“She’s not my boss...I don’t think.” *Is she my boss?*

“Never mind any of that. So, you invited her, cool. Did she accept? Is she going to be there tonight?”

“No clue. She left it kind of vague, and like, ‘*we’ll see.*’” I say, the dejection clear in my tone. I hate it. I hate she’s having this effect on me. I hate that I care.

“So, you’re saying there’s a chance...” his grin widens.

“Fuck off, man. I don’t know why I’m even talking about this with you.”

I turn to head back downstairs. I should have known better than to talk about this shit with anyone in the band.

“Dude, wait.” He grabs my arm and pulls me back. “I was just joking around. I didn’t realize you had a thing for her.”

“It’s not a *thing.*”

“It sure looks and sounds like a thing.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not. She won’t show up anyway, so just forget about it.”

“Why do you say that? Why wouldn’t she show up? We’re awesome.”

I glare at him. “Really? Who would want to get involved with this hot mess?” I wave my hands, indicating my person. “She’s better off staying away from me. *Far* away.”

“Don’t be like that, man. You’re not a bad person.”

“Yes. I am. And it was stupid of me to even think about being with her. It’s the worst possible thing she could do if she cares at all about her own reputation.” I start heading away again. “I’d take her name off the list if I thought for a second she might actually show up. But I know that won’t happen, so all of this is irrelevant anyway. Forget about it.”

“Dude, you are way too hard on yourself,” he says, patting my back as we walk. “You may not see it, but we all do. Deep down, beneath all the macho bullshit, you’re a good guy.”

“No, I’m not. I’m a dick.”

“Alright. You’re a dick. I am not going to argue this point anymore because I won’t be able to convince you otherwise. Just know not everyone believes that, okay?”

“Fine. Whatever.” I don’t want to argue about my level of virtue anymore, either. I just want to play the show and have a good time.

As we head back downstairs, Logan’s words replay in my head. He doesn’t get it. I have to be the jerk, the bad boy. It’s my role. It’s *been* my role for as long as I can remember.

Under all the bravado, the real me might be a decent guy, but I can’t let that version out. He’s too fragile. If people saw the real me, they’d discover how insecure I am. How desperate for approval. How afraid of fucking up and disappointing everyone. Of being abandoned.

So I play the rockstar. Arrogant. Reckless. IDGAF attitude. It’s the armor that protects the scared kid still inside. I perfected that persona young to survive my chaotic childhood. Never let them see you cry. Never let them see you care. Now, it’s rooted in me. I don’t know how to be any other way, no matter how exhausting. It’s safer on the surface.

With Sloane, though, I slip sometimes. I forget to be the rockstar jerk. And it terrifies me. Makes me feel exposed. What if she likes the real me but then realizes I’m not enough? That I’m just faking it, barely holding it together?

I can’t take that risk. It’s better if she sees the facade like everyone else. Keeps her at a distance where I won’t get hurt. Where *she* won’t get hurt.

Because at the end of the day, I'm really not the good guy Logan or anyone claims. I'm toxic. Corrupt. I'd only drag Sloane down if she got too close.

She deserves so much better than the mess I am inside.

The catastrophe I'll always be.

sixteen

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Wicked Ones

Sloane

I have not been to The Roxy Theatre in years. Especially to see a show rather than perform. As I arrive, there's a comfort in how little things can change in L.A. While there is a lot of reinvention happening in various parts of the city, when it comes to music venues, the old staples never seem to go out of style.

I'm surprised to see Cooper did leave my name on the list at the box office. For some reason, since I'd hedged on whether I'd come, I thought for sure he'd write off the idea. The thought that he still hoped I would come sends a warmth running through me and calms me down. I'm still not sure if I'm going to regret this or not, and I almost dragged Fiona along with me for support but thought better of it at the last minute. The last thing I need is her teasing me at work about this.

Besides, I have never had a problem going to a concert or show alone, and I'm not about to start now. I believe it's better to go alone than not at all. You just don't want to miss some things, and if you're relying on someone else to have a good time or experience, then you're probably doing it wrong.

I follow along with the throng of people making their way into the club. For a 'secret' show, it sure looks like it will be a full house. But then, all of L.A. can't keep a secret to save their lives, either.

After standing in line for a good fifteen minutes to get a drink, I squeeze my way back into the concert area and take up position along the back wall near the VIP section. The Roxy isn't the biggest venue in West Hollywood. In fact, it's on the small side, and my first thought about the size of the crowd might have been an enormous understatement. I've been to a lot of shows

here over the years and even performed here a couple of times, and I've never seen this many people. If I had to guess, they oversold the show, maybe not realizing people would come if the band was popular enough, especially on a Saturday night. Somebody didn't plan for a turnout this size.

After a few more minutes of people packing together in front of the stage, the house lights go down, and the first chords of Murderous Crows' song, *Fear Factor*, blare through the speakers, and everyone goes crazy. I've never seen a crowd react like this, at least not here. The audiences here are enthusiastic, but not to the point of boiling over. I sense these people might be more aggressive than I'm used to, and I tell myself to keep my guard up. That's probably the only downfall of showing up alone.

After the first song, Jake tries to talk about how they're trying out their new songs but can hardly finish a sentence because he's overtaken by the shouts and cheers thrown at him. He's able to laugh this off during the first part of the show, but after a while, I can see he's frustrated. All of the band is.

Otherwise, they are fantastic to watch. Skyler is amazing behind the drums, with her blonde hair flying around as she plays. It's cute to see her and Logan blow kisses at each other in between songs when they think no one is watching. Jake is a terrific frontman, even though his attempts at connecting with the crowd aren't working very well tonight. His personality shines through when he sings, and you can tell he feels every word and note he sings.

And then there's Cooper.

I'm surprised I even noticed any other band members since my attention has focused solely on him. It's a little tricky for me to see since he's on the far side of the room, and there are some taller people between me and the stage, as well as people trying to stage dive and crowd surf. But what I do see makes this adventure worth showing up alone. He seems to come alive when the spotlight is on him, feeding off the crowd's energy. He was born for this, and it shows.

And while he's got the performance down to a science, I get the feeling something is off with him tonight. It's like he's restrained or holding back for some reason. I can't quite figure it out, but I keep watching him and learning about his stage presence. It's magical.

About an hour and a half into the show, I'm about to head to the bar for a bottle of water because it's so damned hot in here with all of us crammed so close together when I hear the song they're playing come to a discordant and

abrupt stop. I glance at the stage in time to see Cooper throwing his guitar down and jumping into the crowd.

What the hell?

The crowd parts to make way for him as he pushes through to get to a girl lying on the floor, curled up and covering her head protectively while hugging herself. He pulls her up and talks to her quietly before handing her over to security and then turning and punching a rather tall man with a shaved head and tattoos on his face and neck. The idiot laughs as though the fist connecting with his face hardly bothered him.

“Get the fuck out right now before I call the police on your sorry ass,” Cooper yells, getting in the guy’s face. I’ve never seen somebody this irate.

I think it’s pretty scary, but the guy just smiles at him with a grin that chills me to the bone. He raises his hands and acts confused, but everyone here can tell it’s an act.

“What’s the problem? I didn’t do anything,” he drawls sarcastically.

If I was close enough, I’d punch this guy just for being an ass.

I’m still not sure what he did, but whatever it was made Cooper lose his cool in the middle of a show, so it has to have been pretty bad. I glance around for the girl who was this asshole’s victim of some kind, but I don’t see her. What I *do* see is almost everyone standing around with their phones out, recording everything.

Shit. Cooper needs to be really careful here.

I try to push through the sea of people to get to him, but it’s slow going as people don’t want to move out of my way. *Damn it.*

“You know exactly what you fucking did,” He’s still shouting. “You fucking groped that girl while she was crowd-surfing and unable to defend herself, you sick fuck. You know what, fuck this.” He turns to the other security guys standing around him. “Go ahead and call the police. It’s about to get real fucking messy in here.”

The tall guy only laughs again at this, but it’s enough to tip Cooper over the edge. The next thing I can see through the people crammed in front of me are arms and fists flailing, and others from the crowd are now starting to join in the fray, and it’s starting to look like a free-for-all.

I get jostled into a short girl next to me with bright red hair and then pushed back to the wall where I started, and now I can’t even see Cooper or the asshole he was fighting. Trying to get to him is useless, so I change course and aim for the backstage area. Maybe I can find and help the girl who

was involved and whisked away.

I slide along the wall and make it to the hallway leading upstairs to the dressing rooms. With all the commotion happening at the front of the stage, nobody is bothering to watch this area, so I climb up the stairs to see what's happening.

In the second dressing room, I find a woman with long purple hair and another woman with blonde hair and blue tips comforting the girl from the incident who is curled up on a worn couch.

"Is everything okay?" I ask, though it's pretty apparent nothing is okay from the looks they all give me.

"I'd like some water if that's alright," the girl croaks between sniffles as she lifts curious eyes to me in the doorway. "You're Sloane Castle." Her voice holds a note of wonder, as if she can't believe I'm here, which throws me off for a second.

"I am," I say, raising an eyebrow at the other two women who stare back at me now with surprise but without saying a word. "I'll go grab you some water. Just sit tight. I'll be right back."

I turn to search for a mini fridge or cooler in one of the other rooms and slam straight into somebody's solid chest. As my balance slips, whoever I run into grabs me around the waist to prevent me from falling.

It's Cooper. And the rest of Murderous Crows are right behind him.

"Cooper?" Then, I see the blood all over his shirt, dripping from wounds on his face and hands, and fresh bruises starting to bloom and swell. "Oh my god, are you alright?" I begin frantically patting him down, looking for injuries that might not be obvious.

"I am now. And don't worry, most of this blood isn't mine," he says as he pulls me into a hug and buries his face into the crook of my neck, his breath warm against my skin. He's trembling from stress, and I squeeze him back. I don't care that he's bleeding and sweating all over me. I don't care that the rest of his band and pretty much everyone else is watching us.

I don't care about any of it.

I close my eyes and rub his back gently, careful not to touch any areas that might hurt from the melee. It's hard to tell how badly he's injured from this vantage point, but I'm happy just to hold him if that's what he needs.

After a few minutes, he pulls back and looks around. "The girl? Is she okay?"

I look back into the room where she is, and she's now got water and

plenty of people looking after her.

“She’s going to be fine,” I say, leading him to a separate sitting area. “Wait here for a minute. Let me find a first aid kit for you. I think I remember where they keep one here...”

“No. Don’t leave me. Not yet.” He grabs my hand and pulls me down to sit next to him, and when I glance up, I find him smiling at me. “You came.”

“I did.” I can’t help but smile back at him, even though seeing him in such a sorry shape hurts.

“Thank you for showing up,” he says, lifting the back of my hand to his battered lips. “I didn’t expect it to, but it means a lot.”

Something in his eyes melts the ice around my frozen heart when he says this.

Cooper Davies. The Rock God himself is glad I came to his show.

What do I do with that?

seventeen

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Tell Me I'm Alive

Cooper

She showed up.

She fucking came to my show.

I still can't believe it. And I had to go all He-man on some douchebag in the crowd and end the show early. He did deserve it, though, so at least I'm not worried about the press writing a story for once. I hope the police throw the book at him. The scumbag needs to pay for what he did.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Sloane asks, running her long, elegant fingers absently through my hair. It feels like heaven, and I could die a happy man right here and now, simply staring at her like this. "I really need to find the first aid kit for you..."

"Stay. Please," I say, grabbing her hand as she starts to get up. I'm not ready to lose her warmth and nearness. She looks at me curiously but sits back down. I let out a shaky breath, still clinging to her hand. "Just give me a minute."

I wipe her cheek, where some of my blood has smeared on her skin during our hug. I should have kept my distance, but when I saw her up here, I was so stunned I couldn't help myself. I still can't stop touching her like I'm double-checking she's real. I'm waiting for somebody to pinch me and wake me up.

What's come over me? I'm acting so needy and vulnerable, two things I never let show. But I can't bear the thought of her leaving my side right now. It scares me how much I already rely on her steadying presence. We barely know each other, yet she makes me feel anchored in the chaos like I don't have to pretend to be invincible.

I know it's dangerous to get attached. I'll only end up hurting Sloane in the end. Still, I can't resist these fragile moments with her. I'll deal with the fallout later. Right now, I need this oasis of peace she provides. Just a little longer before I have to let her go.

So I cling to her, memorizing everything I can. The concern in her eyes, the stroke of her fingers on my skin. I'll hoard these stolen moments like priceless treasure. However fleeting, her light has illuminated all my dark corners. There's no going back now. She's changed everything.

"Here," Remy's voice snaps me out of my thoughts. I see him holding out a first aid kit to Sloane, and she takes it eagerly, unzipping the nylon bag and searching the contents.

"Oh good, thank you. I've been trying to get up to find this but have been held back..." She glances at me with a fake glare, and I shrug innocently as if I have no idea what she's talking about.

"So, you must be Sloane from the Rhapsody Foundation I've heard so much about. Nice to meet you." Remy holds a hand out for her to shake, and she takes it.

"I am," she mutters absently, returning to the kit as she pulls out various items to get me cleaned up and tended to. "Nice to meet you too, Remy."

He and I share a look, and he raises his eyebrows as if impressed, and I just shrug at him. I'm as surprised as anybody right now.

"Well, I'm going to go back to helping Mac and Eliza with that girl while we wait for the police," he says, hooking a thumb over his shoulder toward the dressing rooms. "Great job with that, by the way, man. I don't know if anyone else caught what that asshole was doing."

"Yeah, sorry about the rest of the show," I say, looking down at my battered knuckles. "I bet Mac is pissed, right?"

"Oh, she's pissed, but not for that," he says, stepping back.

That doesn't make any sense. What else could she be mad about if not me? The show was going great until I jumped into the crowd to help the girl.

"For what, then?" I just get the question out when Sloane attacks my face with a cotton ball doused with alcohol burning the shit out of my skin, worse than any punch I've felt. A hiss slides through my teeth as I take the pain, and I do my best not to flinch away, but fuck, it's hard.

"Shit, you don't know, do you?" he asks nervously, taking another step backward. I do not like where this conversation is going all of a sudden.

"What the fuck, Remy? Spit it out already. What is Mac pissed about?"

“Nyx was here.”

“Here in L.A.?”

He nods, his face anxious. “Yeah, but also here at the show.”

I can feel when my blood turns cold as it flows through my body. And Sloane must notice something is wrong since I tense every muscle.

“Who is Nyx?” she asks, looking between us, suddenly now interested in the conversation and not my cuts and bruises.

Remy and I stare at each other, not wanting to be the one to talk about her. He must see my reluctance and says, “She was our former merchandise assistant. And now she’s taken to selling bullshit to the press for money. Mostly about walking bullseye, lead guitar man, here.” He waves to indicate me, and Sloane studies me for a minute.

“Why is she selling stories about you in particular?” She at least looks genuinely curious and not just feigning interest. “Did you two have a falling out?”

I glare up at Remy. He didn’t have to mention me like he did. We don’t know for sure if she’s primarily targeting me. It’s all just guesses at this point as to her motives.

“Not that I’m aware of, no,” I say, keeping the daggers pointed Remy’s way. “We don’t know why crazy people do crazy things.”

“Which reminds me, while I’m at it...I forgot to tell you we’re supposed to meet with Blackmore’s legal soon. I’m not sure when, though,” Remy says, backing up again and further out of my reach.

“You mean with Cassidy?” I ask.

“Of course.”

“Then just say that. Or Jake’s fiancée. You make it sound so fucking formal.”

“Well, it’s kind of formal, isn’t it?”

I sigh and roll my eyes. I hate playing semantics with him. “What’s the meeting about?”

He glances in Sloane’s direction as he hesitates, but she’s gone back to administering aid and isn’t paying attention to the two of us chatting. At least, I don’t think she is.

“We can talk about it later. I’m sure you guys want some privacy.” He turns to leave. “Nice to meet you, Sloane.”

“You too,” she says without missing a beat, wrapping my hand in gauze.

I bet she was listening the entire time.

“You heard every word, didn’t you?”

She shrugs and continues, still not faltering. “Of course, I was listening. I was being spoken to. I don’t have to stare at you to be able to hear what you’re saying. That’s kind of how ears work. Independent of the eyes.”

“Come back to my place.” The words burst out of me before I can even consider them properly.

But they get her attention, and she stops what she’s doing. Only for a second, but it definitely got through to her. This could go horribly wrong, but for some reason, her showing up tonight makes me think things might be different between us. Maybe she’s seeing past my bad-boy reputation.

Maybe she does see me as I really am.

“And why would I do that?” There’s a smirk dancing on her lips I want to kiss away so badly. I don’t know how I’m restraining myself. Sitting next to her and having her touch me repeatedly drives me to distraction.

“Because I want you to?” I grab her hand to halt her actions, and she meets my gaze, almost in a challenge. “And because I’d like to spend some time getting to know you and acquaint you with the real me.”

That last part scares the shit out of me, but I’m in it now. Time to go all out.

“So, the other day, it was out of the question, but today is different... how?”

“The other day was a surprise. I didn’t know how to react, so I reacted wrong. I’ve had some time to think about it now.”

After an agonizing minute of deliberation, she tilts her head to the side and whispers thoughtfully, “Okay.”

All the air leaves my lungs at once, and I feel like I can finally breathe again after a long suffocation.

I am so fucked.

eighteen

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Coast

Sloane

After giving statements to the police about what happened during the show, we slide out the back of the club relatively unnoticed and hire a ride to Cooper and Remy's house in Van Nuys, which is about forty-five minutes away. On the way, we thread our fingers together, but I'm extra careful since his hands are hurt. It's not lost on me every time he flinches in pain with the slightest movement. Every insistence he get x-rays to see if there's real damage is met with profound refusals, so I don't push him. He wouldn't be this stubborn about it if it were severe.

At least, I would hope not.

We don't talk much along the way since we've both picked up that our driver may recognize one of us, though I don't think we figured out who.

"Are you kidding? He was falling face first into groupie mode over you," Cooper says as we make our way up the front walk to his house, and watch our ride drive away.

"Oh, please. There's no way he even knew who I was, let alone fawned all over me. You're the one who starstruck him." I demand.

"Well, agree to disagree," he concedes.

"No, agree that you're wrong."

He kisses the back of my hand again, and every time he does that, it sends shivers up my arm and straight into my brain, where all logical thought then decides to vacate the premises immediately. I wonder if he knows it does that to me.

Entering the house he and Remy are renting, it's about what you'd expect from two bachelors who are also traveling musicians. Not a lot of furniture or

decoration, but a lot of empty space. And a *lot* of mess.

Cooper must take notice of the disarray because he starts to hurriedly clean up, grabbing old pizza boxes and beer bottles and disposing of them somewhere in the kitchen. I pick up some fast food bags from the coffee table and get them instantly ripped out of my hands.

“What are you doing?” he asks, confusion marring his features.

“I...was going to help...”

“Don’t. Sit. I got this.” He nudges me with an elbow, and I fall back onto the couch. “Stay right there. I’ll get you a drink. What do you want?”

He doesn’t wait for my answer but heads into the kitchen with more trash.

“Do you have wine?” I call out to him. After the last couple of hours, I could use something to unwind a little. I’m still not sure what’s going on between me and Cooper, so I’m a bit on edge.

“Ahhhh...no. Anything else?”

“Whiskey?”

This time, his head peeks around the doorway, and his grin is wide and infectious.

“Good call, but...nope. No whiskey.”

This is going to take forever if we keep at this.

“How about you tell me what you *do* have?”

He disappears and then, after a minute, yells, “We probably should have stopped somewhere on the way. We have...beer. Beer and...water.” He’s silent for a second. “Want a beer?”

I can’t help but chuckle. At least, I know none of this was planned beforehand.

“Beer would be great.”

I can hear the sigh of relief from where I’m sitting, and as he comes back into the room and hands me a bottle, it’s the first time I get a good look at him in his own home. The house suits him somehow. Disheveled and unorganized, but still cozy and welcoming. I never thought I’d think about Cooper Davies like that before now. Especially given our recent tumultuous history. But then, I never thought I’d be in his living room, either.

He sits beside me on the couch, resting his hand on my knee.

“You doing okay?” He asks, genuine concern in his bright eyes.

I do my best to ignore the dark bruise already well-formed on his left cheekbone, but it’s so hard. He looks like he’s been through the wringer, and from what I heard during everyone’s statements to the police, he was the

superior fighter. I can only imagine what the other guy looks like.

“Yeah, I just don’t like seeing you like this.” I trace a fingertip along the edge of the bruise, careful not to put any pressure on it.

He takes my hand and twists it, again kissing the back.

God damn it.

“I’ll be fine. I want to make sure *you’re* okay.” He starts to laugh softly to himself. “Not the show I wanted you to see tonight.”

“It was certainly a show.”

“Yeah, but I wanted your input about the new songs.”

“I liked what I did hear. And I can listen to your songs anytime.”

“But live is where we shine. Recordings are poor substitutes.”

“Interesting. Most bands rely on the digital stuff now, even during live performances.”

He scoffs. “Not us. That will never be us.” He shakes his head. “Jake would rather jump head first out of a tall tree than use a backing track during a live set. Actually, all of us would.”

“Wow, I didn’t realize you guys were so against it.”

He nods from side to side, rearranging his thoughts. “It’s not that we’re against it, necessarily. But we don’t want to be the kind of band who relies on it, you know? We want our stuff to be accessible to everyone. I want a kid to be able to pick up a guitar, and maybe a few pedals, and play my parts. Not be tied to a laptop and software they need to be an engineering genius to figure out to sound like me. Just freakin’ play.”

As he talks, the intensity in his eyes is captivating, and I can’t look away. I love how much he cares about his music. It makes me miss that passion. I used to have just as much as him, if not more, before...

“What about you? Yay or nay on the backing track?” His eyes turn curious.

“Well, it depends,” I say, trying to reign in my stray thoughts and consider the question. “I honestly haven’t thought about it since I don’t perform anymore.”

Shit. That left me wide open to more questions. I don’t want questions. I want to enjoy this.

“Why is that?” he asks. *I knew it.* “Why don’t you perform anymore? Did something happen?”

I take too long to answer because I’m trying to figure a way out of talking about it. I don’t know if I’m ready to open that wound yet. At least, not with

Cooper.

“So, tell me about this Nyx person,” I say, deflecting like crazy. “Why is she so out to get you? What’s her story?”

He stares at me long and hard, searching for a sign of cracks in my armor. There are none.

“I’ll tell you about Nyx if you tell me why you don’t perform anymore.” His eyes narrow, and the challenge hits me straight on, and it’s a perfect strategy. Out of every possible way to get me to talk, this was the only one that stood a chance. But I’m still not sure I’m willing to share.

“Cooper...”

He must sense I’m uncomfortable revealing my secrets because he gives in.

“You know what? Nevermind. We don’t need to meet all the skeletons tonight.”

“Thank you,” I say, inwardly surprised at how relieved I am. Why does it matter so much to me what he would think about what happened? Am I afraid he wouldn’t take my side? Or see my perspective? I don’t think that’s it. I think I’m scared of looking weak or like a quitter. I put up a tough façade, but inside, I’m as brittle as a pressed flower.

“As for Nyx, like we said earlier, we don’t know what her motives are other than money.”

“You two weren’t an item? She’s not a jilted lover? An innocent woman scorned by the bad boy rockstar?” I can’t help but play up the idea to irritate him.

“God, no.” He nearly chokes on his beer.

“Why that reaction?” I ask, patting his back as he sits forward to cough roughly.

“Long story short, she was basically our dealer when we were into that shit back in Vegas.” A shadow overtakes his features and stays there, darkening his usually bright eyes. “And honestly, she took off right after Jake got arrested for Andy’s death because she thought the band was over. And now our star is rising, and she missed out on her chance to be a part of it.”

“You think that’s why she’s lashing out at you guys? She’s jealous?”

“I don’t know. It’s the only thing that makes sense to me, anyway. But like I told Remy earlier, you can’t predict what crazy people will do. And, well, Nyx is kind of crazy. If I had to guess, I think she might be dipping into her own supply of whatever she’s dealing.”

I nod my understanding. I do know what that's like. Firsthand. I've been through my own personal hell dealing with music industry people who will do whatever it takes to get ahead, even if it's just one step in front of you. Right and wrong don't exist. Only results. Only personal gain.

After a few more beers and a lot more talking about the music industry while carefully avoiding my past, we both get quiet. The excitement of the evening finally takes its toll on me, and it's getting hard to keep my eyes open.

"Sloane?"

"Hmm?"

"If you ever wanted to talk, I'd listen."

That makes me glance up and meet his gaze, and as soon as our eyes meet, something sparks between us. Our eyes lock, and an electric current runs through me. My heart stutters as he gives my hand a gentle squeeze. A soft gasp escapes my lips when he brushes a thumb over my knuckles, and a connection ignites that almost feels physical. A tangible thread between us snaps tight and strengthens.

My voice is barely a whisper as I say, "I know."

I could tell him anything without fear of judgment or repercussion. There's a safety to being around him I've not felt with anyone else before. And it's not just his six foot whatever mass of tattooed muscles making me feel safe. His life experience living deep within him has seen it all, and nothing would surprise or phase him. Not only that, but there's a sense he would somehow know how to deal with anything and everything. But even if he didn't, I'd still feel protected by him as we figured it out.

"Bed or couch?"

I snap out of my reverie again and stare at him.

"Excuse me?"

He chuckles, taking my beer from me and setting it on the coffee table. "You're clearly tired and zoning out, so there is no way I'm putting you in a car alone and sending you home."

"Cooper, really..."

"Nope." He stands up, pulls me off the couch, and into a tight hug so all-encompassing I never want to leave his arms. It's surprising but entirely natural at the same time. We fit together well. "You're stuck here."

I reluctantly pull away and look down at my outfit. A mini skirt and knee-high heeled boots. Not exactly comfy pajamas.

“I’m not prepared for a sleepover.”

“Come with me,” he says, kissing the back of my hand again and leading me toward the bedrooms. I’m about to protest, but he stops in front of what I assume is his room. “Wait here.”

As he disappears behind the door, thuds and crashes sound from his bedroom, accented with muffled curses. I bite my lip, picturing him shirtless, muscles flexing as he searches for a clean shirt or something else for me. Heat blooms in my cheeks at the mental image.

“You okay in there?” I call, stifling a laugh.

Then the door flies open, and he shoves a T-shirt at me that I barely catch before it falls to the floor. “Here. You can wear this. If you want. It’s a T-shirt. It’ll probably be too big, but it’s the best I could do. On short notice. If you want. Or, you know, wear whatever. Or nothing. If that’s your thing. You do you.” He leans inside the doorway, first on an arm draped semi-casually on the frame, and then with his arms folded across his chest.

I have never seen a man be as awkward as Cooper Davies, and I’m unsure how to react. He is known as the group’s wild child, so seeing him act like a nervous schoolboy really throws me off. He’s been doing this a lot lately.

“Are you feeling okay?” I ask, tempted to feel his forehead for a fever. Maybe he’s got a concussion from the fight earlier.

Something shifts in him then, and it’s as if a switch is flipped, and all of his pieces line up again after briefly being thrown off kilter.

He takes a step toward me with a smolder in his eyes that could melt my underwear on the spot, and I instinctively take a step back, my shoulder blades pressing into the wall behind me. After another step, my breath catches in my throat, and he’s only inches from me as he rests a forearm on the wall above my head. The heady mixture of his sweat and cologne makes me lightheaded as I lift my face to look at him, but focusing is difficult now.

“I think I’m more than okay now that you’re here,” he whispers in my ear, the warm breath tickling the tiny hairs on my neck and causing goosebumps to erupt along every inch of my skin.

Holy shit. I could turn my head and kiss him right now. Why don’t I?

Why the hell don’t I?

“Um…” I’m literally speechless. Again.

I am never speechless.

This gets a full-blown laugh from Cooper, and he throws his head back as he steps away. “The bathroom is right behind you. You can change in there. I

will take the couch, and you can have my bed. The sheets are clean.” He points to the bed in the room behind him. “That way, Remy won’t wake you up or accidentally sit on you when he finally comes home. If you need anything, just yell.”

One more kiss to my hand, and he disappears down the hall, leaving me clutching his T-shirt and staring after him, wondering what the hell just happened.

nineteen

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Where You Go I Go

Cooper

When I wake the next morning, Sloane is gone. Oddly, her absence bothers me more than I thought it would. She must have snuck out in the early hours but left a note on the kitchen table.

'Thank you for the hospitality. Chivalry is not dead.' - Sloane

The grin plastered on my face the entire morning eventually gets on Remy's nerves.

"Dude, you didn't even sleep with her. Why are you smiling like that?" he asks, pouring another cup of coffee.

"You think I need to sleep with someone to be happy?"

His brows draw down in confusion. "Well, yeah. You're Cooper Fucking Davies. That's how the world works."

Wow. Is my reputation that bad?

I'm surprised what he said stings. I'm not used to all of these emotions. I've spent my entire adult life actively doing everything to avoid feeling this way. And now, suddenly, I'm okay with it? Even knowing how it will end?

When did I stop caring about getting hurt, and, more importantly, hurting someone else? I might need to do more soul-searching like I did in Ojai not too long ago. Maybe I went too far the other way.

"Fuck off, man." I grab my phone and start scrolling through social media, trying to distract myself from the invasive thoughts about who will

eventually hurt whom. As I open TikTok, I see myself tagged in a ton of videos from last night. “Shit.”

“What is it?” Remy asks, looking over my shoulder.

We watch as last night’s events unfold from different angles and perspectives from the people recording in the crowd who uploaded videos. Nothing is missed. Not the asshole groping the girl who was crowd-surfing. Not me throwing my guitar and jumping into the crowd. Not the belligerent asshole trying to defend himself. And not me starting an all-out brawl. Everything is out and open for everyone to see. Even the asshole getting arrested. *Good*. At least the press can’t twist this into something it’s not. There were too many witnesses.

So many witnesses, but I was the only one who acted on what the asshole did? That’s fucked up in itself.

Mackenzie calls after about an hour of taking in the media storm that happened while we were sleeping.

“I take it you’ve seen everything online?” she asks, her tone all business as it usually is. She needs to lighten up.

“I don’t know if I’ve seen everything, but I’ve seen enough, yeah.” I start to inwardly cringe, awaiting the axe that’s about to fall on my neck for stopping the show last night. The label is most likely pissed that videos of me beating a guy up and starting a melee are all over the internet. I can’t wait to hear what a fuck up and disappointment I am to everyone at Blackmore Records. I wonder if that’s part of why there’s a meeting with Cassidy in the near future.

“Nice job, Coop,” she says, and I’m not sure I heard her.

“Excuse me?” She did not just compliment me for getting into a fight.

She clears her throat and says, “What you did last night for that girl. Nice job.”

I’m stunned, speechless. Mackenzie isn’t known for being the most exuberant with her praise of people, especially me, so this throws me for a loop. She’s our group cheerleader, yes, but personal motivation coach is not on her resumé, especially not with me.

“Don’t let it go to your head that I gave you a compliment,” she snaps, but I can hear the laughter in her voice. She tries to come off like a hardass, but deep down, she’s a big softie.

“Oh, I wouldn’t dare. Don’t worry.”

My relationship with Mackenzie has never been what I’d call easy. More

often than not, we're at each other's throats with differing opinions about what is or isn't acceptable behavior, and how poorly I'm making everyone in the band look by my actions. She's usually right, but I'd never tell her that to her face.

The difference is that until now, I didn't give a shit.

Now, all of a sudden, I want to look good in the press. And why is that? Because I want to impress Sloane Castle.

Fuck.

"Cooper? Are you still there?" Mackenzie is asking.

"Yeah, I'm here. Sorry." Thoughts of Sloane are taking over and throwing me way off my game.

"Did Remy tell you about the meeting with Cassidy?"

"He said there would be one, but not when or what it's about." I can't help but hold my breath while waiting for her answer. I have a bad feeling about this meeting for some reason.

"Well, it's Tuesday after your recording session at Jude's, and it's about Nyx."

A chill rolls over me at the name, and my jaw clenches. I'm surprised I don't reflexively crush my phone.

"Oh?" is all I can get out. Remy gives me an odd look, but I ignore him. I have a feeling he's known what the meeting is about but didn't want to be the one to tell me because he knew I'd be pissed. He was right about that much.

"Cassidy wants to go over our legal options with us so we can figure out what to do going forward if she continues to sell her bullshit stories."

"Do we *have* legal options?" I don't know why, but I'm surprised at this.

"Apparently, we do if the stories don't have any truth to them."

The way she words that is awfully specific and gets me thinking maybe our options are more limited after all. It could be pointless to try to fight against them. But damn it, I want to.

"Fine. Whatever," I finally say before we hang up. Mackenzie and I don't do small talk. Actually, *I* don't do small talk. It's not just Mac.

Remy eyes me warily over the sandwich he's eating. "I take it she told you about the meeting?"

"She did." I glare at him but don't really mean it. I just like watching him squirm uncomfortably.

But Remy knows when I'm fucking with him, too, and tosses a limp piece of lettuce at me, which I expertly dodge.

“You better clean that up,” I say with a grin as I slide out of the kitchen.
“Fucker.”



AT THE FOUNDATION ON MONDAY, SLOANE AND I FLIRT LIKE CRAZY.

Between the first and second classes, she sidles up next to me and straightens my T-shirt collar. "You know, this bad boy look really works for you. The whole muscles, tattoos, hot...*thing* you got going on."

I lean in close. "Oh yeah? You like a rebel, do you?"

"Maybe I do." She runs a finger down my chest.

I suck in a sharp breath. "Careful now. Wouldn't want to corrupt you."

Sloane gives me a smoldering look. "Who says you haven't already?"

Jesus Christ.

On the next break, I spot Sloane down the hall and make a show of checking a watch I don't wear. "You're late for our rendezvous, Ms. Castle."

"How careless of me to keep you waiting." She steps closer and brushes lint off my shoulder. "Though I daresay you're worth the delay."

I catch her hand and press a kiss to her fingers. "For you, I'd wait an eternity."

Sloane fans herself dramatically. "Why, Mr. Davies, you'll make me swoon with such talk."

I pull her in close. "Stick with me, baby. I'll have you swooning all day." I give her a wink, and she melts against me.

Her laughter is music as she makes her way back to her classroom, cheeks red.

After the third class of the day, I lean in the doorway to my room suggestively as she approaches.

We're both grinning like idiots.

For no reason.

I love it.

"We really have to stop meeting like this. People will talk," I say, taking in her gorgeous eyes. They're especially golden today, and she is simply radiant.

She arches a beautiful eyebrow at me and smirks as she leans on the other

side of the doorway, inches from me. “Oh, really? Well, maybe we should give them something to talk about.”

Fuck. That’s not where I expected her to go with this. And, of course, her words go straight to my dick.

“Are you being naughty in the middle of a school day, Ms. Castle?” I ask, inching closer and watching her eyes lift to mine as her head tilts back. I absolutely love this view of her. “What would the students say?”

I say it in jest, but we both look out at the hallway, and the students now stopped and staring at us. I didn’t realize we had an audience.

Shit.

We fly apart from each other, trying to act nonchalant, as though we weren’t just looking like we wanted to jump each other’s bones right here in the doorway to my classroom. There are a few snickers and giggles from students as Sloane slinks back across the hall to her room, and I notice Ethan and Penny staring at us. Actually, no, I think they’re *glaring* at us.

I’m about to call out to Ethan, but he turns away and heads down the hall with Penny following behind before I get a chance. It’s probably for the best. I’m not sure what I would have said, anyway. Maybe I interpreted their looks wrong. My brain is still on Sloane.

I have to be very careful here. I wasn’t lying when I told Sloane I’m no good for her. She could do so much better than me. She deserves someone that’s not going to end up in the tabloids every other day for fucking something up. She doesn’t need that kind of shit in her life. And that’s what spending any length of time with me would be like. Utter shit.

I need to stop forgetting where I came from. I need to stop being selfish.

As the kids stared at Sloane and me, reality crashed back in. What am I doing, flirting with her in the halls? This can only end badly. For both of us.

Seeing Ethan and Penny glare at us drove the point home. If the students see our chemistry, it’s only a matter of time before the press gets wind of it. They’d have a field day with those headlines, which would no doubt hurt Sloane’s reputation, not to mention the Foundation’s. Which will ultimately hurt all the kids that come here to get lost in music.

Fuck.

I stare at Sloane’s back as she gets to her classroom, and my mind whirls with the consequences of what we’re doing. The devastation following my heart for once could bring on all of us.

I can’t do this to her. To *them*.

As much as I might fantasize about it working out, deep down, I know I'd only corrupt her light with my darkness. She's been through enough pain already. The last thing she needs is a reckless asshole like me causing her more heartbreak.

What the fuck was I thinking? That I could actually be the kind of stable, dependable guy she deserves? I must have lost my fucking mind.

No, as fun as our flirtation has been, it has to end. I need to stay far away from Sloane, for both our sakes. Quit while we're ahead. Before this combustible chemistry between us erupts into an inferno we can't contain.

I'll hurt her eventually. It's inevitable with my issues and self-sabotaging tendencies. I'd rather break things off now than see the pain and disappointment in her eyes when I fail her down the road. And it *is* a when, not an if.

Walking away without saying a word, I feel like I'm tearing myself in two. Every fiber of my being strains against this decision, reaching back out for Sloane. Leaving her behind shreds my heart more painfully than I could have imagined. Now that I've had a taste of what we could be, letting it go cuts me to the core.

It takes every ounce of willpower I have not to turn around and change my mind. To pull her into my arms and confess how hard I've fallen, fuck the consequences. But I force myself onward, fists clenched, jaw set. I have to stay strong, as much as it destroys me.

So I walk on, swallowing back the urge to scream at the world. Rage against my reputation. If this is my penance for a careless life, so be it. I'll withstand any agony to protect her.

My entire life's trajectory has changed so much in the last few minutes, my head is spinning. The ashes of what used to be my heart trail behind me as I go, and I can feel them get taken by the wind. Not a single trace of my feelings for Sloane can remain. Every ember needs to be drowned. I have to let her go.

And she doesn't even fucking know yet.

twenty

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Alkaline

Sloane

On Tuesday morning, Fiona corners me before I can head to my classroom. She tried all day yesterday, but I avoided her like a ninja.

“Hold up, boss lady,” she says, blocking my way out of the main office area. “I need a direct download of what’s going on with you and Cooper.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.” The feigned innocence on my face and in my voice is so unbelievable we both burst out laughing.

“Come on. Fess up,” she says, hands on her hips. “I hear there was an incident of some kind in the hallway yesterday I totally missed, on top of the press conference from last week? Why am I getting all of this info secondhand? I thought we were friends.”

I can feel the blush spread up my neck and into my cheeks. “What incident yesterday?” I ask. I know exactly what she’s referring to because I thought of little else the entire day, but I’m more curious what was said about it by other people.

“Don’t pretend you don’t know. You’ve got ten seconds to spill.”

“Or what?”

She gets flustered, her cheeks heating. “Or...I don’t know what. Just tell me what’s going on!”

“Oh, I’ve been meaning to ask you, have you been buying me coffee every morning and leaving it outside my classroom?”

“What?” Her brows knit in confusion. “What the hell are you talking about? No. I don’t buy you coffee every morning. Where the heck did that come from?”

“If it’s not you, then who?” Now I’m thinking maybe Cooper just said it wasn’t him, but why wouldn’t he admit it? Why the secrecy?

“Sloane, stop trying to change the subject. What is going on with you and Cooper? Talk to me.”

I turn my attention back to Fiona and try to think of what to say. We’ve been all over the map, and I’m not sure where we currently are.

“I don’t know what’s going on with us,” I shrug. It’s not a lie.

“But you *want* something to be going on, am I right?” Her devious grin is infectious, and I can’t help but mirror it. Sometimes she’s too damned observant. I really wish this wasn’t one of those times.

“Maybe...” I can’t help it. It’s true. I do want there to be something between us. I think something is already between us, and I want to see where it goes. I’m just not sure if he feels the same way.

“Well, make that shit happen, girl,” she says matter-of-factly. “Go!”

Fiona literally shoos me out of the office toward the piano studio, not caring that students and other teachers are watching the spectacle we’re making.

She stops when she sees Cooper standing in the doorway to his classroom, turns, and practically runs back to the main office, leaving me and Cooper to look at each other awkwardly.

“Hi,” I say with a small wave. Butterflies are taking their positions in my rib cage, ready to freak out. All of a sudden, I can’t stop fidgeting.

Wow. So smooth.

“Hey,” he says, but it’s flat. Monotone. No expression whatsoever. He moves to head back to his class.

He didn’t even meet my eyes. Odd. Maybe he’s having a bad day.

“Do you want to grab dinner tonight? Or drinks?” I ask quickly, my voice shaking a little with nerves and my fingers fumbling with each other. I want to catch him before he disappears into his classroom. Yes, I just asked Cooper Davies out to dinner. It shouldn’t be that big of a deal. *Then why does it feel like I’m standing on the edge of a cliff?*

He examines me coldly, and I can’t read him at all. It’s like he’s suddenly a completely different person than the one I’ve been getting to know the last few weeks. This isn’t the guy I held hands with on Saturday night in the back of a car and chatted with until the early morning hours. Something’s changed, but for the life of me, I can’t think of what. My stomach sinks.

“Thanks, but I have plans.”

And he's gone.

The door to his classroom shuts, and I'm left standing in the empty hall staring at the doorway we flirted with each other in less than twenty-four hours ago. I can almost picture us as I imagine the students watching us yesterday did. Me smiling up at him, and him gazing intently into my eyes. Barely even registering we were being watched because we were lost in each other's presence.

What on earth happened between then and now to cause Cooper to act like this? Did I unknowingly do something wrong? Did something happen to him?

I'm baffled as to what could have happened to make him change so much in such a short period of time. My hands shake as I clutch them to my chest. Tears swell in my eyes before spilling onto my cheeks. A hollow ache blooms behind my ribs, one I haven't felt in years. I've not felt this in a long time because I don't allow anybody in. Somehow, Cooper Davies got in. And now I'm going to pay for it with heartache.

How did that even happen? We fought like cats and dogs when we first met, and now, all of a sudden, I'm holding back tears in the middle of the hallway because my heart is crushed.

"Ms. Castle?" Someone is calling my name quietly, and I glance up to see Penny standing in the doorway to the studio. She's looking at me with so much concern I quickly pull myself together to hide whatever is happening inside. It'll have to wait.

"Sorry, Penny," I say, straightening my shoulders and wiping my eyes with the heels of my hands. "I'm coming."

I'm now in the perfect mood to write songs about unrequited love because, boom, here I am in the middle of it myself.

Art can stop imitating life. It's fucking annoying.

twenty-one

...

Chelsea

Cooper

I rush out of the building when my last student of the day leaves so I don't run into Sloane. It's cowardly and a chicken-shit way to go about things, but I need to get my head straight before doing anything else. I'm having crazy thoughts about commitment and long-term exclusivity with a woman I haven't even fucking kissed yet.

That is not me.

And until I figure out why I'm suddenly doing these things and what it all means, I can't pull anyone else into my vortex of chaos. Not yet.

The look on Sloane's face when I turned down her dinner invitation was almost enough to break me. *Almost*. I had to bite the inside of my cheek hard to remind myself I don't do dates. That's not who Cooper Davies is. And Sloane Castle needs to learn that real quick. It's a painful lesson for all involved, but it's my reality.

I make it to Blackmore Records on time for the meeting and find the rest of the band and Mac already in the conference room with Cassidy, Blackmore's attorney and Jake's fiancée. A tall woman with blonde hair and blue tips named Eliza is also in attendance. Apparently, she's one of the executives at the label.

So, the whole fam damily is here. Wonderful.

Once everyone gets settled, Cassidy starts the meeting.

"So, as everyone knows, there have been stories about the band, particularly about Jake and Cooper, in the tabloids over the last few months. And specifically in *Blindsided*." We all nod. This is not news to any of us. "And I know you probably have questions about what we can do legally

about the stories.”

“Please tell me we can sue Nyx seven ways to Sunday,” Mac growls. “That bitch has made our lives hell.”

Jake and I share a look, knowing we’ve been on the receiving end of that hell more than most. We never really talked about it though. It all happened so close to Andy’s death, and everything about us was fucked up then. We never discussed how it was affecting us individually. With our brand-spanking new record deal, the band was our main priority. We, as people, were secondary.

Cassidy winces a little at Mac’s bloodthirst. “Well, here’s the thing...”

“Welp, so much for that,” Remy snaps, throwing his hands up, already giving in to defeat.

“No, wait,” Eliza says, trying to calm us all down. “Hear what Cassidy has to say on this, okay?”

“The thing is, defamation cases are challenging to pursue with any success.” She swallows hard, and I can tell she hates to be the bearer of bad news. “And we would need to prove harm, which means experts would need to do assessments...”

“Psychological?” I ask, already knowing the answer.

“Yes.”

“Fuck no,” Jake and I say in unison.

Everyone shifts their gazes between us curiously but doesn’t say anything.

“There’s no way I’m letting any assessment of my personal shit become public record anywhere,” I say directly to Cassidy, avoiding everyone else. “That’s a real quick no.”

“But Cooper, we can’t let Nyx get away with this--” Mac’s hackles are raised. Her protective streak is a mile wide when it comes to us. I appreciate that, but I *am* protecting myself here.

“Can’t we?” Jake asks, looking at us in question. “She’s gone this long without repercussion. And she’s so far removed from us now, there’s no way she has anything new to sell. Or at least anything anyone would want to buy.”

“That hasn’t stopped her so far,” I say. I see what he’s saying, but she’s been running on fumes for months and is still cashing in. This whole thing is messed up.

“What do you suggest?” Skyler asks. Level-headed, as always. “Do you have something in mind?”

“I do,” Cassidy says cautiously, and I get the sense we won’t like what she says next. “I want to make a deal with Nyx.”

The room erupts into chaos, with everyone in the band standing and shouting that there is no way in hell we’re going to make a deal with the devil. Eliza and Cassidy are trying their best to calm everybody down. And Mackenzie sits and stares silently at nothing, too stunned by the idea.

After the initial explosion of emotions, Mac puts two fingers to her mouth and whistles loudly, effectively shutting us all up.

“Guys. Chill the fuck out.” She waits for us all to take our seats before continuing. “Let’s hear Cassidy’s reasoning before we all go nuts, okay? Go ahead. Convince us.”

As Mac leans back in her chair while twirling a purple braid, Cassidy nods at her and clears her throat. I bet she didn’t expect this meeting to be such a nightmare.

Welcome to Murderous Crows.

“Okay. Look, sure, we could go after Nyx, but does she really have anything worth taking? Or is it the principle of the thing? If that’s the case, how much is that principle worth to you? Because it will take a shit load of time and money to pursue without a guaranteed result. I’m just being honest.” She meets each of our gazes, leveling us with her truth. “If we can get her in here, get her to sign an NDA, and maybe pay her a little bit of money to keep quiet--”

“Whoa, wait a minute there,” Jake starts, shaking his head. “You want us to pay her off, too? Reward her for all the bullshit she’s put us through? No way.” He’s just said what we’re all thinking.

“Honey, listen,” she says, grabbing one of his hands with both of hers. Her eyes are almost pleading, and something in my chest aches at the sight of them on the verge of an argument. They *never* argue. I don’t like it. “The key is to get her to sign the NDA. Once we do that, we can be reasonably confident all of this will be behind us. And if it costs a fraction of what a lawsuit would, I say that’s a good investment. Blackmore is on board with this.” She glances over to Eliza, who nods her agreement.

“I don’t know...” Jake looks over at me in question. As if I have any say in any of this.

The best I can do is shrug. I am so far out of my depth right now, and I don’t know what the hell is up or down anymore.

“I just want this shit to be over with,” I say, running my hands down my

face. “I’m tired. I’ll go along with whatever you want, Jake. It’s your call, man.”

He stares at me for a minute, and in that fraction of time, we have the silent conversation we’ve both been avoiding for months since Andy died. All the blame, guilt, sadness, and anger that we both went through alone when we should have been there for each other channels through us. Admissions are made, and forgiveness is given. It’s been a long time coming and way overdue.

Finally, we nod at each other in understanding. We’re in agreement. The past is now behind us, and we need to finally let shit go and move forward. If that means paying off Nyx, so be it.

I don’t like it, but I understand it. It’s a big-picture move because we’re not small-time anymore. We’re no longer an anonymous local Vegas band. We’re in the major leagues now, and it’s not about any one of us. It’s about all of us.

But fuck, if all of this doesn’t piss me off.

“Do it,” I say, and leave the conference room before I explode.

I need a fucking drink, and there’s a beer or ten somewhere out there with my name on it. I want to forget my life entirely for a little while. Erase the feelings. Drown my sorrows, as cliché as that is.

It’s cliché because it’s a classic. And classics never go out of fucking style.

twenty-two

...

Delirious

Sloane

“It might not be what it looks like at all,” Fiona says, scrolling through her phone across from my desk as I scroll through mine in the morning before classes start. “You can’t believe anything the internet publishes. You know that.”

I do, but it doesn’t change the fact I’m looking at pictures of Cooper making out with and hanging all over some supermodel of a woman last night.

“Oh, did his tongue ‘accidentally’ slide into her mouth?” I hold up my phone, showing a picture of the two kissing while leaning against a car in some parking lot. My stomach lurches. “And his hands slipped and landed on her ass? Come on, Fiona. I get that stories can be made up. That happens all the time. But photos? They don’t lie.”

“Still, there’s got to be some sort of reasonable explanation.”

I appreciate she’s trying to cheer me up or justify the pictures or whatever she’s doing, but it’s not working. There is no explaining this away. He turned down my invitation yesterday and instead went out with someone else. It’s as simple as that.

It shouldn’t hurt so much, but it does. We don’t owe each other anything. We’re not dating. Hell, we haven’t kissed. Despite that, I could have sworn we had a solid connection. We were getting over our bullshit stubborn beginning and building something else. Something real.

I guess I was wrong.

“Just forget about it. I’ll get over it. Don’t worry.” I force a smile, though I’m sure it’s not convincing. “You know me. It’ll take a lot more than Cooper

Davies to bring me down.”

She stands and straightens her shoulders, smiling back with the same plastic smile. “Fuck yeah, it will.”

I shut off my phone and get up with her, grabbing my mentoring materials. Classes start soon, and I want to get to the piano studio before Cooper comes in. If I can avoid him, maybe I’ll get through the day. It’s going to be hard in between classes, though. I’ve grown to look forward to our brief flirting sessions in the hallway. Well, look what that got me. A broken heart.

Stupid girl.

Of course, the world is conspiring against me, and I practically run right into him in the hallway. He’s still pretty rough around the edges from the fight on Saturday night, and his bruises and scrapes look worse. If I had to guess, I’d say he was also hungover from his evening with the supermodel.

Poor thing.

“Watch it,” I snap, barely avoiding a collision as he pushes through the hall.

When he turns around to see who would dare call him out, he seems surprised it’s me.

His expression shifts from surprise to happy to blank in a flash. “Sorry, I didn’t see you there,” he says flatly.

“Obviously.”

My annoyance must grab his attention because he turns back to me, confused. “Excuse me?”

“You obviously don’t ever see me, Cooper,” I say, stopping in front of my classroom. “No need to apologize for it now.”

I don’t know where I’m going with this. I should have just kept quiet and went about my miserable day. But now that I’ve confronted him, I have to deal with it. Me and my big mouth, I’m starting to feel like an angsty teenager.

He stops with me, the confusion on his face only growing. “What the fuck are you talking about Sloane? How do I not see you? And what am I apologizing for? Please fill me in because I’m completely lost.”

He can’t be this hardheaded. Did he think I wouldn’t find out about his escapades last night? He had to be aware photographers were following him. Hell, they’re *always* following him.

“I’m sure your ‘friend’ from last night would be happy to fill in the

blanks for you.” I am coming across as downright petulant, and I’m irritating myself. I don’t act like this. “You know what, Cooper? Nevermind. You are free to do whatever with whomever you want. It would be wrong of me to assume anything about you or us, so please disregard my outburst.”

“What--”

“Have a good rest of your day,” I say, avoiding his eyes like I’ve been doing this whole time before turning and shutting the door to the studio behind me.

I don’t know what he looked like or if he tried talking to me, and I don’t care. This situation is my sign from the universe to forget about trying to start anything with Cooper Davies. I knew better than to allow myself to catch any feelings for him, but I went ahead and started falling for him anyway.

Stupid, stupid girl.

The studio door opens, and I whirl around, bracing for another volley of barbs with Cooper, but find Penny instead, looking a bit sheepish in response to my cold demeanor.

“Oh, hi, Penny. Come on in.” I start rifling through my papers to distract myself and look like I’m not falling apart, even though I am.

“Are you okay, Ms. Castle?” she asks, genuinely concerned.

I force yet another fake smile for her. “Of course. I’m great. Let’s get started.”

“You saw the *Blindsided* article, didn’t you?” She slides onto the piano bench, setting up her notebook.

Cooper had said Penny’s crush is on Ethan, but I’m still unconvinced. She’s awfully tuned in to Cooper’s actions for someone who isn’t interested.

“Yes, I did see it, but it has nothing to do with me.” My smile will crack if I have to hold it much longer.

“Okay,” she shrugs, digging her pencil out of her bag. “But if I were you, I’d be upset.”

Oh, I’m upset. Don’t you worry.

“There’s nothing to be upset about,” I insist, taking my place next to her on the bench.

Lies. All lies.

And when it comes to lying to myself, I am an expert at it.

twenty-three

...

Demon

Cooper

What the actual fuck was that all about? I get that I'm pushing Sloane away for her own good, but that felt incredibly specific about something I have no clue about. *I don't ever see her?* Where did that come from? My head hurts too much from all the shots last night to allow me to go through the mental gymnastics necessary to figure out what that's all about.

I'm surprised to not see Ethan already in the classroom since he's been early for almost every lesson. As I turn the lights on, I get an odd sense of wrongness that makes me stop and inspect the room. Nothing seems out of place or different from how I left it yesterday, so I don't know why the feeling is growing the longer I stand here.

"Don't be an idiot," I mumble and cross the room to my guitar to prepare for the lesson.

As I snap open the latches on the case and lift the lid, my heart stops, and time seems to slow. I can't be seeing what I'm seeing.

I shut the case and open it again as if it will change something.

It doesn't.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I repeat the words over and over as I take in the destruction in front of me that used to be my guitar. "*Are you fucking kidding me?*"

The neck was forcefully separated from the body since it's a relatively clean break. Steel strings curl broken and untethered, far removed from any melodic expression. The tuning pegs look like they've been individually bent out of shape with precision. Shards of fractured wood lay in an inert pile.

This is no longer an instrument. It's just garbage. A pile of wood and bits

of metal.

My hands tremble as I pick up shattered fragments of the guitar. Each piece pulsing with memories - late nights writing songs, early gigs at hole-in-the-wall bars. This guitar has been with me from the beginning, before the fame. Before the record deal. It was an extension of me.

As if this destruction isn't bad enough, the word '*LIAR*' is cut jaggedly into the crushed velvet fabric of the interior lid. My hand reaches up to run along one of the tears, and I see my fingers shaking. All of my body is vibrating.

I catch on to something tucked into the lining and pull it out, stumbling backward as I see what it is. It's the corner of the early Murderous Crows photo I kept here.

Just the corner.

It's obviously been ripped. I start furiously digging through the case, searching for the rest of the pieces, but only immediately find a few.

This was no random act of violence. It was personal and meant to devastate. What about the other photo that was stashed inside? Me as a grinning kid with my brother and mom. One of the few untarnished memories of my childhood. That one is completely gone. Probably forever.

Whoever did this knew just how to twist the knife in deep.

I can't think straight. My mind can't wrap around the idea that anyone would do this. *Has* done this. I wade through the jumble of thoughts rushing around my brain, trying to imagine who hates me this much.

While I'm sure plenty of people would line up for a chance to do this to me, not everyone has access to this room or my guitar. My mind first travels to Nyx, who would do something like this in a heartbeat. But how the hell could she get in here? I don't think she could and not be noticed.

So, who *here* is mad at me?

Sloane.

The shock that jolts through me is devastating.

How could she?

I slam the lid shut and haul the case across the hall, my blood boiling. I can't believe she would be this spiteful, but her disdain for me was more than obvious a minute ago. I don't understand it, but I saw it. And now I see what it can do.

Pushing through the door, Sloane and Penny jump up from the piano bench in surprise at my loud entrance.

“Cooper? What is it? What’s wrong?” Sloane asks, shock and concern in her dark eyes. I almost believe it.

Knocking over several chairs and music stands on the way to the center of the room, I throw the guitar case on the floor between us and kick the lid open, my stomach clenching in pain as I see the devastation again.

“What’s wrong?” I laugh, but it’s not my voice. I don’t know where it’s coming from. Everything about me at this moment is disjointed. “What’s wrong? Seriously?”

Her eyes widen as she looks down at the remnants of my guitar with an almost convincing gasp. Penny, at least, looks horrified and goes pale.

“Oh, my God...” Sloane whispers, a hand flying to her heart.

“Don’t fuck around. I saw how pissed you were at me this morning. I have no clue what that was all about, but come on. This? This is beneath you.” I point to the lid. “And, liar? What the fuck? What did I ever lie to you about? I may be many things, but a fucking liar isn’t one of them.”

She turns her wide eyes to me, and I can’t read them. The surprise is still there, but something else is there now. Anger? Did I hit a nerve? Guess right, too quickly?

“You think *I* did this?”

Penny keeps a distance from us as she slowly circles the room, careful not to draw attention to herself as she moves, and exits so as not to be caught in the crossfire.

Smart.

“Didn’t you?” I take an uneven step toward her, grabbing a fistful of my T-shirt, trying to hold my splitting heart together. I am so shattered. I feel like I’m going to be sick. The betrayal is too deep. How could I not see this side of her before? Isn’t everyone capable of this on some level? I unclench my other fist and let the few crumpled pieces I could find of the band photo fall to the floor between us. “Fuck with my guitar, fine. Screw it’s sentimental value or the fact that it was irreplaceable. Even shred my case. Hell, rip my god-damned heart out for all I care. Who gives a fuck? But tearing up my memories? One of the few remaining connections I had with Andy? That’s too much. Too far. Way too far, Sloane.”

Nearly choking on the words, I don’t know how I’m keeping my shit together right now. I’m trembling so hard it feels like I will fly apart in the slightest breeze.

She gazes down at the scraps on the floor, and again at the guitar and

case. The hand that was over her heart now covering her mouth. Tears stream down her cheeks when she glances up.

Taking a step toward me, she shakes her head and whispers, “Cooper, I swear to you, I did not do this.”

“Who else?” I yell, pulling at my hair and choking on my emotions. I can’t think straight. “Who else could do this?”

Her shoulders tighten, and her eyes narrow. “I get that you’re upset, obviously. But you have no right to accuse me of something so horrible. What makes you think I would do something like this to you? *Could* do this to you? Do you really think that about me?”

I stare at her, trying to find the side of her that I’ve not seen before. The side that could completely destroy someone’s things. Their memories. Their happiness. There’s got to be a side of her coldhearted enough to do that. To do *this*.

When we first met, I think I saw that part of her. It was plain as fucking day how much she hated me. I should have left her alone. But no, I went ahead and *wanted* something. I wanted her to be different. I wanted her to care.

About me.

Fucking fool.

It’s too much.

And now, I want to believe her when she says she didn’t do it, but my brain can’t figure out an equation that puts anyone else near my guitar. Opportunity plus motive is everything, and she’s the only one with both. Even though I don’t know exactly what that motive is, it was apparent she had an axe to grind with me this morning.

There are so many words I want to say and emotions I want to let loose, but I swallow them all and leave before I do something stupid like trash the whole building. As I go, I push past Ethan and a few other students, observing the spectacle from the doorway.

Step right up, folks. Get your tickets to the sideshow in classroom 12B.

My entire life is now just a fucking circus. Every bit of it is on display for everyone to watch and judge. I thought I could handle that side of it. I thought I *was* handling it.

Maybe I’m not.

twenty-four

...

Burn Down My House

Sloane

I can't breathe. Air just isn't making it into my lungs. I'm starting to get dizzy.

Who would do this?

"Sloane, did you hear me? The police are on their way." Fiona has been trying to get my attention for a while now, but I can't seem to focus on her. Or anything other than the ravaged guitar still on the floor in front of me. I'm too stunned.

Somebody came into *my* building and destroyed a musical instrument. And not just any musical instrument. One belonging to someone I care about and know cherished it almost as much as life itself. That's what an instrument means to a musician. It's more than just a tool. It's an extension of the person, a way to communicate, to express themselves.

It's sacred. It's *everything*.

And someone desecrated that.

A wave of nausea rolls over me, but I stuff it down. I need to pull myself together. This is not the time to fall apart. No, now is when I need to kick some ass.

I jump into action.

"Nobody leaves the building," I say to Fiona. "Not a single soul goes in or out until the police get here and can look at everything. And clear this room, and Cooper's. I don't want anybody contaminating anything."

I don't wait for a response and stalk down the hall to my office. Every single person I pass on the way is a suspect in my mind, and it takes every ounce of control I have not to jump into interrogation mode.

For some reason, I'm not worried or hurt Cooper blamed me. It makes sense. We had just argued. Of course, I'd be at the top of his list when he tried to figure out who would do that to him. Not that it doesn't bother me, because it does. But I understand it. I'd probably think the same thing if I were in his shoes. I am prime suspect number one.

When the police finally arrive, it's no surprise they aren't interested in what happened to Cooper's guitar. They have much more important things to deal with. The importance of anything is relative, and to them, this is merely childish vandalism.

Their lack of interest is because most people in the building are juveniles, there is no security footage to review, and no witnesses have come forward voluntarily with information. The amount of legwork required to investigate the destruction of a fairly old guitar is disproportionate to the item's value. But, they take a report and gave me a copy to give Cooper if he wants to file an insurance claim.

"It's nothing personal, you understand," the officer says, shutting his report binder. "This is pretty tame for this part of the city, to be honest. There's not much we can do about this kind of crime. Though, from the looks of it, it seems pretty personal. Mr. Davies might want to look closer at his inner circle."

I nod, disheartened. I don't know what I expected. Actually, I do. I wanted a full-blown investigation where no stone went unturned, a SWAT team was deployed, every single person in L.A. was questioned, and some super-sophisticated technology was used to find and name the perpetrator in a matter of minutes.

Unrealistic? Sure. But my heart is in the right place. I hate this for Cooper. Something like this feels like such an intrusive violation. I can't imagine what he's going through.

When the police leave, I talk briefly with Fiona and make a few calls to Board members who were notified of the incident to let them know the status. I cancel the rest of the classes for the day. No one is in a very creative mood, and maybe a day off will do us all some good after the emotions of the morning.

In the piano studio, I look closer at the guitar as if I can figure out the mystery by examining it. I don't know its history, but the parts that are unharmed look well-loved and cared for. I take the pieces out of the case and carefully lay them on the floor. Maybe it's like a puzzle that can be put back

together somehow. I'm struck by how one crack leaves an instrument forever changed. It will never be the same again.

Just like one act of betrayal forever alters a heart. It changes a person. A family. A world.

I trail my finger over the jagged edges, wincing as a splinter pricks my skin. A slight sting compared to the lacerations on my soul. My ability to trust and love openly was damaged by people I trusted. But, like this guitar, I'm irreparably scarred.

And now, Cooper is too.

I understand his devastation. This guitar was part of himself, and now that's been violated. Some betrayals cut too deep to ever fully heal.

Kind of like my heart. How poetic.



WHEN I ARRIVE AT COOPER'S HOUSE MID-AFTERNOON, I WORRY WHEN HE doesn't answer right away. Part of me wonders if he went somewhere else when he left the Foundation. The supermodel's house, perhaps? Or he's on the other side of the door, saw it was me, and doesn't want to answer. All of these are legitimate possibilities as far as my crazy imagination goes.

The door swings open, and the sight of Cooper, wet, in nothing but a towel, steals my breath away. My eyes avoid the darkening bruises and are drawn to the artwork decorating the canvas of his skin. I try to take it all in at once because I don't know where to look first. I've seen the tattoos on his arms and hands since those aren't usually covered, but the ones on his chest and stomach are new to me, and I can't help but stare at the patchwork of ink.

It's beautiful.

"What are you doing here?" he demands, snapping me back to reality.

"Can I come in?" I ask. I don't want to just give him the police report and leave. We need to have a real conversation.

His light eyes pierce through me, looking for a reason to turn me away, I'm sure, but he must not find one. He shrugs a shoulder and turns back into the house, leaving the door open, so I follow him in.

He pads across the wood floor of the living room to the hallway, water droplets falling in his wake as he goes. "I'll be right back," he mutters, not

looking back at me.

Okay. This is going to be more complicated than I thought.

I sit on the couch and take in the house, noticing it hasn't reverted to the mess that was here when we came in on Saturday.

Maybe he kept it clean for the supermodel.

Stop it.

Cooper comes back into the living room wearing worn jeans that sit low on his hips and pulling a T-shirt over his head that hugs him like a second skin. My fingers itch to trace every muscle that flexes as he moves, and I have to make a tight fist to keep from reaching out to him.

"So, what are you doing here?" he asks again, falling into a chair across from me. As far from me as he can be in the same room, I note.

My heart sinks along with my mood. I had hoped the time since he left this morning would give him a chance to realize I didn't have anything to do with the destruction of his guitar. I guess that didn't happen.

Reaching into my purse, I find the police report and slide it across the coffee table. "Here. The police said you might need this if your guitar was insured. They also said there isn't really much they can do. Or, *will* do. They don't think the guitar had equal value to how much work they would have to put in to find out who did it."

He scoffs, and the smile on his face is full of cynicism. "No value, huh?"

"That's just what they said. It's not what I think. I know it meant a lot to you." I look down at my fingers, tying themselves in knots. "Cooper, please believe me when I say I had nothing to do with this. And I'm sorry it happened. I do feel responsible since it happened in my building. I wish there was something I could do to fix it. To find the person who did it so they could pay. But my hands are tied. All I can do is tell you I'm sorry. And, pray you believe me."

He stares at me for a long moment, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. I can't tell what he's thinking, but some heavy consideration is going on in that brain of his.

Finally, he nods, leans forward, and picks up the police report from the table. "I know you didn't do this, Sloane. I'm sorry I accused you of it. You were the first person to pop into my head when I saw it because we had just argued, and you had access. And you were the only person I could think of in the building who might be pissed off at me enough to do something like that."

“Cooper, I would never--”

“I know, I know. Like I said, I realize that now, but I wasn’t thinking straight at the time. I saw the destruction, and then all I saw was red.” He drops his face into his hands and rubs at his eyes in frustration.

“Do you have any idea who else might have done it? Maybe that Nyx person you and Remy mentioned at the show? Or maybe an overzealous fan?”

“Nyx is always at the very top of my shit list, but yeah. I’m thinking it had to be her.” He laughs sarcastically. “Jesus, I was not in any shape this morning to deal with something like this.”

I don’t say anything, and my eyes drop to the table, knowing perfectly well what he’s referring to. The supermodel. His night on the town with her must have tired him out. When I glance up, I see him staring at me with an odd look on his face I can’t discern.”

“What is it? What’s the matter?” I ask, not sure if I want to hear the answer.

“I could ask you the same thing. You looked very uncomfortable there for a minute, and I’m just wondering why?”

My eyes shift back to the table, and I debate how much I want to say. After everything that’s happened today, do I really want to get into the stories on the internet? Who he might be seeing? None of it is my business. None of it has anything to do with me, so I don’t think I should say anything.

But there’s something at the back of my brain that itches as I think about it. Wanting to know the story. Something in the back of my heart that echoes with longing for the truth because I know we shared *something* this weekend. And for him to just push me aside like he did doesn’t feel right.

“It’s just. I don’t know....”

“Sloane, what is it? Something is eating at you. You can tell me what it is. Or ask me whatever it is you’re curious about because I can see it working away at you.”

Looking up at him, I see something I haven’t seen since Saturday. Something he’s been hiding ever since then. I’m not sure what it is, but it keeps him human. It’s also something he desperately tries to bury.

“I saw the story this morning on *Blindsided*. About your date last night.” I’m looking everywhere in the room except at him. For some reason, I can’t meet his eyes, and I don’t know if it’s out of fear of what I’m going to see and the self-protection of my heart. Or if I just don’t want to see the truth.

Whatever it is, I can't look at him. "That's what I was upset about this morning when I saw you. I had just seen the article. So, even if I was mad about that, I wouldn't have had time to destroy your guitar. But I hope you know there is nothing you or anyone could have done that would have compelled me to do that to anyone. I do hope you've learned that much about me. Even though you really don't know me at all."

"What story are you talking about?" His voice is edged with anger, and I can't help but look at him now. I can see the frustration, and the lines on his face among all the bruises just emphasize his emotions. "I did not go on a fucking date last night. The only place I went was to the bar down the street, where I had a few too many shots and then stumbled home."

"But the article..."

"Jesus Christ, Sloane. Have we not learned everything online is probably a lie by now? Especially when it comes to me? You should know it's all bullshit."

I hear what he's saying. And I would agree with him if there weren't pictures of him making out with that girl. And if he was that drunk... I dig into my purse and pull out my phone. I hate that I'm doing this, but I navigate to *Blindsided's* website to pull up the article. Once I find it, I hand it over to him.

"Pictures don't lie, Cooper."

He takes it but doesn't look at it. Instead, he stares at me. His eyes are cold and unfeeling. "But I do?"

Shaking his head, he glances down at the screen and zooms in on whatever he's looking at. He swears to himself under his breath, stands, and tosses my phone on the table before going into the kitchen.

I don't know what to make of any of that. Should I be waiting for more of a response? Should I go into the kitchen and confront him? Should I just fucking leave? It doesn't help I don't know where I stand with him, so I don't know how to react.

So I do nothing. I just wait.

A few minutes later, Cooper is back. This time, he has his phone out and scrolls for a while before stopping and holding it for me to look at the screen. When I take it, I see a photo on his social media of him with the supermodel from last night in the exact same scenario.

I glance up at him, confused. I'm not sure what this is supposed to prove to me.

“Look at the date on that post,” he says, sitting back in the chair. “You’ll see these photos were from three years ago. In Vegas. That’s not even L.A.” He sighs heavily, leaning forward, elbows on his knees, trying to get my attention. “If you would have *really* looked at the pictures. If you would have, oh, I don’t know, for a single moment thought better of me, you would have noticed there are no bruises on my face in the photos. There are no cuts on my fingers. The person in those pictures did not just get in a fight the other day.”

He gets up and leaves the room, and I hear a side door open and close, and I’m left with the realization of how wrong I’ve been. How quick I was to think the worst of him. How fast my thoughts went to him being someone else I couldn’t trust. How ready I was to be betrayed. So much so that I saw it when it wasn’t there.

I’m such an idiot. But then, how he acted when I asked him to dinner yesterday doesn’t match either. I don’t know what to think about anything anymore.

I don’t know whether to go after Cooper or wait here. Or, maybe I should leave and go home. Give up on this. Give up on us. Maybe there is no us.

I *want* there to be an us.

twenty-five

...

Just Asking

Cooper

I don't know what the fuck I'm doing anymore. My life has been turned inside out in a matter of twenty-four hours. In what I thought was a move to protect Sloane, I ended up alienating her. It doesn't help that the press played on her worst fears. No wonder she was so mad at me this morning.

And then there's my guitar, and it's complete annihilation. Somebody out there hates me enough to do something that aggressive and destructive, and I don't know what to think. Should I be scared? Should I be worried? Not only for me but for the people around me? Is there some psycho out for my blood? Or the blood of my chosen family? What about my real family?

There are too many questions going unanswered, and I don't like not knowing. I'm not the kind of person who has the patience to wait for results.

Right now, I've got a beautiful, intelligent, caring woman sitting in my living room who I think wants the same things I do. It's hard to tell since neither of us has talked about it, and I'm in the driveway pacing like the fucking Mad Hatter late for tea.

Fuck this.

I go back into the house, straight into the living room, and pull Sloane up from the couch. Grabbing her face with both hands, I gaze into her dark brown eyes that are now so full of surprise I have to bite down a laugh because this is important.

"I don't want to hurt you, Sloane. You deserve so much better than me." I'm literally shaking as I say this. "Being with me is nothing but pain. Nothing but heartache. *I don't. Want. To hurt you.*"

She's grabbing my waist, but I think it's more to steady herself than

anything else, and I feel her body stiffen at my words. She knows it's the truth. She knows I'm nothing but a bright red flag. I can see in her eyes she acknowledges that.

"I don't want to hurt you either, Cooper. That's all I know how to do, too. But I don't do it actively. I shut down and run away. I can't promise you I won't."

I take her in. I take her words in. And I take them to heart. She didn't say she wouldn't run away. In fact, it sounds like she's warning me that she will. But is that an absolute? Or a possibility? And does it matter to me? Is she worth the risk?

I think she is.

As I stare into her dark eyes, the air between us ignites. I'm consumed with wanting her, needing to feel her. But a voice inside screams: *It's a mistake. This can only end in disaster.*

Even as my body throbs for release, my mind races with warning after warning. *Don't do it, Cooper. You'll destroy her. Ruin everything good here. Walk away before you cause more pain.*

But the fire in her gaze melts my doubts. I ache to taste those soft lips and run my hands over her silken skin. Feel her unravel beneath me. Our chemistry is too powerful to deny.

I war within myself, teetering on the edge. Her shallow breaths draw me closer, pulling me under the waves. Still, the voice in my head persists: *Turn back now. Have some fucking self-control for once.*

My hands tremble with restraint even as my erection strains the front of my jeans. Our mouths hover a whisper apart, the tension pulsing between us. It would be so fucking easy to close that gap.

In this excruciating moment, I see it all. A future ablaze with passion, then burnt to ashes when I inevitably fail her. Myself in ruins, having destroyed the one person that made me believe I could be whole.

I start to pull away, to do the right thing, but the raw need reflected back at me shreds my resistance. With a groan of surrender, I crush my lips to hers, determined to sear this memory into my soul before the fire between us consumes us both.

My hands cup her face, fingers sliding into her hair. Her hands grip my shirt, pulling me closer. We dissolve into each other, all the pent-up longing pouring out. I sweep my tongue along her bottom lip, and she opens for me with a sigh. Our tongues intertwine, deepening the kiss. She tastes like honey

and fire, an addictive combination.

We break apart just long enough to gasp for air before diving back in, unable to get enough. My hands roam her back, her curves pressed against me. I'm lost, drowning in her.

A hunger takes over between us, and we can't get enough of each other. The sweet taste of her tongue caressing mine. The salt of her skin. The smoothness of her neck and shoulders. All are sensations I want to burn into my memory. I want to remember this taste for the rest of my life. I know that won't be a problem because I won't be able to forget it. Just like I won't be able to forget the way her body arches into mine. Or the low moan deep in her throat that escapes when I run my hand up her thigh.

There are things in life you tell yourself, *'I'm never going to forget this. This is a core memory.'* But you're lying because, just as quickly, it's erased from your mind. And then there are things etched directly onto your soul you couldn't forget if you tried. This moment is going to leave an indelible mark on my soul that I will take with me to the grave.

I pull back and look down at her, chest heaving and breathless. I search her eyes to see if she feels the same way I do. With a barely perceptible nod, she tells me that she does. So, I scoop her up and carry her into the bedroom, kicking the door shut behind us.

Laying her on the bed, I make quick work of her clothes, and within a few breaths, she's bared to me. And glorious. I want nothing more than to worship her right here and right now until she calls my name to the heavens.

I kiss my way up her inner thigh, grabbing her ass as I go. I lick across her stomach and watch goosebumps rise as my breath sweeps across her skin. When I reach her breasts, I find the nipples stiff and taut and aching for me to suck on them. So I do. Voraciously. Nipping with my teeth and flicking with my tongue until she's grinding against me, wanting more.

My fingers delve inside her, and she's wet and ready for me. As I stroke into her, her body begins to tremble against me.

It's too much. I can't wait any longer. I need to have her. *Now.*

"Sloane, now is the time to tell me to stop if you don't want to go any farther." I squeeze my eyes shut and pray to whatever gods there are she doesn't say no because there is nothing on this planet I want more than to be inside her right now.

"Don't you dare stop. And you better have a fucking condom."

I lean back to look down at her, ready to find her laughing, but she is

dead serious. And that alone makes me crack up.

“Do you know how perfect you are?”

I don't wait for a response. I lean over to the nightstand and pull out a condom, but she takes it from me and opens it. Expertly fitting it onto my cock, her hands firm as she pumps me.

That's it. I grab a thigh and lift it over my shoulder, opening her wide for me. We both watch as I sink into her inch by inch until I am filling her completely, and it is hot as fuck. She's tight around my cock and has stretched to let me in, but it's a perfect fit.

“Does that feel good, baby? Is that enough for you?” I start sliding in and out of her slowly at first, enjoying the small sounds she makes each time I thrust into her. So, I pick up the pace. Steadily arching my hips to hit the exact spot both of us are going to chase until we reach euphoria.

She doesn't respond with words but with her body. And her hands. And her mouth. And her tongue. And her teeth. And her breath. And her moans. And I understand every single word of that language because I'm speaking it too. This isn't a conversation. This is a song we're writing as we go. One minute, I'm the melody. Then next, the harmony. And we switch. And we switch. And we switch. Until we finally catch that sensation that grabs and pushes us over the edge.

Our eyes meet, and something inside of me shifts, turning up the volume of the song between us. And we both fall. Holding on to each other as we go. Pulsing and trembling. And aching. And feeling. Every single nerve ending alive and singing.

I bury my face into her neck as I try to catch my breath, still inside her, with her legs wrapped around my hips. Her breath is ragged like mine, and she squeezes me, her arms tight around my shoulders. She presses me into her chest, and it feels like nothing I've ever experienced. I've never felt this way after sex before.

This wasn't just sex. This was something else entirely. And I have no fucking clue what to do about it.

I push up on my elbows and rest my forehead against hers, our breathing starting to even out. I search her eyes to see if maybe she's feeling the same way I do about what just happened. I think she is because she's searching my eyes, too.

“What was that??” I ask, not sure if that's the right question, but it's what I want to know.

She laughs, and the sound resonates somewhere deep within me. “I was going to ask you the same thing. That was something else, huh?”

I push the hair sticking to her forehead aside. We’re both sweaty and still catching our breath. “That’s one way to put it.”

I’m not sure what to do now. I’ve never been in this situation before. I’ve never wanted to hang around with someone after I’ve slept with them. But with Sloane, not only do I want her to hang around, but I want to talk.

Carefully pulling out of her, I go to the bathroom to clean up. As I end up staring at myself in the mirror, I can’t help but notice that the person looking back at me is not the same person who moved into this house not long ago.

Sloane Castle has changed me.

twenty-six

...

Without You

Sloane

He told me he didn't want to hurt me and called me perfect. And then he made love to me. That was not a fuck. I don't know what I expected from Cooper Davies, but this was definitely not it. I did not picture him holding me and playing with my hair absently in the middle of the afternoon. That was not on my Cooper Davies bingo card.

"I'm not sure what I'm doing, Sloane," he says quietly, his chest rising and falling under my ear. We've been quiet for quite a long time now. I don't think we were prepared for what just happened between us. "To be honest with you, I haven't known what I'm doing in a very long time. I tend to go with the flow. I don't plan. Life happens *to* me, and I grab it and hold on for the ride."

I smile to myself because I used to be that way. I know how free that can feel. But I also know how out of control that way of life is. How open you are to being hurt.

"So what are you trying to tell me?" I lift up on an elbow and look down on him. His blue eyes are sparkling in the late afternoon sun that slants in from the windows. "Are you telling me not to expect anything from you?"

He stares at me thoughtfully, considering the question. "I get the feeling we're both fish out of water in this situation. It's not that I'm telling you not to expect anything from me. I honestly don't know what to expect of myself." He raises a hand to push the hair out of my face, and his touch is so gentle it feels like he's being especially careful with me. I love that.

"I am not one to put any demands on you. I am not here to tie you down or push for a ring on my finger." When I say this, my stomach clenches as if I

just told a lie, and I don't know why. I don't want those things. I've never wanted those things from anyone. I did once and learned the hard way never to do it again. I only need to make a mistake like that once to learn a life lesson.

A crease forms between his brows as he lazily draws patterns on my upper arm. "What happened to you that would make you say something like that?" He raises up on his own elbow to meet me face to face. "It sounds to me like that stance comes from experience. Not to sound cliché, but who hurt you?"

I laugh, but it's nervous and reactionary in an attempt to buy some time to find a believable answer but still not entirely the truth. I still don't know how much of my life I can share. It strikes me as funny that Fiona asked me the same question not too long ago. Maybe my hurt shows to other people more than I thought.

"Who hurt me? Well, Mr. Cliché Book Boyfriend, that's a pretty open-ended question. The better question would be, who hasn't?"

He traces a finger along my cheekbone, down to my lips, and across my chin ever so lightly. I have to stifle a shudder that wants to shake me senseless. Just a simple touch from Cooper and I disintegrate.

The concern on his face hasn't changed or dissipated at all and, in fact, appears to deepen at my response. "Whoever would be dumb enough to hurt you doesn't deserve you."

I laugh again, trying to cover up my unease. "Well, you said it, not me."

"Talk to me, Sloane. How did you end up here? With me in bed on a Tuesday afternoon? A disreputable bad-boy rockstar known only for bad press. For some reason, I don't feel like your type."

"What makes you think I have a type?"

"Everyone has a type, whether they admit to it or not is beside the point. Deep down in that beautiful brain, inside that generous heart, and swimming around in your glorious hormones, is a picture-perfect specimen of a human being that is your ideal mate." He wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me closer, and I can feel his hard cock press against my stomach. "I can't imagine I am anywhere close to the idea in your head."

I grab his ass and pull him closer, making him groan and writhe against me. And as I begin trailing kisses down his neck, his body suddenly stiffens, and he pulls away from me gently.

His eyes narrow slightly as he reads me, and I know that *he* knows

exactly what I'm doing. I'm trying to distract instead of talk.

"You don't have to tell me everything, but I need some guardrails." He pulls farther away, and the air between us cools. "I can't do a relationship that's all trial and error. If we're going to do a relationship, which I think we are, I'm going to need a little bit of help from you."

"Just don't betray me or try to control me." That, at least, is the truth. "Ever."

Cooper is quiet for a minute as he considers my words, and I can tell he's trying to figure out if he can ask more questions or if that's all I'm going to say on the matter. And internally, I wrestle with myself, wondering if I can trust him. I want to. God, how I want to.

"I have a feeling the subject goes deeper than someone telling a little white lie to you, correct?"

I nod. "That is correct."

"Do you want to tell me anything more?"

I glance down at our hands on the bed only inches apart and carefully walk my fingers over to his. He doesn't hesitate and grabs my hand, twisting it to kiss the back, and that one small gesture, tiny action, simple movement, makes me want to tell him my entire life story right here and now. His absent-minded display of affection, which he probably doesn't even know he's doing or its effect on me, shows me his true feelings and good intentions.

I'm suddenly brave. A sense of safety wraps around and hugs me for the first time in many years. I didn't think I would ever feel safe with someone again.

"There's a reason I don't perform or record anymore," I start, unsure where in the story I should begin. He doesn't react or say a word. He just gives me space to talk. "And there's a reason I no longer have family or a large circle of friends. Or, many friends at all."

Pushing the hair from my shoulder, he simply asks, "And what is that reason?"

I search his eyes again, reassuring myself I can do this. "Because everyone I trusted, including my family, used me. I was just a tool for them to get what they wanted. I was a puppet. A rung on the ladder to be stepped on as they elevated themselves. And when I pushed back, refused to change, and resisted everyone's demands that would make me into something I'm not, I was tossed aside and buried."

“What did your family have to do with it?”

I can feel the familiar pain in my heart as I think of them. What started out as something so good and exciting became so twisted. “My parents were my managers. All they saw were dollar signs when they looked at me, and I guess their greed took over their better nature.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“That’s the thing, they weren’t always like that. I think that’s what hurts the most, watching them become monsters right before my eyes.”

“So what happened?”

Here we go. Details. The emotional roller coaster of the day is starting to take its toll on me, and I’m not sure I want to let my feelings sink any lower after they were just so high.

“Can we stop there for now? I don’t want to ruin this afternoon.”

He instantly shifts gears and moves to pin me on the bed, planting kisses across my collarbone and biting my shoulder. “So long as we can start something else...”

My body automatically responds to his, and all negative thoughts run back to the shadows in their respective corners.

I’m fully aware that their retreat is a temporary situation.

twenty-seven

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Drowned in Emotion

Cooper

We spend the rest of the afternoon in bed, and after ordering in dinner, we walk around the neighborhood for a little while before she heads home. We're quiet at first, just holding hands, fingers threaded together, taking in the night sky.

"You know, for the longest time, I thought stars were made up?" I say, looking at the bright moon that's almost full, ducking in and out of clouds above us.

"Made up? Why is that?" she asks, turning her face up to the sky along with me.

"Vegas," I shrug. "It's hard to see anything with all the casino lights. My older brother, Tim, used to bullshit me with stories about how only kids who listened to their older brothers could see them. Or, people who wore blue on Tuesdays were the only ones. It was always something different. Sometimes I believed him, sometimes I didn't. He was always difficult to read."

"Are you two close?"

An ache for a relationship I never really had with my brother echoes through me.

"Nah. Not really." I don't try to laugh it off like usual, which strikes me as odd. "It's hard to trust someone who tells you stars aren't real, you know?"

She squeezes my arm, and it's exactly what I needed in that second. That small gesture.

"That isn't a great foundation for a relationship, no."

"I mean, there's other stuff, obviously," I say. "When getting into trouble, I followed in his footsteps rather well. We were both pretty wild."

“Were?” she raises her eyebrows in surprise. “You did not just say that in the past tense.”

I smile, but it’s weak. “I know, I know.”

Leaning her head on my shoulder, she says, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Yes, you did.”

“Okay, yes. I did. But you can’t blame me, can you?” She slaps my chest lightly with a laugh, and this time I join her. She’s right. I can’t.

“Alright. Fair enough. I deserve that.” I sigh. “But in my defense, I have been getting better. Haven’t I?”

“That’s TBD.” Her laugh chimes again, and I love the sound of it. Even if it’s at my expense, I will pay that price just to hear it.

Feelings I’m unsure what to do with are starting to run through me. I have never thought about somebody’s laugh like that. And I’ve certainly never considered talking about my relationship with my brother, or the complete lack of one, with anyone else. Especially someone I’m sleeping with.

This is different.

When Sloane leaves for home, I’m left to think about the day’s events. What started with a hangover and utter destruction of a cherished possession has ended with a high I didn’t know was possible.

When I met Sloane Castle, I knew my life would not be the same afterward. I just didn’t realize it was going to change me as a person so drastically. I was not prepared to have my whole existence turned on its head in a matter of weeks. It took me a lifetime to carve these personality traits, habits, idiosyncrasies, opinions, and perceptions of how the world works into myself. And it feels like it took her only a few heartbeats to show me how wrong I was.

My life, however, has shown me repeatedly that good things cannot be trusted. People don’t care about you as a person. They care about what you can do for them or what they can get out of you. I think Sloane and I have that belief in common. I don’t know if we can get past that and put faith in another person to treat us differently, genuinely care about our emotions and well-being, or trust. We are of like minds when it comes to trust. And I wonder if we can truly get over that.



MACKENZIE CALLS ME EARLY THE NEXT MORNING TO LET ME KNOW WE HAVE an afternoon meeting with Cassidy and Nyx. There are no classes at Rhapsody on Wednesdays, so it doesn't affect my mentoring schedule, but it leaves me plenty of time to work up my rage against Nyx and feed my suspicion of her fucking with my guitar.

I can barely contain my anger by the time I walk into the conference room at Blackmore Records for our meeting. None of the other guys know that my prized guitar has been utterly destroyed at the Rhapsody Foundation. I haven't told them because I know if I say it out loud, I will completely lose my shit.

As soon as Nyx saunters into the room, acting like she owns the place, I jump up from my seat and get right in her face.

"Do you think trashing my guitar is funny?" I growl through clenched teeth.

Nyx's eyes go wide with faux innocence. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Cut the bullshit," I shout, slamming my fist on the table. "You destroyed my guitar back at Rhapsody. Why?"

The other guys in the band all stare at me in shock.

"Dude, what happened to your guitar?" Remy asks.

I whirl around to face them. "This psycho bitch broke into my classroom and smashed my guitar to pieces. And she had the nerve to carve the word 'LIAR' into the case too."

"Holy shit," Logan says under his breath.

Jake shakes his head angrily. "Man, that's so messed up."

I turn back to Nyx, who is examining her fingernails nonchalantly. "Well? And what about my pictures, huh? What the hell is wrong with you?"

She shrugs. "Prove it was me."

"You mean besides the fact that you're the only unhinged person who hates me this much? Gee, let me think," I spit.

"Sounds to me like you don't have any proof. Just wild accusations," Nyx says calmly.

I lose it, then. Lunging forward, Jake and Remy have to hold me back

from getting right in her face again.

“You evil, vindictive bitch!” I yell as they drag me toward the door. “You’re not going to get away with this!”

She just smirks and gives a little wave as they pull me out of the room. I shake the guys off and punch the nearest wall, bloodying my already bruised knuckles. I barely feel it.

She’s gone too far this time. That guitar was irreplaceable, and she knew it. This means war.

I storm down the hallway, fuming with rage. My bandmates hurry to catch up to me.

“Dude, talk to us,” Jake says. “What the hell happened back there?”

I stop and take a deep breath, trying to calm myself enough to speak.

“Yesterday, when I got to my classroom, my guitar was just...destroyed. Smashed to bits. And someone carved ‘*liar*’ into the case,” I explain through gritted teeth.

Remy puts a hand on my shoulder. “Shit, man. I’m so sorry.”

“It had to be Nyx. I just know it was her,” I say.

Logan shakes his head. “As much as I hate that bitch, we don’t know for sure it was her.”

“How could she get into Rhapsody without being noticed?” Remy asks.

“She got into our show without us knowing,” Jake says, rubbing the back of his neck. “Who knows how or why she does anything.”

“Who else could it be?” I shout, punching the wall again. This time I feel it, and fuck, it hurts.

Jake grabs my fist before I can hit it again. “Hey, take it easy. We’re on your side here.”

I hang my head, fighting back the tears stinging my eyes. That guitar apparently meant more to me than I thought it did. Or maybe it’s the pictures that are now gone that bother me so much. Either way, the loss is only now really hitting me.

Remy leans in, trying to grab my attention. “You gonna be alright, dude?”

After a minute, I take a deep breath and straighten up. “Let’s just get this fucking meeting over with.”

We head back to the conference room. Nyx hasn’t moved from her seat, still looking bored. It takes every ounce of restraint I have not to lunge across the table at her again.

While everyone gets settled, I take a minute to study her, looking for any

sign she might give away that could prove her guilt. Her hair is as bright red as ever, and her confidence is way bigger than it should be, but there are dark shadows under her eyes, and she's lost a lot of weight. She's almost unrecognizable from the girl we all knew just months ago in Vegas.

If she hadn't caused us so much trouble and heartache, I might care that she looks like she's having a hard time. But knowing how much she's hurt Jake in the past, and me now selling her bullshit stories, has removed that wire from my circuit board.

I could't give a shit what she says about me or does to me. Nyx could tell twenty lies about me or kick me in the head every single day for the rest of my life, and I would not give a fuck. But she has hurt the people I care about and dragged the Foundation into the mud she created now, too, which is unforgivable.

She smiles with a hubris only built by hate, and we all glare at her. There is no love lost in this room. I notice Jake and Remy slide their chairs away from her ever so slightly as if to either get further away from her for their own good, or perhaps for hers.

Cassidy finally starts going over the terms of the NDA. I try to pay attention, but I'm seething the whole time. "Thanks for agreeing to come today, Nyx. We appreciate it. And while I can't give you legal advice as that would be a conflict of interest, I want to reiterate my concern that you don't have representation in this meeting."

Nyx shrugs as if this isn't a big deal, and she knows exactly what she's doing. "I'm fine on my own, thanks."

Cassidy nods and continues. "Then you won't mind if we record this conversation?"

"Nope. I have nothing to hide."

I can't help but shift uncomfortably in my seat and see a few others do the same. It's not that we have anything to hide either, but we know how the slightest truth can be blown out of proportion and twisted and turned into something hideous. We've all seen it and specifically seen Nyx do it to us. And now, I've got my recent outburst to worry about.

I wonder which tabloid will buy this story from her.

Eliza starts the recording, and Cassidy continues.

"Right, well, we asked you here to discuss arranging a potential settlement with you in an attempt to cease the inflammatory stories being bandied about in the press. We are aware that a large portion of the stories

quote you as a source, and as you can expect, we need a way to halt spreading rumors on the internet as much as possible.”

“I don’t tell anyone anything that isn’t true.”

I can feel all of us inhale as if we’re about to start arguing the point, but Cassidy quickly holds up a hand to stop us before we can utter a syllable. Surprisingly, I don’t jump over the table.

“We understand that’s your position, and as I said, we are looking to keep the press items focused on the band’s music as much as possible. We would like to limit and control the personal information released, as we believe there is an individual right to privacy.”

She has the audacity to scoff at this. “Privacy? You guys are celebrities now. You don’t get privacy. You’ve all obviously changed and let your fame go to your heads.” Her words are edged with anger or jealousy, I can’t tell which, or maybe it’s both, but it makes it obvious why she’s doing this.

Mackenzie must notice it, too, because she leans closer and says, “*You* are the one that quit. You are the one who left without saying a word. You gave up on this band at the slightest sign of a problem, so for you to say anything about these guys just shows me what kind of person you really are.”

“Mackenzie...” Eliza warns, trying to rein her in, but once Mac gets started, there is no stopping her.

“No, I don’t know if I’ll get this chance again to tell this bitch what I really think.” She looks around at us, and none of us in the band have a single thing to say about it. We are silently cheering her on. Turning back to Nyx, she says, “You saw what Jake was going through after the accident. You were even there with me cleaning their house before he came home from the hospital, so it would be a little bit easier for him. You were the one who picked him up from the hospital, for Christ’s sake, and saw how devastated he was about Andy’s death. You saw firsthand how much these guys grieved for losing their friend. And for you to take any of that grief and use it for your own monetary gain is the absolute lowest thing a human being can do. No, you know what? You’re not even human. You’re fucking scum.”

Nyx doesn’t react at all. She doesn’t flinch a muscle. It’s almost as if she expected this from us. And I guess it is predictable. After all this time, we get her in a room; of course, we’ll give her a piece of our mind. I don’t know if she expected Mackenzie to be the one to do it, but it’s out there all the same.

I don’t have anything to add, and as I glance around at the other guys, especially Jake, it doesn’t look like they do either. Mackenzie pretty much

summed up how we're all feeling right now. Jake does look incredibly uncomfortable, and I know he's going through a lot sitting near her like he is. Being in close proximity with someone who attempts to ruin your life isn't exactly the easiest thing to do.

"Okay...We're offering you a monetary settlement in exchange for your silence and your continued silence going forward." Cassidy pushes some papers across the table toward her. "I have prepared this non-disclosure agreement for us to sign, which protects all of us from any future issues that might arise."

Nyx raises her bloodshot eyes to Cassidy. "You want to buy my silence?" The laugh that comes out of her causes the tiny hairs on the back of my neck to rise. It's then I see the pure evil inside of her. There's no longer a question of whether or not she's just morally gray. That laugh is the only proof I need that evil exists in this world and can manifest itself in a person. "You think you can shut me up by throwing me a little cash?" The papers are slid back.

"We think this agreement is beneficial for all parties involved." Cassidy pushes the papers back towards her. "You can take your time with the contract. Read it over, or have an attorney look at it for you. There is no pressure for you to sign anything today. We ask you to consider our offer seriously, as this will be the only one not involving litigation."

That last part gets Nyx's undivided attention, and her head snaps up. "Litigation? Really? You think you stand a chance in court against me for these stories?" She looks around the table at us individually, and none of us look away. We all meet her gaze head-on. We are a united front against her. "Like I said, I didn't say anything that wasn't true. What people do with that truth has nothing to do with me."

Cassidy doesn't back down, either. "This settlement offer does not reflect our confidence level of success in court. We are merely trying to save everyone's time by getting to the part where you remain quiet, and the band can get on with making music." The determination on Cassidy's face is impressive, and I would hate to face her as an opposing party. I can only hope Nyx feels a fraction of that.

As she studies Cassidy, Nyx must see a glimmer of the possibility she might lose because she grabs the contract off the table and says, "I'll have my attorney look at this and get back to you."

"As you'll see on the last page, this offer expires in seventy-two hours. Please get back to us before then or have your attorney get in touch. My

contact information is listed as well.” Cassidy stands, indicating the meeting is over, and Nyx looks around at us again, smugness painting her features.

“Bye, boys,” she says, rising smoothly and leaving the office with Eliza close behind.

The room erupts with the loudest silence I’ve ever heard when the door shuts behind them. There is so much emotion bouncing off the walls that words can’t even be formed. We all just look at each other, not sure what to feel, let alone what to say.

Eventually, Cassidy is the first to break the silence. “Speaking of NDAs, we need to have a little chat about them.”

“What about them?” Skyler asks.

“I think it would be a good idea if we instituted a policy for the band to have NDAs in place with anyone who has a relationship with the band.” She preemptively holds up her hands to stop any argument about to fly at her. “I know this sounds like a dick move, but look at where we are right now. Without having one in place, Nyx has been allowed to run rampant on the internet with bullshit and half-truths, and now we’re cleaning up that mess, or at least trying to. Who knows if we’re going to be successful. We need to start taking this seriously, and that means protecting ourselves.”

Jake gives Cassidy an odd look, and I can see the gears turning in his head about some of the relationships here. “So does that mean you and I have to sign one? And Logan and Skyler have to sign one? How meta does this get?”

Cassidy smiles, but her answer is sobering. “That means everyone should sign one. One of you could quit tomorrow and start raising hell. Or, I hate to say it, but Jake, you and I could break up someday even though that’s impossible, honey, I know. Or God forbid Logan and Skyler break up someday. You know I wouldn’t wish that on you guys, right?”

“Oh, I know,” Skyler says with a nod. I can see her reach for Logan’s hand under the table, but he still looks offended at the idea.

“The point here is anything can happen. And we need to take steps now to protect the band’s future. That’s all this is. Insurance.”

We all look at each other again, considering the possibility any of this could go south in such a way that one of us would betray the band. It doesn’t seem like something any of us would do right now. But then again, as Cassidy said, who knows what the future holds for any of us.

“OK, I guess it makes sense.” Jake turns to the rest of us expectantly. I

assume he is searching for agreement with him, but I hesitate.

It dawns on me, and I think Remy, too, that this could become a hassle for us going forward. I would need to get Sloane to sign off on one of these to continue to have a relationship with her. And anyone Remy goes out with would have to sign one.

“What happens if, say, the person we’re involved with refuses to sign one?” I ask, because I’m not so sure Sloane will. And I don’t think I would blame her if she didn’t. It’s a lot to ask a person to get laws involved with your personal relationship with someone.

Cassidy looks at Jake and then the rest of us before answering, “Well, that’s going to be up to you guys. Are you going to make this a strict requirement going forward? Or is it going to be something you won’t enforce?”

Remy and I watch as everyone else looks at each other, baffled as to what to say. It’s almost comical to see how much nobody wants to be the voice of doom in this situation.

“How about we make it as a thing we decide on as relationships arise?” Jake asks, the voice of reason for once.

“OK, so do I need to get Sloane Castle to sign an NDA? Or do you think we can trust her?” I purposely word it that way to see how they answer.

“It’s not a matter of trust,” Cassidy says. “It’s a matter of protection, Cooper. And in my opinion, seeing as she’s already made statements to the press regarding you, I would suggest she sign one, yes.”

I hadn’t considered that she’s talked about me to the press. But in her defense, she did it to protect me, not to hurt me. I don’t think Cassidy’s legal mind sees the difference, though. My chest tightens at the thought of asking Sloane to sign a contract, but my head tells me Cassidy is right, and things are much bigger than me now. And that includes my relationships.

Whether or not I can convince Sloane of that is another story.

twenty-eight

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Old Wounds

Sloane

I can't remember the last time I was in this good of a mood. Actually, I don't think I ever have been, which is weird because surely something good has happened in my life before today. The problem seems to be that I can't remember. Cooper has completely muddled my brain, and I am perfectly OK with that.

Fiona can tell something is up, and I know how she is with something like this. She will be like a dog with a bone until she finds out what's going on. She insists on asking me in between every class so I don't get a chance to flirt with Cooper in the hallway like I want to. I've noticed he hasn't been in his doorway like I expected. But I figure he might be laying low after the guitar incident.

"So I'm going to show up here every hour on the hour for the rest of the session until you tell me what or who is causing that permanent smile on your face."

I give Fiona a dirty look, but I'm only met with a smirk. "You know some things are private. That means not for public consumption."

"Are you calling me the public?" Her feigned offense is admirable, but I'm not buying it.

"What I'm saying is sometimes things can be said without saying a word. Do you get my drift?" That's as close as I'm going to get to telling her what happened between Cooper and me. I am not one to kiss and tell, even to close friends like Fiona. I've always been this way and am not about to change now. My sex life is private.

She arches an eyebrow at me, and the smirk turns into a devious grin.

“Say no more. I completely understand. Blink once if it was shit or twice if it was as incredible as I think it was.”

I stare at her, not blinking at all.

“Oh, my God. It was even better.” She starts fanning herself dramatically, and we both burst out into laughter. My silence said everything I wanted to say, and I know Fiona shares my happiness.

“That’s all I’m going to say on the matter.” I cross my arms over my chest and take on a stern expression to convey my stance on the issue. But even I don’t know if I’m kidding or not. Even though I didn’t say anything, it feels good to share.

Fiona pretends to zip her lips and toss away a key. “Say less. And I will say nothing.”

At the end of the day, I finally see Cooper, and I can’t help the butterflies beating against my rib cage at the sight of him. His bruises are finally starting to heal, and for some reason, just seeing his hands and knowing they were on me, and what they can do to me, and how they make me feel so alive makes me want to drag him into the studio and shut the door behind us.

As he saunters across the hall toward me, I sense a nervousness about him, and I wonder if he gets butterflies when he sees me, too. I doubt it since it’s not as if flirting with a girl is new to him. And while flirting isn’t new to me either, he’s had much more practice at it than I have. And it’s evident because he is really freaking good at it.

He gets a look so predatory, hungry, and singular in its aim at me that I wonder what is happening in his brain when he gets this way. There is a spark in his eyes that is so fucking attractive I don’t know what I would do if he looked at me that way in public in front of people. Right now, I can react a little because we’re alone, but if we weren’t, I think I would be in trouble of being his next internet scandal.

“And what is that look for?” I ask, grabbing his wrist and leading him into the studio. I chance a quick kiss but leave the door open. As much as I want to shut the door and have my way with him right here and now, I probably shouldn’t act on it at the Foundation.

His eyes roam my entire body from head to toe and back again, as if he’s having the same thoughts I am, and I can feel my blush climb up my neck and into my cheeks as I imagine things I shouldn’t be imagining in a school-like setting.

“I think you know what this look is for, Angel.” He wraps an arm around

my waist, and I instinctively melt into him. Screw my inhibitions. Leaning down, he starts trailing kisses along my neck and whispers in my ear, “I have been thinking about you all day, Ms. Castle, and all the things I want to do to you. You have no idea how hard you make me with just a thought.” Taking my hand, he presses my palm against his obvious erection, straining against his jeans, and I inhale a sharp breath as I feel it. “This is what you do to me, Sloane. This is what a day spent fifty feet away from you, knowing I can’t touch you, does to me.”

I rub his length over the denim fabric, unable to stop myself. The thought of his thick cock in my hand, or better yet, in my mouth, weakens my knees. I want nothing more than to make this man come.

Pushing against him gently, I walk him into the door so it shuts behind him with a loud click. And I reach around him and engage the lock.

“I think I like where this is going,” he says, squeezing my ass and pulling me into him.

As I start to unzip his jeans, I glance up, and the heat in his gaze as he looks down on me is enough to set me on fire. “Do you want to see what it does to me?”

Reaching into his pants, I wrap my fingers around his length, and this time, it’s his turn to inhale the sharp breath. He leans in to kiss me, but before he reaches me, I drop to my knees and lick his cock from base to tip in one stroke, and he grabs the sides of my head gently.

“Fuck, Sloane. This feels so good.” He starts to thrust as my mouth takes all of him, or as much as can fit. As he hits the back of my throat, the moans that escape him are so delicious I know he won’t last long.

I chance a look up at him and see his eyes trained on me, taking his cock. Licking him. Sucking him. And driving him crazy. There’s a power to holding someone’s pleasure, and with Cooper, I like holding that power. Not because I’m going to withhold it, but because I’m going to give it, and there is nothing better than giving someone you care about pleasure only you can provide.

He’s about to finish, and I can tell he’s trying to lift my head, but I insist on seeing this to the end. So I grip his base a little tighter, and I suck just that little bit harder to let him know he can go ahead. And as I meet his eyes as he comes, his whole body trembling with the sensation, a sense of euphoria washes over me as the salty tang of his seed slides down my throat.

“Jesus Christ, Sloane. I was not expecting that,” he says, pulling me up to

him and kissing me thoroughly. “I need to return that favor.”

“Oh, that wasn’t a favor. That was a gift.” I give him a wicked smile, knowing I just broke my own rule that I made in my head a minute ago when I thought about us alone here in the studio. I guess that’s the good thing about being the boss: I get to change my mind when I want to.

He smiles back, fixing his clothes. “I came here to see if you wanted to grab some dinner.”

“In public? Like on a date?” I ask, knowing the magnitude of potentially being seen with him. I’m not quite sure what to make of it, and I’m kind of shocked he’s asking with the press breathing down his neck. “Is this because I just gave you a fabulous blowjob?”

His laugh is infectious, and he pulls me to him, rubbing my back softly. I can’t help but lean my head against his chest and wrap my arms around him. I’ll never get sick of standing like this with him.

“While, yes, that was, in fact, a fabulous blowjob, that is not why I’m asking you to dinner. I was going to ask you beforehand, but I kind of got sidetracked.” He reaches behind for my hand and pulls it to his lips for a quick kiss before leading me further into the room. “There are a few things we probably should talk about, and I thought maybe dinner would be a good time to do that.”

The hesitant way he says that makes my antenna go a little crazy. It’s not what he said. It’s how he said it that concerns me.

“What do we need to talk about?”

Again, he pauses before answering me. And I automatically don’t like where this is going. It hasn’t gone anywhere yet, and I can tell by the vibe in the room I won’t like what he has to say.

He avoids looking me in the eye, and I know right away my instinct is correct. “Well, we met with Nyx yesterday at Blackmore to talk about a settlement.”

“Oh yeah? How did that go?”

“There hasn’t been any resolution, but the offer was made at least.” He laughs at himself a little, then says, “You should have seen Mackenzie go off on her. It was a beautiful thing.”

“I’m sure it was.” I’m still not understanding what there is to talk about because none of this has anything to do with me.

“The thing is, after the meeting, we had a discussion about getting NDAs in place with people we have relationships with to head off any situation like

the one we have with Nyx before it happens.”

He’s staring at the floor, and his cheeks are burning red. Part of me thinks this was not his idea, but that could be wishful thinking.

“Are you saying...?”

“I’m not saying I think you would ever do anything like Nyx is doing, but they did raise some valid points. And it’s not just me that has to do this; everyone is doing it.”

I feel like I’ve been kicked in the gut. Memories of the last time I was forced to pledge my silence plow through me, and suddenly, I can’t breathe. I’m instantly thrown back to the conference room at my old label, where the lawyers threatened me if I said anything about how I was treated, or what they did to my music. The only way to keep all of my songs, *my creations*, was to shut my mouth. I went along with it to keep my family afloat, only to have them betray me and sell my songs right back to them from under me. So not only was I robbed of everything, but I couldn’t say a damn word about it.

This is giving me that same feeling. Something I want is being dangled in front of me, and the only way to get it is to promise not to say a word.

The walls start closing on me, and I need air.

“I’ll be back...” I turn from Cooper and run out of the room, ignoring his calls after me as I make my way out a nearby side door, bursting through it and gasping for air as I clutch at my chest.

“Sloane, what are you doing? What’s wrong? Are you OK? What’s going on?” His voice is panicked, and I almost feel bad for him, but right now, that’s not an emotion I can feel for anyone else but myself.

“Get away, Cooper. Get the fuck away from me.” The tears have started, and these are tears that haven’t been shed for over four years. I don’t know if I’ll be able to stop them now that they’ve started. “I need space. I need air. Give me a minute.”

He reaches for me, and I push him away. He’s not going to understand any of this.

“Tell me what this is about. I won’t make you sign anything you don’t want to sign. Believe me, I wouldn’t do that to you.”

I want to believe him. I want to believe this is something he was forced to do, not something he thought he had to do. He doesn’t really want to silence me. This isn’t coming from him. It can’t be. *It can’t be.*

“You have no idea what you’re asking of me. No clue what that is dredging up for me. I can’t. I just can’t.” The cold sweat breaking out all over

me is chilling.

“Talk to me, Sloane. Tell me what is going on. I need to understand, and I can’t do that if you don’t talk to me.” There’s a pleading in his voice that reaches somewhere close to my heart, but not quite. It’s not enough.

If he really cared about me, he wouldn’t have asked for something like this in the first place. Trust goes both ways and if he doesn’t trust me, this is all for nothing.

If he cared, he would trust me.

And I just...oh my God.

“I need some time. I’m going to need some time to think about all of this.” I look up at him, my eyes still overflowing with tears, knowing that I’m broken, and he’s not the one that broke me, but he’s the one in front of me right now. He’s the one opening that scar. He’s the one ripping it wide open. “There’s a lot you don’t know, and I’m not ready to talk about it with you yet. Just know that the worst thing you could have done to me is ask for my silence.”

“Sloane, please...”

“Don’t. I have lots to think about, and I can’t do that with you in front of me. Please just leave me alone for a little while so I can think about things. So much has happened in the last few days, the last few weeks even, I haven’t taken the time to consider.” I wipe at my face, the tears finally stopping. I need to pull my shit together. “It’s a lot, Cooper. And this now just kind of put it all into focus for me.”

We stand there in the side lot with the late afternoon sun finding ways to reach us through the lace of the canopy of trees above us, staring at each other, almost as strangers. So much has happened between us in such a short time. From being at each other’s throats when we first met to as close as we are now, or at least as close as I thought we were.

It turns out I may have been wrong about that part.

He steps up to me and tentatively caresses my cheek. I can tell I’ve spooked him, and he is afraid to touch me now. I hate that I’ve done that.

“Take all the time you need. I’m not going anywhere.”

And as I watch him walk away, I wonder if that’s true.

I wonder a lot of things.

I wonder what use I am to Cooper Davies. And I wonder if my silence is worth it.

twenty-nine

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My Demons

Cooper

That went exactly as bad as I knew it would when the discussion about NDAs came up. What I didn't plan for was the topic coming up right after getting the most amazing blowjob I've ever had. That makes the whole situation worse. I look like the biggest dick on the planet for even bringing the subject up.

When I get to Jude's house for our writing session, it doesn't take long for everyone to realize something is wrong with me. It's almost as though I've completely forgotten how to play guitar, and I don't know how much of this I want to talk about with any of these guys. There's a lot that's already happened they know nothing about, like my guitar being vandalized. Nobody knows that whole story, and I'm not sure I want to bring it up.

"Why don't you take a break, guys," Jude says after I take another solo off the rails. "Coop, let's go for a little walk, shall we?"

He doesn't wait for me to answer and heads out of the studio, so I follow him up to the terrace on the roof. The sun is just setting, and the lights are on at the pier. He really does have a killer view from this house. As a matter of fact, Jude Lockwood is probably the luckiest son of a bitch I know. He has a great wife, great kids, a tight-knit band, and a level head on his shoulders. Even with all of Indigo King's fame, he still seems to be himself no matter what.

I lean on the railing next to him, looking out at the ocean not too far away, with half an idea he wants to talk, but I don't know if I do.

"So, what's up?" I ask.

"Well, from one soulless ginger to another, you're not exactly present

today. And you, my friend, look like somebody who needs to talk about something.” He rakes his fingers through his longish red hair, and I can tell he’s sincere in his concern. “I might not be your first choice of person to talk to, but maybe I’m not your last?”

That makes me chuckle. “That’s an interesting way to put it.” I go through all the thoughts ricocheting around inside my brain, wondering where I’d even begin.

“Listen, Coop. This rockstar gig isn’t the easiest thing in the world to deal with. Especially when it comes to relationships with other people. As a matter of fact, it’s one of the most difficult things. What it comes down to, though, is you. Any relationship you have will be hinged on how you act within it.”

“What do you mean by that?” Jude is known to be a bit of an intellectual, and sometimes, what he says goes over my head. Not that I’m dumb, just that I have a different life experience than he did, so I don’t always get what he’s talking about.

He sighs, “The success and failure of most of your relationships will be on *your* shoulders, not anybody else’s. It will be determined by *your* effort, and your effort alone. Because people will be there for you only if you let them. There needs to be an invitation. But with that invitation, there needs to be some permanence on your part.”

“I get what you’re saying, but I don’t know why you’re saying it to me, or right now.”

“I know about the NDAs Cassidy wants you guys to sign. And your lack of focus today tells me it might have become a problem for you. Am I close?”

“Bullseye.”

He nods knowingly and leans against the rail next to me. “This business is full of vultures both inside and out. The trick is knowing who’s who. Sometimes, there is absolutely no way to know who will turn on you, but you have to be ready because, eventually, it will happen.”

“Has it happened to you?” I haven’t heard anything about Indigo King having any problems like this. Outside their drummer’s crazy brother popping up and causing issues a while ago, they have been media darlings.

“Not directly,” he shakes his head. “But in my short time in the business, I’ve seen it enough. Just because it hasn’t happened yet doesn’t mean it won’t. And I am fully aware of that.”

“So what would you suggest if the person you asked to sign doesn’t want to?” Visions of Sloane in a panic attack and in tears this afternoon flash through my memory. I hate that I put her in that position.

He takes a while to answer. “It would depend on their reasons, I guess. I would need to hear why, you know? Because to most people, it’s not a big deal. You just agree to not spread rumors about people. In the scheme of things, that shouldn’t be such a hard ask of someone. But if someone is dead set against it, it sounds to me like there’s a story behind it. And maybe that needs some consideration.”

I nod. He’s right. I know there’s a story there, but Sloane needs to tell me what it is. I don’t like that she thinks she can’t tell me something that seems so important to her. That puts our entire relationship in question. I could give a shit about her signing a contract, but for her not to talk to me about something affecting her so much makes me wonder what we’re even doing.

“I agree. There’s more to it than meets the eye. I just need to be careful I don’t fuck up the relationship in the process.”

“That is always the goal. And, of course, you know this is not legal advice, right? None of this will hold up in a court of law.”

I laugh. “Thanks, Jude. I appreciate it.”

“Of course. Now pull your shit together and get in there and play your fucking guitar like a God damn professional. No more fucking around, got it? Good.”

His laughter follows him as he goes back inside, and I can’t help but chuckle. Jude Lockwood is the strangest but most interesting person I’ve ever met. Thinking that I just got life advice from him hasn’t hit my brain yet.

Before I head back in, I think about what he said about me being the hinge of all my relationships. I hadn’t thought of it that way, but he’s right. Any connection with somebody else depends on me, my availability, my schedule, my location, my level of exhaustion, or even my level of soberness. I have more responsibility than I thought.

I’m not sure how to feel about that. I almost prefer being blissfully ignorant of that fact. Now that I know, I have to act. And that means talking to Sloane.

The question is, will she talk to me?

thirty

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You're Not Special

Sloane

“Don’t forget today is the day of your interview with *Rough Cutt Magazine*,” Fiona says as I walk into the office the next day. “And also, your mother called yet again.”

I ignore the second part, “Did I know about this?” I ask, internally cringing at the thought of answering questions of a known tabloid magazine. “And who set it up?”

“You had me set it up over a month ago.”

She’s right, of course. But that was before Cooper Davies and his whirlwind blew through here.

“Why did I set up an interview a month ago? It makes zero sense.”

Fiona shrugs. “I don’t know why you do half the things you do. But, I have learned not to question you because I get my head chewed off.”

“I’m not like that,” I say, rolling my eyes. Then I remember why I scheduled it. “And I scheduled the interview for now because it’s close to the end of session concert. A lot of our funds come from that. We’ve only got two weeks left before that, so, see? There is a method to my madness.”

“If you say so, boss.”

I ignore the jab and head into my office to prepare for the day. The interview isn’t until this afternoon, so I have time to mentally plan for whatever will be thrown at me. I’m pretty sure whatever it is isn’t going to be pleasant.

Interviews are the worst.



I MAKE IT THROUGH THE DAY SUCCESSFULLY AVOIDING COOPER, WHO I SEE hovering just outside the periphery, determined to talk to me, but I'm still not ready. Even with all of the thinking I did during my sleepless night last night, I haven't settled on a decision when it comes to signing an NDA with him. The hurt that came with that question is still too much right now. And the fact my mother called again today, knowing I would refuse to talk to her like I have for the last four years, just pushes me that much more to shut myself down.

The reporter shows up early, and we set up in the lobby of the building, which showcases various instruments and photos of some of the mentors we've had over the years. It's out in the open, but it makes a nice backdrop for our discussion.

"So you've been the director here for four years now, is that correct?" She asks, starting with a softball, which I can appreciate. I know we're still dancing around each other.

"That's correct. I've been here since the inception of the Foundation. Barry Sparks and I started the program."

"And Barry is still on the Board of Directors, right?"

"That's right." My stomach tightens, wondering why she's focusing on Barry. He's never the subject of interviews. This is supposed to be about the upcoming concert.

"Didn't you and Barry used to date?"

And there it is. Straight into personal questions. It didn't take long for this interview to take a U-turn.

"No, actually. Barry and I never dated." I paint a smile on my face that is one hundred percent disingenuous. "Though I'm curious what that has to do with the article you're writing."

"Oh, I was just getting background." Her return smile is equally fake.

So we understand each other. This is going to be a dance. *Alright. This bitch is about to find out how well I can tango.*

"Well, I'm sure Barry's husband of fifteen years would be interested to know if we dated as well." My grin widens.

Print that, bitch.

Her grin falters for a second, but I see it. This girl must be new. A simple internet search would have found that information. It was a setup question.

“Haha. I’m sure he would be,” she says, attempting to laugh it off. I let her. “How many students have you served in the four years you’ve been doing this?”

We go back and forth like this for the next half an hour, with her occasionally dipping her toes in the deep end and me successfully pushing back. Our conversation starts to have a cadence, a pattern of predictability that almost lulls me into complacency for a minute. But then she asks something I was not prepared for.

“How has Cooper Davies being a mentor here affected your relationship with him?” She looks a bit like the cat who ate the canary as she asks this because she knows she worded it in such a way that I need to be very careful with my answer.

I stare at her momentarily, considering my words before speaking. “As I’ve mentioned previously, Cooper has been nothing but a benefit to our program. We’ve had record enrollment with him here, and he’s been an asset. The kids love him.” Hopefully, that’s enough to get her off the topic.

“So are you denying then that you and Cooper Davies are dating?” She gives me a sly smile as if this juicy bit of information will stay *‘just between us girls.’*

Fuck. Thoughts of the agreement I haven’t signed about my talking about our relationship run through my head at breakneck speed. I can go several ways with my answer, but decide to go the protective route.

“Cooper Davies and I are not in a relationship.” Something in my heart cracks as I say this, but I think it’s the right thing to do until we figure out what we’re doing.

The interviewer’s eyes sparkle as she follows something behind me, and I turn my head to see what she’s looking at but don’t see anything.

“I think that’s all I need.” She stands and motions to her photographer that the interview is over. “Good luck with your concert. I hope you raise a lot of money.”

She is completely full of shit, and we both know it, but we make nice, she goes on her merry way, and I have survived another interview.



THE INTERACTION WITH THE REPORTER HAS PUT ME IN THE PERFECT MOOD TO deal with my mother once and for all. She reaches out to me a few times a year, but I've always brushed it off. It's okay for a while, but then I live in constant fear that she will just keep calling. I need to get closure on this situation. I need to put an end to this so I can finally heal. The longer I drag it out, the deeper the scar becomes.

I call her from the Foundation's phone because she doesn't have my cell phone number, and I'm not about to give it to her.

When she answers, I don't pause or hesitate, and I don't let her talk.

"This is your daughter. You know, the one you fucked over four years ago. I will respectfully ask you to stop calling my place of employment. And, in fact, stop attempting to contact me completely. As far as I'm concerned, we are no longer family. We are no longer related in any way, shape or form. And this is going to be the last time I speak to you.

"There are things in life that are mistakes with good intentions. Even mistakes that are accidental. What you and Dad did to me was purposeful and malicious. Parents are supposed to protect their children, no matter how old they are or what business they're in. Looking out for your child's best interest is your number one job, and you failed miserably.

"The lame excuses you gave back then and are probably ready to feed me again don't matter. They never did. They never will.

"I do not wish you ill. I do not wish you harm. And in fact, I wish both you and Dad a wonderful rest of your life. But it will have to be without me in it. I have come to terms with that and suggest you do the same. Goodbye, Mom."

As I set down the phone, a weight lifts from my chest. My lungs expand with deep breaths, no longer constrained. The churning tension in my core that I secretly got used to unravels and dissipates, leaving calm in its wake. That was a long time coming, and the overwhelming feeling of relief and, surprisingly, freedom is astounding. I didn't know it would be this way.

"Good for you," Fiona's voice comes from the doorway. I glance up and see her smiling at me through tears that I think are out of pride.

Not a single tear of my own threatens to fall. And I don't feel bad about

that in the slightest.

“Sometimes you need an end to start a new beginning.” I shrug slightly, but the same pride as Fiona’s rushes through me. Two months ago, hell, two weeks ago, I wouldn’t have had the nerve to do this.

It’s about time.



THE NEXT MORNING, I’M SURPRISED WHEN FIONA INTERRUPTS MY FIRST CLASS to tell me Cooper is a no-show for the day.

“He didn’t call in to say he was sick?” That doesn’t sound like him. One thing I thought I knew about Cooper was that he cared about the kids in his classes, and he took mentoring those kids very seriously. The knot in my stomach at this news only tightens as I think about it.

“No, he hasn’t called at all. Do you want me to try calling him?”

I have to imagine that for him to not show up like this, something big has to have happened. He would have called if he could or felt he needed to.

“I hate to ask this, but is there anything we should know about online? Maybe someone posted something?”

Fiona pulls out her phone and starts scrolling through social media. “I have an alert on my phone to notify me of stories posted about him on certain sites, and I don’t have any notifications. That doesn’t mean there isn’t something, though. Let me take a look.”

I’m not sure what to think about Fiona having an alert set up for Cooper, but in this instance, it sounds like it makes sense to have one. Maybe I should have had one set up, too. But then, do I really want to be notified of his extracurricular activities I’m not involved with? Probably not.

“Are you seeing anything?” I ask, my worry rising by the second. The longer I allow my brain to play with it, the worse my imagination gets.

“No. It looks like it’s pretty quiet.” She shuts her phone and looks at me with a concerned expression. Fiona is often unemotional, but lately, she’s been letting them slip. She’s just as worried as I am. “I’m going to go make some calls,” she says as she leaves the studio. “Finish your class, then come to the office. I’ll let you know then what I hear.”

I have no choice but to continue my day and wait for word about why

Cooper isn't here.

“See if you can reach any of the subs too, to cover Cooper's classes,” I yell after her. This is not the circumstance I thought these subs would be used, but at least we have them.

I didn't want to use them at all.

thirty-one

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Lost

Cooper

'Cooper Davies and I are not in a relationship.'

I can't get those words out of my head. Even after I called Cassidy to see about using the cabin in Ojai again and the drive up here, those words have played in a loop and still echo now as I watched the sunrise from the valley between the Topatopa mountains.

I didn't even consider sleeping last night because I knew I wouldn't. My brain doesn't work that way. If there is something I need to solve, my brain won't rest until it does. Unless I drink or otherwise, to shut up my thoughts. I'm pretty much screwed.

I came up here to think and to clear my mind. For some reason, I can't do that at home. Even if Remy goes out and I'm alone, I can't seem to have a coherent thought. So here I am at the butt crack of dawn, sipping coffee and watching the fucking sunrise. By myself. To think. When did this become my life?

When I met Sloane Castle, apparently.

What would make her say we weren't in a relationship? Did I offend her so much by asking her to sign an NDA? We haven't had a chance to talk about anything yet, so for her to come out and flat-out deny she has anything to do with me really fucking hurts.

My world has been turned upside down ever since I met Sloane, but until now, it was in the best possible fucking way. I welcomed the change. I wanted the change. But now I don't know what the fuck I'm doing.

I can't keep doing this. I understand that relationships have ups and downs, but this is extreme. We started this out basically hating each other,

and then we swung the other way and fell for each other. At least I did. I don't know if she did or not. I want to believe that she did. But then what she said yesterday makes no sense.

If Jude is correct that it all hinges on me, then I need to figure out what the fuck I want. I could stay the lone wolf, getting my rocks off on occasion, getting fucked up more than not, but that will lead me to an early and lonely grave. I don't want to die alone.

Sloane has awoken something in me that has been long since dead. And that's my heart. Somehow, she got past my defenses and put feelings back where only dust and cobwebs were. All of the chambers of my heart were empty until she came into my life. And now I'm feeling things I've never felt before.

I've never looked forward to waking up before. I've always dreaded the morning. But now I have a reason to get up every day. I want to see her. I want to touch her. I want to kiss her. I want to talk to her. I want to laugh with her. I want to cry with her. I want to listen to her. I want *her*. That's all there is to it. It's that simple. And it's that hard. Because Sloane Castle is not an easy person to get to know. I have tried. And the problem is she is just as stubborn as I am, damn it. That can make for an exciting relationship that keeps me on my toes. But it also opens up challenges that don't always look initially surmountable.

Like this.

I need to judge whether the good outweighs the bad between us. The bad seems to be our biggest obstacle, which is communication. If she doesn't tell me what's wrong, I can't do a God damn thing to fix it. If she doesn't tell me about the minefield of her past, I will unknowingly step on one and blow this whole thing up. And for some reason, I feel like I've already done that. I must have done something for her to say so matter-of-factly that we are not in a relationship. It couldn't get more explicit than that.

So what do I do? Do I take it at face value? Take her at her word? Somehow, accept my feelings for her are not returned whatsoever? I can't believe that. I can't believe we've shared what we have with each other, and somehow, in a matter of hours, we are so far apart that we can't find a way back. I don't want to believe it.

But what if it's true? What if I have irrevocably fucked this whole thing up? What do I do then? How do I go back to being Cooper Davies, the rockstar who doesn't give a shit about anybody? How do I turn off the faucet

of emotions she's opened up? How do I pretend I'm OK with that?

I spent most of my life pretending I was OK. Acting as though nothing bothered me, nothing got under my skin, nothing anybody said or did affected me whatsoever. That is how I've lived for most of my life. And not only do I not know if I can go back to that way of living, but I don't know if I want to. Because I wasn't living. I was coasting. I was skating. I wasn't really alive.

Not until I met Sloane.

God damn it. That woman has changed everything.

I guess I know my answer. The question remains whether Sloane knows hers.

I feel like shit leaving Rhapsody high and dry this morning, but I just couldn't show my face in the same building that crushed me the day before. I don't know when the interview she gave is coming out, and I don't care. As far as I'm concerned, the audience that needed to hear it was already in the room.

I couldn't face any of the students, knowing Sloane was only a few feet away, and I not only couldn't talk to her, but apparently, there's no point. The students are advanced enough in their classes that we're basically no longer learning anything new but rehearsing for next week's concert. If I thought for a second the kids weren't progressed enough, there's no way I would have disappeared like I did today.

thirty-two

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I Don't Like People

Sloane

The rest of the day is full of juggling mentors and students, and when I finally get to my office, I find Fiona pacing with a strange expression on her face.

“What’s the matter?” My foot taps rapidly as scenarios race through my mind. Cooper lying unconscious on the side of the road or wrapped around a telephone pole. My fingernails dig into my palms as imaginings of hospitals and ambulances flash before my eyes.

“Have a seat, Sloane. I need to tell you something.”

“Oh my God, it’s Cooper, isn’t it? Something’s happened, hasn’t it? Please don’t say that. Please don’t say something has happened to him.” I haven’t moved, and my heart is about to jump out of my chest.

Fiona grabs my arm and shakes me a bit before pushing me into a seat. “No. It’s not Cooper. I talked to their manager, and he just went out of town for the day. As far as I know, he’s fine.”

I release my held breath in a whoosh and try to calm my racing heart. Though it’s taking me a while to stop the horror movies playing in my brain. I’ve been getting worked up way too quickly lately. It’s not like me.

“Jesus Christ, you scared the crap out of me.”

“Get your shit together, woman.” She stops and takes a deep breath before continuing. “Remember how our IT guy Carl was looking into the e-mail issue we had with Cooper at the beginning of the session?”

It takes me a minute to translate what she said into a thought in my head, but I finally catch up to what she’s saying, and the context now makes sense. “Yeah, did he finally find something?”

“He did. And you’ll be shocked at who messed with my e-mail.” She leans against her desk and crosses her arms, and as I look at her closely, I see that she’s highly unsettled. Instantly, my heart starts racing again because seeing her like this is not normal. It takes a lot to ruffle Fiona’s feathers.

“Well, who was it?”

“Penny Hawkins.”

I can’t have heard her correctly.

“Did you just say, Penny? Penny Hawkins? The most talented student we have in the program?” I can’t wrap my head around this. “You’re saying she hacked your e-mail?”

She nods, and even that can’t convince me Penny would do something like this. “According to Carl, she intercepted the original e-mail before it was delivered and was able to reroute it through her own, but she was able to hide her e-mail address somehow. I don’t know. I’m not a hacker. And to be honest, I’m just taking Carl’s word for it because he seemed to know what he was talking about.”

“I can’t believe Penny would do this.” I stand up and start pacing where Fiona left off. “Why would she? Why would she want to tell Cooper our meeting was at a different time? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Well, it got you two to fight, didn’t it?” She starts tapping her chin as she speaks. “If she has feelings for him, which I’ve told you, I think she does. That poor girl has it bad. Then what better way to get a chance with him than to screw up yours.”

I shake my head. “I’m telling you she does not have a thing for Cooper. It’s Ethan she has feelings for.”

“Well, regardless, we need to talk with her. Should I call her now, or do you want to?”

My stomach drops as something else occurs to me. “Do you think she’s the one who destroyed Cooper’s guitar? It said, *‘liar.’* Did she misunderstand something with him and think he lied about something?”

Fiona lets out a deep breath. “Holy shit, that’s a good point. What if she is the one who did that, too? What are we going to do?”

My heart breaks thinking of this poor girl whose emotions are too big for her to handle, but then I remember the destruction and mayhem she’s caused because of it, and there is no way to justify it. No matter what she may have been feeling, that is no excuse to mess with people’s lives and destroy their property.

“What do you think? Should we call her in now? Or should I talk to or confront her tomorrow when she shows up for class?” The idea of a confrontation with Penny hurts, but she can’t get away with what she’s done either.

“Part of me wants to say wait. But most of me wants me to say this needs to be nipped in the bud immediately.” She grabs my arm to stop me from pacing, and I turn to her. “You can’t let your feelings for Penny get in the way. I know you and her are close, but you know what the right thing to do is.”

I nod. “I know. Can you get her to come in now? I’m going to call Cooper and let him know what’s going on. I have a feeling he might want to be around when we talk to her.”

I barely sit when Fiona comes into my office, gripping her phone so tightly that I think she’s going to break it. “Um, we have a problem.”

“What is it now?” I can’t imagine anything else can go wrong today. But in that, I would be wrong.

“Penny Hawkins has run away.”

thirty-three

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Cannonballers

Cooper

On my drive back to L.A. later in the afternoon, I call into the follow-up meeting with Nyx that's been arranged at the last minute. With my ringer being off most of the day, it's the best I can do since I'd never make it in time. I really wish I could be there just to see the look on Nyx's face when we finally tell her to fuck off and shut up. Because it's been a long time coming.

I mute the phone on my end in the off chance something like that slips out of my mouth.

"We're all here, so we're going to go ahead with the meeting." I can tell Cassidy is anxious to get this over and done with. I don't blame her. I know how much this has bothered Jake, so I'm sure she wants to resolve this, if for nothing else but to ease his mind. "Nyx, I understand you've had a chance to review the agreement, and you are willing to discuss terms. Is that correct?"

"I am willing to bargain, yes." The confidence in her voice sickens me. She knows she has us by the balls, and she's giving them a little twist on the way out. It's a good thing I'm muted because I would happily share a piece of my mind with her.

"Well, we'll see about that," Cassidy says flatly. While she's eager to get this over with, she won't take any shit either. "If you have new terms you would like to propose, please go ahead."

My fingers instinctively tighten on the steering wheel, and I need to remind myself I'm in a moving vehicle. I have to keep my emotions in check.

"Well, I'm fine with just about everything except for the monetary arrangement."

“Of course, that’s the thing that’s holding you up, bitch,” I mutter to myself. The only thing she cares about is the fucking money. That is no surprise.

“If you have a counteroffer, please go ahead. We’re all ears.” The tightness in Cassidy’s voice is almost funny. She’s not hiding her annoyance, and I love it.

Right when Nyx is about to talk again, I get an incoming call and see that it’s Sloane. “Fuck. This is the worst possible time.” I send the call to voicemail and strain to hear the end of Nyx’s counteroffer.

“Two million...”

I nearly swerve off the road when I hear the number. Did she really just demand two million dollars to be quiet? She has got to be out of her fucking mind. There is no way we or Blackmore are going to pay that kind of money to anyone, especially her.

The sound of Jake, Logan, and Remy objecting to the amount fills the car, and I’m glad I’m not the only one who thinks she’s insane.

“Guys, guys, please settle down,” Eliza says, and it takes a little while, but eventually, everyone does calm down.

Another call comes in from Sloane, and I send it to voicemail again. We can talk about why I didn’t show up today later. This is more important right now.

Nyx laughs, and it’s not a normal laugh. It’s edged with something I can’t quite give a name to. Malice? Malevolence? Evil? Or is she just too far gone with the drugs now? She did not look well when I saw her the other day, and it’s never a good thing when a dealer dips into their own stash. It will not end well for her if she doesn’t get her shit together. I don’t know if I care or not, but two million dollars, let alone two in the hands of a junkie, is a really bad idea.

Cassidy dives straight back into negotiation mode. “Well, compared to the two hundred thousand dollar offer originally presented to you, a two million counter is far from where we started. Don’t you agree?” She must shrug or give some other sort of nonverbal response because I don’t hear anything, and Cassidy continues. “As we mentioned in our last meeting, this arrangement is being offered as a courtesy to you. I don’t think you want this to be dragged into court only for you to fail and get absolutely nothing, right?”

“What makes you so sure I would lose?” She sounds delusional enough to

think she wouldn't.

"Well, for one thing, we have the truth on our side. And for another, we are willing to do whatever it takes and spend whatever we need to see this through. If that means spending every dollar we have to see you lose, that's exactly what we'll do." The steel in Cassidy's voice even intimidates me hours away and over a phone line. She is not fucking around.

"Go, Cassidy, go."

Again, my phone rings with a call from Sloane, and this time, I'm legitimately worried something is wrong. She wouldn't keep calling me like this if everything was OK. But I'm torn because I need to hear what happens with Nyx. I hesitate but then send it to voicemail again.

There is silence for a while, and for a minute, I worry that I accidentally ended the call with the meeting, but then Skyler must clear her throat or something, and I realize it's just quiet there.

"Nyx, just take the money," Jake says, and I'm surprised there's no vengeance in his voice. If anything, I hear regret or remorse. "This is the best you're going to get. And I'm not just saying that. We've all talked about it, and this is it. Take the money, go back to Vegas, and move on with your life."

It's quiet again, so I guess she's considering what Jake said. From where I'm sitting, he sounded empathetic. His words were heartfelt. He is a much bigger man than I am. I would not be as gracious. So perhaps it's good that I'm muted in my car far away rather than in the meeting and probably getting in her face.

"If I sign and take the money, it doesn't mean that what you did to me was right."

What the fuck is she talking about? Who did what to her? She isn't making any sense.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Jake says, his voice still calm. "But if it's because I turned you down, that wasn't anything personal, Nyx."

Whoa. I missed something because I had no idea there was any proposition or rejection on either side. But then again, I was in my own head right after Andy died, so a lot of things probably happened that I didn't take any notice of.

"Fine. Whatever." It sounds like there is some shuffling of papers. "But I want the fucking money today."

"I can write you a check as soon as your signature is on the dotted line,"

Eliza says, and the near joy in her voice is audible even to me.

There is silence, and again, more papers being moved around. I assume she's signing, and either Cassidy or Eliza is also signing. I don't know who has to do what in this situation.

I want to high-five somebody. I want to roll down the window and cheer at passing traffic, *'Ding dong, the witch is dead.'* I'm dying to unmute the phone and tell her to fuck off, but I don't. My mind shifts to Sloane and why she may have called me three times in a row.

Hanging up on the meeting as soon as possible, I listen to my voicemail and hear Sloane's voice, very upset and worried.

"Cooper, this is Sloane. Listen, we got news that Penny is the one who tampered with Fiona's e-mail way back when. But that's not why I'm calling right now. She's run away. Give me a call when you get this."

What the hell? Penny screwed with the e-mail? Why would she do that?

"This is Sloane again. Just trying to reach you. Give me a call when you can."

"Cooper, please call me."

Something in her voice in the last message has me extremely worried. And it's mostly because she's so concerned. I understand that she is compassionate and feels for Penny in some way, shape, or form, regardless of what she's done. But something isn't adding up with this equation.

The idea that she would mess with the emails to get us to argue doesn't make sense since she has feelings for Ethan, not me. If I thought Penny had a crush on me for one second, I would have tried everything in my power to dissuade that girl from any notion that anything could come of it. I would have done everything I could to make her hate me. And I'm pretty fucking good at making women hate me.

But maybe my radar is off-kilter. Maybe Sloane has completely warped my sense of reality to the point where I can't tell when a kid is crushing on me. I'm too blind to it. Anything is possible, I guess. I hit the accelerator a little harder to try to make up time. I need to get back, and I need to help find Penny.

I call Sloane back, and when she answers, my stomach ties itself in knots. All thoughts of Nyx, Sloane's interview, tabloid stories, and wrecked guitars go out the fucking window when I hear the panic in her voice.

"Cooper. Thank God you're OK. I was so worried about you." She's out of breath as if she ran to get the phone, and I picture her in her office, and I

instantly want to be there with her. I want to hold her and tell her I'm fine. Everything will be alright. "I don't know if you listened to my messages, but we have a situation with Penny, and now she's run away. The police aren't doing anything because it hasn't been twenty-four hours yet, but we are working with her mom and her friends and doing everything we can to locate her. Can you help with the search?"

She says all this in a rush, and it's hard for me to keep up, but I do and wish I hadn't driven so fucking far away because now I'm unable to help when I'm needed the most.

"Shit. I'm still about an hour away from L.A. right now, but I'm heading back, and I'll be there as soon as I can. Do you have any idea why any of this has happened or is happening?" Deep down, I want Sloane to have all the answers to this because I can't figure it out.

"Oh, I didn't realize you had left town." She's quiet for a second, and I can't tell what she's feeling from her voice. "I'm still at the Foundation for now. Come here if you can. As for why, I'll tell you what we know when you get here. Hopefully, we find her before then."

What the hell has Penny done?

thirty-four

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Wish That You Were Here

Sloane

After hanging up with Cooper, my heart settles a bit, knowing he's aware of the situation. The Foundation has become the epicenter of the search, and Fiona and I are acting as coordinators as friends, family, staff, and even strangers are out in greater Los Angeles looking for her.

As I wait for Cooper to arrive, I go over my last interaction with Penny to see if I can glean anything that would point to the reason she ran away and maybe where she might have gone.

Ethan has been very quiet during all of this, but I can tell he's obviously upset. Maybe he has feelings for Penny after all. He eventually went alone to look for her even though several people offered to go with him since he seemed so upset. The determination in his demeanor really got everyone wanting to do whatever they could to find her.

Fiona is taking calls from everyone searching and keeping track of where people have looked so efforts aren't duplicated. From the looks of it, all of L.A. is covered. Hopefully, that means we'll find her sooner rather than later. Pretty soon, the sun is going to set, and night is going to fall. Even with all these people searching, finding her will be more difficult.

Penny's mother is nearly beside herself but is driving around to any location Penny has ever been to in her life. I can't imagine being in her place and having my child purposely alone on the streets of L.A. Not only is the city huge, but parts are highly unsafe, and there are real dangers out there. The idea she would go anywhere outside the city isn't even being entertained by anyone, but the possibility she caught a bus, train, or plane shouldn't be completely ruled out. Nobody who knows her thinks that was an option, so

we keep the search fairly close to home.

Trying to stop the thoughts of worst-case scenarios from overtaking my mind and trying not to make up scenarios where any of this is my fault, it's a long hour and a half wait until Cooper shows up. When he walks into the office, it's as if time stops, and everything moves in slow motion. After not being around him for a few days and only having my memories of him, it's as though I'm seeing him for the first time.

The red in his hair seems a little deeper, the blue in his eyes looks a little brighter, and he stands taller, just overall more impressive. I know it's my brain playing tricks on me, but he feels more like himself than he did.

When our eyes meet, whatever tension or disagreement was between us disappears, and I can't help but crash into him, wanting to return to that safety I know I'll feel in his arms.

And as he pulls me closer to him and leans down to whisper in my ear, I know this is where I belong.

"We're going to find her. Don't worry about a thing. We're going to find her, and she's going to be all right. It's going to be OK." He sounds so sure, so confident everything is going to be OK. The only thing I can do is believe him. And the relief flowing through me allows me to breathe freely for the first time in hours since I first heard Penny was gone.

"I can't help but think this is my fault somehow." I step back and wipe at the tears that have appeared suddenly. They're not from sadness but anxiety and fear, and I notice my hands shake as they push the tears away. "I must have said or done something to push her to do this."

Cooper grabs my shoulders and shakes me lightly, forcing me to meet his gaze. He's looking at me intently, and his seriousness is sobering. "This is not your fault, Sloane. This isn't anyone's fault but Penny's. I don't know why she's done the things she has, from the e-mail tampering to running away. It doesn't seem like her at all. But that just further proves this isn't any of our fault. Something is wrong there."

I nod. He has a point. All of this is so out of character that we may not see the whole picture. Even Penny's mother was at a loss and completely surprised when we told her about the e-mail tampering. This whole thing just feels wrong.

"I feel so useless standing around here. I feel like I should be out there looking for her." I pull away from Cooper and start pacing to stop myself from shaking. The feeling of wanting to jump out of my skin is becoming

overwhelming. “I’ve felt helpless all day like I need to be doing something. Not waiting around here.”

“Well then, let’s get out there and start looking.” He goes over to Fiona’s desk and looks over her shoulder at the map she has pulled up on her monitor. “Is there any area that hasn’t been covered yet?”

Fiona double-checks the screen and then a notebook she’s been using to keep track of the search. “Everything nearby has been covered. It’s just a matter of spreading out now. We’re not sure how she is moving, whether she’s walking or has a ride, or what.”

Cooper gets a thoughtful expression as he stares at the screen. His blue eyes are intense as he studies the map. He doesn’t say anything for a long moment but straightens, looks at me, and says, “Let’s go.”

I don’t hesitate and let him take my hand and pull me from the office.

Cooper Davies could lead me anywhere, and I would follow.

thirty-five

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Pieces

Cooper

I start driving west out of nothing but pure instinct. When I looked at the map and Fiona's notes, it seemed the search was spreading north and south, not west. There's something in the back of my mind I can't quite put my finger on, but this just seems like the right direction to go.

Grabbing Sloane's hand as I drive, I automatically bring it to my lips and plant a reassuring kiss. Where we stand with each other is still an unknown, but being with her now is enough for me.

"You didn't show up today..." She says quietly, her eyes scouring the scenery we pass, nearly distracted but obviously not.

I guess now is as good of a time as any to talk about what's going on between us. Who knows how long we'll be driving around.

"Yeah, I had some thinking to do."

"Oh? What about?"

That's a loaded question, considering the depth of my soul-searching last night and this morning.

"Everything, I guess. There's been a lot on my mind."

She squeezes my fingers but doesn't tear her eyes away from the passenger window. "You can talk to me, you know. The listening thing goes both ways."

"Well, a lot of it was about you."

That surprises her, as I can sense her breath catch next to me.

"Me?"

"Yes, you. After hearing what you said during your interview about our relationship, or lack thereof, I should say, I had some reevaluating to do."

“What I said...?”

“I heard you say we didn’t have a relationship, and I needed to take some time to unpack that in my head, and my heart. So I went up to Ojai and tried yet again to get my head on straight. I needed to figure out what I’m feeling and whether or not it’s something I want to pursue.”

“Cooper, I only said that because--”

“I figured out pretty quick it was because of the whole NDA thing. The only question is why you wouldn’t sign one. You see, in my mind, it’s a pretty easy yes. There is nothing wrong with putting insurance in place in this business. And I would have thought with you knowing how this industry works, you would understand that.”

She pulls her hand away from me, and my chest tightens. Suddenly, I know this is where it ends for us. This is where all my dreams of Sloane get shattered.

“You have no idea what asking that of me means.” She glances at me but returns to searching out the window, her voice calm yet full of emotion. “There is a history that is extremely painful and involves me being legally bound to stay quiet.”

Memories of the Google search I did on Sloane at the beginning come back to me, and how strange it was I really didn’t find anything about her. That lines up with what she’s saying now. But it’s also a case of I don’t know what I don’t know.

“Obviously, I had no idea about that. Had I known, I would have approached it or talked to you about it differently or shit, I don’t know.” I run a hand through my hair, not sure what to do with this information. “Are there things you *can* tell me? Or want to tell me?”

She hesitates, considering her options, her words, or maybe both. “There is a lot I would like to say, so much I want to tell you, but it’s not just the legality of it. I want to keep my past in the past. And I want to keep you as far from it as possible.”

“I’m willing to listen if you’re willing to tell me anything.” I don’t know what else I can say to convince her. I reach over and take her hand back, and she doesn’t resist.

After another long silence, she gives in. “My record label wanted to turn me into something I’m not. And they had the power to do that. I would record a song as I wrote it, but what would be released was nothing like the original. They wanted me to be some cutesie plastic pop star when that was the

furthest thing from who I was. And when I refused to perform the songs live like they released them or write any more songs, they sued me.” She takes a deep shuddering breath, but I don’t say anything, giving her room to talk. “Like I told you before, my parents were my managers because they had been musicians and knew the business. We ultimately got out of the contract, but the cost was my songs, and my parents agreed to it without telling me. Everything I had created up to that point was stolen from me.”

“Oh, my God. That’s horrible.” I squeeze her fingers lightly, not knowing what else to say. I can’t imagine that kind of betrayal coming from your own family.

“And I had signed NDAs with everyone and couldn’t say a fucking thing about any of it. I haven’t talked to my parents since then, and this was four years ago. So, when you brought up the need for me to sign an NDA to have a relationship with you, I lost my shit.”

It makes sense now. All of it makes sense now. Her initial disdain for me. Her mistrust of the industry. Her freaking out at the possibility of having to sign an NDA. She has every reason to feel all of those things and more. And I just danced on every single open nerve those represent. I’m such a fucking idiot.

“Then forget it. I don’t want you to sign the fucking thing. Blackmore and the guys can fight me on it if necessary. If I had known any of this, I swear so many things would have been done differently.”

“Don’t say that. I don’t want you walking on eggshells around me or pretending to be something you’re not. I want you to be you and nobody else.” She kisses the back of my hand and gives me a slight smile before looking back out the window. “What happened to me in the past only made me who I am now. It shouldn’t change who you are.”

That’s an interesting way to look at things, but I’m not so sure I agree. “No, that’s not fair. Because how I treated you was based on only partial information. If I had had the whole story, I could have made an informed decision on how I acted towards you.”

She arches an eyebrow my way. “Were you reading psychology books in Ojai or something?” Her small laugh eases my racing heart just a little and breaks the ice between us that much more.

“No. But I did have some revelations about myself.” Fuck it. I may as well tell her everything. “I’m falling for you, Sloane. There’s no way around it, and it took a minute, but I finally admitted it to myself. I’m not the same

person I was at the beginning of the mentoring program. You've changed me. And it's all for the better. My pulse speeds up like crazy whenever you enter a room. Your laugh makes my heart race. I literally ache every fucking day to wrap you in my arms and never let you go. I daydream about our future - one I never believed I could have. But with you, anything seems possible."

There's a stunned silence that weighs heavy in the air between us but also feels charged somehow. As if our heightened emotions are ricocheting around the interior of the car.

"Against my better judgment, I think I'm falling for you too." She laughs. "Wait..."

"Against your better judgment?" I laugh. "Oh my God. That's awesome."

"No, I didn't mean it like that."

"No, no, it makes total sense. And actually, I'll take it as a compliment." My laughing is starting to hurt my stomach. "It's a perfect depiction of how things are between us."

"Cooper, come on. You know I didn't mean it in a bad way." Her cheeks are red, and the blush is adorable.

"I know. And regardless of how you got here, to hear you're falling for me too is all I need to know."

And it's true. All I wanted to hear was that she felt the same about me. And now that the rock pushing on my chest this entire time is lifted, I can breathe freely for the first time in a long time. It hasn't been an easy road to get here, but we're here. I'd be too greedy to ask for anything more.

"Venice beach?" she asks as I pull into a parking area. "What makes you think Penny is here?"

I slide into a parking spot and turn towards Sloane. "I'm going to let you change the subject just this once because finding Penny is a priority right now. But know that I saw what you did there, and we will circle back. Got it?"

She smiles. "Got it."

"I *don't* know if Penny is here. This is just a guess, but I hope it's an educated guess. There was a line in Penny's song about '*something something crashing on the shore.*' I don't remember exactly. But that made me think maybe she would go to the beach. And Venice Beach is as good of one as any, and it's nearby."

Sloane briefly studies me, then says, "You might be a genius." And then gets out of the car and heads toward the boardwalk.

I follow right behind her, and we start combing the beach in search of a runaway teenager.

thirty-six

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Runaway

Sloane

Cooper's idea of Penny coming to the ocean is good, but the task becomes daunting as we approach the boardwalk and see the throng of people we'll need to wade through. I don't have much time to think about it because he grabs my wrist and pulls me along, weaving in and out of people on bicycles, families pushing strollers, roller skaters, and people walking their pets, enjoying the early evening on the beach.

"How are we going to find her with all these people? It's going to be like finding a needle in a haystack." The more we walk and have to dodge out of the way of people, the more discouraged I get.

"You're right. Penny wouldn't be on the boardwalk."

I'm about to ask him what he's talking about, but then we veer to the right and start heading toward the water. There are significantly fewer people on the beach than on the boardwalk. Hopefully, this strategy works.

Walking on sand is slow, and I'm not exactly dressed for a walk on the beach. After a few minutes, we have to stop so I can take off my shoes. High heels and sand do not mix.

"Do I need to carry you too?" Cooper smirks.

"Do I need to kick your ass?"

He laughs and shakes his head as he grabs my hand, kisses the back of it, and pulls me along with him. With Cooper's hand wrapped around mine, my shoulders relax. My hands stop shaking. My breaths come slower and steadier. His solid presence chases away the nerves twisting my stomach into knots.

After about fifteen minutes and nothing, we're about to head back to the

boardwalk to circle around when Cooper stops and points at someone sitting in the shade of a palm tree about thirty yards away. Sure enough, I can see the long brown hair blowing in the breeze and instantly know it's Penny.

"So what do we do now? Do we approach her? Do we call somebody? What is the protocol when finding a runaway teen?" Cooper asks, excitement and anxiety edging his voice.

I don't know the answer to any of those questions. I've never been in this position before, so everything from here on out will simply be instinct.

"We should talk to her. Or maybe just one of us should go so she isn't spooked."

Something close to fear crosses Cooper's face, and I'm pretty sure I know who's going to approach her.

"I don't think..."

I pat his arm and start heading towards Penny. "Stay here. I'll go talk to her. I'll signal you when it's OK for you to come over. Call Fiona."

I don't wait for a response and close the distance carefully. She's sitting with her backpack open on her crossed legs and has her head down, writing in her notebook. In my head, I try to imagine the song she's writing right now, but considering that I've realized today how little I know her, I can't picture what she's thinking anymore.

I stop next to the tree and watch her for a minute, not saying anything as I try to figure out what to say. I thought I knew Penny, but obviously, I was wrong.

It doesn't take long, but she must sense the presence of somebody nearby because she looks up, and when she sees it's me, she throws her notebook into her backpack and attempts to get up quickly to run away. I jump in front of her, blocking her path.

"Wait. Wait, it's OK. I'm just here to talk to you." I glanced around, ensuring I know precisely where Cooper is in case I need him, and see him anxiously awaiting not too far away. But out of Penny's site. "I just want to talk, OK?"

She looks scared to death like the cornered animal she probably is. "Ms. Castle, you don't understand. Please just let me go."

"What don't I understand, Penny? Tell me." I try to keep my voice calm, steady, and not anxious like I'm feeling. "I'm here to help. I'm here to listen. Tell me what's going on."

That's when her eyes meet mine, and I see the utter devastation. This girl

is hurting, and it's a pain I recognize.

"It was Ethan. It was all Ethan."

"What was all Ethan?"

Tears start streaming down her face, and her long hair sticks to her cheeks. I'm tempted to reach out, but I don't want to do anything to scare her off. I can see Cooper slowly approaching over Penny's shoulder and switch my attention back to her.

"Everything," she sobs, her shoulders shaking and her entire body trembling. "He used my e-mail to mess with you and Cooper. He's the one who destroyed his guitar. And he's the one that's been buying you coffee every day. I thought he was trying to get close to me, but he was just using me."

Everything clicks then. Of course, it was Ethan. I don't know why I didn't see it before. Cooper told me Ethan had a crush on me, but I wouldn't believe it.

"Oh, Penny, honey. I am so sorry." I hug her, and she starts sobbing uncontrollably into my shoulder. Glancing over to Cooper, I shake my head slightly, signaling him to keep away for now. I have a feeling she might be more embarrassed if he was here.

He nods, looks around deliberately, then points to the parking lot and mimics driving. I think he's saying he'll wait at the car, so I nod. At least, I hope that's what he's saying. It would make sense because he might be starting to get recognized and want to get somewhere safe. I hadn't considered that possibility, so it makes sense.

Turning my attention back to Penny, she seems to be calming down a little, so I pull away and help her clean up her face. This poor girl has had her heart stomped on and ripped to shreds. Being used like that is so violating and leaves you feeling exposed and vulnerable. She must really be hurting.

"What tipped you off that Ethan was the one to do all of this?"

She clears her throat and straightens her shoulders, "He showed me a picture on his phone of Cooper's ruined guitar. It wasn't taken in your studio. It looked like it was taken in Cooper's classroom. And the only time it was there was before he found it. It took me a little while to figure that out because I asked him about it, and he lied and said it was moved back there for pictures or some shit. It didn't add up, but I wanted to believe him because I didn't want to think he could do something like that."

"And what about the e-mail?"

She starts wringing her hands nervously. “When Carl called and talked to me about it yesterday, I had to think about how that could have happened. The only thing I could think of was the times Ethan would use my phone, saying his was dead. I never thought to check what he did while using it. I was just happy we were hanging out, you know?” Her eyes brim with tears again, but she can hold them back. She’s being amazingly strong right now. I don’t know if I could keep my shit together like this.

“And I’ve been wondering about the coffee ever since they started appearing in front of my classroom. I thought it was Cooper. Never in a million years would I have thought it was Ethan who was leaving them.”

“You may want to be careful, Ms. Castle. After what he did to Cooper’s guitar, I’m afraid of what else he might do. That’s kind of why I ran away. There’s something definitely wrong with him, and when he finds out I’ve told you what he’s done...”

“Don’t you worry about that,” I say, pulling her back into a hug. She had started to shake again with fear, and my protective instincts kicked in. “We’ll figure this out, and if Ethan needs help, we’ll get help for him too.”

“I just thought he liked me...” The tears start again, and I squeeze her tighter.

I am familiar with betrayal. It doesn’t matter who does it. The effect is the same. The lack of trust Penny will now have in everyone is enormous. I can do nothing to fix that, but I can be here for her now. Something I didn’t have when I was betrayed.

“Cooper is waiting for us in the car. What do you say we go and get this all sorted out so we can put it behind us?” I lean down, pick up her backpack, and toss it over my shoulder. She hesitates but then walks with me back to the parking lot. “In the meantime, Cooper called Fiona to tell her you’re safe. There is quite a search party out looking for you right now. Your mom is worried about you.”

While the mystery is solved, the answers are just beginning.

thirty-seven

...

Lure and Persuade

Cooper

When we get back to the Foundation, Ethan is being held in one of the classrooms while waiting for one of his guardians, and after taking my statement, the police allow me a few minutes to talk with him. He now looks like a kid much younger than he really is. I don't know how pain does that, but he seems to be shrinking within himself. I know everything he's done comes from a place of pain.

I know this because I've *been* him.

Sitting across from him, he doesn't look up but continues to stare at his shoes. I don't expect him to meet my eyes. Because along with that pain is a shit ton of shame. That's almost harder to get rid of.

"I'm going to say some things to you, and I don't expect you to say a word back. But I do want you to listen."

He doesn't respond but keeps his eyes trained on the floor.

I take a deep breath and organize my thoughts, trying to figure out what I could possibly say to this kid to get through to him. I don't know if I can, but I need to try.

"I get it, dude. There are things or people in your life you want, things you know deep inside you can never have, and your life is such shit the only thing you can do is try to prove fate wrong. It's not even about the item or the person. It's about the idea that you can't have something, and that thought alone drives you crazy.

"So, instead of reaching for something you *can* have or someone within reach, you manipulate the world around you and the people in it to get what you want. Whether that's using Penny and her feelings for you for your own

benefit or fucking up my guitar and tearing the pictures of my band and family, those are the actions of someone taking what they want because what they're asking for is not being heard by anyone."

He shifts in his seat and starts wringing his hands. I must have touched on something, so I keep going.

"When I say I get it, Ethan, I mean it. I didn't have the best family life either, and that's putting it mildly. But I had better than some. There was a time when I thought I wasn't being heard and lashed out. Thought I deserved so much more than I really did that I did a lot of sketchy shit to try to get it. I hurt people. I used people. I lied and did whatever it took to get what I wanted. But no matter what I was going for, I wasn't any happier when I got it. In fact, I would feel shittier than I did beforehand.

"I'm not going to get into specifics. That's between me and my future therapist. But all the shit you've seen about me on the internet? That's a result of the shame that comes with all the other shit. You know that saying, '*fuck around and find out?*' Well, you're finishing up the fuck around stage and are about to hit the finding out."

"Yeah, but you're famous now, so this whole lecture is bullshit." He is surprisingly stubborn about the right or wrong of his actions. Unbelievable.

"Bullshit? What part of anything I've said is bullshit?" I lean back and cross my arms over my chest, waiting for enlightenment.

"You got what you wanted eventually. You were a total fuck up, and now you're famous." He raises his head to stare me down, and I don't flinch. All I can do is chuckle at how naive he is.

I remember when I had all the answers. Nobody could tell me anything because nobody understood. Everyone was my enemy. Little did I know then I was the worst enemy I'd ever face.

"I got one thing. You're right. I did get fame. But do you know what it cost me? It cost me one of my best friends because I was too fucked up to see that maybe he needed help. It has cost me I don't know how many years of true happiness because I spent that time self-medicating and covering up the shame for all the damage I've caused. And because of all that, until now, I haven't been able to have a real relationship with anyone because I never believed I deserved to be loved."

His eyes drop to the floor again, and I lean forward. He probably isn't going to get any of this right now, but it's amazingly cathartic for me to be talking to him right now. This might be doing me more good than it is him;

who knows.

“Listen, Ethan. I’m not going to lecture you about anything because you’re not going to fucking listen anyway. That’s not what I’m here to do. I’m just letting you know you are not the first person to feel like you do.

“You’ve got fucking talent, man. I would hate for you to throw that away because you can’t handle your fucking shit. You’re *lucky*. You’re finding this shit out now. Take advantage of it. Take whatever help is offered to you because of this. Take it and fucking run. Trust me, it’s better to be a good person than good at anything else.”

I get up from my chair and leave the room without looking back. I can only hope some of my words got through to him. I could be wrong, and he’s got bigger problems than I can imagine. All I know is I tried to help. Whether I actually did is not up to me.

Sloane is waiting for me in her office and looks at me expectantly as I enter. “How did it go?”

I ignore the question and pull her to me, wrapping myself around her, burying my face in her hair, and inhaling her sweet floral scent. This feeling when I’m with her, this new familiarity, is something I crave now. I never thought another human being could make me feel this way, but Sloane Castle does nothing but surprise me.

thirty-eight

...

The Perfume of Decay

Sloane

The last week of the session is full of rehearsals for our end-of-term concert. Everything has settled down after the recent craziness, and having everyone focus on one common goal helps with forgetting what happened.

Cooper has talked the rest of Murderous Crows into performing an acoustic set, so tickets for the event sold out in record time. We almost considered changing the location of the venue, but the auditorium at the Foundation has always been where we've held these shows. Just because my famous rockstar boyfriend is performing doesn't mean that will change. Murderous Crows don't come to these rehearsals, though. They are still busy writing and recording their next album, and just having them in the lineup is good enough for me.

Penny has convinced me to perform her song with her, and I'm still not sure how I feel about it. I haven't been on the stage in so long. I don't know if I'm ready to take that step. Cooper is all kinds of supportive and encouraging, but fears aren't always rational.

After the last rehearsal, Cooper takes me to dinner at a hidden-away restaurant near my house I never knew existed. This entire week has been so busy we've hardly had any time alone, so sitting across from him in the dark corner of a restaurant sounds a little bit like playing hooky.

As we wait to be seated, I can't help but tease him. He's behind me with his arms wrapped around my waist, so I back into him suggestively, making sure my ass rubs against him in precisely the right way to drive him crazy.

"Stop it," Cooper chuckles, his voice low and husky in my ear.

"Stop what?" I laugh. I am the picture of innocence.

I do it again, this time adding a subtle breathy inhale as I press into him. It's definitely working because I can feel his cock hard against my backside.

He tries to back away, but I hold him tighter to me.

"You know what," he growls, but I can hear the lust in his tone. "Stop it."

"I'm not doing anything." My smile is wicked as I glance at him over my shoulder.

"Sloane--" he warns, but the host comes back to lead us to our table. On the way, Cooper gives me a quick smack on the ass, causing me to yelp.

The host gives me a concerned look as he seats us, which we both ignore.

It's time for me to turn up the volume on this game.

Starting with intense eye contact, I've let my hair down and twirl a lock around my finger, letting the curls fall and slide across my shoulder. After the waiter takes our order, I suggestively trail a finger along my open collar into my cleavage while biting my bottom lip.

"What the fuck are you doing, Sloane?" He rumbles under his breath, a crooked smile curving his mouth.

I lean in and reach across the table, lightly tracing the tattoo on the inside of his forearm and into the center of his palm, making sure he's got a prime view of my breasts. "I don't know what you're talking about. What am I doing?" I say, my voice mostly air.

He shifts uncomfortably in his seat, obviously adjusting himself, but his gaze never leaves my mouth. Licking his lips as if starving, he grabs my hand to stop its teasing and clears his throat. "Oh, I think you know exactly what you're doing. And you better be careful."

"Or what?" I lick my lips, too. I am loving this game. And loving how crazy it's making him. I arch my back a little, forcing my breasts to strain against my blouse.

"Or this." He slides out of his seat and pulls me out of mine and into a nearby restroom, locking the door behind us.

"Cooper, what are you doing?" I barely get the words out before my skirt is pushed up and my thong is ripped off, his fingers finding me already wet and eager for him.

"Fucking hell, Sloane. You know perfectly well what you do to me." My wrists get trapped above me as he presses me into the door, his erection pushing into my hip. All the while, he deftly plays and preps me. "And now you're going to see what happens when you play with fire."

I don't have a chance to take a breath before he steals a kiss from me, and

then he's kneeling down, propping my heels on the counter, and his mouth sucking my clit. With his fingers curved and persistent, the orgasm that overtakes me is sudden and explosive. I'm not ready for it. I've never come so fast before. I have to bite down hard on my lip so I don't cry out. And while I have my hands in his hair curling into fists as the pulses shoot through me in waves, his tongue continues to pleasure me.

Just as I think the sensation is coming to a close, there's a knock on the door behind me. But Cooper doesn't stop. I start to panic and try pulling on his hair to stop, but he is not moving. In fact, he's looking up at me, and his eyes are smiling. The sight of him going down on me while I know there's someone only inches away on the other side of the door is so fucking hot I start to come again.

Sparks flash behind my eyes as the orgasm hits, and another knock on the door pushes me over the edge. And this time, I can't keep quiet. But as I inhale, Cooper sticks a finger in my mouth before I cry out. I'm tempted to bite down, but suck on his fingers instead as the ripples flow through my body, making me shake.

"Occupied," Cooper yells, and whoever it is goes away for the time being. Then to me, he says, "God damn, you're fucking gorgeous when you come."

He stands and kisses me deeply while his hand still works me, drawing out my tremors even longer. I reach down to grab his cock, but he maneuvers out of reach.

"What are you..."

"Uh uh. This was to show you what *I* could do to you, baby." His warm breath in my ear almost gets me started again. "And that's just an appetizer. We'll have to wait for the main course until I get you home." He pockets my ruined thong, but the soft kiss that lands on my forehead is even more unexpected.

My knees are weak, and I'm nearly breathless as we head back into the central part of the restaurant after cleaning up. Several pairs of knowing eyes watch us as we take our seats, but I don't care.

This has become my absolute favorite restaurant.

thirty-nine

...

No Longer Broken

Cooper

The night of the concert at Rhapsody Foundation is strange for me, not only because we'll be playing a small acoustic set but because I will actually have students performing. I imagine this is what a proud parent feels when their child participates in a recital, a school play, or a talent show. Every time one of my students performs, I find myself standing with my chest puffed out and feeling like I'm ten feet tall. It's the oddest fucking feeling in the world.

After each performance, I am the loudest person cheering, even though I'm on the side of the stage, and their actual parents or guardians are probably out in the audience. I've seen how hard these kids have worked and how far they've come in just a few months. Every single one of them impressed me.

Even Ethan impressed me, though he isn't here. He was admitted to a facility to deal with his emotional issues. I was happy to learn that he accepted the help that was offered to him, and I hope it works out for him. I wasn't lying when I told him he was talented. Someday, he will be a famous musician; he's got that much talent. We'll see if he can handle it better than I did. I will definitely be keeping a close eye on how he does.

When it comes time for Penny to perform her song, I give Sloane a quick hug and a kiss before she steps out onto the stage with her. As she takes her seat at the piano, she glances up at me, and I point to myself with a nod as I mouth the words, '*Look at me.*' She nods back with a deep breath before launching into the music.

I've heard them sing the song during rehearsals, but there's always something different that happens when you see a finished performance as it happens in front of an audience. It takes on a life of its own and somehow

becomes more poignant, targeted, and meaningful than it did when they were just practicing. The words hit harder. The emotion is stronger. The melody is more haunting. It becomes larger than life. And this song is no different.

While not as strong as Sloane's, Penny's voice has an eerily haunting quality that is almost ethereal in nature. Something about it makes you lean in a little closer, and strain a little more to hear what she's saying. Grabbing an audience's attention like that with just your voice is something money can't buy. Add on top of that the lyrics ripping your heart out, and you've got a performance that will never be forgotten by anyone who sees it.

When the song ends, they don't even finish the last note before everyone is on their feet, applauding and cheering. I see a few people wiping tears from their eyes. That's the kind of connection with an audience every musician longs for and works toward. That's the kind of response every songwriter wants to elicit from a listener.

Sloane catches my eye as they take their bows, and aside from the relief I see, I think she may have just beaten her phobia of performing. At least, I hope so. She is way too talented to never perform again. Yes, she's excellent at what she does at the Foundation, and she's doing a lot of good for a lot of kids, but Sloane Castle belongs on stage. Convincing her of that is going to be the challenge. She is one stubborn woman, and unless she can do things on her own terms, it's not going to happen.

Murderous Crows goes on last, and we play a handful of songs. This event was not about us, and we're only here to raise money. So, we thought it would be cool to have some of the students in the program join us on stage. Penny joined us for the song '*Good Company*' that Jake wrote for Cassidy a while ago. Her harmonies with his voice are so interesting we are including her on the new album. We might all be witnessing the beginning of a huge career for Penny in the music business.

After the concert, there is a bit of a meet and greet with some of the parents, which is even weirder than the concert itself. It's a dynamic I never envisioned for myself, that's for sure. Sloane must know how strange it is for me because after everyone clears out, she teases me about it.

"So, should I go back to calling you Mr. Davies?" She steps up behind me, wrapping her arms around my waist and resting her head against my back. I grab her hands, kiss the back of one, and then pull her hug tighter around me.

"Are you confessing to a teacher-student kink, Ms. Castle?"

“You wish,” she laughs, slapping my back lightly as she pulls away.

“Hey, I’m open to anything. You know this.”

“I do know this.” She says with a sly smile. “It’s just one of the many things I love about you.”

We both freeze.

She just said the fucking L word.

We stare at each other for an eternity, and the silence is suddenly deafening. Amazingly, I’m the first one to come to my senses.

“So, how does pizza sound?”

She lets out a breath quickly, and the nervous laugh that follows is entirely too endearing. That’s just another thing I love about her.

And I just thought the L word. Fuck.

“Pizza sounds great.”

epilogue 1

...

Break In

Sloane – Three Months Later

Murderous Crows have finally finished recording their album, and there is a release party at Jude and Ren's house in Santa Monica. There are a lot of music industry people I haven't seen in a long time here, and luckily, none of them are people I have a problem with. All of Indigo King and their crew are here, too, since they were heavily involved in the recording and producing of the album along with Jude.

Ryan Crawford and his wife Sarah only briefly appear with their new baby girl Madelyn. She is the cutest little baby I've ever seen. She's definitely got the most hair I've ever seen on a baby, anyway. Ren and Jude's daughter Charlie fawned over her the entire time, and I can tell she will be a great chosen-cousin growing up.

A few hours into the party, Murderous Crows puts on an impromptu concert for everyone in attendance. They play several songs from the new album and some of their old songs. When I think they finish, the band clears out from the terrace, except for Cooper, who sets up a stool and a microphone and sits with his guitar.

"If you folks could indulge me for a minute, I would like to invite Ms. Sloane Castle to the stage area, please." His clear voice through the sound system hits my ears but doesn't make sense.

What is he doing?

Everyone starts clapping, and Mackenzie pushes me toward where Cooper is sitting. All the other guests apparently know what's happening, but I sure don't.

"What are you doing?" I stage whisper at him as I stand awkwardly by

myself near him while everyone watches. “Do you want me to sing with you or something?”

He only laughs, and it’s then I see how nervous he is, and my stomach clenches. This had better not be what I think it is...

I’m going to fucking kill him.

“Sloane, we have known each other for what, five or six months now? And we’ve only wanted to kill each other for about two of those.” Everyone’s laughter joins ours. He’s not wrong. “In that time, you have challenged me to be a better person. And I can only hope I have met that challenge head-on.”

“You’re hard-headed enough!” Remy yells from the crowd.

“Fuck off, man,” Cooper chuckles into the mic.

“Seriously, what are you doing?” I ask again, glancing nervously at everyone, but they’re all just smiling at us.

“I’m getting to it. I’m getting to it, woman. Just give me a minute. I’m having a moment.” At least the humor seems to be loosening him up a little bit. “I, Cooper Fucking Davies, have written you a song. One that is *not* on the album. One that will be just ours. And, hide your dogs because it’s one I’m going to sing. It’s a bit of a question I’ll need an answer to at the end, okay? And it goes a little something like this...

*Blinded by the spotlights
for way too long.
thinking I was happy
but I was so damn wrong.*

*Then I met you, and I fell
but you showed me the way
to open up my heart
and learn what it means to stay*

*It’s all a leap of faith, love
jumping into the race
It’s a leap of faith, love
I want to see you in lace*

Now I can’t live without you

*since you've stolen my whole heart
but I don't want it back now
I gave you all the parts*

*Stay with me forever more
never leave my side
it won't be easy by any means
but we'll make it worth the ride*

*It's all a leap of faith, love
let's jump into the race
It's just a leap of faith, love
I want to see you in lace*

I knew Cooper could sing because I'd hear snippets of him here and there, but I've never heard him sing an entire song solo like this. His voice has a whisper-like rasp that is so intriguing that it does something to the song to make it more meaningful.

More special.

"Mr. Davies..." I start, stepping toward him on wobbly knees. "Are you asking me to marry you?"

Cooper laughs, but it comes out strained. He runs a hand through his hair and rubs the back of his neck, glancing at the audience gathered before looking back at me. "Oh, shit. I'm back to Mr. Davies, huh? Yes. I am. And I want you to be Mrs. Davies." He hesitates, suddenly distraught. "If you want. You can keep your name, of course. If you'd rather do that. I'd never make you--"

"Of course, I'll marry you, you idiot," I say, wrapping my arms around his neck.

His guitar either gets taken or thrown or magically disappears, and the next thing I know, he's lifting me off the ground and twirling me around, and I don't think my feet were touching anyway. I don't think I've felt the ground since we met.

When Cooper Davies came into my life, I thought for sure it was a disaster in the making. He would vanish like any other shooting star in the sky. I had no idea how much he would change me. And I certainly had no

idea how much I would care about him.

Falling for a rockstar was not on the agenda this year, but marrying one just might be.

epilogue 2

...

A Reason to Fight

Cooper

“Are you sure you want to go in by yourself?” Sloane asks.

We’re sitting in the parking lot of the behavioral treatment center in San Diego, where Ethan is currently staying. It’s the third one in as many months and the second one I’m paying for. This one focuses on music therapy for people with emotional disorders, and according to his doctors, is actually working.

“Yeah,” I say, kissing the back of her hand. “I don’t have a lot of time, so I need to make the most of it. Plus, him seeing you and all your beauty might not be the greatest idea. I’m not sure where he is with all that yet.”

Murderous Crows start a West Coast tour tomorrow, and I’ve been so busy with rehearsals I haven’t had time to come down to visit until now.

“Okay. I’ll be here waiting for you.” She waves a paperback novel she brought to pass the time.

“You better be.”

I hurry up the steps and into the building. Everything is bright and cheerful, with calming pastels in the abstract art on the walls. Exactly what you’d expect from a place like this, I guess.

When I check in to get a visitor badge, the receptionist gives me an odd look, like she thinks she might know who I am but isn’t sure.

Yup. That’s my level of fame. I look *vaguely* familiar to everyone.

“Aren’t you that guy...?” she starts to ask.

“No. I’m not,” I say swiftly. I want to get to Ethan and not play twenty questions with this lady. “Which way do I go?”

She’s momentarily offended, but I flash an irresistible smile, and she

relents.

“The common room is through those doors, Mr. Davies.”

Great. I'm back to being Mr. Davies. Full circle moment.

I nod my thanks and push through the doors into the common room, where I find Ethan sitting by the window with his guitar. But he's not alone.

He's teaching someone else how to play. Another guy about his age.

Holy fucking shit.

I freeze in place, trying not to be noticed now that I want to see what he's doing. The last time I talked to him on the phone, he sounded great, but he didn't mention anything about teaching guitar to anyone.

“Use your wrist, or else you're going to have one huge bicep and look fucking dumb,” he says, repositioning the other guy's arm for him. “Yeah, like that. Now try it.”

No fucking way.

There's a weird stinging behind my eyes as I watch, and I have to blink it away.

This kid. I swear to God.

Shaking it off, I approach. I don't have a lot of time.

“Don't listen to this guy,” I say, slapping Ethan playfully on the back. “He doesn't know shit about playing guitar.”

Ethan glances up at me and smiles, ready with a comeback. “Only because you're a horrible teacher, dickhead.”

“Hey, aren't you--” the other kid starts.

“Nope,” Ethan and I say in unison as I grab a nearby chair. The other guy takes the hint and leaves us alone to talk. That was easy.

“How's the food here?” I ask, glancing around the room, keeping it light.

Ethan shrugs as he starts plucking out a random melody on his guitar. “Not bad.”

“Are you hydrated? Do they let you get enough sun?”

“I'm not a fucking houseplant,” he scoffs.

“Oh yeah? You try going without water or sunlight and see what happens.”

“Fair.”

I let my gaze land on him finally and look him over. He seems healthy. Alert. He's not doped up like he was in the last place. His eyes seem brighter, too.

“You doing alright here?” I ask, praying that he genuinely is.

He looks back at me and meets my gaze. After a minute, he smiles, and it lights up his face. I don't think I've ever seen him like this. This happy. And it looks *real*.

"I am."

A warmth spreads in my chest at his words. I hope it's true. And I hope it lasts. This kid needs a fucking break already.

After discovering his involvement in the email hacking and destroying my guitar, I've learned a lot about Ethan. He's not had an easy life, to put it mildly. As a matter of fact, his life thus far has been really fucked up, which makes some of his behavior understandable.

Some. But not all of it.

That's where these behavioral treatment centers have come in. It feels like it's been a shit ton of trial and error as things got figured out, but now we've found the right program, and everything seems to be clicking. His new meds seem to be working, too.

"And how's therapy going? Do you like your new doctor?"

His expression sours a little, and he shrugs. "He's okay, I guess."

We both do not like talking about our problems. In that, we are very alike.

"Dude, you have to talk to the man," I say, knowing how much he hates it.

The smile is now completely gone, and I start to worry that maybe I should have kept to the easy topics. I might have screwed something up going deeper.

"I talk to him. Geez. It's just..."

"What?" My throat tightens. *Please, not another setback.*

"He wants me to write an apology to Penny." Noticing my raised eyebrows, he continues. "Not to actually send it. Just to write it out."

"Okay...that's not so bad, right?" I can't tell from his expression if this is a problem or not. He's gone unreadable.

"No. It's not bad at all." He looks around the room, then back at me. "I just thought I should probably apologize to Sloane, too. Don't you think?"

My breath eases out of me in relief. Out of everything this kid has gone through, for him to now be worried about who he should be apologizing to gives me so much hope for his future I'm nearly beside myself.

"I think she might like that, actually. Sure." I almost tell him she's out in the parking lot and I can get her, but I stop myself. Right now, it's just a thought in his head. I'll let him make it concrete when he's ready.

After talking for another half hour about nothing and everything, I get up to leave. We bump fists as usual and make it as awkward as humanly possible.

We're good like that.

"Don't be a stranger," he says, laughing with me at how dumb we are.

"Don't be an asshole."

"Don't be a dickhead."

"Don't tell me what to do," I say, backing through the door to the reception area, grinning while flipping him off with both hands.

Now, I can go on the tour without worrying about him. It's only for three weeks, but it would have felt like an eternity if he were still in bad shape. I don't know why or how this kid got under my skin like he did, especially after all that he's done. I couldn't turn my back on him, knowing everyone else has. He's become like a little brother to me.

"How is he?" Sloane asks, closing her book and turning to me as I get in the car. Her concern for Ethan amazes me, too. She doesn't have to care. Probably *shouldn't* care. But she does.

'He's a Rhapsody student. He's one of mine,' she had said, and I love that about her.

Add it to the list. I love everything about her.

"He's good," I say, kissing her cheek and starting the engine. "He's real good."

We head north, back to L.A. Back to our lives and our future together. I don't want to think about the next three weeks I'll be without her. I don't want to imagine *any* time without her.

Shit. I can't even remember my life before her.

If that's not love, I don't fucking know what is.

--THE END--

overture playlist

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3hGpdIJReDDKaJv3lNc0z7?si=3727818d10ee4e5b>

Prologue: Ed Sheeran/Bring Me the Horizon, *Bad Habits*

1. Bad Omens, *Limits*
2. My Chemical Romance, *Teenagers*
3. Taylor Swift, *Mad Woman*
4. The Devil Wears Prada, *Chemical*
5. Shinedown, *Enemies*
6. The Haunt, *Why Are You So Cold?*
7. Imagine Dragons, *Believer*
8. PVRIS, *Good to be Alive*
9. Lost Hearts, *Night to Remember*
10. Laura Zocca, *Love is a Battlefield*
11. Palaye Royale, *Lifeless Stars*
12. PVRIS, *Smoke*
13. Bring Me the Horizon, *Follow You*
14. Rain City Drive, *Talk to a Friend*
15. Foxblood, *Mess Like Me*
16. Dorothy, *Wicked Ones*
17. All Time Low, *Tell Me I'm Alive*
18. Hailee Steinfeld, Anderson Paak, *Coast*
19. Fight the Fade, *Where You Go I Go*

20. Rivals, *Alkaline*
21. Dragged Under, *Chelsea*
22. Swim School, *Delirious*
23. Savage Hands, *Demon*
24. Architects, *Burn Down My House*
25. Aquilo, *Just Asking*
26. Lapalux, Kerry Leatham, *Without You*
27. Caskets, *Drowned in Emotion*
28. PVRIS, *Old Wounds*
29. Starset, *My Demons*
30. Maggie Lindemann, *You're Not Special*
31. Dermot Kennedy, *Lost*
32. Boston Manor, *I Don't Like People (& They Don't Like Me)*
33. Colony House, *Cannonballers*
34. Florence + The Machine, *Wish That You Were Here*
35. Andrew Belle, *Pieces*
36. Aurora, *Runaway*
37. Citizen Zero, *Lure and Persuade*
38. Tigercub, *The Perfume of Decay*
39. Alphamega, *No Longer Broken*

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